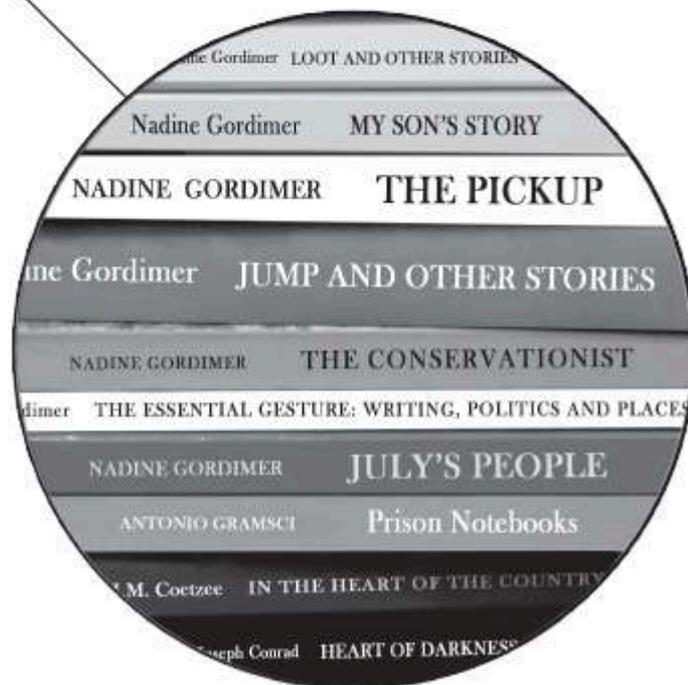


Nadine Gordimer

De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing

COMMONWEALTH ESSAYS AND STUDIES



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Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing. Introduction



In a reflection about her own positionality, seen against the provisional and uncertain background of the “breaches and interstices that the ravelling-out of apartheid colonialism produced” (*Writing* 128), Nadine Gordimer recounts how her artistic calling preceded her political activism. In this essay, entitled “That Other World that Was the World,” she explains that before she committed herself to the anti-apartheid struggle *per se*, she had mingled with black writers, painters, and actors, and that this formative period in her life showed her how her own “personal revolution [as a writer] had no other issue but to lead [her] into theirs” (130). Such a revolution is described as anything but a *tabula rasa*, or a black hole from which unformed matter can be shaped into a new society. Instead, in tones that are unusually hopeful under her pen, Gordimer writes of mending fragmentation:

Only in the prescient dimension of the imagination could I bring together what had been deliberately broken and fragmented; fit together the shapes of living experience, my own and that of others, without which a whole consciousness is not attainable. I had to be part of the *transformation of my place* in order for it to know me. (*Writing* 130)

In this passage, the compartmentalization, segregation and discrimination upon which the regime of apartheid was premised is countered by the sense of becoming part of a new order. In the wake of Graham Riach’s analysis of her late style and its “structural fracture” (1077), which he sees as particularly blatant in the short story collection *Jump*, our contention is that the “breaches,” interruptions, disruptions, disjunctions, cracks, breaks and fractures are still very much apparent in a number of works, early or late. This volume was born from an attempt at mapping out the forms taken by such ruptures.

They are obviously geographical, interrogating a space that has been divided to secure the lion’s share for the white population, and to relegate non-whites to Bantustans and townships. They are also temporal. Alongside her developing a forceful “art of the present moment” (Gordimer, “Short Story” 15), Gordimer’s writing is nonetheless haunted by the ghostly traumas of a colonial past and “always in some way in dialogue with an absent future” (Clingman 13). This resonates in new ways a few years after her death, as post-apartheid South Africa continues to undergo major social, economic, political and cultural changes. While all chronological (let alone teleological) timelines also appear fractured in Gordimer’s oeuvre, some reconfigurations of linearity find their way in, making for patterns which radiate at all other levels: spatial, ideological, affective, narrative and metafictional. In other words, the irruption of violence exerted in *diegeses* can also be read as reiteration, but also possibly as a means towards a new order. Such literary moments of non-linearity and reconnection are crucial to how the South African author intends to intervene in the world she is showing; to how transformative and performative her writings may be in their re-casting fissured agencies. Calling attention to such processes as linkage and re-connection is also a way of considering anew the “interregnum” in and on which she dwelt (see Gordimer, *Essential Gesture*), a place where destruction rules but where odd collocations emerge where and when least

expected. Likewise, odd reconfigurations can be witnessed at temporal but also narratological levels, suggesting possibilities for meaning to circulate again, at times of crises. The notion of crisis, with its etymological connection to the act of separation, reveals both the challenges, and the necessary failure, of interpretation of passages such as the moment when, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, the narrator's heart repeats "afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive..." (43).

Beyond the specificities of the South African context, fragmentation is a useful concept when one wants to probe the relation between past and present, between events and historiography, between lost testimonies and belated archives. De Certeau writes, "The book on Loudun took shape in this in-between. It is cracked from top to bottom, revealing the combination, or relation, which makes History possible."¹ The crack pointed out by De Certeau constituted a moment of resistance to the epistemic violence inherent in Western modernity, and the resulting need for equally violent deconstructions, and excavations. Decades later, Walter Mignolo was to approach new modalities of knowledge production through the practice of "delinking"; one finds a similar "crack" provoked to counter the universalizing and totalizing work of Eurocentrism when Mignolo calls attention to "the ever-constant struggles, actions, and constructions – the decolonial pedagogies – that fissure or crack the modern/colonial matrix of power" (76). This issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* is meant as a timely re-assessment of Gordimer's literary experimentations and innovations in their relation to her writerly commitment. Foremost among these concerns we wish to address and qualify the category of realism often used to describe Gordimer's fictional aesthetics, and which in fact tends to morph into fable and the tell-tale, postmodern narrative unreliability and satiric irony. The notion of linearity also extends to the act of reading Gordimer, a writer who tended to favour such fragmented forms as the collection of essays or of short stories. The cumulative nature of such texts is problematic and invites investigations in the direction of epistemological construction through/beyond crisis and fragmentation.

The hallmark scalar distortions in the novels and short stories can thus be seen as a case in point of a technique which both suggests conventional meaning (with the microcosm of the house echoing the macrocosm of the country, the region, or the planet) and curtails conventional meaning (what does "home" (257) mean in "Amnesty," the last short story in *Jump?*). Meaning is indeed at stake when it comes to the formal examinations of moments of rupture and interruption. It is the meaning of globalization, as disparate as the world itself, in a paradoxical intensification of difference. Appadurai thus writes, "the new global economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (32), a statement which resonates with Gordimer's own: "I have used the term 'segment' in defining my place in South African Society" (*Essential Gesture* 264). This segment seems to be reverberated throughout her works, as a testimony to her own perspectival conundrum. The eight articles in this issue are all concerned with these moments of segmentation, understood in a wide range of ways.

Renowned Gordimer scholar Stephen Clingman opens this volume with an article which is the third in a triptych of recent chapters by him in which he reappraises the

1. Our translation of: "C'est dans cet entre-deux que s'est formé ce livre sur Loudun. Il est lézardé du haut en bas, révélant la combinaison, ou le rapport, qui rend possible l'histoire" (16).

South African writer's work. In "Gordimer, Interrupted," he retraces the notion of interruption as a signature feature of all of Gordimer's work, from her early and, as Clingman reads it, paradigmatic "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" (1947), through her novels, short stories, and essays, right up to her final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012). Interweaving a biography of Gordimer's writing, close readings, and analyses of punctuation, themes, and narrative form, Clingman deftly shows that interruption is more than just a mere stylistic trait for Gordimer and is, in fact, a complex, fluctuating, and constantly evolving matrix. Interruptions are retraced and explained here, in both re-readings of classics such as *The Conservationist* (1974) and *July's People* (1981) and investigations of her more recent fiction, as a means for Gordimer to expose the fault lines of South African society over a period of more than sixty years and as an aesthetics adequate to this task.

Like Clingman, Pascale Tollance focuses on the disruptive power of Gordimer's fiction, although she dwells in particular on the short story form and its relationship to what she calls "the art of the fragment." Tollance analyses the cuts, gaps, voids, and interruptions which permeate Gordimer's short stories and gradually lead, in her later stories, to a dislocation of voice. This article emphasises the many ways in which Gordimer uses her own fiction to "tea[r] at the fictions people live by," and Tollance probes in particular the endings of several stories, thinking through the implications of blunt conclusions in stories such as "Town and Country Lovers" and the omissions (or cuts) in others, such as "Six Feet of the Country" (1956) or "Jump" (1991). The last part of this article homes in on the collection *Jump and Other Stories*, which Tollance sees as more formally complex, and provides an intricate reading of the manner in which Gordimer toys with continuity and discontinuity as her writing becomes more self-reflexive.

Following the vein of the panoramic yet detailed approach of these first two articles, Liliane Louvel sketches out the contours of Gordimer's sustained and somewhat overlooked engagement with "uncanny elements" throughout her fiction, suggesting that this disrupts the dominant view that her work is predominantly social realist. Zooming in on Gordimer's use of microscopic detail, Louvel delves into the visual dimensions of Gordimer's essays and fiction, frequently establishing links with Virginia Woolf. She also analyses the return of the repressed and its specifically South African implications in stories such as "Something Out There," as well as Gordimer's gestures to Western literary and historical figures who were outsiders on the African continent, such as Joseph Conrad or David Livingstone, in "Livingstone's Companions" (1972) and "Friday's Footprint" (1960). Louvel concludes by extolling Gordimer's talent for exposing simultaneously the rot and the wonder at the heart of South African society.

The intersection of race, gender, and class issues in Gordimer's fiction is explored by Michelle Goins-Reed in her article which reads the post-apartheid novel *The Pickup* (2001) and a late short story, "The Second Sense" (2007) alongside an earlier collection of short stories, *Soldier's Embrace* (1980). Notwithstanding Gordimer's own repudiation of the term "feminist writer," and her fraught relationship to feminism generally, Goins-Reed analyses these texts from a feminist literary perspective and teases out the ways in which Gordimer engages with gender and race in the domestic and intimate spheres.

Kerry-Jane Wallart moves us away from the domestic and into the public sphere in her examination of the 1991 short story collection *Jump and Other Stories* from the original angle of cars as voids. Through a series of detailed discussions of individual

stories, Wallart provides a material analysis of the manner in which Gordimer uses vehicles to stage confrontations, most of which fail. Wallart links Gordimer's interest in the apparently banal presence of vehicles to a long tradition of writing about them in literature from or set on the African continent, evoking the inherently political nature of car ownership in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Supported by Giorgio Agamben's work on states of exception, Wallart's article explores the tensions between *zoe* and *bios* as related to the liminal spaces of cars which are revealed to be both objective correlatives (or "carrelatives") of the ravages of apartheid and neo-liberalism and spaces of reconfiguration since they are inevitably linked to potential motion. Cars, Wallart shows, are invested by Gordimer with semantic, symbolic, and political dimensions, all of which must be read together.

Audrey Golden, in her article "Nadine Gordimer and the Force of Law: Revisiting *My Son's Story*," considers the novel published contemporaneously to *Jump*, which she reads alongside Jacques Derrida's lecture entitled "The Force of Law" and the notion of Bakhtinian literary chronotopes. Noting Gordimer's concern to scrupulously research South African law and transcribe it correctly in her fiction, Golden shows how Gordimer's novel of the transition potentially opens up a space for developing a force of law that operates "outside the ideological constraints of geopolitical time," generating a new literary space-time. Pointing out how Gordimer's interpretation of the "force of law" diverges from Derrida's, Golden goes on to unpack how time and space, within and outside the novel, are intricately linked to the breaking down of ideological boundaries, showing how legal and literary language coalesce in "the intertwined nature of imagination and justice within the Zero chronotope" and in the conception of an ameliorative force of law.

We then return to Gordimer's short stories with Vivek Santayana's article on the late collections *Loot* (2003) and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), and the deft interweaving of fable, allegory, and realism in these collections. Like other scholars in this issue, Santayana contests the tendency to view Gordimer's short stories as the poor relation in her oeuvre, dwarfed by her novels, and instead exposes the agenda at stake in using fragmented, non-linear forms in order to respond to the urgencies of post-apartheid South Africa. The short story cycle, argues Santayana, is particularly apt at laying bare the combined and uneven development inherent to late capitalism and the post-apartheid era. It also allows for a representation of the different scales of inequality, conflict, and injustice, and thus constitutes "a radical political gesture." Santayana concludes by suggesting that the discussion should be widened to consider the post-colonial short story cycle more generally and "the impact the contexts of production and publication of the short story have on its meaning."

Peter Blair's article on Gordimer's non-fiction and her late-apartheid novels brings this issue to an end, and marks a fitting conclusion to this collective reappraisal of her work. The article's main focus is *July's People* (1981) which Blair re-reads as a self-reflexive engagement with alterity. Firstly providing a broad yet highly incisive overview of Gordimer criticism, he presents the double-bind of her being considered potentially exploitative in writing about black experience or complicit with apartheid in the case of a failure to engage with it, and relates this to the writer's public pronouncements on this question. This leads him to discuss the central tension between "potential experience" and "the potential of one's own experience," particularly, though not exclusively, in

relation to *July's People*. The famously ambivalent ending of this novel is revisited as “a utopian ideal of subjectivity as heuristic, in which experience has the potential to liberate,” and Blair makes a strong case for acknowledging that in her fiction “an author’s reach might tentatively exceed her grasp.”

There can be no doubt that the robust health of critique on Nadine Gordimer, as evidenced by this issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, is testimony to the South African author’s continued “reach.” Taken as a whole, the issue explores Gordimer’s inflections and distortions of a context with which she nonetheless never ceased to grapple. As such, it constitutes a useful intervention within the field of South African studies, while also following new lines of flight towards Material Studies, Border Studies, Gender Studies, and Migration/Diaspora Studies. These renewed – and repeatedly displaced – perspectives make way for further understandings of Gordimer’s specific de-scribing or dis-scribing of apartheid and its aftermath, at the (aporetic?) crossroads between realism and the fantastic. The tensions between coalescence and disjunction which result from such aesthetic experimentations are, we argue, a new outlining of perceptions, be they sensual or intellectual. These perceptions captured and provoked by Gordimer’s writing reconfigure linearity and suggest future regimes of politics and poetics.

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Gordimer, Interrupted*

Recent critical attention has turned to questions of form, genre, and style in Nadine Gordimer's fiction, and particularly to the disrupted or disruptive features of her work, not least in her later short stories. This essay approaches the idea of interruption as not only consistent in Gordimer's fiction all along, but as one that can be read as a kind of signature in her novels and short stories alike. Whether concerning content, form or style, Gordimer writes under the sign of interruption, in a way that develops and transforms through time.

"[A]nd then something burst in his eyes, some wet flower covered them, and he thought, he knew: I've been interrupted, then –"

These are the words that tell of Colonel Bray's death at the end of Part 5 of *A Guest of Honour*, Nadine Gordimer's sixth novel, published in 1971 (469). Even as they describe what happens to his eyes, they are focused *through* his eyes; the sentence oscillates between subjective and objective polarities. This is consciousness at the limits of what it can know about itself at the moment it comes to an end, as the pendulum of awareness (what is inside/outside) comes to a stop. But there is no stop, that is no full stop, in the sentence. Even as it talks of interruption, it closes – but does not close – with a dash.

If anything, the sentence refers back to an earlier thought of Bray's, that explains it in a premonitory way:

it seemed to him he had come to understand that one could never hope to be free of doubt, of contradictions within, that this was the state in which one lived – the state of life itself – and no action could be free of it. There was no finality, while one lived, and when one died it would always be, in a sense, an interruption. (464-5)

Note the provisionality of the sentence: "it seemed to him he had come to understand." There is no resting place here for perspective even as perspective is announced: this is an understanding, but also only a seeming to understand. Note too in the texture of the sentence the rhythms of the commas: consciousness flowing forward, slowing back, peristaltic flow and ebb a form of interruption. Note also (again) the dashes, and observe that dashes became perhaps Gordimer's distinctive punctuation mark, adopted by her in the 1970s soon after *A Guest of Honour* was published to note speech without necessarily demarcating the speaker: in effect, un/markings speech as a different kind of interruption. If there is perspective in this moment of Bray's death, if there is something in the style that gestures towards it, in both respects it is one of interruption. This is philosophy, perspective and form together, whether regarding life, death, or the sentences or novels that write them.

A Guest of Honour would normally be read as a predominantly realist novel, but if that is so it should be not only, or even primarily, because of its representational modes but also because of its structure and vision. Certainly Gordimer wrote it under the impress of theorists she had been reading at the time, whose work would have

*This essay completes a triptych of my recent articles on Nadine Gordimer, the other two being "Gordimer's Pathologies" and "Gordimer's Home." Inevitably, I have drawn on my previous work generally, but I trust from a different angle.

influenced her in terms of both form and content. From Georg Lukács would have come the idea of “critical realism” not as a mode of representation but rather as a structural perspective locating the lives of its characters in relation to their collective historical surroundings.¹ Gordimer had also been reading Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which she would have observed a realism of a different kind – a political and historical realism indicating that the advent of independence did not mean the same as liberation, precisely because it also meant the advent of neocolonial dispensations. Indeed, *A Guest of Honour* quotes Fanon on this very matter regarding the betrayal of nationalist elites: “The treason is not national, it is social. The people must be taught to cry, ‘Stop Thief!’” (Gordimer, *A Guest* 292; Fanon 116). In this light, it is intriguing to think that Fanon’s form of historical realism may well imply a theory of interruption. The march to liberation is inevitably interrupted, to be resumed, perhaps repeatedly. Realism in this sense necessarily rules out any assumption of smoothness, whether in social relations or temporality – and we have already seen how that recognition works its way into the textures and perspectives of the novel. Gordimer, surveying not only the unnamed African country in which the novel is set but also her South African surroundings, clearly found a persuasive logic in such a recognition.

It is indicative therefore that *A Guest of Honour* ends on a note of irony. Bray’s papers are collected by others and published by Mweta, Bray’s former protégé, now responsible as President for the neocolonial repression that Bray had been struggling against. In the event, the Bray Report is an exercise that both ventriloquizes Bray and legitimizes Mweta, yet it also registers Bray’s thoughts and his long-term commitment. Invariably Gordimer’s novels end on such a note, and irony is itself a form of interruption, of doubleness in which one perspective counterpoints or cancels out the other. This is Gordimer, interrupted: writing under the sign of interruption, marking it out as an intrinsic modality, despite appearances to the contrary. Even in this most realist of Gordimer’s novels, and notwithstanding any assumptions of smoothness, continuity, and perspective, nothing is uninterrupted, even here. There will always be what Bray thinks of as “new combinations” (*A Guest* 385).

Recent discussion on form, genre and style in Gordimer’s work has given particular attention to the fragmented and disrupted in her fiction. It is a discussion that has gone in different directions, sometimes focusing on fragmentation as a matter of disruption in its own right, sometimes invoking it by way of opposition to any simple assumptions of a presiding realism in Gordimer’s work; sometimes these two concerns are combined. Some years ago Dominic Head read Gordimer’s fiction as manifesting an increasing trend away from realism towards postmodern features, leaving her in a “borderline” position where her work “combines a postmodernist decentring with a necessary ideological recentring” (193). Rita Barnard has deftly followed Fredric Jameson in seeing varied possibilities within the nature of realism itself. Exploring Gordimer’s later short stories, she finds in them shifts between different generic orientations, commenting that perhaps the “meaning” of Gordimer’s fiction “resides in these shifts from formal impulse to formal impulse or genre to genre” (“Gordimer’s Transitions” 25). Elsewhere, Barnard finds moments of transitive temporality in such moves, when

1. For more on this, see Clingman, *Novels* (10, 126).

the future presents itself as an irruption into the present; this is “the unforeseen, the emergent” in Gordimer’s work, the “not-yet-become” (Barnard, “Locating” 105, 104; see also Barnard, “Leaving” 55). Fiona McCann traces a presiding liminality in Gordimer’s *Jump and Other Stories*, marking their transitional positioning in South Africa, and (following Homi Bhabha’s formulation) the “insider’s outsidersness” (Bhabha 14; McCann 35-6).² From a different perspective, Graham Riach detects in Gordimer’s stories of this period a form of “late style” akin to Beethoven’s in his late quartets, and as defined by Theodor Adorno and Edward Said. Here are various narrative erraticisms, idiosyncracies, impatiences, insistances, producing a texture of break, rupture, almost spleen (though Riach does not use that word), and often, in Gordimer’s case, the (seeming) impenetrability of some of her sentences. Riach too invokes the question of the future, and the twinned issues of how Gordimer’s “fictional texts articulate political content in specifically literary ways” (1078).

These contributions open up Gordimer’s work in various productive respects. I want to follow them up from a particular angle, organized around certain questions. Barnard, for instance, gives a compelling, even bravura account of Gordimer’s oeuvre as an example of a “situated postcolonial modernism” (“Locating” 100-1), showing in particular her debt to Kafka, Proust, and Hemingway. As Gordimer said, her rejection of white supremacy came through “the apparently esoteric speleology of doubt, led by Kafka rather than Marx” (“A Bolter” 26). If this had something to do with the nature of Kafka, it also had quite a bit to do with the nature of South Africa; this perhaps was Gordimer’s “situatedness.” But it also, I would suggest, had a good deal to do with Gordimer’s nature as a writer, her orientations, perceptions, and forms of engagement that might have led her to *see* something in Kafka in the first place. As she put it in that same early essay (immediately following her comment on Kafka), “the problems of my country did not set me writing; on the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling through the surface of ‘the South African way of life’” (“A Bolter” 26).

It is in this light that I want to think further about interruption – Gordimer’s forms of interruption of that surface. Where Barnard remarks that interruption is “a crucial technique in Gordimer’s best fiction” (“Locating” 114), I want to see if it is more than a matter simply or primarily of “technique.” I also want to see if interruption was primarily a function of Gordimer’s “late style.” Rather, it appears to me, interruption was implicit and sometimes explicit in Gordimer’s work from early on, and that it underwent development in response both to the changing world of South Africa and to Gordimer’s own developing capacities as a writer. My aim then is to view interruption in Gordimer’s work not in relation to any specific concept (such as realism, or late style, or liminality, important as these are), but rather as a matrix involving content, form, and narrative as the registration of an evolving aesthetic engagement – one that was remarkably persistent and durable, even as it underwent transformation. In short, I want to see interruption as a matter of Gordimer’s praxis as a writer all along – the praxis before, during, and *beyond* the concept, and a feature that develops its own theory of writing in her work. It is a praxis that has a history, and it is a form of signature in Gordimer’s fiction, the Jamesian figure in the carpet, so to speak.³

2. For more on liminality (in Gordimer’s *The Pickup*) see Clingman, *Grammar* 237.

3. That is, if there is a clear figure in the carpet in the Henry James story, which is not so certain: a reminder that no single concept is likely to be all-inclusive.

A last word in this preliminary account. From one point of view, we can think of interruption as simply a lens through which to view Gordimer's fiction – one that brings out certain features. As such, it may also seem arbitrary; perhaps it could be replaced by a different term. From another perspective, however, the idea of interruption might appear overdetermined, in that interruption is the very stuff of fiction, perhaps of all narrative. There is no story, no plot without shifts, challenges, reversals, whether that concerns the homecoming of Odysseus or a mysterious incident in a set of caves in India. This also means there is no character in fiction who does not face obstacles, boundaries, questions. If this is so, however, the task here is to see what Gordimer makes of that stuff in her fiction, and why. We will want to see how it is inflected by her conscious and unconscious imaginings, with implications for her work both existential, historical, formal and stylistic. This will also allow us to see interruption in her fiction as both more than arbitrary and less than overdetermined. Interruption became in Gordimer's time and place, and through her capacities and preoccupations as a writer, a form of perception, being, and understanding. In approaching it we approach the biography not of Gordimer but of her writing.

As so often, in exploring Gordimer's work, I return again to the short story I have called an early genetic blueprint for much of her fiction, "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" (see Clingman, *Novels* 212). The story was first published in September 1947, when Gordimer would have been less than twenty-four years old. It came perhaps from some unbidden zones of consciousness in a young writer, where in a few condensed pages she would have discovered the fundamental landscape and attendant themes her fiction would thereafter so predominantly be drawn to. Of course the story did not appear *ex nibilo* or *de novo*. In her characteristic work around that time Gordimer was writing what became known as her "masters and servants" stories, exploring the ironies of hierarchy and intimacy in the domestic racialized settings of South Africa. But "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" took the field of those encounters, and both generalized and concentrated its territory. In one respect it externalized the structure of Gordimer's fictional concerns, taking the domestic setting and locating it outside, in another place. In a complementary respect it became an inner diagram of Gordimer's writing, setting up at some level both concrete and abstract the characteristic terrain of its exploration and enaction.

Key aspects of the story are well known. It begins with what Gordimer calls a "reversal of the elements" in which the sky moves "like the sea on a silent day" (115). Both reversal and silence will be important, because although the story tells of a dramatic encounter and more than one reversal, its effects will be felt inwardly by the character through whom it is focalized, in a realm of silence which she may have to spend a lifetime contemplating. Here is the young white woman (though she is not explicitly racialized) making her way across open territory on the edge of a town. There she sees a figure approaching – a black man, who seems to excite both fear in her and the magnetism of an unavoidable encounter. The encounter occurs, and it is violent, but not what the young woman expects: not a sexual attack but a lunge for her handbag and parcel. The man is identified with the natural setting; the young woman is out of place, in no man's land, the emblematic space of this double reversal. The young woman surrenders her belongings, fleeing through trees and bushes, until she scrabbles through a barbed

wire fence and regains the dubious safety of the white settlement. She does not ask for help, she cannot face having to explain, and she cannot explain to herself what her struggle was about. She regains the road, but her road will now be a different one.

A story of interruption in no man's land, where space and time seem to open up and then resume, except they are no longer the same space and time. Here race and gender complicate one another, working along contradictory axes of power: the black man and the white woman. Space is important in another respect, for on the edge of "settlement" it is undefined, natural in some ways, threatening in others, beyond the realm of safety. This will be the characteristic space of so much of Gordimer's fiction, where blacks and whites engage with one another, threaten one another, attract one another, repel one another, where subconscious emanations and bodily instincts are in tension, all of it generated by unequal structures of power and inflected by their distortions. How could there be a simple logic for all of this? There are so many vectors at play, all criss-crossing one another in a field of interruption – if I can literalize this space on the basis of the story. It is significant, therefore, that the general logic of Gordimer's stories of the period, most of them set in a broader framework of realism, is itself interrupted in "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" Here its realism (recognizable setting, characters, perspectives) is complicated by an entry into a symbolic mode, where that symbolism has to do with issues that combine the epic or archetypal (liminal space, the testing ground, sexuality) with the profoundly historical, emanating from *this* time and place and no other. One mode has interrupted another even in this very early story; there has been a "reversal of the elements" in what now becomes a *different* form of archetypal terrain inseparable from this combination in Gordimer's fiction.

Other stories of this time and succeeding years mirror these issues. In "The Train from Rhodesia" (1947) a journey by train is interrupted by a stop at a rural station, but the more important interruption is in the prevailing liberal assumptions and colonial habits of mind of a white couple. The young man bargains down the cost of a wooden lion sculpture his wife has admired, and she is revolted by his meanness: a relationship interrupted by context, by encounter. Yet even here, if this seems to be wholly about content, there are formal and stylistic notes. Again we are in a no man's land in this rural space, where prevailing patterns in the lives of the two white characters are both displaced and revealed. Here too topography is mirrored by geometry, in this case triangulated in racial and gendered terms between the white woman, her husband, and the old black sculptor. Here is that image yet again: at the station "the sand became the sea" (94). Intriguingly in so early a story, Gordimer does not use quotation marks; rather, speech is unmarked in the flow of the text – except (again) for the occasional dash, a harbinger of her later practice. Also, if the forward movement of the train is interrupted, it is not only by the stop: as it leaves, "[t]he blind end of the train was being pulled helplessly out of the station" (99). It may seem excessive to compare this to Walter Benjamin's angel of history, being driven backwards into the future with the disaster of "progress" piling up at its feet, but the analogy is there, even and perhaps especially in so brief a moment (Benjamin, "On the Concept" 392). This is the logic of placement, belonging, comfort, interrupted to the point where a certain kind of content becomes the inner form of the fiction, shaping it, outlining its contours and lineaments, the very nature of its engagement. If there is something like a late style in Gordimer, it was not unconnected with formations and preoccupations she developed early on.

We see similar patterns in other early stories, such as “Six Feet of the Country” (1956). Here irony prevails, and again irony is a kind of double-movement, a contradictory polarity of perspective. On a white-owned farm just outside Johannesburg a young black man from Rhodesia has died. The authorities return the wrong body for burial, to the anguish of the young man’s father and the local black community, and the irritation of the white farm owner who is also the narrator of the story. Revealed primarily through his narration is his self-serving complacency and liberal hypocrisy. This is not so exceptional in formal terms: a morally fallible first-person narrator has a long literary history, but note the particular implication here of spatialization as perspective is differentiated. As in “The Train from Rhodesia,” the geometry is one of triangulation between the narrator, his wife Lericé, and the farmworker, Petrus, with whom the narrator has been negotiating – or haggling – over the fate of the body. “She and Petrus both kept their eyes on me as I spoke, and, oddly, for those moments they looked exactly alike, though it sounds impossible...” (19). Again, white husband and wife are divided in relation to a black figure, but if Lericé and Petrus look alike to the narrator, then there is no simple equation between them, and in this respect the geometry is not only triangulated but uneven. The narrator, Lericé, and Petrus are on different levels of “height” or authority: the triangle has vertical as well as horizontal dimensions. Moreover, there are other implicit perspectives in the story – for instance that of the dead man’s father, who realizes the body in the coffin is too heavy to be his son. Perspective is refracted – polarized, “angularized,” if one might coin a term – in multiple directions, as if it had multiple points of origin: no mean achievement in a story with a single narrator. This is origin, perspective, narration, geometry interrupted.

One could mention other stories from this period, for instance, “Which New Era Would That Be?” (1956), where the intrusive element is a young white woman whose faux-liberal gestures towards understanding and racial honesty are quite simply abominable. She disturbs a gathering in more than one way, and again perspective undergoes various kinds of angular alternations. But it may be worth taking the account forward, into the territory of Gordimer’s novels. *A World of Strangers* (1958), though only her second published novel, is quite intriguing in this regard. The main character is Toby Hood, a publisher from England (loosely based on Anthony Sampson, the editor of *Drum*) who arrives in the “world of strangers” that is Johannesburg. There he faces an environment of dizzying division, split between the white and black denizens of the city, and Toby’s alternating choices. Is he drawn to Cecil Rowe (shades of Cecil Rhodes, shades in her name of sexual ambiguity in the novel?), the flighty and unanchored woman from the wealthy northern suburbs, or to Toby’s black friend Steven Sitole, the racy black journalist from Sophiatown, or to Sam Mofokenzazi, also a journalist and the graver and more responsible figure? Angularity is apparent from the outset, not only because of the divided world, but also because Toby is the outsider whose perspective defamiliarizes the “real.” Again the first-person narrative is a complex one, ranged in this way both within and against its context.

The key moment, however, comes towards the end of the novel, when Toby is on a hunting trip with his white cronies, and here the text shifts into a different gear. Many years ago, when I first analyzed the faultlines and layerings of *A World of Strangers*, I did so via Pierre Macherey’s theories of the contradictory text and the “not-said,” but now I want to view them through the particular lens I am suggesting here. So, in that

hunting scene, outside of the environs of Johannesburg, Toby finds (or loses) himself in a blighted landscape with symbolic overtones where in animal howls in the middle of the night he hears “the echo of a pack of nightmares” (227). By the end of the trip, the dog the hunters have brought along (suitably named Grace) is dead, just like the prey they have tracked, and Toby returns to the city to find that his friend Steven has been killed in a car accident after a police raid on a club. This prompts the ending of the novel, where Toby, on the point of leaving South Africa, appears to commit himself to Sam, who is married and expecting a child. Optimism is shaded by residual ambiguities (will Toby return or won’t he?), but other aspects of the hunting scenario may be more fundamental. Again, we are in open and undefined territory, a no man’s land, where in a kind of genre alteration something important is revealed. And if this interrupts the prevailing realism of the novel, it also suggests something crucial: that this no man’s land is one of *adjacency* – linked with the world from which it emanates but not identical with it. Adjacency in this guise establishes a different syntax in the novel. Partly as a setting it is metonymic, but this is not the ordinary school version of metonymy as simple representation. Rather, something *different* happens here that sets the rest of the novel in a different light. Adjacency occurs in horizontal space, therefore, but also suggests something of depth: the different reality lurking beneath the surface of the real, which rises up (“like a pack of nightmares”) at this point. The setting then is both metonymic and metaphoric, if we adopt the schema laid out by Roman Jakobson, as long as we see these functions as both revelatory *and* differential.⁴ The shift is angular and refractive, an alternation of vision and perspective, a signal from a different modality. It is a move, if we can allow the word to resonate in different registers, of *displacement*: in every way a form of interruption as well as an interruption of the novel’s form.

One could plot versions of such displacement and interruption in other of Gordimer’s novels. *Occasion for Loving* (1963) concerns both a cross-racial love affair that interrupts the logic of apartheid, and the logic of apartheid that interrupts the affair. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) the central character, Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, finds her life interrupted by a looming decision on whether to aid an underground political movement. Here again there is a formal shift in the latter pages of the novel as, in the early hours of waking, Elizabeth imagines the astronauts circling the earth above her in space. The suggestions are mythical and archetypal. In a time of political crisis, the perspective is (in a doubled sense) spatialized, interrupted, the realism of the text superseded. And then, if we follow this sequence of novels, there comes *A Guest of Honour* with its own definitions of interruption.

If there is a work that establishes the registers of displacement in their most intriguing formal terms, however, it is surely *The Conservationist* (1974). The contours of what I view as Gordimer’s masterpiece are well known, so I will just review some of their lineations here. The setting is again one of adjacency: the white protagonist Mehring’s farm, just outside Johannesburg. The farm itself occupies a kind of conceptual adjacency, because the wealthy Mehring keeps it as a kind of faux-farm, an indulgence as well as a tax-haven: not quite a real farm, but a simulacrum of one. In this doubly metonymic setting the underground comes to the surface, interrupting the real in multiple ways. The

4. For further discussion on Jakobson, see Clingman, *Grammar* 13-5.

key figure is that of a murdered black man who has been buried shallowly on the farm by the police. Insistently, the presence of the body comes to occupy Mehring's mind, becoming his *doppelgänger* with a difference, his reproach, haunting, threat. Eventually a storm from the Mozambique Channel raises the body to the surface, at which point Mehring flees in crisis, meeting his fate – symbolic as much as “real” – in another form of no man's land, an abandoned mine-dump on the outskirts of the city. In a chiasmic shift, Mehring's history of dominance has been interrupted, while in some prophetic way that of the black body resumes, as he is laid to rest by the black farmworkers: “He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them” (267).

Added to this are forms of textual disruption: almost the entire novel is told through Mehring's prevailing monologue, expressed through composite elements of stream of consciousness and free indirect style, but this is inhabited by layerings of ironic subtextual double meaning. To take only the most obvious example, the black body whom we are repeatedly told has “nothing” will in this countertext prophetically come into his own with “everything,” while Mehring will ruminate contentedly in his fields that he “want[s] for nothing” (159). Gordimer also interrupts the narrative with a series of citations drawn from Zulu religious tradition, which disturb and obliquely appear to control the direction of Mehring's story. Farm, body, the shallowly repressed recognitions of Mehring's psyche: all become a kind of alter-text to his supervening reality. The flow of his conscious and unconscious life is overcome by the symbolic interventions of nature and emanations of the haunted present as well as the unknown but profoundly intimated future. Realism contends with different kinds of psychic, semiotic, historic, ecological and formal shifts, all of them rising to the surface to overturn the text of Mehring's placement and power. Gordimer's masterpiece is also a masterpiece of interruption.

If anything, Gordimer's succeeding novel, *July's People* (1981) takes this further. Time itself is interrupted in the imagined futurity of a revolutionary moment that also interrupts the lives of the Smales family. Space is interrupted in their flight to July's village. In this setting both existence and history inhabit interruption not as the point of intercession between one moment and the next, but rather as a prevailing and extended *condition*. In what Gordimer (following Antonio Gramsci) described as a period of interregnum, sequence itself is interrupted: “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”⁵ Relationships, in the classic raced and gendered Gordimerian triangle of Maureen, her husband Bam, and their (former) servant July, are all interrupted, caught up in the “morbid symptoms” of Gramsci's formulation (Gramsci 276). For Maureen, at the heart of the novel, there is no “going back” (the repeated phrase of the novel) to her former life, and no going forward in anything like the same way. Hence the mythic and apocalyptic resonances of the ending, the transfer into a different kind of vision of the future at this limit of space and time (Clingman, *Grammar* 218-9). *July's People* was part of a more general movement in South African writing in this period, which in various ways interrupted the surface of the real (Clingman, “Writing”), and the vision of *July's People* is a particularly concentrated version.

What then of Gordimer's later fiction? Here I should like to dip in and out of some moments to indicate how the story of interruption became developed and elaborated

5. Gramsci's definition of the interregnum provided (in a slightly different translation) both the epigraph to *July's People* and the key marker for Gordimer's essay, “Living in the Interregnum.” See Gramsci (276).

in her work. Take for instance, a short sequence from *The House Gun* (1998). It comes when Harald and Claudia Lindgard visit their son Duncan, who has been arrested for murder, in prison:

Signals fly like bats about the room. Don't ask me. We only want to know what to do. I need to see you. If you don't tell us. I don't want to see you. Whatever: have to know. You can't know. At least how did it. You don't have to get mixed up. You can't keep us out. Don't ask for what you won't be able to take. Come. I want to see you. Don't come. (30)

Is this simply a version of Gordimer's late style? Perhaps, but there is a specific logic in the passage, an unfolding of styles inherent in earlier work. There are no speech markers at all here; rather we have fusions and crossings of consciousness in this particular triangle of mother, father, son. Are the words voiced or unvoiced, signals gestured in a look, a tilt of the head? Syntax is interrupted, thoughts unfinished, there are cross-flows between interrogative and indicative moods, without the usual signals of punctuation. This is textual and subtextual communication, each gesture interrupted by another – a kind of wave interference. The speech act – if there is one here – is composite, collective, but comprised only of its echoes and refractions. If we take the “bat” analogy seriously, this is a form of semi-blind navigation, a kind of echolocation in which the position of each figure is situated in relation to the others. Bakhtinian dialogue, in which countervoices are infused in the voice of the subject, is multiplied in such a formulation (Bakhtin 265; Clingman, “Surviving”). This is angularity hypostatized, yet also marked by a kind of fluidity, occupied in challenge and counterchallenge, hectic, resigned, resistant, panicked. There are other examples of such reverberation in the novel, written into the microtexture of its sentences.

This may be a form of late style, but I would suggest it is the opposite of simply idiosyncratic. Here Gordimer's patterns of interruption have taken on expressive forms and implications impossible to separate from the moment of the novel, written three or four years into South Africa's transition out of apartheid. The writer's mood and the moment mesh, interrogate each other. From one point of view the historical “interruption” of apartheid was over, just as the history of colonialism in Africa came to an end. Yet it was also an interruption with massive effects that would never go away. So too was the postapartheid resumption an interruption – of lives, geometries, habits of mind. The novel is founded on a murder, and the murdered man – Duncan's former lover – lies “under the ground of the city” (261). This is a different kind of adjacency, as if the body in *The Conservationist* had been murdered yet again, but new life must emerge from that history. This is the adjacency of the past to the present, but it is also a space in which characters may come to be “beside” their former selves in a different kind of no man's land. A son may be a murderer, his privileged white parents must find their way. In this setting old relationships are disrupted and new ones may start to form, alternate versions of the non-biological family that begin to emerge in the novel – as in the figure of Kulu Dladla, black and gay, who becomes a surrogate son for Harald and Claudia and a kind of father to the child of Duncan and his girlfriend Natalie. In short, this is a space and time of dis/articulation, in which locution is always interlocution, relational geometry is polygonal, and navigation a novel and semi-blind undertaking. The terms become both historically and stylistically loaded: *re-generation, dis/articulation*. No surprise that it should be focalized in the oscillations and angularities of Gordimer's sentences. In particular, we see these “othered” forms of consciousness and speech: new kinds

of interruptive syntax in the bruised collective beginning to emerge from the crime of its history.

Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), written at the very end of the millennium, takes a cue from *A Guest of Honour* in that a significant part of it is set in an unspecified country. As a novel it involves a veritable landscape of interruption. One of its two main characters, Julie, is interrupted in her journey to the EL-AY café in Johannesburg when her car breaks down. Her life is interrupted by the person – and other main character – who fixes it, whom she first knows as Abdu, an undocumented Arab migrant. Abdu's life has been one of perpetual interruption in his quest to gain what he calls "permanent residence" in a variety of countries, and now his life in South Africa is interrupted by his love affair with Julie. That in turn is interrupted when he receives a departure order – as an illegal immigrant, he must leave the country within a certain period. Julie then interrupts her life again: she and Abdu get married and leave for his own country where they take up life with his family. In this transition, Abdu's proper name is revealed as Ibrahim ibn Musa: in English, Abraham son of Moses. Like any of Gordimer's novels of relationship, however, this is not an uninterrupted one, even between the two characters, and not only because of external circumstances but because those circumstances are ingrained in the very texture of their relationship. Ibrahim and Julie meet one another on the uneven terrain of their different histories, their different levels of authority, identity, and power, the angles of their different perspectives. Julie's home seems inauthentic and unreal to her but real and attractive to Ibrahim; his home seems unreal to him but becomes a place of belonging to her. Their relationship will be interrupted yet again when Ibrahim leaves his home for life and work in the United States, but Julie waits for him to come back to his village.

From this perspective we can say that interruption is embedded in the form of the novel – the way content configures its shape, the way that shape becomes both a determinant and a kind of content. Yet again this is embodied at the level of style – perhaps Gordimer's late style, but a style nonetheless consistent with her developing themes and visions all along. Yet again we see it at the level of her sentences, most significantly in modes of inner and outward vision and dialogue. In settings that are a mix of the homely/unhomely for both Ibrahim and Julie, their gaze towards one another is not one of parity or mutuality but an oscillation in the very moment of perception: Julie is "oddly conscious of him, Ibrahim, her husband, yes – watching her as if to perceive before she did what she might be seeing" (127); alternately, "[s]he often has the sense that he is not looking at her when his regard is on her; it is she who is looking for herself reflected in those eyes" (129). Ibrahim is ashamed of what Julie sees in his home country: "Not for her; no, that was it" (133). In such a moment his view purports to be located in her mind – a "reading" of her mind, so to speak – even as it is a reflection of his own: this is the relationship *as* the faultline that both connects and divides. Ibrahim applies for papers so they can leave his country, and tells Julie about it:

I started right away to get us out of here.

But where to. She was reading down the form as she spoke. What sort of country.

Does she still believe in choice. But he gave her his slow rare smile that he knew she was, always, moved to coax from him. Any one we can have. (140)

Again there are no speech markers, no punctuation to differentiate between the interrogative and declarative. This is not simply to make life difficult for readers. Rather speech

is a kind of reverberation between Julie and Ibrahim, speech a kind of thought, thought a kind of speech, altered in the very way it sounds between them; in this dialogue a question is also a form of recognition. So, “Does she still believe in choice” could be a thought from either of them before, in this oscillatory motion, it appears to emanate from Julie’s mind – but only because it is prompted by the perspective she knows Ibrahim would have, and which he therefore silently elicits from her. Similarly, the awareness of the rare smile that Julie likes to coax out of Ibrahim is a recognition that could come from either. Speech is an expression of this *otherwise* dialogue. But if the lack of markers signals the flow between the two characters, it registers the simultaneous fragmentation.

This again is Gordimer, interrupted; seeing what she, specifically, is able to see and write as a writer. It is, as I have suggested, a kind of signature, written here in reversed and reversible script.

In this way we arrive at Gordimer’s other late work, including her collections of short stories, *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), *Loot and Other Stories* (2003), and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), as well as her final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012). If we take *Jump* as emblematic, again we see the forms and varieties of interruption at work. It is there in “Once Upon a Time,” both in the horrifying story of a family interrupted by machinations of its own making, and in its fusions of realism and fantasy modes. It is there in the oscillating perspectives of a hunting party in “Spoils.” It is there in the fractured relationship between an underground political operative and the bourgeois woman he has a half-expedient half-real affair with in “Safe Houses,” or the way, in “Comrades,” in which a white woman, aligned with the anti-apartheid movement, has her view suddenly disrupted by the presence of young black comrades in her house. In “Keeping Fit” a white runner out for a jog in a no man’s land bordering on a black township has his world interrupted by an event that threatens to unsettle the foundations of his existence. “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” tells the hidden, interrupted story of death and a broken cross-racial family connection. The title story, “Jump,” concerns a character in a condition of suspension, his life as a state of interruption in the aftermath of his history as a mercenary, before a possible jump might end it. The refugee children in “The Ultimate Safari” have had their lives wholly undone in their journey from Mozambique to South Africa, and that too is a story with alternating perspectives. We can see interruption in the incursions of an authorial (or authorial-like) figure in a number of the stories, breaking some of the conventions of standard fiction. We might even think of the volume *Jump* as a whole as a discontinuous novel of the South African condition in its varied narratives, internal dialogues, fault-lines and unequal combinations, its angular topics and topographies. We would find similar, and sometimes even more pronounced, versions of its patterns in Gordimer’s other late works.

I have written this essay with a profound awareness of Nadine Gordimer’s death in July 2014, and the kind of afterlife she leaves behind. In a completely different sense we might say this was Gordimer, interrupted. It was in fact this subliminal thought that initially drew me back to her definition of Colonel Bray’s death in *A Guest of Honour*. Work and life are perhaps of a piece in such a view, one that Gordimer herself might have been at peace with, just as Bray’s death involves both acceptance and belonging. Or perhaps she would not have been at peace, given the characteristic orientations of

refusal – of the obvious, of the expected – that also made her a writer. Perhaps we can see Gordimer’s death then as in accord with her life and work, organized around one of her key codes of limit, transition, and oblique continuity, but also of unceasing interrogation, alternation. As far as her writing is concerned, perhaps it will always be possible to see it through the interruptions of new perceptions, new forms, new enquiries.

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“[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand”: Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer’s Short Stories



This paper focuses on some of the key gestures which give Gordimer’s stories their disruptive power. Across the years and from one grave to another (“Six Feet of the Country”/“The Moment Before the Gun Went Off”), Gordimer’s text both exposes the failures of the symbolic and fends off the threat of the abject. Paying particular attention to the punctuation/punctures of the stories at the strategic point of closure, the article also traces, in the more formally complex stories of *Jump*, the way in which voice becomes the instrument of the dislocation of the narrative.

“Spoils,” the twelfth story in *Jump and Other Stories*, closes on the detailed description of a fascinating scene where the focus is placed on a character who has so far remained off centre: Siza, the black man who serves as a guide to a group of white people on an exclusive safari, has taken them to see the remains of a kill; he suddenly turns away, gets his knife out and dexterously cuts out a small portion of meat for himself whilst leaving most of it behind for the lion, as he takes care to explain when asked why he has restricted himself to such a small piece. In many respects, this scene sums up what Gordimer manages to do within the confines of the short story and what power she draws from the limits it imposes. Pierre Tibi argues that synecdoche is the “mother-figure”¹ of the short story. With each of her stories, Gordimer not only “projects”² the presence of the whole through the part, she relies on fragments and vivid details to carry a meaning which is felt to cut deeper than it may seem at first. As Tibi remarks, synecdoche often gets “entangled”³ with metaphor: here the private reserve can be seen as a microcosm where Gordimer raises the question of who gets what and how the “spoils” are shared on a wider scale – or, as a matter of fact, how they *might* be shared for in that brief episode looms a larger story in which it is *not* the lion who gets “the lion’s share.” But Siza’s efficient technique and the “neatly butchered” piece he cuts out also give the passage a self-reflexive dimension: as a genre capable of turning apparent limitations to an advantage, the short story goes to show that “small is plentiful.”⁴ Gordimer makes a little go a long way, just like the aptly named Siza (a diminutive), whose wisdom stands against the spectre, past or present, of blind and boundless greed.

If Gordimer handles in a particularly skilful manner the art of the fragment, the special power of her stories must nevertheless be sought further. In “Spoils,” our attention is drawn not only to the portion of meat that is carved out but to the deft hand that grips the knife, the object on which all eyes are riveted. Gordimer’s pen shares with the knife – or draws from the knife – something of its trenchant power. In her

1. In “La nouvelle : essai de compréhension d’un genre,” Tibi entitles one of the sections of his essay “La synecdoque ou la figure-mère” (63).

2. “Le paradoxe [de la nouvelle] est ainsi de projeter le tout dont elle est une partie” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 65).

3. “Il est difficile de démêler, à ce niveau, métaphore et synecdoque. C’est souvent que la partie se rattache analogiquement au tout.” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 66)

4. “Pour la nouvelle, qui trouve le moyen de dilater les espaces réduits, ‘small is beautiful’ ou plutôt ‘small is plentiful’” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 69).

hands, the art of the short story comes closer to Poe's "effect"⁵ than to Henry James's "impression"⁶: it must cut the reader to the quick, make its mark in the flesh. If, as Poe insists, every word of a short story is written from the start with the idea of the whole it will form,⁷ Gordimer's stories often seem to shape themselves around a hole. The power of the narrative lies in the break, the shift, the blank which produce discontinuity or interruption – "a disunifying and disruptive" power (Head 163) developed and refined by the modernist short story, as Dominic Head points out. Gordimer shares with Mansfield or Joyce the same urge to tear through the thick veil of discourse and appearances, to find cracks and fissures and pry them open. One may nevertheless recognize something fiercer and blunter in Gordimer's stories which may be connected to the extreme violence – not least the discursive violence – about which she writes. "Six Feet of the Country," first published in 1953 in *The New Yorker* as the walls of apartheid were starting to go up, stands as highly emblematic. The grave that was meant to receive a body will remain empty as the deceased black migrant worker claimed by his family has been mislaid and lost by the authorities after the autopsy of the corpse: the story lays bare the abject fate to which the body has been abandoned while building a symbolic space for it. The cuts Gordimer makes – and that is particularly obvious at the closure of the stories – open or widen gaps rather than bringing resolution, or, equally often, they stop the story short by pulling a veil over what remains entirely unresolved – yet another form of violent interruption. Punctuation then reflects the ambivalence that Barthes develops around his *punctum*, both a mark and a puncture/hole/wound,⁸ both an eyecatcher and a blind spot, both piercingly significant and resistant to signification. Cuts and gaps tend to grow over the years with what Graham Riach describes as Gordimer's "late style" (Riach 2016), but they also result from a wider variety of disruptive gestures. In some of the more formally complex stories, it is in the profound instability and dis-location of voice that we can find one of the most powerful expressions of a world out of joint.

Cutting out a space for the body

Most of the time, Gordimer's short stories offer us a "slice of life" which opens perspectives far beyond the spatial and temporal confines in which the narrative chooses to dwell. As is often the case in the short story, the focus comes to bear on transitional moments: departures, journeys, encounters, separations – punctual events which put into relief what remains otherwise hidden, and set astir the imaginary veil which wraps each of her characters in his/her own limited reality. Gordimer's relentless energy at disclosing the fracture of her country often expresses itself through the need to expose not simply "illusions" but the insidious power of an invisible imaginary framework –

5. Poe insists on the "unity of effect" of the "short narrative in prose." Henri Justin comments on Baudelaire's hesitations as to the translation of Poe's "effect" and suggests that something crucial gets lost when the French poet finally opts for "impression": "Le texte est défini par la force psychique qu'il exerce sur le lecteur" (Justin 123).

6. James distinguishes two effects attainable by the rigour of brevity: "The one with which we are most familiar is that of the detached incident, single and sharp, as clear as a pistol-shot; the other of rare performance is that of the impression [...]" (*The Fortnightly Review*, April 1898, quoted by Shaw 47).

7. "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to be the one preestablished design." (Review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, *Selected Writings*, 443) This emphasis on the "whole" did not prevent Poe, of course, from building his own holes into his tales.

8. "[...] *punctum* c'est aussi: piqure, petit trou, petite tache, petite coupure – et aussi coup de dés. *Le punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)" (Barthes 49).

even, or especially, in those who show an “open mind” and are possessed of the best intentions. In *Jump*, Gordimer shows that she can go for the fast blow, a sudden turn of events that shatters everything: the bomb that explodes in “Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” leaves the reader hanging in mid-air, tears a hole that will never be filled in the fabric of the story that the narrator had patiently woven. But the pacing of the stories varies. In “Six Feet of the Country” Gordimer drills holes into the dream of owning a farm – a quintessential South African dream. The body whose fate falls to the white male narrator is not a missile that suddenly blows to bits his ordered life but a burden (an ironic displacement of the “white man’s burden”) he does not know how to carry, a corpse that can neither be retrieved nor got rid of. Each story, in its own way, justifies Dominic Head’s reservations about Stephen Clingman’s claim that “disruptive elements are less marked in [Gordimer’s] shorter fiction than it is in the novels” (Head 163). As Head points out, “Clingman reproduces an aesthetic of the short story – based on notions of its unity or aesthetic perfection – commonly found in short story criticism” (163). “Six Feet of the Country” is not just an embryo of *The Conservationist*, it stands very much on its own, conveying with great sharpness the allegorical dimension of a haunting remainder – the shard that stands for the whole is also the shard that makes a gash in the whole.

Short of being fully in a position to convey the reality of black and coloured South Africans, Gordimer mainly works at undermining the (un)reality in which the white minority is steeped. The first sentence of “Six Feet of the Country” emphasizes that disconnection through a chiasmus and a polyptoton which immediately foreground the question of the “real”: “My wife and I are not real farmers – not even Lericé, really” (19). In fact, the apparent awareness shown by the narrator turns out to have little substance as a few lines further down he rejoices in being far away from “the imitation-stone bird bath of the suburbs” (19) to enjoy what sounds very much like the real thing... until a real body gets in the way. The theme of theatricality pervades the text (Lericé is a former actress) as it does in “Spoils,” where years later the rich are still shown to be at play in their so-called “game reserve,” each sticking to his/her part including the narrator, who describes himself as “the clown [...], the charmer, the wit” (163) in the “ceremony of the evening meal” (164). It is against the backdrop of this “parody of old colonial times” (164) that the irruption of the body or the sight of flesh and blood is to be read. “Unreal” says “the wife” in “Spoils”; “No. Real. *Real*” thinks the narrator (173). Gordimer’s stories oppose airy words to the solid materiality of the body, to bodily needs, body fluids and body smells. But she also opposes a body that can be accommodated or domesticated to an excessive body, a body which is “*Real*” in the Lacanian sense in that it resists symbolic and imaginary appropriation.

The encounter with that other reality has the effect of turning the secure world in which many of Gordimer’s characters take refuge into something thin and hollow: at the end of “Comrades,” the expensively decorated house with its chandelier and carved lion becomes an eerie, fantastic place in the eyes of one of the three hungry youngsters whose final reflection closes the story: “Only the food that fed their hunger was real” (96). At the beginning of “The Bridegroom,” it is not a sculpture that is proudly displayed but a photograph which just about sums up what “the bridegroom” knows about his future wife, a “smiling girl [...] like one of those faces cut out of a magazine” (171). It is for the girl in the picture that the character is about to cast aside Peet (the

servant who acts almost like a mother, almost like a lover) and leave the camp, its people and its music in order to shut himself up in a caravan. But the failure to see what one sacrifices has greater consequences sometimes, not least for those on the other side of the camp. In “Six Feet of the Country,” the very real body that the narrator fails to restore to its proper place does not only provide an ironic counterpoint to the hollow lie in which the mock farmer lives. The hole in the ground marks a gap in the symbolic at the most basic level. The narrator who poses as feudal lord and fatherly figure does not only pathetically flounder in his dealings with the authorities who have simply lost trace of the body. He fails to recognize why this matters so much, why his black workers should be prepared to spend their last savings to retrieve a dead body. Denied, even in death (the one thing that eventually makes everyone equal) its singularity and integrity, the nameless boy who had fled Rhodesia is finally doomed to the abjection of a common grave. The hole dug in the ground which remains empty, “six feet of the country,” marks the place of a void that Gordimer chooses not to fill but which can, at the level of the narrative, work as a place of symbolic inscription and mourning.

In many respects, Gordimer’s repeated acts of tearing at the fictions people live by leaves us with two very different pictures depending on what side of the grave one decides to look at, as is underlined in a story like “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off.” But more often than not, the rejection/dejection/abjection to which one side condemns the other contaminates those who thought they were apart or did not have any part in the process of exclusion. Destruction becomes self-destruction: the “accident” by which Van der Vyver puts a bullet into his own son is no longer just an accident when one considers the crime that was committed long ago. The failure to recognize one’s own flesh and blood leads Van der Vyver to accept a partition through which he believes that he can share something (“a moment of high excitement shared through the roof of a cab,” 116) when that barrier conceals the path of the bullet that it nevertheless lets through. But it is as though the bullet had bounced back: the farmer ends up “soaked” in the blood of the “boy” he failed to call his “son,” just as later at the police station he is seen “sobbing, snot running onto his hands like a dirty kid” (113). Whether they refuse to call things by their names or remain fathers in name only (another instance of which is to be found in “A Journey”), fathers repeatedly fail, effecting a dissociation of the real and the symbolic instead of enabling their connection.⁹ The recurrent motif of fathers destroying their own flesh finds one of its most unbearable expressions in “Once Upon A Time” where a child ends up mauled by the “dragon’s teeth” that his own parents have erected all around their house. The torn flesh of the child offers a powerful image of the morbid state of a country, where until something new can be born,¹⁰ death strikes what has barely time to see the light of day.

In its own way “Spoils” can be considered as representing the ultimate stage of the situation of abjection which is already powerfully conveyed in “Six Feet of the Country”:

9. On the whole, if Gordimer’s white male characters tend to be failing or lacking in many respects, it is not so much their psychological shortcomings which are at stake here, but a lack at the level of what Lacan calls the Paternal function or the Paternal Metaphor which is supposed to connect the Symbolic and the Real – at the cost of a loss that must be conceded.

10. I am alluding to the epigraph of *July’s People*, “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms,” a quote from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

In the warmth of the bed your own fart brings to your nostrils the smell of rotting flesh: the lamb chops you devoured last night. Seasoned with rosemary and with an undertaker’s paper frill on the severed rib-bones. Another corpse digested. (161)

One might argue that the “corpse” is in this case only the flesh of an animal, but the allusion to the “undertaker’s frill” and the list of news items that follows emphasize the idea that the narrator is not just talking about the meat daily placed on his table but about the daily fare of TV and newspapers, human bodies with which one is fed every day and whose death one has learned to “digest” without thinking about it. Things are closing in: the inability to give the body a decent burial has turned into a general necrophagia, and those who think they are bathing in “amniotic fluid” in the perfect swimming-pool might not realise that what is “at their own body temperature” (174) is the putrid smell which the focalizer now detects everywhere. In front of these children (babies?) at play in their game reserve, Siza’s final gesture proves particularly meaningful: the knife fulfils a practical purpose – that of cutting the piece of meat with which the father will feed his family – but it is also the instrument of an unwritten law (about how things might/should be shared) which does not simply give the cutting power of the knife a symbolic value but, more fundamentally, restores the value of the symbolic.

Rita Barnard points out that one may find in Siza “disquietingly familiar traits: the features of the old colonial type of ‘the guide who really knows Africa’” (131), something rather comforting for the little group. Yet the cliché is somewhat upset by what everyone has recognized earlier:

He has a knife in his hand and the white man who has just joined the group recognizes it, it is the knife that is everywhere, nowhere without the knife, on the news, at the dark street-corners, under the light the warders never turn out. (178)

With the raw facts that Gordimer introduces at regular intervals in her stories, the author does not simply consolidate a background of which we never lose sight, she rends the fabric of her text in a manner which distinguishes her fiction from that of her modernist forebears without being ascribable to a straightforward realism. Whether or not we decide to consider this feature as characteristically postmodernist, it introduces a heterogeneous element which points to the presence of something very real outside fiction despite the fact that it is always mediated, and heavily so. The symbolic can, and must, be restored but without losing sight of what it renounces or sacrifices.

Cutting points: tearing the curtain/drawing the curtain

It is generally acknowledged that the dynamics of the short story rests largely on what happens in its last lines. Unsurprisingly, it is an ideal strategic point at which Gordimer can display her cutting skills. The strength of much of Gordimer’s fiction lies in the subtlety and complexity of the characters, narrators, and situations she builds: in other words, things are rarely clear-cut in the world she depicts. Even when she opens a story with a name like Marais Van der Vyver, which brings to mind uncomfortable associations (with Eugène Terre’Blanche for example), she decides to project in the midst of a stereotypical and extreme picture of white resistance the figure of a man torn by conflicting feelings that he cannot fully acknowledge. Alienated, out of place, or stuck in an uncertain in-between, many of her characters nevertheless end up having to make choices – or, more often, having these choices made for them. Having explored a zone

of contradiction, ambiguity or indeterminacy, a number of Gordimer's stories draw their power from the trenchant manner in which the issue gets decided. The brutality of the story does not then lie so much in the gap that opens but in the gap that closes again as if nothing had happened.

In many cases, as in "Town and Country Lovers," the brutal ending reflects the brutality of a law and its officers who break into houses and tear couples apart when they are not of the same skin colour – unless this law has been internalised and splits individuals in two: in the second part of this story which forms a diptych, a father ends up killing with his own hands the illegitimate child he had with Thebedi, the only girl with whom he seems to have ever found a true connection. In each case, the ending puts an end to a relationship formed despite the barriers erected by the law, but, as often, the worm is in the apple: the relationship is shown to be marred in the first place by the irresponsibility of the two white men who get involved with, respectively, a coloured and a black girl. If the Austrian geologist of the first story seems far less encumbered by cultural and political determinations than the son of a typical white South African farmer, his detachment in this convenient relationship turns out in the end to be almost as chilling as the crime committed in the second story. The geologist's superficial involvement¹¹ is finally presented as being not so different from the rape which is committed under the umbrella of the law when the young coloured woman is forced to undergo a medical examination: "[The district surgeon] put into her where the other had made his way so warmly a cold hard instrument that expanded wider and wider" (277).

The tension between the ambiguous situations Gordimer's narratives build and the straightforward outcomes that they sometimes reach can be read in various ways: nuances and intricacies may have to be treated as irrelevant when considering the crude racial divide which is at the heart of every story. In this case this leads the narrator to sacrifice his/her characters and feed them to the press: the end of each part of the diptych cuts to newspaper reports of the trials which have the brutal effect of exposing the characters like criminals (the only criminal remaining in fact shielded behind "his mother's raincoat"); at the same time the narrative suddenly erects a screen which cuts us off from the characters we have just read about and pushes the story out of the picture:

Interviewed by the Sunday papers, who spelled her name in a variety of ways, the black girl, speaking in her own language, was quoted beneath her photograph: "It was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more." (286)

This is the art of cutting a long story short: Gordimer's piece, like Siza's piece, gets "neatly butchered," like the name of the black girl. Whether Thebedi expresses her true feelings or not, the episode is closed and the curtain drawn.

If dismissal can be read as a sign of resilience (marked earlier in the case of Thebedi by her marriage to Njabulo), the return to normality proves sometimes more harrowing. At the end of "Six Feet of the Country," it is the father of the young man whose body has not been retrieved who is dismissed by the narrator and his wife: "The old man from Rhodesia was about Lerice's father's size, so she gave him one of her father's old

11. Despite his profession, the man avoids delving deep into the various countries to which his work leads him: "[...] year after year the experience of this work unfolds him, swaddling him away from the landscapes, the cities and the people, wherever he lives" (267). The story already plays on the tension between the horizontal and the vertical that Stephen Clingman explores in *Jump*, but there is no room for the *Unheimlich* here, the man in question being too safely "swaddled."

suits, and he went back home rather better off, for the winter, than he had come” (31). Just before this final twist, it had seemed that the narrator was to pay a dearer price for his inability to sort out the swap of corpses: the narrator’s remark that his wife and Petrus, their black servant, “looked exactly alike” as they “kept their eyes turned on” him suggests Lerice’s definitive estrangement from her husband and a swapping of sides.¹² The very end makes this shift less clear as husband and wife seem to agree on what is not just a swap but yet another “swindle,” the very thing against which the narrator purported to act (“Why should they get away with a swindle?” 30). The “suit” carries an echo of the response first given by the health authorities: “the body had been suitably disposed of” (24); on top of it the swindle gets conveniently covered up or dressed up by what may pass for an act of kindness.

The sudden interruptions or blunt conclusions which close many a story draw their power from the way in which they wrap up the narrative but also from what they leave out. The art of cutting in Gordimer’s fiction can be seen to conform to the art of omission championed by Hemingway. In this particular case, leaving something out means also refraining from writing the story one can only conjure up from the other side: the end of “Six Feet of the Country” marks the beginning of the story that remains to be written, that of Petrus and Petrus’s brother and Petrus’s father. The same applies to almost all the stories involving black or coloured characters: the blank they refrain from filling allows that story to exist somewhere, in the wake of the text. Gordimer stops on a threshold even when dealing with the side she feels she knows a bit better. The end of “Jump,” “Not now; not yet” (20) which leaves the reader poised on the edge of a window is a case in point: by deferring the jump, the text displaces the emphasis from an action with which the character is familiar to an abyss which remains gaping.¹³

The art of omission invites us to pay close attention to the image used by Gordimer to describe the ability of the short story to capture something the novel cannot convey: “the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness” (Gordimer, “Flash of Fireflies” 264). One may feel that the darkness does not simply lie around but within: shadows and blind spots appear even where Gordimer directs “the light of the flash.” The cut-off point of the story heightens the power of the half-said, of the simultaneous combination of revelation and obfuscation. The last word of “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” “son,” literally sheds light on a number of elements we have read so far but also suddenly introduces a wide shadowy area, a place into which the reader will never go. We get an interesting variation of what Pierre Tibi calls an epiphany with a double trigger (“*une épiphanie à double détente*”)¹⁴: the “crime,” which we are prepared to believe

12. Dominic Head, among others, reads the story in that manner: “A crucial aspect of this ending is the clearly implied distinction between the narrator and his wife: her interest in the matter suggests a compassion which is at one with her apparent affinity with Petrus, whereas the narrator’s dogged engagement with the authorities is no more than a matter of principle. The isolation of the narrator’s perspective parallels the physical isolation indicated by his physical estrangement from his wife” (Head 173). In that respect one may underline a striking shift in the last scene which starts with “She and Petrus” (the narrator is facing the pair), an ironic echo of the very beginning of the story “My wife and I.”

13. In an article entitled “The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer’s *Jump and Other Stories*” Nicolas Boileau suggests a fascinating parallel between the story “Jump” and *Lord Jim*: “Analysed as a reference to Beckett and Shakespeare (Riach 1085), and I would add to Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, which is also about an enigmatic jump, this story interrogates the limits of telling [...]” (Boileau 59-60). We can also find very powerful echoes of *Heart of Darkness* in the story, and, more generally, a strong connection with Conradian aesthetics as a whole.

14. Tibi comments: “[...] l’épiphanie dite à double détente se décompose en deux épiphanies successives dont la seconde confirme, nuance, complète ou problématise la précédente. La première rebondit, fait ricochet, se dédouble

was not a crime, conceals another “crime” of sorts of which not a word will be said. However blunt, the conclusion raises complexities that linger beyond the close of the story, beyond the last word which works like a quilting point yet tightens a knot of contradictory feelings – an instance of what Dominic Head calls the “productive” or “resonant” ambiguity (165) of Gordimer’s stories.

What is hushed, hidden or obscured is often simply displaced, as can be seen at the end of “Keeping Fit,” where the emotional shock the character has been through both reveals and conceals itself in the “fit” he has, when exposed to the desperate cry of a bird trapped in a pipe. This very Mansfieldian ending insists on the failure on the part of the character to recognise what has just happened to him and his need to blot things out. But the reader is also left to hear in that lonely and helpless cry something which the man cannot have experienced in his very brief excursion to the other side, something which lies beyond the curtain. “No room for sorrow” (58), a phrase describing the “drunken joy of the gypsies” in “My Father Leaves Home,” may be said to characterise Gordimer’s fiction as a whole. The sense of feelings heavily contained can be found at the end of the last story in *Jump*, “Amnesty,” where the puzzling vision of the rat emerges from “a bar of grey, not enough to make rain,” potentially an image of tears that cannot be shed. Even in “Once Upon A Time,” where ambiguity has been ruled out to make room for a perfectly cruel tale, the last character to appear is the “weeping gardener,” a puzzling detail which works like a *punctum* in the general picture. Unlike “trusted” in “the trusted housemaid,” “weeping” does not work like a fixed epithet so that the weeper seems to stand apart from the stock characters of the mock fairy tale. There might be after all a place for tears and mourning, beside the clear “warning” to those who still believe in fairy tales in a country like South Africa. For is there anything sadder than to accept that a child can no longer read a tale for children or will do so at his own peril? That story, the black gardener certainly knows better than anyone else.

Widening the gap: from dissonance to dislocation

Holes and gaps can be considered to widen in Gordimer’s later texts; they also result from a growing variety of gestures that rend the unity of the text. The temporal fabric, which is mostly linear in the first stories, becomes more and more discontinuous over time but it is also in terms of voice and focalization that the homogeneity of the text gets severely undermined.

From very early on, Gordimer has excelled in producing intense moments of dissonance in her stories through a biting irony. While resorting to a large extent to dramatic or tragic irony, Gordimer also uses her incisive skills to insert now and then an incredibly direct line that will sting the reader. In “Town and Country Lovers,” Dr Franz-Joseph von Leinsdorf appears from the first as rather distant and withdrawn, but delicate and refined – hence the shocking effect of his description of the cashier-girl who is to become his companion and lover: “She was rather small and finely made, for one of them. The coat was skimpy but no big backside jutted” (269). In “The Bridegroom,” Gordimer selects the moment when the two camps (that of the white overseer and that

[...]” (Tibi “Pour une poétique de l’épiphanie,” 225). Here the power of the ending lies in the fact that one short word condenses the two revelations whilst keeping them separate, the idea of a “crime” committed long ago “problematising” the second “crime.”

of the black workers) seem to have merged (“they were sitting close in at the fire now,” 178) to wreck the sense of harmony the music had introduced. It is at the moment when “the bridegroom,” carried away by an enthusiastic and generous impulse, offers to share his own music that he flounders in the most pathetic and embarrassing way: “Next week’ – the young man raised his voice gaily – ‘next week when I come back, I bring radio with me, plenty real music. All the big white bands play over it—’” (178). The long dash does not simply mark a pause in the narrative: the character suddenly stops because he knows there will be no “next week” around the camp fire; he might also be vaguely aware of the violent rift he has suddenly introduced. Whether he is or not, the effect on the reader is the same: the dash is the limit against which the feeling of something shared gets shattered in a territorial reassertion (“white bands,” “real music”) but also in a parody of the parody of a white man speaking his own language in the way he thinks a black man does.

Irony is thus often introduced through a process of self-exposure which makes the reader wince or sometimes writhe with embarrassment. The shaming moment takes place sometimes closer to home, as can be seen in “Comrades,” where the well-meaning hostess, a distant double of Gordimer herself, digs herself into a hole when she draws attention to her “carved lion.” Once again Gordimer tracks the blunder, the impulse that leads one to bare one’s defences, accuse or humiliate oneself. The moment of dissonance is a moment of deep resonance: “the foolish remark” brings the attention to bear on an object which gives the obstacle that separates the hostess from the “comrades” a heavy material presence. The woman suddenly becomes as grotesque as the lion which she calls hers (“How d’you like my lion?” 96). In this case, the embarrassment is only alleviated by a sudden shift of focalization which makes the hostess and her lion simply irrelevant. As the narrator cuts to the point of view of one of the comrades, the “impact” (96) of the whole place seems neutralized; the only thing that matters and that has any reality, the only thing *they* can call theirs, is “their” hunger. After the white woman’s self-sabotage, the only thing that can save the story and turn “the foolish interruption” into “revelation” (96) is to wipe her out as the consciousness that can carry the narrative.

It is this process of erasure, together with the multiple shifts of points of view, which makes a story like “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” a perfect example of the attempt not just to describe the gulf that divides the country but also the sense of things being out of joint. Apart from the dramatic irony at work in the story, one can hear now and then the bite of a recognizable voice making itself heard “silently” through free indirect speech in order to expose an all too familiar racist discourse: “[...] blacks can sit and drink in white hotels, now the Immorality Act has gone, blacks can sleep with whites... It’s not even a crime any more” (114). But irony has become local: we no longer get the impression that we can rely on a vantage point from which to embrace the whole narrative. The reader seems to have been deliberately challenged to identify the point of view or the voice that shifts sometimes within the same sentence. If we assume that we are following the roving eye of a single omniscient narrator, that eye is literally all over the place, while the voice keeps shifting, disconcertingly, between a factual approach and highly subjective and offensive comments. An example of this can be found in the scene at the graveyard where the narrator adopts a detached and speculative attitude which suggests the choice of external focalisation (“It is obvious

from the quality and fittings of the coffin [...]”; “a woman who can’t be more than in her late thirties [...]”¹⁵ but then inserts into the description tendentious comments such as “The young wife is pregnant (of course)” (115). The reader may have to overcome his disbelief and accept that the whole narrative has been entrusted to an invisible narrator who is deeply biased (and not just echoing the prejudices of some of the characters) despite the regular return to what poses as a mere exposition of the facts. The “moment” which gives the story its title introduces yet another complexity. As the anadiplosis that spans the blank between the penultimate and final sections shows, that moment is both connected to the rest of the story and severed from it, separate in the narrative economy of the text. Although the focalisation is clear (an internal focalisation on Van der Vyver), the voice that carries the tragic moment suddenly seems to have been neutralised. The droning voice of self-victimization does reappear in the final paragraph but it is as if that voice had been hushed for a while. Somehow we hear that hush: the moment draws its intensity from its contents (carefree laughter followed by sudden death; a man covered in what he sees for the time as his own blood) but also from its suspended quality. The fantasy of rewinding time and freezing the moment “before” may belong to the character; but the desire to accommodate that moment “without explanation” (116) could respond to a need on the part of the implied author, tired of her own words, to suspend both the ruthless logic she has set into motion and the discourse that surrounds it. “No room for sorrow” however: the moment can only exist thanks to the gesture which consists in cutting it off from the rest of the narrative to make it float in a kind of impossible nowhere.

Together with the growing disorientation it generates, the problematic inscription of voice points to the difficulty of providing a third space from which to rise above a fracture which has become more and more acute. The schizophrenia embodied by Van der Vyver makes room in “Jump” for what amounts to an erasure of identity after a changing of sides. Here again, Gordimer cuts off the moorings of the voice carrying the narrative but to a different effect: the disappearance of an authoritative voice no longer comes from a multiplication of voices but from a reduction to a voice alone with itself.¹⁶ “He” is both inside and outside, “behind the door” and following the travelling eye along the corridor by which “he is finally reached within” (3). “He” is both the “dim ballooned vision of a face” on “the silvery convex of the TV screen” and the man “looking up” “on the dead screen” (4) – although he cannot be gazed at and gazing at exactly at the same time.¹⁷ “He” is a series of endless reflections, faced with the impossibility of coinciding with “himself” and yet who can’t be anyone but “Himself.” “He” “is an echo in the chamber of what was once the hotel” (3). Time has become a perpetually dark room, a cave to which he has been exiled and in which, like Echo herself, he is undergoing a slow process of petrification. We realise that his story is the repetition of a story that has been repeated many times before – in endless interviews, interrogations, confessions – like the tape that is being played over and over again and that conjures up the image of a soldier that could be himself. It is also story *as repetition*.

15. “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” 115 and 116. My emphasis.

16. Although the story presents itself as a third-person narrative, the focalisation is entirely internal and allows for no other point of view but that of a single character. It thus comes as no surprise when the narrative spontaneously turns into monologue.

17. A point which Derrida develops at length in his reflections on the spectral and time “out of joint” in *Specters of Marx*.

As Graham Riach points out, it is difficult not to think of Beckett and *Krapp’s Last Tape* in this “temporal shuttling between past and present, leading to a sense of interminable stasis” (Riach 1083). But if the image that comes to mind is that of a Möbius strip, as Riach suggests, it is not exactly that because “forward progress is at once a return to the point of origin” (1084). A Möbius strip does not have a beginning or an end and this is the nightmare from which the character can no longer awaken. The end suggests that nothing and no one can cut that strip. What turns out to be meaningful is the absence of a determination that might have grounded the word “jump,” which can be read as a noun or a verb, a truncated infinitive or an imperative form. Beyond a shift of meaning characteristic of Gordimer’s fiction, as Karen Lazar rightly points out,¹⁸ we get the sense that “jump” now floats in the same void as that which the character inhabits.

A tale does unwind little by little in “Jump” but that does not counter the feeling of repetition as temporal landmarks get blurred and we can’t be sure at any one moment which umpteenth time the tale has reached in its endless loop. Just like in “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” matter resists form. As they both diverge and overlap, the separate paragraphs that make up the text in each of these stories do not simply produce a jumbled temporal order but appear like a repeated attempt to get closer to a story that cannot be told in full – an extension of the “stuttering” (1085) Riach hears in the “telling, telling-telling” of “Jump” (14). At this late stage, the story has become a provisional construct, a tale in the making. As they foreground their lacunary nature, both short stories can be considered to reflect the state of disintegration of the country in the last years of the apartheid, adding a stone to, or rather boring yet another hole into, a literary edifice which could be compared to a termitary in the story of the same name.¹⁹ But this act of dismantling appears more and more clearly as the ethical response to the state of the country rather than its mere allegorical representation. The description of the hollow ground full of tunnels and passages on which the house of the narrator of “Once Upon a Time” is built reminds us of the fragile ground on which her solid house was once erected. It also prefigures her intention of grabbing not so much a knife as a pickaxe in the fairy tale she eventually concedes to write. At the same time, by duplicating the act of mining and undermining, the author still performs an act of remembrance and not just a dismemberment: she builds a space for a haunting past – “six feet of the country” for the “Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners” (24) who worked and sang and died down below.

The journalistic and the poetic

The “rents and fissures” that Gordimer builds into her texts or the “ravaged character” of her late style (to quote Riach quoting Adorno, 1077) take on multiple forms which include self-reflexivity. A story like “Once Upon a Time” suggests that metafiction in Gordimer’s hands is not just about showing the seams of the story, but bringing out a tension which can put the narrative at war with itself. The author *will* write her fairy tale after all, but not without putting up a major act of resistance. It is also striking that as she brings us closer and closer to a raw reality, Gordimer should multiply layers of

18. “Gordimer’s stories almost always involve a radical shift in power relations of some kind [...]. The trajectory of a mere word in a story may often be enough to signal such a shift: as in the case of *jump* which signifies domination yielding to self-disgust” (Lazar 787).

19. “The Termitary” was published in 1980 in *A Soldier’s Embrace*.

texts and screens, in Conradian fashion, or in more contemporary style by inviting into her text newspaper or TV. While they insistently conjure up the realm of facts, it would be inaccurate to say that these insertions highlight an unproblematic realistic agenda as they are often presented as potential for further or alternative distortions. What is undeniable is the disturbance they introduce or the clash they provoke: the journalistic often appears as the instrument of transgression, like the metaleptical inclusion of an author who could be called Nadine Gordimer in some of the stories. Cutting through barriers, Gordimer raises the question of the continuity and discontinuity between different orders of narration and representation. What matters once again is the gap she opens. This constitutes an interesting development of what, according to Valerie Shaw, is a seminal aspect of the short story, *i.e.* the association of “the journalistic and the poetic”:

The poetic and the journalistic are usually taken to be opposed, not complementary, terms, but [...] the short story has a marked ability to bring apparent extremes of style together, mingling self-conscious literary devices and colloquial spontaneity within the “essentially poetic” compression of single narrative. (Shaw 6-7)

Gordimer does not simply combine or “mingle” the journalistic and the poetic: while the journalistic may be used to break the continuity of the narrative and strip the illusion into which the text may lull us, we may argue that the poetic possesses its own disruptive power as it cuts through discourse with sharp images that challenge the stability and univocity of meaning. The end of “Spoils” also offers us a good example of how the metafictional itself, sometimes borrowing the form of discursive interruption, can gain some edge through the use of powerful images which in their turn silence discourse. As the instruments of a “productive ambiguity,” poetry and allegory assert their own subversive potential, prying open and keeping open the gap between signifier and signified. What have a few “leaves” in common with the verb “Leaves” in the title “My Father Leaves Home”? The end of the story, which strings together a long succession of negative sentences, foregrounds a hiatus: there is no way of retrieving the story of the father “leaving” home (“This village is not my father’s village”) and it is “not out of any sentiment,” we are told emphatically, that the narrator has collected “six leaves from [her] father’s country.” Despite the lack of correspondence between present and past, something unexpected has nevertheless been experienced in the wood, a fear that knows no boundaries and connects various pictures in the narrator’s mind. Of that collage – a landscape of fear with “the hurt and hate it brings” (66) – the “leaves,” across time and space, do bear some trace.

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Nadine Gordimer's Strangely Uncanny Realistic Stories: The Chaos and the Mystery of It All



This paper purports to study and develop an aspect of Gordimer's fiction which has often been overlooked. Uncanny elements may be identified all along her career constituting a kind of return of the repressed. Insects, animals, landscapes, unidentified threats and fears loom large in the background and constitute a menace for the white population most of the time. The black population is confronted with even more direct brutal problems. Thus in an indirect way, an allegorical one in the sense of the etymological "speaking other," "the situation" under the state of Apartheid is addressed and denounced. Gordimer's so-called realistic short stories turn out to contain eerie uncanny features. The geography and the history of this African country are called upon to testify to a violent past inscribed on the landscape by mapmakers.

Nadine Gordimer has often been hailed as a realist writer, even a social realist one, but reading her novels and especially her short stories, one cannot help but be struck by the presence, as if looming in the background, of the uncanny. Persistent, unusual, even *unheimlich*¹ situations or events reveal another side of the writer's art showing she could use all the tools a writer has at her fingertips to reach her aim. Gordimer always insisted that she started writing as a young fifteen-year old in a mining town and that she was chosen by the situation, and did not choose it herself. She happened to be a writer writing in South Africa but first and foremost she was a writer. In her introduction to her *Selected Stories* published in 1975, she insists on her own take on what a commitment is and simultaneously addresses the (im)possibility of defining the elusive form of the short story compared to that of the novel:

What I am [...] saying, then, is that in a certain sense a writer is "selected" by his subject – his subject being *the consciousness* of his own era. How he deals with this is, to me, the fundament of commitment, although "commitment" is usually understood as the reverse process: a writer's selection of a subject in conformity with the rationalization of his own ideological and/or political beliefs.

My time and place have been twentieth-century Africa. Emerging from it, immersed in it, the first form in which I wrote was the short story. [...]

[A] short story is a concept that the writer can "hold," fully realized, in his imagination, at one time. [...] A short story *occurs*, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop – sweat, tear, semen, saliva – that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it. (*Selected Stories* 14-5, emphasis in original)

The very sensual and concrete way she addresses the question of creation alluding to sweat, tears, semen and saliva, together with the role of imagination, exemplify Gordimer's own way of dealing with "a situation" as she calls it, whether happening in the interior or the exterior world. I shall concentrate on this surprising – for a writer deemed realist and a committed one at that – side of her art, the presence of what she calls "fantasy" verging on the uncanny in her short stories, together with the use of the visual

1. I am using "*unheimlich*" following Sigmund Freud's "*das Unheimliche*" (the uncanny), and as applied to the postcolonial context by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*.

and the recurring reference to the unknown impressive/oppressive mysterious presence of the all-enfolding “dark continent” and its inhabitants claiming their due even while assuming the looming shape of a frightening presence lurking on thresholds. Although based on a grim reality, sometimes her stories verge on the genre of the fable or of the cruel fairy tale. A very clear example of this is the so-called Christmas story she wrote for *Salmagundi*, “Once Upon a Time,” which takes the canonical form of the fairy tale but ends up as a very cruel one with the death of the little boy maimed by the many defense contraptions built by his parents, egged on by “the old witch” his grandmother, to protect them against the outside invaders.

“The Flash of Fireflies”: a visual take on the short story

For Gordimer, the short story is the ideal form for writing about a moment producing a close-up effect on a situation. It is close to poetry and can be read “at one sitting” (Poe) which, in a country for a long time living in “a state of siege” – from the sixties till the nineties – was an asset: it was easier to concentrate on a short text rather than on the longer form of the novel.²

In her essay “The Flash of Fireflies,” Gordimer is once again led to compare the forms of the novel and of the short story. In terms of their relationship she comments on the short story’s ability to

capture the ultimate reality at a time when [...] we are drawing nearer to the mystery of life or are losing ourselves in a bellowing wilderness of mirrors, as the nature of that reality becomes more fully understood or more bewilderingly concealed by the discoveries of science and the proliferation of communication media outside the printed word. (179)

The fact that she wrote this in 1968 shows she had an inkling of what would rule our world some 50 years later: the importance of communication media to enhance, transpose or conceal reality in a very different way from the printed word. At a time when a book can be read like an image from a digital screen this can sound anticipatory indeed. Of note too is her use of a potent synesthesia mixing the visual and the aural and resorting to “a bellowing hall of mirrors” to illustrate her impression of being at a loss. We shall see that thinking in images is one of the characteristics of Gordimer’s aesthetics.

She insists on the paradox of the nature of the reality captured by fiction when it may be “more fully understood” or “bewilderingly concealed” by scientific advances and communication media. Therefore, she is led to examine the complex relation of fiction to fantasy and to what she calls “the ultimate reality.” She then resorts to another very visual idiom to convey her meaning, showing how she tends to think in images. Fantasy, she claims, is no more than “a shift in angle” in relation to reality and the rational. “Flashes of fearful insights alternate” with lulled states of indifference:

Writers are becoming more and more aware of the *waviness of the line that separates* fantasy from the so-called rational in human perception. It is recognized that fantasy is no more than a *shift in angle*; to put it another way, the rational is simply another, the most obvious, kind of fantasy. Writers turn to the less obvious fantasy as a *wider lens* on ultimate reality. But this fantasy is something that changes, merges, emerges, disappears *as a pattern does*

2. Black writers in South Africa also chose the theatrical form for this reason. Thus they were able to address their audience directly before being chased away by the police, in a maximum of an hour and a half, the time necessary to read a short story too. Poetry was also a favourite means of literary expression for black writers then. They often could not spare days and months for writing novels. When they were not exiled like Ez’kia Mphahlele, Gordimer felt close to them.

viewed through the bottom of a glass. It is true for the moment when one looks down through the glass; but the same vision does not transform everything one sees, consistently throughout one's whole consciousness. Fantasy in the hands of short-story writers is so much more successful than when in the hands of novelists because it is necessary for it to hold good only for the brief illumination of the situation it dominates. [...] [T]he short story is a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference. ("Fireflies" 180-1, my emphases)

Her comparison is close to the fragile kaleidoscopic view one may ascribe to her writing and the way she renders her multicoloured ever-changing view of her society, as so many bits of geometric glass "viewed through the bottom of a glass." The result is a pattern and an image close to those produced by fantasy when reality (that of bits of coloured glass and mirrors) is distorted under a wider lens or a microscope.

In the same essay, she develops her conception of the short story as a brief illuminating moment she calls, returning to one of her favourite images using insects, "the flash of fireflies." She evokes "the quality of human life, where contact is more like *the flash of fireflies*, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness" and explains that "[s]hort story writers see *by the light of the flash*; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment" (180, emphasis added).

The short story therefore gives us quick glimpses of particular moments, it triggers a sudden vision of a fugitive reality temporarily anchored in the present of the event, and no more. The "flash of fireflies" as aesthetic principle, and the use of punctuation as we shall see later on, are also akin to one of Woolf's striking short stories written during the Blitz, "The Searchlight" (269-72). In this story, the recurring use of three dots marking the text mimics the rotating action of the searchlight as seen from a tower by the characters.

Gordimer's seminal image, that of the flash of fireflies, expressing her aesthetic and ethical approach, reappears with variation in a later short story. In "Something Out There," published in 1984, the white terrorist is stopped at a barrier while a train passes by. He finds himself alongside the estate agent who lets him the dilapidated farmhouse, and his wife, in their car. After a moment of anxiety, he feels free to give a social sign of good will. The description of the light thrown onto the veld by the lit-up train windows projecting flashes on the veld, which the narrator compares to a camera lens, echoes Gordimer's essay:

On one of [Charles's] return trips, he drew up at the level crossing and found himself beside Naas Klopper and Mrs Naas in the Mercedes. A train shuttered past like a camera gone beserk, lens opening and closing, with each flying segment of rolling stock, on flashes of the veld behind it. The optical explosion invigorated Charles. He waved and grinned at the estate agent and his wife. (139)

This gives the reader a key to her short story writing within the core of the story itself, conceived of as a succession of luminous visions and significant moments caught in a glimpse.

This striking image will allow me to argue that one of the means she resorts to so as to convey the often elusive "ultimate reality" is the constant but discreet presence of the visual in her work. It may directly figure like photography (in "Jump" and in "Amnesty"), or indirectly, when the visual is a means of translating reality into vision in a recurring description ("Livingstone's Companions"), or as a potent symbolical image

verging on the allegorical, the gruesome and the macabre (“Six Feet of the Country,” *The Conservationist*) as we shall see.

Making use of “significant detail”: Looking through a microscope

One of the constant marvels of Gordimer’s texts and a salient stylistic trait is the way she manages to bring to the European reader’s eyes the very presence of such a far-off country, its landscape and its people by describing minutiae. She gives us an insect-like view of plants, gardens, clothes, houses, and of course people, focussing for instance on their calloused feet when black people arrive barefoot. In “Spoils,” people marvel at the mound of guts which spill out of the zebra and at the frenzied insects’ activity going on there. The writing microscope is doing its minute studying work. Note once more the reference to insects and scarabs:

What’s going on here is a visible transformation of an inert mass. It is literally being carried away by distinctly different species of beetles who know how to live by decay, the waste of the digestive tract. The scarabs with their armoured heads burrow right into the base of the mound, and come out backwards, rolling their ball of dung between their strong, toned legs. The tunnels they have mined collapse and spread the mound more thinly on its periphery; smaller beetles are flying in steadily to settle there, where their lighter equipment can function. (177)

Of course, focussing on detail is part of Gordimer’s visual way of writing and the hallucinatory way with which she tries to capture “the ultimate reality,” verging on the *unheimlich* at times, as if magnified by a microscope. This is a trait she shared with Woolf too who was described as dissecting people like insects, providing her readers with an entomologist’s point of view. In “The Lady in the Looking Glass” (*Shorter Fiction* 221-5), for instance, the lady is submitted to close analysis as if she were being etched, divested of her superficial being all at once.

Defining once the import of “the significant detail” and the necessity of what she called “the fresh eye” Gordimer once argued:

It’s significant detail that brings any imaginative work alive, whatever the medium. If you can’t see things freshly, if you can’t build up through significant detail, then I think you fall into cliché, not only in the use of words and phrases, but even in form. That fresh eye is the most valuable thing in the world for any writer. [...] In *The Conservationist*, the landscape is the most important character. So therefore, it had to be allowed to speak and the land could only speak and come alive for the reader through my finding its significant details. (*Conversation* 13)

The visuality of the scenes in “Spoils” for instance is so vividly intense at times that one has the feeling of actually seeing the cubs tearing at the zebra’s flesh, or black people’s cracked skin and dirty feet or the thick fabric of the blanket they wear on the veld. In the same way, when the younger generation try to give up the older ways of dressing, as in “Amnesty,” the narrator provides an abundance of detail showing how the young wife of the political prisoner, on her way, she hopes, to Robben Island to visit him with his parents, is dressed to look modern:

I wasn’t wearing, any more, the old beret pulled down over my head that farm girls wear. I had bought relaxer cream from the man who comes round the farms selling things out of a box on his bicycle, and my hair was combed up thick under a flowered scarf that didn’t cover the gold-coloured rings in my ear. His mother had a blanket tied round her waist over her dress, a farm woman, but I looked just as good as any of the other girls there. (250)

In this story, we are given a vision of life on a farm in the veld, the man going round “selling things” together with details of colour, shape, fabric, as if people were put under a microscope.

Fictional ethics: “Living in the interregnum”³

In this in-between situation of the “interregnum,” the uncanny seems to be a way of sharing one’s sense of the bizarre as well as acting in accordance with one’s ethics: “As a writer, I think that my first duty is integrity as an artist. I have a superstitious notion that if I lie, my characters will be damaged, somehow; their verity will be destroyed” (*Conversation* 5). Gordimer’s stories sometimes verge on the uncanny. Although anchored in a then contemporary time and place (although they may not be accurately pinned down), her stories seem to be suspended in a floating in-between allegorical world.

In quite a number of Gordimer’s short stories the reader can identify images signifying the return of the repressed pointing to strong harm and shady dealings. Regarding land spoliation, a potent image keeps haunting the short stories as well as some of the novels: I will call this the “resurgence of corpses.” Gordimer once answered a question about Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, by insisting on the absence of rights to the land of white people, claiming the rightful inheritors of it were black people, insisting on this through paronomasia (there/theirs):

I think that whites are always having to assert their claim to the land because it’s based, as Mehring’s mistress points out, on a piece of paper – a deed of sale. And what is a deed of sale when people have first of all taken a country by conquest? Tenure is a very interesting concept, morally speaking. When you come to think of it, what is tenure? What is “legal” tenure? Blacks take the land for granted, it’s simply there. It’s theirs, although they’ve been conquered; they were always there. They don’t have the necessity to say “Well I love this land because it’s beautiful, because it’s this, that, and the other.” (“Conversation” 6)

The returning corpses coming to claim their land as theirs in order to be decently buried already appeared in an early story of Gordimer’s dating back to 1953, “Six Feet of the Country.”

The story, or rather novella, “Something Out There,” also illustrates the theme of the return of the repressed and the uncanny haunting of white people’s suburbs and conscience. The title itself pinpoints the undetermined although frighteningly grotesque shape which has been spied by several people without their being able to identify it: a black man? An ape? A baboon? Nevertheless, such crimes as stealing fruit, venison and all kinds of available food, rummaging in dustbins, climbing trees, killing pets, frightening servants, are committed and give rise to a chorus of voices in the suburbs and the newspapers. From well-off and plush suburbs, the haunting moves to not-so-rich ones and then even to white working-class suburbs. The police in the infamous John Vorster square (a place where torture was used to extort confessions) are powerless. This story strand develops at the same time as a second one: two white people and two black people are secretly hiding in a deserted farmhouse “out there,” preparing to sabotage the local power station, an endeavour they manage to carry out with success. So the town is under two different sets of threats, and when the sabotage deprives

3. “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, quoted as an epigraph by Nadine Gordimer to her *Judy’s People* (1981).

them of power, the looming animal threat recedes into the background and... from the newspapers. Still, at the end, the beast is recognized for what it is, and loses its haunting dimension. It is cornered and killed.

At the end of the story, the narrator weaves together the various historical strands of the making of the country and of its inhabitants, be they natives or emigrants. Their ascendancy goes back to a common ancestor, as Dr Grahame Fraser-Smith remembers “looking back in fancy into the eyes of hominid evolution on a golf course” (“Something Out There” 203). The various characters in the story, as well as the ape and the copy of a rare statue similar to Indian ones, are all fused, as well as the land and its deep mines where two of the terrorists hide, preparing the final stage of the attack. But once again, the true owners of the mine are eventually restored to their rights by the all-knowing narrator:

The mine-working where Eddie and Vusi hid, that Charles identified as belonging to the turn of the 19th century, is in fact far, far older. It goes back further than anything in conventional or alternative history, or even oral tradition, back to the human presences who people anthropology and archeology, to the hands that shaped the objects or fired the charcoal which may be subjected to carbon tests. No one knows that with the brief occupation of Vusi and Eddie, and the terrible tools that were all they had to work with, a circle was closed because before the gold-rush prospectors of the 1890s, centuries before time was measured, here, in such units, there was an ancient mine-working out there, and metals precious to men were discovered, dug and smelted, for themselves, by black men. (“Something Out There” 203)

The “hominid ascendancy” who came back to haunt the suburbs were claiming what was theirs by right of first occupation, and the mines of old provided a cache and a cradle for their descendants trying to claim their inheritance.

It should be noted that Gordimer here uses animals to represent her aim in a symbolic way: the baboon is a case in point, but we also find insects as in the “flash of fireflies” or in another early story, “The Termitary,” in which termites undermine the white family house, threatening to topple it. They then have to call in the competent men who bring about total chaos in the house. In “Amnesty,” the concluding story in *Jump*, the black woman is awaiting her militant husband watching the clouds in the shape of a rat eating away at the clouds. She is waiting for her land and for the time to call it hers, her home.

I'm watching the rat, it's losing itself, its shape eating the sky, and I'm waiting. Waiting for him to come back.
Waiting.
I'm waiting to come back home. (257)

The gruesome presence of death and of the return of the dead set in the overwhelming Southern African landscape also lies at the core of stories clearly set “in the heart of the country” (Coetzee). Strange visions arise in a landscape to which the white man or woman are completely alien. The uncanny imbues the quest journalist Carl Church is sent on when, on the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of Livingstone's death, he is sent to the interior to find the graves of “Livingstone's Companions.”

In the Heart of the (Dark) Country: of Livingstone, Friday and others

J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* is set on a farm deep in the veld. The title of this sombre novel dealing with racial prejudice and the ever-recurring theme of love between a black man and a white woman, and the Hegelian master/slave relationship, echoes Conrad's own *Heart of Darkness* as well as Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* published in 1878. Gordimer herself chose an extract from the novel by Conrad as an epigraph to one of her early pieces (1960-1) published in *The Essential Gesture*. "The Congo River" explores the fantastic powerful myth-laden snake-like river which flows right into the heart of Africa. It is the same river Livingstone explored when he was attempting to find the source of the Nile.

... A place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. (*Heart of Darkness*, quoted in *Essential Gesture* 157)

In this extraordinary travelogue, in which Gordimer renders the beauty of the river and the sense of awe she felt during her journey, she notes:

From Stanley-Pool the Congo opens a way more than a thousand miles, without a man-made lock or a natural obstacle, through the centre of Africa. It leads to what Joseph Conrad called the heart of darkness; the least-known, most subjectively described depths of the continent where men have always feared to meet the dark places of their own souls. (*Essential Gesture* 163)

And "the dark places of their own souls" are exactly what Gordimer also set out to probe and sound in her writing, as one sounds the depths of a river to find dead corpses. Her account of the voyage into the interior casts an interesting light on some of her later stories such as "Livingstone's Companions" and "Friday's Footprint."

In these stories, the uncanny mingles with the fascinating and fear-inducing interior of Africa. Its "darkness," expressing the sense of the unknown, of mystery mingled with fear when one is confronted with dark foliage, huge trees, apparently uninhabited shores and tumultuous cataracts and falls, is duly fantasized and experienced, providing visions of beauty and dread. In the stories the overall presence of water, be it the powerful river or a beautiful far-reaching lake, plays a great part. In "Livingstone's Companions" and "Friday's Footprint," two widowed women are left in charge of a hotel located in the middle of nowhere. People come for a rest there after a safari or because of their administrative functions like the permanent guests in "Friday's Footprint": "The veterinary officer, the meteorological officer and the postmaster" (156).

The "Friday" of the story is Mrs. Cunningham, the hotel owner. Tourists

emerge from their jeeps feeling unreal. The sight of Mrs. Cunningham, in her flowered print dress with a brooch on her big bosom, and her big, bright-skinned face looking clerically dazed beneath her thick permanent, was the known world, to them; Friday's footprint in the sand. (146)

Just as Friday's footprints left on the beach provide Crusoe with the signs of a human presence, Mrs. Cunningham provides guests with a homely recognizable presence when they reach her hotel in Central Africa, by the river. But although Mrs. Cunningham is a kind of reassuring mother figure, she herself suffers from some potent recurring nightmarish visions:

Rita Cunningham did not always see nothing when she turned to look at the water. Sometimes (what times? She struggled to get herself to name – oh, times; when she had slept badly, or when – things – were not right) she saw the boat coming across the flooded river. She looked at the wide, shimmering, sluggish water where the waterlilies floated shining in the sun and she began to see, always at the same point, approaching the middle of the river from the other bank, the boat moving slowly under its heavy load. It was their biggest boat; it was carrying eight sewing machines and a black-japanned iron double bedstead as well as the usual stores, and Arthur and three store-boys were sitting on top of the cargo. As the boat reached the middle of the river, it turned over, men and cargo toppled, and the iron bed came down heavily on top of their flailing arms, their arms stuck through the bars as the bed sank, taking them down beneath it. That was all. There was a dazzle of sun on the water, where they had been; the waterlilies were thickest there.

She had not been there when it happened. (147)

Undoubtedly this is a fantasized vision testifying to the repetition of a traumatic event she experiences again and again by proxy since she did not witness it. She will wonder who described for her the ugly details about the arms caught up in the bars of the bedstead her husband, Arthur, had insisted on piling up on top of the overladen boat. This vision recurs four times in various forms in the story. The last one, when things are not going too well with her second husband, Johnny, her first husband's step-brother, is poignant.

Arthur! She called in a clenched, whimpering whisper, Arthur! Grinding his name between her teeth, and she turned desperately to the water, to the middle of the river where the lilies were. She tried with all her being to conjure up once again out of the water something; the ghost of comfort, of support. But that boat, silent and unbidden, that she had so often seen before, would not come again. (166)

She recalls the former image of the water and the lilies so quick to cover over the traces of the wreckage. As in the novella, "Something Out There," she is trying to conjure up "something," which expresses the strength of the unnamable presence invading one's conscience and unconscious. But this time there is nothing.

Still further into the heart of the country, near the Congo, as in Stanley's search for Livingstone in 1871, journalist Carl Church, sent by his newspaper, is sent on a quest too. His name also evokes Livingstone's missionary calling. C. Church has to find the graves of Livingstone's companions dead and lost in the heart of Africa a century before. Reading Livingstone's *Last Journals* telling of his companions' deaths – pages of which are copied in the story, italicized – Carl first starts off reluctantly and gets lost in the bush. He eventually finds his way to a hotel, the lady-owner of which he met on their plane to Moambe. She claims the graves are on her property but he cannot find them. Instead, he finds "an odd ruin: a solid complex of buildings, apparently not in bad repair, [which] had been pulled down [...]. The bush was all around as far as the Congo, as far as the latitude where the forests began" (364-5).

But little by little he is enticed by the stunning beauty of the lake and the fishing he hugely enjoys. His deep-water fishing is described in quasi-religious terms, mingling life, death and magic:

Then he saw the fish, deep down, twenty feet maybe, a yellowish nonchalant shape which seemed to pasture in a small forest of short dead reeds. [...] The miracle happened again. The nonchalant shape became a frenzied spot of light, reflecting the rays of the sun in a series of flashes through the pale blue water as it swivelled in agony round the spear. It was – this moment – the only miracle Church knew [...]. (367-8)

Mesmerized by the light and the allure of the lake and its hidden life, Carl Church stays longer than expected without finding the graves. On his way back to the airport, he unexpectedly finds them, together with a bit of history:

Suddenly he saw the path, the path he had missed the other day, to the graves of Livingstone's companions. [...] [A]nd then there, where the slope of the hill came up short against a steep rise, the gravestones stood with their backs to rock. The five neat headstones of the monuments commission were surmounted each by an iron cross on a circle. The names, and the dates of birth and death – the deaths all in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – were engraved on the granite. (376-7)

There is one extra gravestone, that of the hotel owner's husband who died in 1957: one more ghost of a hotel founder, still present on this spot of bush and memories, like Mrs. Cunningham's dead husband. Whilst the lake again is granted pride of place, we are given to read this extraordinary, beautiful passage:

They all looked back, these dead companions, to the lake, the lake that Carl Church (turning to face as they did, now) had had silent behind him all the way up; that lake that, from here, was seen to stretch much farther than one could tell, down there on the shore or at the hotel: stretching still – even from here – as far as one could see, flat and shining, a long way up Africa. (377)

I have tried to show the ways in which Gordimer suggests the upsurge of the uncanny disrupting the familiar, how, as in another story, "An Intruder," the unexplained wreckage of a young couple's house turns out to have been perpetrated by the enemy within. Under the influence of alcohol, the husband nightly wreaks havoc on their home and wakes up unaware of his actions. Destructive and violent, he is in a borderline state. Once more the insect simile is called upon ("To her evil had come out of the walls, as the black beetles did in the kitchen") till she understands it all:

'No, I told you. I went into the living room to get a bottle of lime juice, I went into all the rooms,' she repeated in her soft, slow, reasonable voice; and this time, while she was speaking, she began to know what else he would never remember, something so simple that she had missed it.

She stood there wan, almost ugly, really like some wretched pet monkey shivering in a cold climate. But she was going to have a child and – yes, looking at him, she was grown-up, now, suddenly, as some people are said to turn white-haired overnight. (386)

The enemy within, as in "The Termitary" where insects gnaw at the white house, acts unbeknown to the inhabitants. Locked up inside their prejudices, white people are caught up in the turmoil of what they used to call "the situation," trying to control the lives of the overwhelming number of black people who, cheated out of their country, had to fight to get their rights of ownership back.

What is striking throughout Gordimer's writing is the discreet mastery of her style and the way she acts on her reader so as to involve him/her in the situations and conundrums she describes. A brief final look at some of her stylistic devices will be of import here. Not only showing how her characters may be displaced, disjointed and disrupted, Gordimer also manages to dislodge her reader from his/her comfortable seat by using various means of defamiliarization that trigger perplexity and suspension of belief.

Defamiliarizing the reader: a reading effect

What is particularly striking, more and more so as book follows book, is Gordimer's way of suspending meaning by postponing the end of a sentence: to achieve this effect she resorts to the use of hyphens, commas and brackets. One instance of stretching/fragmenting sentences thanks to a parenthesis marked by hyphens is the following: "His green eyes, at twenty eight, already were narrowed by the plump fold of the lower lid that marks joviality – whether cruelly shrewd or good natured – in middle age" ("Something Out There" 37).

The examples crop up often and in a puzzling way in *Jump*. They introduce some confusion for the reader, necessitating a retro-reading to understand the meaning of the sentences, the beginning of which has been lost or obscured. In "Spoils," the group of tourists enjoying a safari displays a sample of white South Africans thrown together on the expedition led by the black man Siza. At times, the atmosphere may become tense and, as suggested by the text, as acid as the grapes they are eating:

There are moments of acerbity; the grapes they are eating pop into sharp juice as they are bitten. One of the quiet guests has become communicative as will the kind who never risk ideas or opinions of their own but can reproduce, when a subject brings the opportunity, information they have read and stored. Bats; the twirling rags darker against the dark – someone suggested, as a woman covered, that fear of them comes from the fact that they can't be heard approaching. (165)

The syntax is broken up by commas, semi-colons and hyphens, separating the verb "reproduce" from the complement "information," the noun "Bats" from the verb "suggested," and the pronoun locution "that fear of them," when this last bit is interrupted by "as a woman covered."

For the reader, the fact that such sentences become more and more puzzling and abundant in the course of Gordimer's writing produces an effect of "double exposure," as in photography when two takes are superimposed. When parts of sentences are superimposed (here three elements are superimposed: bats, someone's speech, and the cowering woman), this produces a blurring effect, a perturbation leading to the slight displacement of the reader who is thus called upon to take in the ethics and aesthetics of the text. In the title story of *Jump* the word "destabilization" is used in the text to characterize the type of action undertaken by the young white counter-revolutionary: "from the word 'destabilization' with the image of some faulty piece of mechanism to be rocked from its base so that a sound structure may be put in its place" (13). Isn't this what Gordimer is also doing while destabilizing the canonical grammatical order by rocking its well-oiled "mechanism from its base," starting with the smooth flow of sentences? When the former political character in "Spoils" is speaking, his speech is mimicked using a number of commas, brackets and hyphens conveying the quick halting rhythm, providing information in asides as well as developing one strain of an idea:

Oh yes, we politicals were kept apart, but with time (I was there ten months) we managed to communicate. (There are so many ways you don't think of, outside, when you don't need to.)

One of them – young, my age – he was already declared a habitual criminal, inside for an indeterminate sentence. (167)

Another sentence in the same story describes the lions' dinner:

The breathing mass, the beating hearts in the vehicle – watching the cubs jostling for places within the cadaver; the breathing mass, the beating hearts in the vehicle – being watched by the lionesses. The beasts have no time, it will be measured by their fill. (172)

This extraordinary sentence is based on the repetition of the same syntax portion devoid of verb, inducing a circling movement to it, a fact enhanced by the chiasmus (“watching/being watched”), and separated by two hyphens pointing at the action and designating what is to be seen. The animals are eating while the human beings stuck in the car are dehumanized, reduced to a mass of flesh, mere breathing bodies and beating hearts.

In an underhand, even covert, way, the narrator often undermines the focalizer's view and thought by resorting to ellipsis (silence), suggestion (the unsaid), free indirect discourse, and even a touch of allegory. Gordimer is a master of irony, a device involving a kind of double enunciation (or “exposure”) where two meanings (overt and covert) are superimposed. These devices are instrumental in staging the return of a repressed and of a suggested subtext.

The narrator also manages, often ironically, to suggest discrepancies, contradictions, unknown to the character him/her self but perceptible to the reader. In “Six Feet of the Country” Graham Huggan spots a link or a kind of mirror image, between Lerice, the unnamed “farmer's” wife, and Petrus, the boy whose brother is lying dead in the hut.

She and Petrus both kept their eyes turned on me as I spoke, and, oddly, for those moments they looked exactly alike, though it sounds impossible: my wife, with her high, white forehead and her attenuated Englishwoman's body, and the poultry boy, with his bony bare feet below khaki trousers tied at the knee with string and the peculiar rankness of his nervous sweat coming from his skin. (79-80)

Both Lerice and Petrus turn away at the same time and leave the farmer alone. Huggan reads the passage as a denunciation of the patriarchal and racial values of the “farmer,” following Martin Trump's remark that “Gordimer has perceived a common element in the degrading way in which black people and women are treated in her society” (Huggan 71).

Nadine Gordimer declared she kept writing what was necessary to her, what she felt to be urgent and sincere. Her books were repeatedly banned but she was spared the harsher treatment reserved for black writers. Her political stands are more or less (but often more) overtly stated and developed, often winning over the reader to the narrator's side when the latter is identifiable. They never overshadow the more intimate and complex developments: “I don't write about apartheid I write about people who happen to live under that system. I'm not a propagandist, I'm not a reporter, I'm a natural writer” (“Conversations” 27).

She wanted to make “something out there” significant and known to the world in her own way, which evolved over the years and became more and more outspoken and vibrant, sparing no side of her “beloved country” but seeing its most mysterious ways as well, the wonder of it all:

I began writing out of a sense of wonder about life, a sense of its mystery, and also out of a sense of its chaos. To me, all art is an attempt to make a private order out of the chaos in life, whether you're a painter or a musician or a writer. (“Conversations” 27)

And sometimes, writers also turn out to be painters and musicians in their own splendid and useful way.

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Conflicting Spaces: Gender, Race, and Communal Spheres in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction



Nadine Gordimer's fictional characters embody unease and often resentment with social class, expected cultural roles, and place. In her fiction, the conflicting notions of space and self are tied to gender, class, and identity. Gordimer's characters are victims of circumstance, of birth, of place, but in addition to the feeling of exile linked to these factors, her fiction draws attention to female spheres, communal spaces, domesticity, and sexuality. This paper will examine the role of female spheres and spatiality through a feminist literary perspective. Though Gordimer's relationship to feminism was at best tentative, her work offers much to the field of feminist studies.

Nadine Gordimer's fiction has long reflected images of her home country of South Africa. Throughout decades of writing, Gordimer depicted her own culture and the societal changes that occurred during and after apartheid. Her fiction focuses on exile, in terms of class, gender, and identity. Likewise, Gordimer's characters find themselves struggling with societal expectations as well as their own identity. Her characters illustrate the changes in South African society, but they are also figures that must navigate a patriarchal system in which they have limited authority. Gordimer exposes the tension of gender roles and social class and explores the arbitrary nature of the patriarchal systems that aim to define her characters. Within their society, her characters attempt to occupy and reclaim spaces in which to define themselves. Gordimer's collection of short stories, *Soldier's Embrace*, written during apartheid, and her post-apartheid novel, *The Pickup*, along with the lesser-known story "The Second Sense," highlight the possibilities that exist within gendered spaces, but also how these spaces are limited when one crosses the color bar. These works, though a small selection of Gordimer's vast output, illustrate a range of female spaces during apartheid (and the Immorality Act) and after apartheid during different periods of Gordimer's creativity. Over the course of her career as a writer, Gordimer expanded the role of her characters to shed light on racial and gender inequality but additionally to encompass the potential of bonds within gendered and communal spaces and beyond South Africa. The town and country, kraal and hut, the bedroom and kitchen, the sewing room, the city and the desert are all spaces upon which Gordimer's evolving ideas on gender and race play out.

Given the timespan of Gordimer's literary output, it is not surprising that criticism of her work has evolved. Gordimer's fictional and personal attempts to tackle social issues prevalent during apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa especially concerning race and gender have been well documented. Her fiction suggests that one rethink relationships among whites and blacks and men and women. However, Gordimer's relationship with feminism itself has been ambivalent and at times dismissive. In early interviews, critics note Gordimer's reluctance "to think of herself as a feminist writer" (Driver 33) and her "expressed impatience with the feminist movement" (Head 19). Robin Visel acknowledges that although Gordimer "said several times that the women's liberation movement is irrelevant in South Africa," her fiction shows that this statement is an oversimplification (34). While Gordimer did not see herself as anything other than

a writer who happens to be a woman, she “gives particular polemical force to her documentation of inequality in male-female relationships by employing it to define female growth” (Driver 34). Additionally, Gordimer’s oeuvre offers much in terms of how women’s identities are formed within the confines of a restrictive culture. As Karen Lazar points out in her 1994 study of *Something Out There*, Gordimer’s fiction “shows the potential for transgression, for alternative ways of seeing, amidst the existence of patriarchal-cum-racist stereotypes” (58).

Regardless of Gordimer’s personal feelings and public remarks regarding feminism and her own refusal to be identified as a feminist writer, her writing offers a significant contribution to the field of feminist studies. Chanty Mohanty writes that feminist “analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstanding of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity” (78). Gordimer’s fiction contributes to the history of South Africa and of the political environment that prevails outside and within her fictional worlds. However, there are limitations to her female characters’ ability to emancipate themselves from the political and social systems governing the world in which they live. White immigrant or white South African women are often illustrated as negotiating patriarchal systems and circumventing consequences from non-conformity in order to secure their social position or to free themselves of their privileged obligations. Although white women in Gordimer’s fiction have freedom to move outside their social circle, they are not always portrayed positively. Mary West argues, “much of Gordimer’s fiction has offered a severely critical reading of white women’s complicity and/or ineffectuality in facing South African racial realities” and their “insulated and selfish white womanhood” (79). Black and Muslim characters are at times eroticized or are generic backdrops for a South African or unnamed setting. Within the gendered spaces occupied by blacks and, in her later fiction, by Muslim women, the cultural norms that dictate behavior are tied to traditional roles and communal expectations. Additionally, their spaces are disrupted and dictated through laws imposed on them during and after apartheid.

Soldier’s Embrace (1980) and more particularly the story “Town and Country Lovers” depicts sexual relationships across the color bar and provides an early example of Gordimer’s fictional confrontation with apartheid and the Immorality Act. Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1975, the story portrays successful white men who become intimately involved with black girls. Although “Gordimer never portrays a cross-racial relationship that can sustain the pressures of apartheid” (Knox 77), the stories offer an interesting perspective on sexuality and race as well as communal and private spaces. In “One,” a non-native white geologist living in the city begins a sexual relationship with a local black girl who works in a shop as a cashier. In “Two,” Thebedi, a local black girl and worker on a farm, becomes the object of desire for Paulus Eysendyck, the son of the white farm owner. Town and country are pivotal spaces of transgression in the story. Although people are living in the spaces relegated to their race, whites in the nicer city flats and farmhouses, blacks in the kraal and the outskirts, the story emphasizes the consequences of interracial relationships and penetration into spaces allocated to whites. In both settings the relationships begin privately and away from the eyes of

the other's social circle, but each coupling ends when community people report their suspicions of a crime to law officials. Dr. Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf and the unnamed cashier are accused of having "carnal intercourse" (Gordimer, *Soldier's Embrace* 84) while Paulus is accused of murdering his child conceived with Thebedi. However, both cases are dismissed due to insufficient proof, and as the story implies, because the men are white and have high social status.

"Town and Country Lovers" opens with a description of Dr. von Leinsdorf who had been working in South Africa for almost seven years. According to the narrator, he has "no interest in the politics of the countries he works in" (*Soldier's Embrace* 74) and is only preoccupied with his work as a geologist. Originally from Austria, he resides in the *Atlantis*, a building with flats occupied by other whites. The unnamed young black girl with whom he begins a sexual relationship lives in the "West of the city [...] for people her tint" (76). Von Leinsdorf first encounters the girl at the local shop where she works as a cashier and begins a relationship with her when the girl takes on domestic duties inside his flat. One night, while she is quietly looking down and sewing a button on a pair of his trousers, he calls her a "good girl" and "touched her" (78). The girl is submissive and stays in his flat when he must attend social obligations. She makes "him welcome without a word" (80) into her body at night when he comes home. During some of her visits to von Leinsdorf's flat, he teaches her basic typing and corrects her English grammar. He occasionally takes her on excursions outside town where they cannot be observed. While they play at creating a domestic space, it is clear that the relationship will not last. The girl also knows that she cannot ignore the consequences of being found out. She lies to her mother about the nature of her relationship with von Leinsdorf and even his occupation, and she never stays the night. The relationship eventually draws the attention of others, and both are arrested. Leinsdorf pays a lawyer to assist both of them, and the charges are dropped.

In the country setting of "Two," Paulus and Thebedi, who had known each other as children and now are teens, consummate their relationship at a riverbed, where the two meet coincidentally during the summer. Paulus' yearning for Thebedi surpasses that for his white female school mates who "had never made him feel what he felt now, when the girl came up to the bank and sat beside him, the drops of water beading off her dark legs the only points of light in the earth-smelling, deep shade" (88). The intimacy described is one of mutual surprise, yet "they were not afraid of one another; they had known one another always" (88). The conversations between them that were once about his life and school experiences cease after the relationship becomes sexual. Instead, Paulus "told her, each time, when they would meet again" (88). The two continue to meet secretly at the river-bed and sometimes at the farmhouse when no one is home. Thebedi, like the unnamed cashier, makes sure that she is within her allocated space before allowing herself to be noticed: "each returned home with the dark – she to her mother's hut, he to the farmhouse" (88). Once Paulus turns nineteen and leaves for veterinary college and Thebedi marries another farm worker, the story shifts in tone.

As a white male and the son of the farmer, Paulus is expected to attend school and college with others like him and to be with other whites. Thebedi as well must adhere to the culture of her people and of that of a female. Her future husband, Njabulo, "asked her father for her" (89) and once money was settled they married. Thebedi gives birth two months later to a child that "was very light" and had "a quantity of straight, fine

floss, like that which carries the seeds of certain weeds in the veld” (90). Her husband made no complaint about the early arrival of the baby as “there was no disgrace in that, among her people it is customary for a young man to make sure [...] the chosen girl is not barren” (90). When Paulus learns of the child, he enters the kraal to see the baby. His appearance in the kraal, a space he had not been in since he was a small boy, immediately causes concern. As he approaches, the “women turned away, each not wanting to be the one approached to point out where Thebedi lived” (90). He returns two days later, but goes into the hut alone to see the child, and the baby subsequently dies. After the child is buried, it is exhumed, because “someone – one of the other labourers? Their women? – had reported that the baby was almost white, that strong and healthy, it had died suddenly after a visit by the farmer’s son” (92).

The charges against Paulus and Thebedi, like those in the first setting, are dropped due to insufficient evidence. Clearly the race of the men and their social status comes into play in the dismissal of charges. Although Dr. von Leinsdorf is Austrian, he is expected to adhere to the social rules like any other South African, but as a grandson of a baroness and successful geologist, he is easily able to afford legal counsel. Paulus as well has the financial and social backing of his own prominent family. As for the unnamed cashier and Thebedi, they are only able to escape conviction due to the ability of their partners to have the charges dropped. When they leave the communal space of their mothers and others of their own race, the girls become subject to the whims of their white partners and the laws of apartheid. Thebedi “wandered far from the kraal and her companions” (87) when she encounters Paulus. The unnamed cashier, out of sight of her mother and in the city, is easy prey for von Leinsdorf. He lures her with the illusion of domestic bliss in his private apartment. Gordimer shows in this early work that spaces are delineated by race and that when one leaves one’s own space to occupy the others’ space there can be no enduring relationship or positive outcome.

In her development of characters later in her career, Gordimer takes on post-apartheid issues and looks beyond spaces in farm velds to urban and desert environments outside of South Africa. While the author J.M. Coetzee felt that “the white writer in South Africa is in an impossible position” (qtd. in Spivak 195), Isidore Diala suggests that Gordimer, like Coetzee and Brink, “enhance[s] our understanding of the underlying implications of South Africa’s peculiar history” (52). However, some hesitate to limit Gordimer to the position of post-colonial writer. Ileana Dimitriu believes that Gordimer “avoids what might be a temptation for the writer who turns from the peripheries of the ex-colony or post-colony” (160). Instead, Gordimer “presents the reader with the impact of liminality and exile on one’s sense of identity and belonging, on one’s relationships” (Dimitriu 167). Her fiction uses personal relationships to illuminate racial and social imbalance as well as how these elements shape gender roles. Later examples of her work show that the post-colony spaces wherein her characters choose to reside are affected by racial and gender inequalities. The remnants of the past linger in post-apartheid Africa and add to the alienation felt by her characters as they try to find their identity and form relationships outside their own country.

The Pickup and “The Second Sense” highlight Gordimer’s approach to post-colony spaces. The texts focus on identity and exile within gendered and communal spaces as well as their effects on personal relationships. The central female characters in these two texts experience a sense of freedom through domesticity and immersing them-

selves into the gendered spaces established for women in another country. As shown in these two texts, white women have the ability to use social class to their advantage and to negotiate their role in their society. Although both Julie and Zsuzsana become emigrants, Julie flees her privileged life in South Africa to join her Muslim lover and later her legal husband in an unnamed desert, while Zsuzsana and her husband emigrate to South Africa to escape an unstable political environment. While these characters at first exhibit marital happiness, the narratives end with each woman choosing for herself how she wishes to continue her life without her spouse. Both Julie and Zsuzsana undergo a transformation that solidifies their place in their new environments. The change they undergo is a result of their ability to become a part of female homosocial spheres and to use those spheres to navigate their positions in their new social systems. However, these two characters are dissimilar in the way they immerse themselves and how Gordimer presents their quest to find themselves. Julie, while referred to as “spoiled,” due to her wealth, her independence, and even her feminism, bonds with the Muslim women of her husband’s family and refuses to emigrate with him to the United States. Zsuzsana becomes the epitome of success by imitating the language and style of her South African female clients and ultimately initiates a divorce to be with a man who has more social status than her husband.

In the 2001 novel, *The Pickup*, Gordimer presents characters who are exiles, either within their own country or in another country and “widens her scope to reveal otherness among exponents of the East and West” (Cloete 52). While addressing the two protagonists’ desire to flee their respective lives, the narrative calls into question gender roles and social class. Julie Summers and Abdu/Ibrahim ibn Musa see in the “Other” a freedom that cannot be obtained at home. Like other Gordimer stories written during post-apartheid, the novel “offers a picture of the new South Africa and its usual problems of race, class and bureaucracy, taken from a local to a global level,” but what is different is the shift “from post-Apartheid Johannesburg to an Arab country and its villages, deserts and Muslim people” (Caravan 6). Julie and Abdu serve as contrasts to show privilege and poverty and to examine the realms of what is legal and illegal. However, gender and the spaces in which gender comes into play are shown to have the greatest potential in the novel. Traditional female gender roles within homosocial bonds become powerful, whereas male gender roles are ineffectual and have no real authority within the context of female spheres.

As the novel opens, the scene presented takes place against the backdrop of modern South African life. Julie’s car has broken down in a busy street when she is on her way to meet her friends at the EL-AY Café, a hangout for Julie and her “elective siblings who have distanced themselves from the ways of the past, their families” (Gordimer, *The Pickup* 23). They assist her in locating a garage. It is at the garage that Julie finds Abdu, an illegal immigrant from an unnamed country, “one of those partitioned by colonial powers on their departure [...] one of those countries where you can’t tell religion apart from politics” (11). A few weeks after first meeting him, she brings him into her social circle. In time, Julie and Abdu begin a sexual relationship, and he eventually stops being a “grease-monkey” (92). He moves into her place, and the relationship becomes the focus of her friends’ commentary: “There was talk: That relationship’s getting heavy, our girl’s really gone on that oriental prince of hers. Where was it she picked him up, again?” (36). This reference to Abdu as an oriental prince and as Julie’s pickup reinforces his

otherness. It also causes concern for Julie as it marks her transition away from her South African friends and the spaces that she has created for herself.

Abdu receives a letter from the Department of Home Affairs informing him “he must depart within 14 days or face charges and deportation to his country of origin” (52). With this letter, the narrative begins to transition to the second setting. Julie, although refusing to seek her father’s assistance, finds a lawyer friend of her father’s. After meeting with the lawyer and realizing there were no options, Julie wants to find someone else. Abdu stops her, and in this scene tries to assert his masculinity; “That was the message of that grasp on her forearm: I am a man. I am the one who is not for you but who possesses you every night: listen to me” (82). This gesture along with others later in the narrative points to Abdu’s mistaken belief that Julie needs him physically and that his phallus holds power over her. Nigel Summers, her father, also fails to assert any real power over her. He regards her relationship and her decision to follow Abdu to his homeland as part of her being “spoiled.” Both men fail at bending Julie to their will. Julie’s “oriental prince” becomes a point of contention with her father, who in anger and resignation, chastises her and “in his shock and desire to sting his ‘spoilt’ child, lashes out at her by using her feminism against her” (Mount 113). He tells Julie: “as for women: you, you to whom independence, freedom, mean so much, eh, there women are treated like slaves [...] you are out of your mind” (Gordimer, *The Pickup* 97). Abdu as well regards Julie’s decision to go with him as “stupidity” (94) and “struggles to come to grips with Julie’s decision to abandon her friends, family and privileged life” (Montle and Mogoboya 64).

Once the setting changes to that of the desert where Abdu, in reality Ibrahim ibn Musa, is from, the dynamics of gender, especially within female spheres, are explored more fully. For Julie, it is with the women in this strict Muslim culture that she finds freedom from her family and privilege. While Gordimer intersperses the first part of the narrative with images of black and white South African women, they mainly serve as stereotypes to contrast with Julie and to illustrate her inability to accept the privilege of her social class. Nevertheless, it is her status as a wealthy South African woman that has given her the freedom, albeit in a Muslim culture, to actively reject her own culture. Interestingly, Julie cannot form significant female bonds in her home country; Gordimer “does not include any strong female characters in the first half of the novel” (Hunt 112). Julie’s stepmother, Danielle, is portrayed as a perfect accessory to her father’s success; “she was beautiful; trust her father for that” (Gordimer, *The Pickup* 41). Her mother living in California with Julie’s casino-owning stepfather has little connection to her. Other South African women are merely backdrops in the street, patients at her uncle’s gynecology office, or prostitutes in the EL-AY Café. This exclusion, intended or not, is telling.

As Julie disconnects from her South African life, she finds that in her new setting she ultimately seeks the solace of women for comfort. Emma Hunt argues that “the spaces to which Julie is drawn are gendered spaces – those of the family and the desert” (111). However, when she first arrives in the unnamed desert, she is out of place, and has no set role in the traditional Muslim world in which she has chosen to live. She is not one of them. When she asks, “Where’s the bathroom?” (121), Ibrahim gets angry, he wants to “tell her once and for all what her ignorant obstinacy of coming with him to this place means, when she failed, with all her privilege at getting him accepted into

hers" (121). Julie wants to explore her new environment, but is naïve about the cultural norms. Ibrahim sees this as her privileged ignorance and her need for an adventure:

Of course. Of course. Independent. This is the way she's accustomed to living, pleasing herself. Again. But that's impossible, here. He has to be with her, some member of the family, if there could be one who could be understood, has to accompany her everywhere beyond a few neighbourhood streets, that's how it is in the place he thought he had left behind him. It's not usual for women to sit down to eat with the men, today was a special exception for the occasion – does she understand. It's enough, for these people, that she goes about with an uncovered head – that they can tolerate with a white face, maybe. (122)

While Ibrahim cannot accept being back home, Julie wants to connect with her new family and their language; however, she is initially "not invited or even permitted to participate in the women's activities" (Mount 116). Her inability to penetrate the "women's sphere illustrates the intersectionality of gender, race, nationality, and geography; Julie is kept on the boundary until the other women learn more about how she will negotiate these differences" (Mount 116). When Julie wants to help the other women with cleaning dishes, "the women crowded about to prevent her from so much as putting her hands in water" (Gordimer, *The Pickup* 136). Ibrahim's mother is the central power in the female sphere; she decides if and when Julie will become part of their sisterhood. Without her say, Julie cannot be admitted into the women's space or allowed to become an integral part of the family. Ibrahim himself does not want Julie to fully integrate with his family. He shouts at his sister Maryam when she "kit[s]" Julie in traditional attire "like any village woman in the street" (162) and tells her to "take that thing off her" (162). This scene ends, not with Julie going to Ibrahim to calm him, but with his sister, "the two with arms again about each other on the sofa quietly as if Ibrahim's wife were a sister" (162).

In time, Julie forms simple connections with the women and children outside of Ibrahim's family. She teaches English to local children and local women, and then Ibrahim's sister and his sister-in-law join to exchange language. According to Derek Barker, "[Julie's] ability to communicate with members of the community is rudimentary – the only clearly positive relationship she has is with Maryam – no men interact with her and all other women keep her at arm's length – her possible place in the society is potentially self-affirming" (104). Although Julie is kept at arm's length, she is able to exist on the periphery and use her connection to Maryam to skirt the edges of the female domain. Andrea Spain argues that Julie "finds herself a part of a homosociality of women. It is an everyday life of common spaces, decisions, labor, and duty, rather than the privatized present and lifestyle scripted by her family" (767). Indeed, Julie does find herself part of the female spheres of her new family; however, it is still limited. The matriarch of the family expects Julie to participate fully in the culture to truly become one of them. To become accepted the expectation is that she should give birth. However, the mother does not speak to Julie directly of this; instead, Maryam tells her "they wonder why you do not get a baby. Then perhaps you will first marry here, our way" (166).

To additionally highlight Julie's struggle to find her place in this new world, Gordimer uses a recurring image of the desert, which becomes the site in which Julie can abandon herself and where she can reflect. It is in the desert that Julie has seemingly found the place where humanity ends and the unknown begins: "The desert is always; it doesn't die it doesn't change, it exists. But a human being, she, she, cannot simply exist;

she is a hurricane, every thought bending and crossing its coherence inside her, nothing will let her be, not for a moment. Every emotion, every thought, is invaded by another” (229). The desert offers a stability that Julie has not found in her prior existence. The allure of the desert and its “eternity” is sublime; “there is no last time, for the desert. The desert is always” (246). When debating her life and her new world, Julie could “tell it to the desert; that is safe” (245). The endless desert is where Julie can be truly free; but more importantly, the desert “is outside of any social space” (Dimitriu 171). It has “no onlooker[s]” (Gordimer, *The Pickup* 171), and it comes to represent a space without limits, without clear boundaries, and without time.

At the end of the narrative, Julie decides to stay behind in the desert and to remain in a restrictive culture. She finds solace in its isolation and other female characters, while Ibrahim “began to feel that his manhood was in question,” because she would not go to America with him (175). Ibrahim’s mother now sees Julie as a conduit to draw her son back to her. Ibrahim realizes this when “she, who always has advice and a solution [...] has none for him. [...] Ah, an ally, that’s it; but not his. An ally of the foreigner, *she* will be the one to restore the son to the mother” (258). Without his mother’s support, Ibrahim understands that he has no authority over Julie. As a final gesture of his anger, Ibrahim “kept away from her [...] let her have an idea of what she doesn’t realize [...] that she will be in this house [...] without the love-making she needs so much [...] without his love for her” (265). He again calls upon his sexuality and his belief that Julie will need him physically. Once he leaves in the cab, Julie goes to their room and the troublesome sister-in-law, Khadija, who “has never come to the lean-to [...], put an arm around her conspiratorially” and in Arabic, which “the foreigner understands enough, now,” she tells Julie: “He’ll come back” (267). This final gesture and her mother-in-law’s realization that Julie has made a significant contribution to their lives solidifies Julie’s place in the female sphere.

Gordimer leaves much to be questioned in terms of Julie’s future and of her portrayal of South African women in general. Julie, of course, still has connections and money in South Africa if she chooses to utilize them in the future. Unlike *The Pickup*, the 2007 short story, “The Second Sense,” offers a less idealistic view of assimilation and of the future of her female protagonist. In this story, Gordimer presents a couple who have emigrated to South Africa to start a life outside of Hungary like other immigrants who were “whites moving in on the blacks’ country” (Gordimer, “The Second Sense” 269). To assimilate, Ferenc becomes “Fred,” and his wife, Zsuzsana, uses an abbreviation of her name Szuzsi, because it “sounded like the familiar ‘Susie,’ common in English” (270). The narrative begins with the voice and perspective of Fred and his need “to make a living any way he can” (269). However, it isn’t long before Zsuzana “who had no more schooling than in a small Hungarian town picked up the language easily,” and “taught how to sew in accordance with the strict requirements of a female role imposed by her grandmother,” is able to solicit clients for whom she made dresses (270). The couple also have a child together; “what better way to make claim to a new country” (270) to secure their place in their new environment.

As the story progresses, Fred struggles to find success in his new country. He wants to retain his former culture and impart that to his child, who resists his father’s attempts to bond through language. Zsuzana on the other hand is able to penetrate female circles to further her social connections and to obtain more fulfilling work. She “had more

women coming to be clothed by her” than she could accommodate (270). Through aligning herself with her female clients and learning their language, Zsuzsana finds that she can use this connection to better her situation: “As the women for whose image she sewed were inclined to take someone outside their social circle into confidences about their lives she was herself beguiled in turn to confess” (271). Similar to the white South African women portrayed in *The Pickup*, the unnamed white women in this story are consumers with little depth and “are products of a profound sense of entitlement” (West 79). However, by ingratiating herself to these women and mimicking their behavior in order to be accepted in their social space, Zsuzsana is able to work in real estate and “the money she was bringing in eased some of the stringencies in their life” (Gordimer, “The Second Sense” 272). Zsuzsana’s assimilation reflects a superficiality like that of her white clients and of the white South African women in *The Pickup*. By becoming one of them, she eradicates what is left of her former culture and ensures that her son, Peter, has every advantage she can provide. Even in intimacy with her husband, Zsuzsana, responds “softly in English” and no longer cooks the family meals since her new livelihood requires time and many late evenings. By the end of this short narrative, Zsuzsana “has decided upon a divorce” and “found home,” while Ferenc “is in exile” (276).

Taken as a whole, the narratives in these selected works offer a range of characters who find ways to navigate a world that has rendered them inferior and dictated the spaces in which they should identify. The characters illustrate vast social differences based on race and gender as well as the consequences of occupying the space relegated to others through social rules and laws. Gordimer does not resolve the inequalities of her society, neither does she romanticize its past or present, but the trajectory of her writing has expanded her range of characters and settings to question cultural practices and in her later works to locate female spheres that offer unknown possibilities. The evolving nature of Gordimer’s characters reflects the ever-changing roles that men and women are expected to play, in addition to her own development as a writer. Her contributions to literature are vast and offer much to our understanding of life in South Africa and beyond, of human nature and weaknesses, and of the notion of self and others. Gordimer forces her readers to “think of difficult things” (Clingman 9). However, Stephen Clingman’s assertion that “Gordimer’s writing is always in some way in dialogue with an absent future” (13) best summarizes her work. She was always looking ahead and beyond, but outward and inward as well.

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Failing to Place Confrontation: The Car as “Void” in *Jump*



Whereas moments of miscommunication stud the collection *Jump*, this article proposes to read five such misfiring encounters between whites and non-whites, in “What Were You Dreaming?” “Comrades,” “Keeping Fit,” “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” and “Spoils,” through a close examination of the spatial configurations where a confrontation can happen (and fail). In all five short stories the situation of racial inequality is mediated through banal elements: the car, food/drink, and the delivering of a testimony. I will connect these elements to the unresolved opposition cast by Agamben between *bios*, the political life, and *zoe*, the biological life. I argue that in these confrontation scenes the “others” are excluded through their very inclusion, but that they are also recognized as a political presence in the privileged site of vehicles functioning in the text as correlatives of what Agamben describes as a “void” in social spaces.

Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you put them into; so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter – away they go clattering like hey-go-mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it. (Sterne 3)

“Inside out” – Locating Confrontation

In an essay about Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* Nadine Gordimer quotes the following passage (in a longer version) from the 1987 novel:

How does one begin to explain the down-trodden drivers' wistful preference for a leader driving not like themselves in a battered and spluttering vehicle but differently, stylishly in a Mercedes and better still with another down-trodden person like themselves for a chauffeur? (“Writing” 72-3)

This post-Independence tale, or even fable, speaks volumes about the so-called complex of the colonized and about the role reversals of dominated and dominating. Gordimer points out here how, in novels like Achebe's, the decolonized elite is shown to have fallen into step with the British “Imperial” described by E.M. Forster in *Howards End*: “In the motorcar was another type whom Nature favors – the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the earth” (323).¹ There is no such explicit satire in Gordimer's own style (see Ball on satire in Achebe). This is perhaps because the device

1. About this passage and others in E.M. Forster's novel, as well as about an analysis of imperialism which cuts across many of the themes broached in my paper, see Jameson. For the Forsterian influence on Gordimer's early writing see Temple-Turston, 24-5, 29.

of satire requires a perspective which is both outside and inside a given society, a procedure rendered difficult by the fluidity of borders in the collection. The present study is premised upon the fact that the short stories in *Jump* are not fully understandable in terms of borders, however unstable these may be declared. I argue that the choice of this particular passage in Achebe's novel derives not from Gordimer's fascination for limits between the oppressed and the oppressor, but rather from an interest in the literary possibilities offered by the spaces where their confrontation can take place – in this instance, a car. Cars are liminal spaces of a particular nature: a combination of outsidership and insidership and therefore, a negation of both; a promise of temporary and not altogether very comfortable togetherness; and a point of view which travels, and travels fast, as such modernist writers as Proust or Woolf have pondered upon and represented in their fiction.

Roads and cars have all but become a *passage obligée* in African literature as a site where the excesses and lacks of post-Independence nations are blatantly displayed; see Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (but also "Obstacle Race"), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born* (but also *Fragments*), Niyi Osundare's "Song of the Nigerian Driver," and the "umbilical cord" (5) of the road in the opening page of Yvonne Vera's *Stone Virgins*. Joyce Cary's much earlier *Mister Johnson* was already centred upon the construction of a road and the changes it brought as well as the oppositions it revealed.² Cars may encapsulate everything that was wrong about apartheid – such a correlation is visible with the car which is apparently "quite safe" but is in reality an "old [...] chassis [...] cracked right through" (Gordimer, *Jump* 173). They represented the ability for whites to move around freely while non-whites were submitted to Pass Laws; they also symbolised a white economic privilege, with the non-white population having to walk, or travel in the still omnipresent "combis." This particular instance of inequality was played on by Alex La Guma in *And a Threepold Cord*: "The rich automobile beams swept above the tiny chinks of malnourished light that tried to escape from the sagging shanties, like restless hope scratching at a door" (37). Cars were not owned by blacks unless they stole them, as in the "common sob story" evoked in "Spoils" (168). This is illustrated by David Goldblatt's collection of photographs entitled *The Transported of KwaNdebele*, first published in 1989, at a time when Nadine Gordimer was writing some of the short stories later included in *Jump*.³ Just like land ownership, car ownership can be seen as a marker of inequality during apartheid.⁴ But because they evoke a semi-nomadism which was "native" before the Europeans arrived in South Africa (Elphick, Barnard), cars constitute a space where, over and again, the different "races" and ethnicities find themselves thrown together, however fleetingly. The car functions as an element of *zoe*, the biological life where hunting for food is thus made easier ("Spoils," "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off"), and of *bios*, where man is granted political existence through a sharing of space (*polis*) and the use of language. Cars are at times hardly symbolic but in a South African context they are heavy with meaning, to say the

2. See the extensive analysis carried out in Christiane Fioupou's *La Route*.

3. The photographs in the volume were taken in 1983 and 1984.

4. The situation has been so modified by the end of the apartheid regime that a National Household Travel Survey was conducted in 2013 in order to chart a situation of massive congestion in some areas of the country (mostly Gauteng and the Cape Province).

least.⁵ Just as much as land itself, they belonged to the white minority, with non-whites relegated to “keeping” them for others, like the old man in “Keeping Fit” who works at an underground car park (237) for a living; but they also represent the desire to end this old order of domination and oppression.

Much convincing scholarship has unpacked the ways in which Gordimer scales down the apartheid regime and uses a microcosm (home) in order to grasp the macrocosm (the nation) (see Clingman’s *History* most notably but also Boyers). I wish to suggest that an emphasis on “home” might also betray a somewhat Eurocentric perspective; if the term is used at the end of the collection by one of the only female black voices heard in the first person, it is also clear that “home” does not indicate a place as much as an emotional and sentimental bond between wife and husband. “Home” may not be a shelter as much as a landscape, a land, a path, for those South Africans whose ancestors do not hail from Europe and its specific traditions of domesticity. It is rather unmissable how in *Jump*, space is organised not only around inside and outside realms, around the erection of borders, however shifting or even unstable they may be (McCann), but also around makeshift *agoras* where an awkward but actual dialogue can start. One case in point is the moment when Mrs. Hattie Telford, whose very last name combines language (tell) and a car (Ford), apprises the uneasy situation of her car transporting a group of young African militants:

The others got in the back, the spokesman beside her. She saw the nervous white of his eyes as he glanced at and away from her. She searched for talk to set them at ease. Questions, of course. Older people always start with questioning young ones. Did they come from Soweto? (“Comrades,” *Jump* 92)

Written with an internal focalization on Hattie, the passage oscillates between her prejudice (visible in her question, as if a paradigmatic township, Soweto, were the only place where blacks ever lived) and her determination to move beyond racial issues, which provokes her recasting the relation as one between old and young people instead. There is much symbolism in the “spokesman” being seated beside her, and therefore on the same level, but also a physical possibility for the two characters to look “at” (rather than “away from”) each other. This gaze is a promise of dialogue – not the European logos and power discourse where the “Other” is always already spoken for, but an actual discovery of what these youths may have to say about themselves and “*their* version of South Africa” (111, original emphasis). The scene constitutes a conjuration of the asymmetric gaze of explorers and settlers, whereby “in the centuries of European colonization, [...] travel and travel writing were (and are) about the gaze of power. It is this that helps explain how the movements of some (non-European) peoples were effectively frozen under that narrative gaze” (Khair *et al.* 6-7). Mrs. Telford’s car contains an attempt at circumscribing the conditions for the existence of a reciprocal look. The car appears as a transitional space deconstructing the institutional place of the University, where the meeting was held, and preparing a moment of conviviality in a home – although that final moment will fall through because of linguistic inadequacies in relation to perspectival diffractions of the “real” (96). In “Comrades,” the moment of together-

5. One can think for instance of how Athol Fugard’s 1980 novel *Tsotsi* was adapted for the screen in 2006 through the inclusion of a car theft, which redirects the finding of the baby. The denunciation of the injustices provoked by the apartheid regime becomes a critique of the neo-liberal order in the “rainbow nation,” which has allowed a black African middle class to emerge better to preserve the *status quo*, which includes the economic interests of the car industry (see Dovey).

ness created by the car is accidental. It betrays the reader's expectations as early as the first line, where a scene of mugging was openly suggested. It is also quite transitional, and only intended as a short ride towards the bus station, where black South Africans are thought to belong. Yet, it triggers a linguistic exchange which activates confrontation between the privileged and the underprivileged.

With this article I wish to re-think the representation of space operated in *Jump* through the object of the car and to connect this space of makeshift communality to language. It is perhaps useful to scrutinize place not merely as a transposition between microcosm and macrocosm, the domestic and the national, but as an aporia: a space which has lost its coordinates and social function, an absence of a forum with little room left for political debate, for opposition, for contestation and dissensus – a void which is still felt, and which produces in turn “a compressing silence” (“Comrades,” *Jump* 92). While Barrett has convincingly charted moments of miscommunication, her approach remains phenomenological as she contends that stories in *Jump* “reinforce the idea that true communication between people lies in emotions and bodily needs rather than in words” (151). I would suggest that true communication remains a failure but that the spaces where it could take place are charted in a number of stories in the collection. The effects of defamiliarization often produced through the various cars represented in the collection all aim, I contend, at deconstructing Eurocentric spaces of houses, farms, streets, cities, and at interrogating a perception of the land through circulation. The latter notion has been partly inspired by Clingman's discussion of Gordimer's (*July's People* and *The Pickup*) and Coetzee's novels in terms of “navigation” (*Grammar* 208-9) and the ways in which such issues of journeying through space are connected by Clingman “to linguistic and – most especially – syntactic structures and progressions” (208). My analysis is less focused on grammatical facts and more on phonetic derivations – how breath becomes language in the five short stories I have singled out.

Cars: Displacing the Encounter (*zoe-bios*)

The symbolic function of the car is at its most visible in a later novel, *The Pickup*, where the “colonial encounter” between Julie Summers, an upper-class white South African, and a migrant worker from the Middle East is lodged around and in Julie's car, which is repaired by a have-not threatened with expulsion who finds cars “beautiful” (9) because he does not have one. Their unlikely encounter takes place after Julie's car has broken down and she must have it fixed: he is the mechanic – not unlike the “Cape Coloured” in “What Were You Dreaming?” who is a “panel beater,” his violent frustration (intimated by “beater”) being thus channelled by the needs of the white section of the South African apartheid society (*Jump* 215). This very car was crucial enough to the plot to give the novel its name. Julie's entrapment in space, her impossible location as a South African white in a post-apartheid society, is clinched by the very first three sentences of the novel:

Clustered predators round a kill. It's a small car with a young woman inside it. The battery has failed and taxis, cars, minibuses, vans, motorcycles butt and challenge one another, reproach and curse her, a traffic mob mounting its own confusion. (*The Pickup* 3)

Like the African animal tales where human strengths and weaknesses are represented by species, the social body is diffracted into vehicles of various revealing kinds. Togeth-

erness frames the passage ("clustered," "mob"); the opening strategies deployed here turn traffic issues into existential positionalities and strife. As is recalled by JanMohamed, the first conflict between whites and blacks, in *July's People*, was already about a car, "because it is their only means of escape and because it symbolizes the technology that has allowed whites to control blacks in South Africa" (141).

Retrospectively, the reader's attention can be drawn to the major role played by cars in more than half of the short stories in *Jump*. In "My Father Leaves Home," the "old car" (61) is just as evocative of the old European world as the "horse-drawn carts" and "wagons" which are "delaying cars and buses back into another century" (58). In "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight," the fact that one of Rad's friends is driving the taxi taking Vera to the airport "while the men talked in their language" (87) can be retrospectively read as a programmatic sign of the trap she has fallen into and failed to understand. In "Amnesty," the political activism of the narrator's boyfriend, his life away from her, are encapsulated by "the combi or some car [which] comes to fetch him" (254). In "Safe Houses," "Sylvie" only meets "Harry" because her car has broken down, and her blatant lack of familiarity with the system of public transportation indicates her social isolation as a white. In "What Were You Dreaming?" the trio is brought together in a car, as the Coloured man must hitchhike because he cannot own a car, even though his job is to repair them. In "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off," the car becomes a crime scene and in "Spoils," the trajectories of the rich clients and of the African guide are jumbled together in a safari-purposed station wagon. In "Comrades," Hattie Telford only meets the group of young activists because she offers to give them a lift – to town, whereas she meant to go home herself (92). Here and everywhere, the car is balanced between an intimate space of wealth and general social privilege, and on the other hand, an engagement within the social sphere. Cars of various kinds are present in every single story of the collection (with the exception of "Teraloyna"). My contention is that they represent in *Jump* both the extreme violence and the configuration of new spaces for dialogue, including in the non "South African" stories. This symbolic focus on a means of transportation might have been suggested to the author by a short story written by Mango Tshabangu, "Thoughts in a Train," published by *Staffrider* in 1978 and then included by Mothobi Mutloatse in *Forced Landing, Contemporary Writings*. In this short text, the train carriages reserved for whites, comfortable, almost empty, and with closed windows, are contrasted with the carriages for blacks, where travellers have to squeeze in and stand in grotesque positions or even sit on the roof – an image of inequality but also of a black numerical superiority which cannot but take the train in the direction of political representation.

In three short stories ("What Were You Dreaming?" "Comrades," and "Spoils"), a confrontation actually takes place in a car, while in "Keeping Fit," the absent car (as the unnamed character runs alongside a road made for whites to drive on) is the occasion for the encounter. Caught amidst a murderous mob which transgresses the border of the township in an episode of "black on black" violence, the character finds himself in what might be likened to the camp described by Giorgio Agamben as one of the crucial elements of our post-disaster modernity, a space where "life that does not deserve to live" is relegated (*Homo Sacer* 136 *seq.*). This space is a reactivation of the "camp" seen by Agamben as the privileged site of modernity (*Homo Sacer* 119-80); turning the camp into a paradigm of spatialization and containment is all the more relevant in a South

African context since the British had devised a precursor to Nazi concentration camps during the second Boer War (1899-1902), and since the building of the apartheid regime included a system of containment through the creation of Bantustans (1951, a law followed by the Bantu Self Government Act 1959).

The emphasis on the bodies present in the cramped interior, on their weight, skin, naked limbs (234-5), bodies whose concern is not to “keep fit” but to keep alive, can be in turn compared to the purely physical life of *zoe*, an existence denied any political dimension. Yet, the white character receives a piece of experience and is confronted for what is probably the first time with “how the other half lives.” The words of the woman reach him as a sort of nourishment as he is also given a cup of tea (in a parody of colonial ceremonies?). By an unexpected inversion, he is relegated to *zoe*, to mere survival, while his interlocutor might be seen to reach for the sphere of *bios* in her delivering a testimony, even a knowledge, of the reality of social struggles in South Africa. In itself, her saving his life cannot not be read as a political act of “keeping” the oppressor in order for him to hear what his responsibilities might be. The camp which needed to be “kept” out of sight from the point of view of drivers (230) has been sighted and turned into a site of political intervention, a *polis*. Alongside a road, the camp is described through a few elements whose incoherence is, I suggest, only apparent:

There were cooking pots and ashes and a tethered donkey, the scabby body of a car like the eviscerated shell of a giant beetle, lamed supermarket trolleys, mud wall, beer cans; silence. Desertion: or the vacuum created by people left behind by the passage of violence, keeping out of it, holding breath. (233)

I argue that silence and desertion, the two notions isolated by a punctuation mark at the end of the first sentence and at the beginning of the next, are at the core of the reflection proposed to the reader in *Jump*: moments when violence produces a nothingness which is tangible and even crucial. This passage moves beyond a tension between the inside and the outside to foreground a confusion of orders and degrees through linguistic drift. The car may or may not be a Beetle, but this type of Volkswagen – or “car of the people” – is heard behind the animal comparison; perhaps even, the “shell” evokes the formerly Anglo-Dutch oil company whose interests in the Middle East became so cardinal to the last developments of the European Empires before it became property of the “new” imperial power across the Atlantic. Likewise, the evocation of Egyptian rites of mummification (“beetle,” “eviscerated”) resonates phonetically with “beer”/bier, the place where corpses are laid, a void filled by another form of emptiness. A cluster of transcultural and diachronic connotations, that “scabby body” is a void which both suggests and resists annihilation. The car becomes in “Keeping Fit” a continuum of “bits of wrecked vehicles” (231), an objective correlative for the destroyed fabric of the South African society during colonial times and apartheid, but also a space where motion could lodge itself in order to start again, if not anew.

The “eviscerated” body of a car is, I contend, a resistance to the camp, a suggestion that cars retain a connotation of motion and of change. It reverberates in the car where tourists discover the law of nature in “Spoils”: “Between the beasts and the human load, the void” (173). The “void” as a space where uncertainties constitute an existential presence is working against the very grain of repeated suggestions of emptiness, epistemic and otherwise, around the African territories, as found in colonial texts – the “place of negotiations” denounced by Chinua Achebe, as he discusses Conrad’s *Heart of*

Darkness (2). The colonial discourse around a presumably absent culture is connected by Mary Louise Pratt to a “biologized body” fully aligned with Agamben’s analysis of the relegation to the biological rather than the political, to *zoe* rather than *bios*, a distinction found in Aristotle (Pratt 1-12). Pratt writes the following about colonial texts and more specifically, about their representations of the Cape area:

In the midst of current scholarly critique of colonialist discourses, contemporary readers can scarcely fail to link this creation of a speechless, denuded, biologized body with the deracinated, dispossessed, disposable work force European colonialists so ruthlessly and tirelessly fought to create in their footholds abroad. One might want to argue that Sparrman’s and Paterson’s accounts simply reflect changes the Khoikhoi peoples themselves had undergone during the five decades of colonial intervention since Kolb. Their traditional lifeways had after all been permanently disrupted. Yet the complicity of these texts begins in the fact that they portray the African peoples not as undergoing historical changes in their lifeways, but as having no lifeways at all, as cultureless beings (*sans mœurs*, in the French version of Paterson). Whatever changes might have been taking place tend not to be expressed *as changes*, but are “naturalized” as absences and lacks. [...] So does the anti-conquest “underwrite” colonial appropriation, even as it rejects the rhetoric, and probably the practice, of conquest and subjugation. (53)

Drawing on the “absence” of any African culture proclaimed by colonial propaganda, Gordimer does not proceed to write back but follows the thread of such a lack, in order to project a space outside of all places. More so than houses, the car becomes as unstable, movable, dangerous, as is required by the urgency of ending the apartheid regime.

In “Keeping Fit” the scene of violence in the township can be seen as a moment of confrontation between whites and non-whites in a soon-to-be transitional South Africa: a violently physical confrontation but also a moment of testimony which upturns the direction of the “colonial encounter” where the European is always paradoxically on his or her own grounds. The border transgressed in “Keeping Fit” is not only a symbolical one between the white city and the Black township: it is a road. The transgression is not so much that of falling through the fence as of finding oneself on foot rather than in a car – and the return from that “Hell” into which the character has descended is connected to a white life spent sheltered by automobiles as he comes across a car “with men in golf caps” (239). The non-white characters have been “making him join them” (238), however briefly, in an experience of the camp, of *zoe*, of a denied political recognition. The fact that “the need to tell began to subside inside him” (240) as the jogger nears his home can be read as a failure of the confrontation and the exchange ends in miscommunication. Yet, some signs are ambiguous: the fact that his own family is having breakfast, and is reduced to their bodily needs; the fact that a bird is dying in a pipe just outside the house, turning it into a lethal trap; and the fact that the black father is working in an “underground” car park, which could suggest that he is surreptitiously in charge of “driving” the country within a few years. South Africa fails to offer new territories and asks to re-invent that same land of violent history and haunted underground, as is intimated in the opening paragraphs of “Once Upon a Time,” where “upon” is turned into a catachresis and reactivated as a literal meaning – a place perched on a void (24). I will now examine the car in its variety of meanings, in “Comrades,” “Spoils,” and “What Were You Dreaming?”

Communality in a “state of exception”

In all three stories (“Comrades,” “What Were you Dreaming?” and “Spoils”), the plot revolves around the unease, but also a quest for meaning, experienced during a car journey shared by white and non-white characters. The car embodies here an ambiguity. While the Cape “Coloured” in “What Were You Dreaming?” has been expelled from his ancestral home by apartheid land evictions, his life is now governed by the line of the N1 road which runs across the country from South to North, from the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town to the Limpopo River and the border with Zimbabwe: could the humiliation become an empowerment as well? The short story re-enacts colonial narratives of exploration and delves into the “heart of the country,” to borrow from Coetzee’s title for his second novel (itself a re-writing of Conrad’s notorious novella). Beyond contextual issues, the car’s possible meaning reverberates in two directions: it could be related to the modernist aesthetics where new technologies (cars but also phones, photography or the movies⁶) might change our perception of reality. Another meaning might be approached through the notions used by McCann in her analysis of some stories in *Jump* (278). McCann lays the emphasis on representations of space which translate social motion, a state of flux which belies but might also corroborate the apartheid regime and the general obsession with borders which characterizes our modernity. These multi-directional signs allow meaning to proliferate, but also to err.

An emblematic device related to the colonial presence of Europeans in Africa, cars have been instrumental both to the repression of the apartheid regime, and to the struggles of the ANC. Like “Harry” himself at the end of “Safe Houses” (“There was nothing to do but keep jogging; at a traffic light the car drew up beside him and two plain-clothes men ordered him to come to the police station with them,” 209) opponents were often “taken away” in the vehicles of the secret services. This is also what Teresa’s husband imagines to have happened to her family (“Home,” *Jump* 126). Nelson Mandela (dressed in a chauffeur’s jacket) was arrested in a limousine thanks to a road-block near Howick, where a monument now commemorates the event. Meanwhile, black retaliation against perceived traitors was carried out through “necklacing,” with a tyre and petrol; and the ANC organization was only made possible thanks to vehicles such as the “combi” (252, 254, 256) which symbolizes the narrator’s new life of political struggle in “Amnesty.” Roads have been mined in South Africa and cars blown up (by the ANC, “Spoils” 168) but also Mozambique (by ReNaMo, “Jump” 11), and this dread of white “Boer” farmers is recalled in “The Moment Before The Gun Went off”; cars have been “stoned” (“Once Upon a Time” 26) and exploded, as Mrs Telford knows her guests will do one day (“a career of wiring explosives to the undersides of vehicles,” “Comrades” 96). Roads have become “strategic” (“Jump” 14) for the Mozambican counter-revolutionaries, and political refugees are careful to keep “away from the roads” (“The Ultimate Safari” 37). In the unnamed African country where the family in “A Journey” lives provisionally, the father drives to the airport in hopes of renewal which are ironically echoed by the traces left of a coup: “There were tanks rolling along

6. See the role of phones in “Home,” of photography in “Jump” and “Spoils,” or of movies in “Jump,” “Safe Houses” or at the end of “The Ultimate Safari.”

this road not long ago, and it's unevenly patched with fresh tarmac where it was blown up" (153).

The harbingers of a sea change in the racial politics of South Africa are more often than not staged in a car. It is the case when the two wives and children of Siza are climbing into the "large station wagon" alongside the paying guests, "flesh to flesh" ("Spoils" 170). The embarkation is both awkward, with a woman talking to a black child "as if he were someone else: 'In for the kill'"; and inevitable: "It is not possible to get out" (171). This car is the occasion both of a communion ("the beating hearts in the vehicle," 172) and of the threat of overload (173), even as a new South Africa could be seen to emerge slowly, in unison and/or in competition for a limited space. The car allows the white section of the population to pretend not to see what is outside their homes, as their lifestyle includes "driv[ing] the car out of the electronically-operated gates" ("Once Upon a Time" 27) and returning home likewise. In "Spoils," the "common sob story" of the blacks' oppression goes through finding "[one's] first real bed when [one] joined a gang of car thieves" (167-8), where one finds the assimilation of the car with a home already present when Barthes was describing the Citroën Déesse, with its dashboards like a kitchen, in *Mythologies* (166). In this sense, my reading of these five short stories intersects some of the conclusions drawn by Rita Barnard about the mythical writing of apartheid literature, but ascribes such myth-making to the specific locus of the car.

The short story "Spoils" has a curious ending, which is and is not an epiphany. The final revelation is allowed to take place but it divides the group. The clients of the safari are let into an awesome universe of loss and gain, of humanity and animality thrown in together, and of careful distribution of what eats and what is eaten; but such a revelation is mediated through language and delivered by someone who "knows." This final scene can be compared to the kitchen in "Comrades," at the end of which the epiphany is perceived by the white character only, and expresses something the others had known before: "Only the food that fed their hunger was real" (96), where the phonetic proximity between "hunger" and "anger" can hardly be missed.

I would wonder here whether the suspension provided by epiphanies ever since their implementation by James Joyce's "The Dead" (Tigges 40-54) allows Gordimer to explore the space of an empty signification. With its phenomenological perception of reality, and its re-asserted quest for knowledge, the ending of a Gordimerian short story joins reality and impossibility, realism and the fable, the tangible object of a car and the line of flight of everything it can stand for. The accident of whites and blacks finding themselves together in a car, in "Spoils" but also "What Were You Dreaming?" and "Comrades," becomes akin to the void of "anomie," in Agamben's thinking about the state of exception (*State* 51-60). Neither a camp nor a shelter, a home nor a danger, space becomes that "void" of empty significations where reality can lodge itself in its barest forms. The absence of *nomos* is connected to sight in "What Were You Dreaming?" a story where the driving away of populations deemed undesirable by the apartheid regime ("We're talking about loading up trucks and carting black people out of sight of whites," 221) is countered by the "Cape Coloureds'" presence in a car whose European driver keeps his eyes "fixed on the black faces he is trying to read" (220). A perpetual motion brings the "Other" in and out of sight, or of focus, in ways that are explicitly meta-fictional ("read").

At this point one might interrogate the titular clues in the collection. “Jumping” indeed suggests a suspension between spaces, a moment of life which supposes the existence of stable ground as a *telos*, as well as an origin. The car is an instance of the mediation operated by the state of exception between the norm (apartheid) and the reality (the individual perspective of characters who, not coincidentally, remain nameless in a large number of cases). Agamben writes:

[T]he impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (*State* 40)

Agamben’s work on the state of exception constitutes a renewed perspective upon one of the tensions outlined by all scholarship on Gordimer between her realism and her re-working the codes of the fantastic. The difficulty linked to the realistic enterprise is not the chaos of “life,” but its void; not its accumulation, but its lack. The problem is not really a prolific heterogeneity, but a homogeneity of emptiness. The methods of description are impossible after the loss of places and the disappearance of locations. There are actually no spaces other than “eviscerated” ones where an exchange can take place: a failure which in itself expresses the horrors of apartheid.

The “camp” becomes a site of brutal segregation in *Jump*, but that site can also be deprived of these connotations in order to start floating in suspension, a possible meeting place which redeems nothing or no one, but allows for a displacement. The “void” is no erasure but a passage where circulation can take place: “there are so many ways you don’t think of, outside, when you don’t need to” (“Spoils” 167). The negativity under the sign of which a space (“outside”) is placed may be replaced, or not, by another positivity. In any case, the point is to move beyond the language of law, which is both fixed and final, predicated along binaries, and sufficiently vague to condemn people to living in the camp for a period which is “indeterminate,” without an end but also without a definition: “he was *already declared* a habitual criminal, inside for an *indeterminate sentence*” (167, my emphases).

I will now turn to such linguistic practices as are articulated around the adjective “indeterminate,” where the logocentric enunciation of the law also corresponds to a blurring of semantic meaning. It should be stated at this stage that linking a desire for a performative act of social reparation to post-Saussurian consciousness is nothing new in the field of postcolonial theory. Benedict Anderson has already developed such a reflection, and his forays into the matter are commented on in turn in a section (“Social Anonymity and Cultural Anomie”) of Homi Bhabha’s essay entitled “DissemiNation.” Bhabha writes:

Anderson historicizes the emergence of the arbitrary sign of language – and here he is talking of the process of signification rather than the progress of narrative – as that which had to come before the narrative of the modern nation could begin. In decentering the prophetic visibility and simultaneity of medieval systems of dynastic representation, the homogeneous and horizontal community of modern society can emerge. (308)

In *State of Exception*, Agamben proceeds to establish a similarly paradoxical association between the (post-)modern awareness of the contingency of language, and a myth of

origins: “everything happens as if both law and *logos* needed an anomic (or alogical) zone of suspension in order to ground their reference to the world of life” (60). According to this line of investigation, “the conflict seems to concern an empty space: on the one hand, anomie, juridical vacuum, and, on the other, pure being, devoid of any determination of real predicate” (*ibid.*) The repeated transgression of apartheid carried out in cars, where blacks and whites are able to interact and speak, or simply to breathe together, becomes the anomic whereby speech can be redirected away from propaganda and towards a presumably more accurate description of the world – through testimony.

Breathing Together: Towards Speech

In the short story entitled “Jump,” the young Mozambican woman who is turned into an occasional prostitute by the main protagonist and focalizer attempts to move beyond the violence of her own commodification and suggests going to the beach. She says, “We can take a bus” (19) to the ReNaMo repentant who was promised a house and a car (5, 18) as tokens for his “rehabilitation” (5). This would make him part of a community whose members cannot afford a car, and it would expose him to the gaze of the people he used to fight and mutilate. Of note is the fact that she receives no answer to the offer: the bus stands here for a space of dialogue which the man will not board. In *Jump*, cars, buses, pick-ups and vans are sites of utterance and even of dialogue. Instead of answering, the main character “nods and leans to take a cigarette.” He then is taken over by that activity, “the inhalation of the cigarette has become his breath and body” (20). The breath evokes more than one passage in “Keeping Fit” (229, 233, 242) but also the passage in the car in “Spoils” (“the breathing mass,” 172) or “Comrades” (“At the back, no one seemed even to be breathing,” 92).

Breathing is just the sort of ordinary act that Gordimer derealizes and defamiliarizes, in an overall attempt at deconstructing the very routine which *de facto* validated apartheid on the part of the “dominating” group (see the passage in “Home” where “daily life” is plumbed as pertaining to the edifice of the apartheid regime without explicitly condoning it – “what will stop it covering up what is really happening?” 131). The most blatant example of an emphasis on breathing, the simplest form of life, appears at the beginning of “Keeping Fit” and pertains to the opening strategies. But there are others: when the youth from “Phoneng Location” (a hidden allusion to phones and the voice communication they allow?) pile into Mrs. Telford’s car, “at the back, no one seemed to be breathing” (“Comrades” 92). Inherent to speech, breath is foregrounded as a presence or promise of conversation in the car. That passage towards speech is curtailed in “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” “a moment of high excitement shared through the roof of a cab” (116) where communality is not mediated by language. The excitement corresponds to that moment when the exception is no longer included in the system, described by Agamben in “The Logic of Sovereignty” (*Homo Sacer* 15-29). The “familiar routine” (“The Moment” 113) is interrupted and becomes a bumpy route with a pothole on the path of the cab which will fire the gun – here also, there is a pun around the phrase “to gun the engine,” which is echoed in the title and is found again in the poem by Bernat Kruger entitled “Gunning” (included in the poetry collection *Never*). On the contrary, “familiar” turns out to be a reliable clue, the first indication of the final revelation, a stone placed on the path of the reader who is invited to see there a catachresis, a return to the literal: the two men are, indeed, belonging to the same

family. These reshufflings of meaning and deconstructions of *logos* culminate around the graveyard, where both of Lucas' parents share their grief in silence. A heterotopia of sorts, that graveyard reactivates the impossible dialogue between driver and tracker in the pick-up, it is a place beyond human activity – the opposite of an agora. Like the “wrecked vehicles” (231) in “Keeping Fit,” the graveyard is turned into the vestigial trace of a former and no longer possible existence.

Yet the car's semantic function goes beyond such hermeneutic clues in the short story. The text points out to the reader its own failure at capturing the moment of Lucas' death and redirects its violence towards the roof of the cab. The title intimates a concern with what happened before while the plot is actually constituted by the aftermath of the murder, be it accidental or not. The exact moment when “The bullet pierced the roof and entered Lucas' brain by way of his throat” (“The Moment” 114) is actually replayed a few paragraphs later through a displacement of the bullet onto the aerial on the roof, functioning as a “whip”:

All his vehicles, including the truck in which the black man died, have aerials that swing their whips when the driver hits a pot-hole: they are part of the security system the farmers in the district maintain, each farm in touch with every other radio, twenty-four hours out of twenty-four. (115)

The pot-hole which produces the accident (in Marais Van der Vyver's account at least) is another void whose emptiness becomes something, a mathematically “positive” value. The aerial becomes a correlative of the violence of the gun and includes the whole “system” in the guilt of the white farmer – more than the sum of its parts. The proliferation of communication means is as lethal as the rifle here, turning the cab into a space where the encounter between father and son is ended in the worst possible way by an omnipresent white discourse stronger than the a-linguistic signs exchanged by the occupants (“he hooted,” 113; “Lucas thumped his fist on the cab roof three times to signal: look left,” 114). The “body” of the car becomes reminiscent of the “voice in the echo-chamber of the subconscious” (23), a metaphorization of childhood stories and fairy tales, a representation of the threat of interracial and social violence, and an image, perhaps, of how language turns into mere sound when the house of fiction is not safe – which, surely, is the case with *Jump and Other Stories*.

In all these cases, the car becomes a metafictional representation for the text itself, as it takes its reader for a ride. Here again, Gordimer reactivates a conceit which was already traversing Coetzee's work for instance, from Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, to *Slow Man*, where the metafictional possibilities deployed by the open road, and the car accident, are played upon throughout.

Carrelatives

While Paul Hazell contends that the specific needs for an “Africar” (232) have not been sufficiently considered by the car industry, I would suggest that Nadine Gordimer weaves the poetics and politics of a “car-relative”: a material representation of abstract notions such as postcolonial negotiations but also confrontations, recognition, guilt, and togetherness, which culminates in the secret kinship of father and son as it is revealed by their co-presence in a pickup truck. I have tried to show that a reiterated critique of white homes and black displacement represents the “archives” (Colleran) of

apartheid but does not include the shock of the confrontation as it is staged here and there, and often in a car, in *Jump* – this is not to mention the fact that discussions around rootedness, African or otherwise, around a nostalgia for “home,” has wreaked havoc in South Africa and elsewhere. The “carrelative” implies no idealized vision of African nomadism either, conscripting the black population into another form of seclusion and exclusion. It suggests an *agora* and a landscape, a chamber of echoes and the mouth from which words can start circulating (as opposed to what happens in “Home” with the fish in their “tank” (136) – another vehicle lurking and connected to silence). Not unlike the rest of the collection, the five short stories I have analysed cast a grim South African future but through its very unfolding, the text manifests the endless possibilities of metamorphosis offered by any aesthetic experience. These possibilities are not necessarily hopeful. In Gordimer’s stories, characters might share Magda’s awareness that “we are on the road from no A to no B” (Coetzee 21), and as previously quoted, the car is part of the “[c]ommon sob story” (“Spoils” 168) in the white progressive discourse which could be Gordimer’s.

The car becomes a Bakhtinian chronotope (and Foucauldian heterochronia) where time and place mingle in a literary site of multiple interpretations; it becomes a prosaic conceit, a surprising metaphor; it is a symbol and a background, an obstacle to interpretation and an endless hermeneutic matrix. The car is, like most other elements in Gordimer’s short stories, a place of failure and disillusion, an impossible setting which both launches and jeopardizes story-telling. Through aesthetic experimentations Gordimer insightfully suggests that only the restoration of places for exchanges to unfold will make way for a narrative background – and foreground. In *Jump*, one sees how the postcolonial trauma of land appropriation and exclusion lodges itself not in places (Sophiatown, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Twin Towers) but precisely in an absence of place. It is a dislocated hurt. The ethical responsibility of literature becomes an act of designating this spatial void, of circumscribing it, of thinking around its emptiness.

The “cab” in “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” might suggest sacrificial practices, as it derives etymologically from “goat” in Latin (*capra*); Lucas becomes a scapegoat expelled from the “body” of the vehicle (“he [...] saw the young man fall out of the vehicle,” 117). A re-enactment of the episode of Abraham and Isaac (and therefore, of Christ’s martyrdom), the text tells of the absence of a redeeming transcendence at the end of the story. The rupture of teleology is highlighted by the way in which, when his son dies, the father becomes a child again, or possibly even the hunted animal (“like a dirty kid,” 113) whose “white-ripple-marked flank” (114) was expressing his being the son of a white man. When the chain of generations and social bonds is made impossible in space – the very site of its impossibility being constituted by the car – language is the only element left to move on. A protean sign which asks the reader to reflect on her hermeneutic practices, the car conveys multi-directional as well as discordant meanings. The “familiar routine” of a writer who writes on a “route” whose destination is fully unknown even as she moves towards it.

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Nadine Gordimer and the Force of Law: Revisiting *My Son's Story*



Nadine Gordimer never gave up on the notion that new modes of justice for racial violence are linked inextricably to literary production. This essay draws on her novel *My Son's Story* (1990) to demonstrate how Gordimer remakes the law as an ameliorative force that undermines the “vocabulary of violence,” as she once described it, through which apartheid-era law was created.

The language of law itself cannot produce political change, Gordimer suggested at the Oslo Conference in 1990: “[T]he law in a new South Africa will outlaw all racism [...]. And all of us who are sincere in the will to create a new South Africa are pledged to that end, not as some rhetorical ideal [...] but as a series of practical acts that will be carried out against all odds” (Gordimer, “After Apartheid”). Given Gordimer’s insistence that we move beyond political rhetoric and toward practical action, readers might be surprised that she left Oslo to continue work on a novel. Gordimer never gave up on the notion that new modes of justice for racial violence are linked inextricably to literary production. Indeed, in personal correspondence with the author shortly before her death, Gordimer confirmed to me that George Bizos, Nelson Mandela’s eminent attorney, drafted the legal language in much of her fiction.¹

Toward the end of the final State of Emergency in South Africa, Gordimer began writing *My Son's Story* (1990), a novel that ultimately was published just after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. The novel thus inhabits a distinct temporality – or atemporality, as I will argue here – in which the end of the violent, racist law of apartheid was in sight and the concept of a free South Africa was coming into existence. In this liminal moment, I contend that Gordimer uses fiction to reveal the possibility for a literary “force of law.”² This is not to say that Gordimer did not find power in the law. In fact, in addition to asking Bizos to prepare the legal language in her fiction, she often was preoccupied with its legitimacy, noting in manuscript edits, for example, “as this is a quote from a law it must be accurate” (Gordimer, “After Apartheid”). Gordimer’s concern with the credibility of legal language in her fiction underscores how she sought to wield the power of law within literature.

This essay argues that fiction can produce new ideas for developing a force of law outside the ideological constraints of geopolitical time. In the essay, I consider Jacques Derrida’s assertion that law in the abstract inherently is tethered to a history of law-enforcing violence, and that as a result the law lacks capacity to produce justice. Breaking free from the ideological boundaries of apartheid lawmaking and law enforcing, *My Son's Story* develops a new model of time-space that is free from those ideological controls. The novel is able to perform this task in part because of the moment when it appears: in 1990, the apartheid system is on the brink of yielding to a democratic South Africa. Operating within this liminal opening, I argue that that novel generates a new literary time-space that I will call the “Zero chronotope” in which law as a historical

1. Personal correspondence with the author, July 2013.

2. The term “force of law” derives from Derrida’s lecture, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority.”

construct can be destroyed and a new force of law can arise.³ The Zero chronotope refers to a temporal point of origin that is tied neither to what has come before it nor to what will follow – a moment of suspension. Hannah Arendt discusses such a period of suspended time and its political uses, describing an

odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses, the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet. In history, these intervals have shown more than once that they may contain the moment of truth. (9)

To be clear, the essay does not suggest that a novel like *My Son's Story* can be treated as an alternative to existing law. Rather, I contend that *My Son's Story*, and other fiction that might produce a Zero chronotope, offer new ways for conceiving of laws that might push back against the harms of laws created – consciously or subconsciously – within the confines of racist ideology. In other words, we might view a work of fiction like *My Son's Story* as offering a new model for jurisprudence and, accordingly, a new theoretical base from which laws might be written, enacted, and enforced.

I begin by looking at the scholarly reception of *My Son's Story*, explaining how attention to the novel largely has been limited to a particular period in South African history. I seek to reinvigorate interest in *My Son's Story*, exploring its capacity to speak to political power beyond the historical moment in which it initially appeared. Next, I assess Derrida's discussion of the force of law, showing how an alternate, ameliorative force of law requires a new conception of time-space. From here, I consider the ways in which literary time-space, or Mikhail Bakhtin's model of the "chronotope," might help us to conceive of the Zero chronotope in *My Son's Story*. Finally, I turn to the text of the novel to demonstrate how it breaks down historical conceptions of "the law" and develops the Zero chronotope in which a new force of law might arise.

Recovering *My Son's Story* from South African History

Since the publication of *My Son's Story*, the novel has occupied a distinct political position in Gordimer's catalogue of work, largely tied to the early years of free South Africa. This essay seeks to revive the novel from its historical fixity and to demonstrate how it offers a new way to conceive of literature's political power in resisting the ideological constraints of racist law. The novel tells the story of a father, Sonny, and his son, Will, living in Johannesburg during the final State of Emergency. Sonny, a "coloured" man who used to be a schoolteacher, has become involved in African National Congress (ANC) politics and has been imprisoned as a result of his activism. During his imprisonment, a white human rights activist named Hannah provides Sonny's family – Will, but also Sonny's wife, Aila, and daughter, Baby – with information, and regularly visits Sonny in prison. After his release, Sonny begins an extramarital affair with Hannah, during which time Aila becomes an ANC activist in secret and Baby leaves South Africa. By the end of the novel, Sonny's affair with Hannah has ended unceremoniously, Aila has gone into exile after her arrest for political activism, and white residents have fire-

3. Bakhtin notably defines the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" as a "chronotope," or "time space" (84). For detailed analyses of Bakhtin's chronotope, see, for example, Bemong *et al*, Falconer, Holquist, and Steinby.

bombed Sonny's home, leaving it in ruins. Will, the narrator, ultimately becomes a writer himself and a critic of the apartheid regime.

In the early 1990s just after the novel's release – at a moment when a democratic constitution and models for remedying the harms of apartheid were taking shape – numerous scholars examined *My Son's Story* through the lens of contemporary South African politics. Stephen Clingman, a long-time reader and critic of Gordimer's work, suggested that it depicted an intellectual or theoretical engagement with a specific liminal moment: apartheid was ending but a free South Africa had not yet come into existence. However, Clingman stopped short of suggesting that the novel could wield power beyond a mere thought exercise, describing the novel as inward-looking and “registering, in the main, ‘mentality’” (xxvii). Liliane Louvel observed how *My Son's Story* presented a microcosm for the newly free South Africa in which racial divisions remained, yet optimism reigned in looking toward the future (30). As Louvel argued, the text's fragmentary form and discontinuity in diction ultimately yield a formal reconciliation of sorts: “[T]he isotopy of fragmentation constitutes a unifying web structurally present at the level of story, text, and narration” (28). Similarly, Jorshinelle Sonza described *My Son's Story* as a novel tasked with “recording social and political events,” like Gordimer's previous fiction, and “reconciling racial and gender conflicts” in free South Africa (105). Linda Weinhouse's scholarship on the novel attended more specifically to the limits of racial rapprochement in a newly free South Africa. Commenting on Gordimer's first attempt at writing a coloured male protagonist, Weinhouse underscored that, “despite the fact that the narrative demonstrates that the voice of the ‘other’ can be heard and imagined, Gordimer's attitude toward her own whiteness [...] is resentful and hostile” (71). Likewise, Ipshita Chanda questioned the larger-scale limits of racial representation and the “implications of Gordimer's work [...] for the milieu in which she lives,” ultimately suggesting that *My Son's Story* attended to contemporary politics but had limited force outside Gordimer's committed readership (58).

Other scholarship addressed shifts in the South African constitutional law that sought to remedy institutionalized sex discrimination under apartheid, but nonetheless focused on what *My Son's Story* could tell its readers about gender-based equality. For example, K.C. Baral contended that the novel “propos[ed] a future South Africa, not only on terms of equality of races but of sexes, too” (123), while Nancy Topping Bazin considered the novel in relation to the politics of interracial sex on the cusp of the free South Africa's coming into being. Although she also discussed the post-apartheid political implications of the novel, Barbara Temple-Thurson saliently announced *My Son's Story* as “Gordimer's first unequivocally feminist novel” in her 1993 keynote address at the Conference on Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies (5).

The novel largely fell out of favor with scholars interested in the political relevance of Gordimer's work in the wake of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In fact, only one peer-reviewed work returned to *My Son's Story* in the twenty-first century. After the initial close of the TRC in 1998, Lars Engle questioned the “utility and power of the Western literary tradition” – including Gordimer's fiction – given that the Western literary tradition long has been an “instrument of oppression” (114). In other words, he suggested that Gordimer's fiction might be relevant only in that it serves as evidence of its own political *irrelevance* in a period marked by Western neo-imperialism and racist law. I argue that *My Son's Story* not only has relevance for its

own political moment, but that it also demonstrates a radical function of fiction across time and space.

On Derrida, or the Force of Law in Literary Time-Space

Given Derrida's contention that the law itself cannot produce justice, I want to consider whether alternative forms of language that are not, in the literal sense, law-creating might produce substitute models of legal language that can be used for ameliorative purposes. More specifically, I want to interrogate whether fiction, such as Gordimer's novel *My Son's Story*, might be able to conceive a force of law that resists the ideological constraints through which the language and function of racist laws of apartheid arise. This essay asks whether fiction can break down ideological borders of "the law" as a construct to produce an ameliorative political language that could better enable marginalized persons to exercise rights and privileges. The theoretical force of law was conceived by Derrida in a public address given in April 1990 shortly before the final State of Emergency ended in South Africa, and just a few months before Gordimer's previously quoted Oslo Conference remarks on the power of literature to make law. The address critiqued the theoretical concept of justice and its practical implications – a question looming large in South Africa at that time. Derrida's address, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority," revisits a Walter Benjamin essay, "Critique of Violence," to consider the limitations of law in producing justice. Derrida intimates that the law as we know it – a system of rules that governs persons, governs a nation-state – inherently produces harm because of violence intrinsic to the term itself.

Even if laws are created to protect a vulnerable population, Derrida suggests that those laws by their nature necessarily include the notion of enforceability and thus preclude them from producing justice for marginalized bodies and voices. Enforceability in and of itself carries with it a capacity for violence and harm: "the word 'enforceability' reminds us that there is no such thing as law [...] that doesn't imply, *in itself, a priori, in the analytic structure of its concept*, the possibility of being 'enforced,' applied by force" (925). Derrida undercuts the oft-cited distinction between an ethical force of law that *produces justice* and the unjust violence that often is employed to enforce unjust laws and asks, "how are we to distinguish between this force of law [...] and the violence that one always deems unjust?" (927). This duality of law makes it impossible to "distinguish between the force of law of a legitimate power and the supposedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have been authorized by any anterior legitimacy" (927). In sum, while it may be possible to conceive of a law designed and even put to use on behalf of marginalized groups, even that category of law – like all of law – already implies a violent force or enforceability. That potential for violence, Derrida argues, cannot be separated from the enforcing violence of racist law like that in apartheid-era South Africa.⁴ Given Gordimer's insistence on the power wielded by the law and legal language, it is important to raise potential objections to Derrida. Gordimer's concern with the law intimates that the latent potential for violence in the law may not be sufficient for considering it inherently flawed, as Derrida implies.

4. Gordimer herself might have been trapped by the ideological boundaries in which she wrote, given that she once imagined a fairer South Africa as one in which "a more equitable distribution of wealth may be enforced by laws" (*Living* 265).

Rather, in Gordimer's estimation, the positive applications of law may, in some cases, outweigh the potential for violence contained within Derrida's conception of law.

In Derrida's conception, is there a possibility for an alternate force of law that inherently does good, or at least has the capacity to do so? I want to suggest that this possibility does exist and that it is tied to the notion of "originary violence" used by Derrida. Since all law as we know it inherently carries with it the "originary violence" of enforceability, to make law anew we must find a way to create a new origin story. Derrida intimates that law must take a new form if it is to do justice, and that it must be distinctly tethered to an immediate temporality that breaks from the past.⁵ That force of law must reconsider the very forms through which to produce justice for large-scale, racially motivated political violence since "there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations, and so forth" (971). Such an unexpected event, I argue, might occur in imaginative literature given fiction's "peculiar attribute of being able to stage and suspend all the presupposition upon which any such institution rests – among them the operation of laws" ("Before" 181).

By Derrida's account, connections among fiction, justice, and the force of law must not only conceive new formal structures, but also new approaches to time and temporality.⁶ Barbara Leckie observes how, for Derrida, both law and literature often are ideological prisoners to the sociopolitical conditions that have named them (40).⁷ As such, there is a salient need to break from a historical trajectory, developing instead an atemporal moment from which to make law and literature outside those ideological confines. When we talk about justice and temporality with regard to fiction, need we address temporality only *within* a work of fiction, or must we also look to the temporal moment in which a work of imaginative literature was produced and circulated? I contend that both the fictional time-space – the Zero chronotope – of the novel, as well as its geopolitical time-space, are necessary to consider how an alternate force of law can arise in fiction.

My Son's Story offers the possibility that both the political-historical moment in which a novel is written and circulated, along with its content, together give rise to new literary time-space models, which in turn can yield new ideas for political engagement. In considering whether Gordimer's fiction can give rise to an alternate, ameliorative "force of law," I maintain that time and space – both within and outside the novel – play an essential role in breaking down ideological boundaries. Can a novel construct alternative historical time, thereby opening up opportunities for political resistance? Frederick Cooper discusses the need to produce new historical time that is not marred by a violent colonial past. Previous scholars have had "difficulty in separating the asymmetry of power from a totality," Cooper argues, given that "they can show that

5. Derrida writes of the immediate but elusive temporality of justice: "justice remains, is yet, to come," yet "however unrepresentable it may be, doesn't wait" (969). Elisabeth Weber underscores that, for Derrida, justice is "an infinite task and responsibility that [...] cannot be relegated to tomorrow" (38).

6. Scholars across disciplines have considered the implications of Derrida's "Force of Law" lecture with regard to literature and politics. Derek Attridge intimates that there is a "force" of literary theoretical readings and of reader responsibility" (5-6). Samir Haddad emphasizes that Derrida's work on fiction is tied to practical concerns about violence, justice, and the law (122), while Barbara Leckie similarly argues both law and literature, for Derrida, "are deeply concerned with issues of representation in the service of participatory democracy" (111).

7. See Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, which details the ideological constraints that prevent us from thinking outside the state. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt maintains that the ability truly to think outside ideological boundaries marks the failure of a violent regime aimed at totality.

such successful challenges to power as [...] anti-apartheid movements did not fully overthrow the inequalities they challenged or escape the frameworks of social order that imperial expansion produced” yet cannot articulate *why* in terms of the temporality and shape of historical moments (31).

My Son's Story presents a unique opportunity to consider the function of imaginative literature in responding to contentions like Cooper's. This argument has two necessary components. First, the novel produces a new temporal moment, tied neither to past nor present. The novel was written and published during the moment *between* apartheid ending and free South African coming to fruition – what Gordimer might have described, along with critics of her work, as an “interregnum.” Yet the use of the term “interregnum” is tied distinctly to a past and future. I argue that the marked political break after apartheid ends yet before a free South Africa comes into existence is so precarious that it might be conceived of as atemporal, or a moment that cannot be tied to a past and may not produce a knowable future. Accordingly, that Gordimer writes and publishes *My Son's Story* at this moment might allow it to exist in an almost atemporal space where ideological pressures of past and future briefly relent. Second, it is precisely this moment of suspension that falls between the end of the final State of Emergency and the official dismantling of the laws of apartheid that gives the novel the ability to develop the internal Zero chronotope.

To explain how the Zero chronotope of *My Son's Story* might open up new ways of conceiving a legal or political function of fiction, I want to turn briefly to the theoretical underpinnings of Bakhtin's chronotope and the notion that aesthetic texts might produce alternate and necessary historical time. That aesthetic or literary works might create new time-space models to resist existing political ones is well studied across fields. As George Kubler wrote of visual art, “the number of ways for things to occupy time is probably no more unlimited than the number of ways in which matter occupies space” (96). Kubler intimated that art can push back against Western historical trajectories of time and space given that “[h]istory has [...] no theory of temporal structure” (96). Accordingly, aesthetic works can produce new visualizations of time-space patterns, or even seemingly nonexistent atemporalities in which “[a] rapid succession of events is a dense array; a slow succession with many interruptions is sparse” (97). Kubler's critique suggests that new temporalities can arise outside any known temporal structure. I want to build from here, considering temporal moments that not only are outside any temporal structure, but that also resist the products of abutting temporalities.

Can fiction really inhabit, and potentially create, a chronotope that exists outside the historical-political forces pushing on either side of it? In the case of *My Son's Story*, can fiction produce the Zero chronotope, which operates outside the bounds of traditional historical time and allows for the creation of a new “force of law”? Bakhtin lays the theoretical groundwork for such a possibility when he suggests that imaginative literature can produce “time-sequences that are neither historical, quotidian, biographical, nor even biological and maturational” (91). Indeed, “actions lie outside these sequences, beyond the reach of that force” (91). And perhaps most importantly, Bakhtin explains how these time-sequences can exist outside the ideological constraints of a past or future: “This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing. This, we repeat, is an extratemporal hiatus that appears between two moments of a real time sequence” (91). In this way, a Zero chronotope might resemble what Bakhtin describes

as an “*alien world*: everything in it is indefinite, unknown, foreign” (101). In such an “alien world,” Bakhtin suggests that the “heroes are there for the first time; they have no organic ties or relationships with it; the laws governing the sociopolitical and everyday life of this world are foreign to them” and thus have the capacity to think and to create outside them (101).

Bakhtin’s work intimates that literary fiction need not carry historical traces, challenging Walter Benjamin’s claim that, always, “the past carries with it a temporal index” (Benjamin, “Concept” 1). It is through the alien chronotope, Bakhtin suggests, that the reader might access “the earliest traces of historical time” (129). Fiction makes it possible, in other words, to develop a time-space orientation that is outside one marked by a historical trajectory and its accompanying ideological constraints. Indeed, the chronotope developed by a fictional work can become “the boundary line *between* two epochs” (158). Bakhtin ultimately implies that literature gives us an opportunity to deny the temporal linkages that require an “earlier” and a “later”; instead, the novel might generate a chronotope that exists *outside* those temporal linkages and thus is free of ideological pressure. (158). The fact that “the represented world” in narrative fiction, “however realistic and truthful, can never be chronotopically identical with the real world it represents” (256), is precisely where the power of *My Son’s Story* lies. Since it is always already outside of the real world despite referring to it, fiction has the ability to produce a new origin story, or the kind of “originary violence” that Derrida suggests is necessary in any definition – or re-definition – of the law.

Here, Gordimer readers and scholars might think specifically about the “interregnum.” In 1982, Gordimer gave the lecture “Living in the Interregnum” in which she defined the state of “interregnum” as one “not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined” (269-70). In using the term, Gordimer referred to what seemed like looming revolution in South Africa to overthrow the apartheid regime. While the term certainly speaks to an “in-betweenness,” the “interregnum” is tied indelibly to material and historical temporalities in a way that I want to resist. To be sure, Gordimer further discusses the “interregnum” as the “perceptual clutter of curled photographs of master and servant relationships, the 78 *rpms* of history repeating the conditioning of the past” (270). Since “literary standards and standards of human justice are hopelessly confused in the interregnum,” and because it is a condition “imposed by history,” the “interregnum” cannot be a time-space in which law can be made anew (268, 275). While the Zero chronotope invokes Gordimer’s use of the term “interregnum” in its discussion of an in-between time-space formulation, the Zero chronotope pushes back against any tethering to historical time. To be clear, while the term “interregnum” has been used to describe the transition between apartheid-era and free South Africa, I contend that the Zero chronotope is distinct from an interregnum as Gordimer and other critics have imagined it. The interregnum suggests a space clearly bracketed by a past and future – clearly situated temporally. The fact that a moment occurs between two distinct periods does not render it atemporal. The Zero chronotope, differently, refers to a moment that presents such a crucial break from the past that a future may not be conceivable. It is within this type of space that the atemporality of the Zero chronotope becomes a possibility.

Given Gordimer’s emphasis on living in an “interregnum” prior to the end of apartheid, her fiction has long been the subject of scholarship on political temporalities,

yet none has yet addressed the role that time and space, or the Zero chronotope more specifically, might play in giving rise to an ameliorative force of law. For example, Eleni Condouriotis observes how Gordimer's fiction puts an "added burden on the reader to integrate disparate histories across different narrative traditions, suggesting a method of reading that approximates cosmopolitan practice in the real world" (3). Discussing Gordimer's novel *July's People* (1981), Nasser Mufti argues that the end of the narrative "promises a termination to what Gordimer described as an 'interregnum,' a transitory stage between the two regimes" (64). Mufti emphasizes that the term "interregnum," borrowed from Gramsci, inherently connotes a momentary period tied both to past and to present in which "law is not at a 'standstill,' but it is precisely what is contested – will it apply to the old or new regime?" (65). In Mufti's view, the "interregnum" that Gordimer depicts in *July's People* is not free from the hegemony of the law, and thus cannot be free from ideological constraints (65-6). Even reading Gordimer's work through a Bakhtinian lens, few scholars have considered the ways in which her fiction develops new chronotopes outside the specific geopolitical moment of apartheid and its aftermath, concentrating instead on a compression of past and future. For instance, Mari-Ann Berg describes the mind of Gordimer's narrator in the short story "An Image of Success" as a "chronotope, or timeplace, in its own right," focusing on the "here-and-now" containment of the narrator's position. Andrea Spain likewise observes the altered temporality of the condition of postcoloniality in Gordimer's fiction and "the force of time, the virtual past insinuating itself within the present" (749). Most prominently, perhaps, Clingman has asserted that Gordimer's writing is "always in some way in dialogue with an absent future" ("Writing"13).

Other scholars have taken less nuanced views of the temporalities within Gordimer's fiction, arguing how, for instance, "Gordimer remains identified with her muscular political novels that chronicle the depredation of apartheid" (Naparstek 67). Timothy Brennan observes how Gordimer's novels engage with two kinds of laws: the laws of apartheid in South Africa, and the laws of realist writing in the twentieth century (756). Both points suggest that Gordimer's fiction is temporally fixed, existing firmly within the bounds of a known historical temporality. J.U. Jacobs, too, argues that Gordimer's novels are "overtaken by history," with fiction that indelibly intertwines apartheid-era legal and literary language (25-6).

In the most basic terms, my use of the term "literary language" refers to the narrative language used to produce fiction. A specific description of literary language, Gordimer suggests, is difficult if not impossible to produce given that literary language is ephemeral and necessarily contains a "transforming imaginative dimension" (*Writing* 22). Gordimer distinguished between literary language and testimonial language, the latter of which might create a practical record with historic and legal gravity (24). In distinguishing between the two, she suggested there is a sense in which literary language is subjective, always subject to interpretation, while legal language is in some capacities fixed and objective. Accordingly, on its surface, literary language is language that does not carry immediate weight under the law and is distinct from the legal language in its practical application. Yet part of my goal in this essay is to underscore the false binary between literary and legal language. If we presume that legal language carries a single, objective meaning while literary language has the capacity to produce multiple meanings, we as readers risk making ourselves complicit in perpetuating the notion that ima-

ginative literature cannot inform political thinking. Bizos saw value in incorporating the distinct language of the law into Gordimer's fiction, and Gordimer emphasized how, in a novel, "a single word had weight" much as in a legal statute (*My Son's Story* 42).

My Son's Story develops language within its narration that eschews both the legal language of apartheid-era South Africa (and other racist regimes) and the literary forms associated with canonical English literary studies. Sonny, a character who was "once a great Shakespearean reader, reverent amateur of the power of words," discovers that "if a term is coined it creates a self-fulfilling possibility and at the same time provides a formulation for dealing with it" (179). Gordimer intimates that a political-literary space defined by the Zero chronotope is no place for Shakespeare or for other names and texts that have become tropes in literary study. Instead, the intertwining of language that at once refuses and draws from both legal and literary language of the past underscores the need for new language *and* new reading practices in the Zero chronotope: "All the movements and syllables that had sounded there, all that had happened there, caught in confusion, eddying without sense, motes drifting within the walls, falling back from them. That's what's over. That's the past, its dust not settled" (238). Analysis and critique of knowable literary forms, like syllables and stress patterns, become moot. At the same time, legal language as it has become known – or that language used for purposes of enacting and enforcing racist law – must be discarded. Indeed, at one point in *My Son's Story*, the narrator rejects language altogether in favor of a seemingly universal symbol; the word "love" (or one of its synonyms) is replaced with an image of a line-drawn heart (231). The third-person narrator in *My Son's Story* refers to the "detritus of common usage" employed by "the lawyer and estate agents and municipal officials" (11).

Rather than reading *My Son's Story* as a novel that integrates past, present, and future histories of South Africa, or that reflects contemporary politics in its language, I contend instead that this particular novel divests itself of past and future, developing the Zero chronotope that resists ideological boundaries created by past law and by the future laws of reconciliation that are to come. In so doing, Gordimer produces new language that speaks to tropes of both legal and literary discourse, demonstrating the intertwined nature of imagination and justice within the Zero chronotope. In *My Son's Story*, for example, Gordimer insists that Sonny must redefine known English language for himself given the atemporality of the political moment in which he exists. The narrator explains that "Sonny had to define to himself what he meant by 'before'" because "there was a blank in his chronology" (257). It is not that Gordimer finally locates a political and literary moment to depict the "new that cannot yet be born" as she does in *July's People*, but rather that she locates a moment to create a newness that resists the confines of past and future ("Living" 266). As Frederick Cooper observes, "historical temporality [...] is 'lumpy': the tendency for innovation and breaks to be reabsorbed into ongoing discursive and organizational structures is sometimes broken by a cascade of events that reconfigures the imaginable and the conceivable" (21). Citing Gordimer's own words, Andrea Spain emphasizes how "Gordimer asks us to become open to *learning to think* outside the way our society [is] ordered, to reimagine modes of living that might alter normality rather than reinforce its permanent alteration of subaltern lives in uneven development" (749). It is with this notion of "learning to think outside" that I want to turn to the text of *My Son's Story* to demonstrate how it breaks down the

ideological constraints of the law and develops a Zero chronotope in which an alternate force of law might come forth.

Revisiting *My Son's Story*

My Son's Story demonstrates how literature, arising out of a distinct time and place, might produce a Zero chronotope that offers an opportunity to reimagine the force of law. This process begins as Gordimer reveals the ideological trappings of the law – and its predecessors and successors – to confirm Derrida's intimation that such a thing as a “just law” cannot exist in current formulations. For example, characters in the novel reflect on a common dictum:

When people make violence the ultimate test of who's right and who's wrong here – you know the argument I mean – “the struggle is no better than the oppression because violence on the part of the oppressed can never be justified,” it reduces them to the level of the oppressor and so on. (127)

Indeed, the novel even goes so far as to suggest that members of the government and the resistance alike are put into those positions *not by their own accord* but instead through the ideological foundations of apartheid law. During the “States of Emergency in the country,” Gordimer writes, “it is the enemy – the police, the Ministers of Law and Order and Justice – who decides who the leaders of the people are” (262-3). Yet there may be ways to break free from those ideological constraints. Violence – a new “originary violence,” as Derrida might describe it – must be enacted upon known literary forms and methods of meaning-making that have been produced by the very ideological constraints that the violence seeks to disrupt. By breaking down these structures, the novel might be able to begin anew, outside the bounds of ideology.⁸ The power of the novel lies ultimately in the possibilities it reveals for, rather than its ability to create, a force of law.

To develop a Zero chronotope, the novel first must reveal the ideological trappings of law, and mark them for destruction if a new force of law is to arise. These ideological boundaries of the law show themselves as both physical, geographic borders and subordinating identity borders placed upon nonwhite bodies in South Africa under apartheid. For the protagonist's family, “the meaning of life seemed to be contained [...] and that could only mean the community to which they were confined, to which they belonged because the law told them so” (9). Gordimer illumines how spatial restriction becomes more insidious, ideologically shaping the identities of those confined within segregated space. As a result of his containment by the law, in the “sub-division of blackness decided by law” (65), Will only fantasizes about blonde, white women, whom he describes as “an infection brought to us by the laws that have decided what we are” (14). In all spaces of the novel – public and private, communal and domestic – the characters intimately know: “The lawyer [...] he was the power,” and the term lawyer cannot shift from the denotation of a white man; others excluded from this definition also are excluded from positions of power as defined by the law (232).

The racist law of apartheid is not defined solely by this regime, however. The law of apartheid contains within itself the enforceability of racist laws of the past, reflecting

8. Steve Biko argued that the “banner of liberal ideology” among whites in South Africa, despite resisting apartheid in name, only served to underpin the enforcing violence of apartheid law (64).

Derrida's contention. Apartheid law inherently is tethered to the laws of imperialism, colonization, and racist exclusion developed along a historical trajectory, and across various geographic spaces. To be anything other than white in South Africa, the novel tells its reader, is to be "judged by the laws white men made for us" (261). In this way, the term "the lawyer" becomes tied to the pejorative enforceability of the law and its historical antecedents. Indeed, "white industrialists, churchmen, academics, liberals and lawyers: they were people belonging to professional and social structures within the law" (267). Sonny awakens at one moment in the novel to realize the historical layers of South African law, and the manner in which law as a construct necessarily contains within itself the racist lawmaking violence that self-perpetuates white power across time and space:

There flashed and plunged behind his closed eyelids a broken sequence of men with white rags tied across their faces in torchlight, men on horseback carrying their flag with its emblem of the swastika, the deformed shape twisted once again to the same purpose. White extremists were rallying to that sign; blacks who had moved into white neighborhoods were suffering threats and vandalism beneath it. And fear, fear. (265)

Lawmaking violence is tied to white power along a historical trajectory; apartheid law cannot be separated from its links to the Nuremberg laws in Nazi Germany, Jim Crow laws promoting violence and discrimination against African Americans in the U.S. through much of the twentieth century, and laws that facilitated the transatlantic slave trade more than a century prior.⁹ To be sure, Sonny "knew as a commonplace sight a barefoot man hobbled by ankle chains shuffling as a horror risen from the slave past into the memory of computers and the glare of the strip lighting in the anteroom" (228). Yet that law as a singular, layered historical entity need not have infected the fiction that critiques it, Gordimer suggests. Given the possibility that imaginative literature might break free from ideological pressure, it also becomes a site in which the force of law might be made anew. Yet to remake the force of law with an eye toward justice, the fiction first must enact a new kind of "originary violence" from which it can begin again, and this new violence must occur in the literary Zero chronotope.

Sonny develops the power to redefine literary language – the language through which characters speak to "chronicle otherwise unknown human experience," as Gordimer describes it (*Writing* 23) – and to instill that power in others:

If he used the vocabulary of politics because certain words and phrases were codes everybody understood – no interpreter necessary, even in the English in which they were formulated they expanded in each individual's hearing to carry the meaning of his own frustrations, demands and desire. (112)

Indeed, the novel explains how, as a "reverent amateur of the power of words, Sonny must have known that if a term is coined it creates a self-fulfilling possibility" (179). The political power of literary language becomes more pronounced when "long wails of terror," produced by apartheid law, "were cut through by the *dry syllables* of shots, a sound hard as the steel that flies and pierces flesh and bone, goes to the heart that is bursting with the effort to run away and to the throat where the yell rises" (emphasis added, 116).

9. Gordimer previously discussed the "interregnum" as being tied to a global history of oppression: "An extraordinarily obdurate crossbreed of Dutch, German, English, French in the South African white settler population produced [...] *apartheid*, coining the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice. Every country could see its semblances there; and most peoples" ("Living" 262).

This literary language is made possible by the Zero chronotope of the novel. *My Son's Story* inhabits this Zero chronotope, an atemporal space into which the law increasingly has difficulty reaching, marked by an aggressive, intentional stagnation of time: "Waiting. All, like them, waiting" (225). This atemporality that defines the Zero chronotope is denoted also by a constant inconclusiveness of time, preventing the reader from situating the particular moment through context clues to past or future: "a matter of 'at that time' and 'then'; qualifications and uncertainties" (87). While apartheid law governing South Africa, and any attempts within the system to change that law, necessarily bear traces of the historical violence of lawmaking and law enforcement, the Zero chronotope of *My Son's Story* comes to exist outside it. Both Sonny and Will recognize traces of the compressed historical temporality in their present, like those allusions to law in Nazi Germany or laws of enslavement, but they nonetheless come to inhabit a more atemporal space in which they can produce language and knowledge that is free of those ideological constraints. Indeed, once Aila is arrested for political resistance, "Sonny had to define to himself what he meant by 'before'" given that "there was a blank in his chronology" (257). Considering his newfound ability to act politically after Aila's arrest, Will reflects on his own power "[s]o long as the length of time that had passed was not measured" (260).

This unfixed political temporality – or atemporality – is defined in part by Sonny's relationship with Hannah: "Its very intensity was granted on the condition that it could not last. Everything outside was ready to rupture it" (72). That there is a brief, limited time in which to reimagine an alternative force of law is underscored by the temporal liminality of the political period itself in which the novel is written and published: "A man who has been convicted of a crime against the State will continue to be watched as long as his life or the State that convicted him lasts; whichever endures the longer" (82).

The power of literary language to redefine, do violence upon, and ultimately reconstruct the layered historical systems of language that make *the law* leaves the novel in a place from which language can begin anew. This place becomes the definitive marker of the Zero chronotope. It is at once a new political time-space, yet also literary time-space that acknowledges the previous power of fiction. By the end of the novel, Will recognizes the Zero chronotope as giving rise to new linguistic meaning, given that "there were no categories of ownership or even usage left" (273). While the plot of the novel ends with a fire that destroys Sonny's family home, Will links the "smell of destruction, of what has been consumed" with the possibility for new creation outside the boundaries of ideology with a directive to the reader: "we're that bird, you know, it's called the phoenix, that always rises again from the ashes" (274).

In a final reflexive move that underscores the ability for literary language to take on political force through the Zero chronotope, an epigraph of sorts tells the reader that "grammar is a system of mastering time" (275). Accordingly, in mastering time, fiction also has the power to change the temporality of law and history. Here the reader is invited to return to earlier moments in the novel that prophesy the power both of the political moment in which the novel appears, and the Zero chronotope within which the characters develop the power to speak and to act against the law that pejoratively defines them. The narrator reminds the reader of fiction's historic power throughout the novel, noting that "Kafka named what he had no names for" (17), and that Sonny "went to Shakespeare for a definition with more authority than those given on make-

shift platforms in the veld” (23). Those who assume otherwise about literary language, the novel intimates, “people like that are so naive [...]. [T]hey haven’t lived enough to connect words with the reality of acts” (127). After all, Gordimer reminds her reader, “words, too, are stones” (32). This realization of the potential power of fiction is “the miracle that makes literature and links it with creation in itself in the biological sense” (275).

My Son's Story ultimately demonstrates how fiction can undermine the “vocabulary of violence,” as Gordimer described it, through which apartheid-era law – and all law before it – was created. Gordimer’s fiction develops new forms of “originary violence” with regard to formal structures of English literary language. In this way, Gordimer engages in lawmaking violence, as Walter Benjamin suggested was necessary to produce justice, without the harmful counterpart of law-enforcing violence, as Derrida argues. Gordimer’s work shows how literature itself can develop the Zero chronotope in which an ameliorative force of law might be conceived.

In considering the possibility that Gordimer’s fiction might enact a new force of law, drawing a line to Derrida is a natural connection. Both writers demanded that fiction should have a political function, and that fiction-making and law-making should be deeply interrelated. Discussing the interrelation of law and literature, Derrida explained: “What differs from one work to the other is not the *content*, nor is it the *form* [...]. It is the movements of framing and referentiality” (“Before” 213). Given current corruption within the ANC and the possibility of another political shift in contemporary South Africa, *My Son's Story* remains relevant in considering whether fiction has a role to play in re-producing the force of law that is responsible for yielding justice. On a larger scale, the possibilities presented by the Zero chronotope in *My Son's Story* also could have implications for fiction arising out of other moments of violence in far-reaching parts of the globe, speaking to liminal geopolitical moments occurring across the world in which there is a distinct need to produce a new, remedial force of law. At the same time, it is vital to distinguish between the theoretical ways in which literature can have transformative power, and the imperfect and often messy realities of political pragmatism. Fiction like *My Son's Story* can offer new ways of thinking, and can conceive of alternate ways of using language to make law. Yet the question of how – and whether – imaginative literature ever can have political currency in praxis is an inquiry we must approach tentatively. That Bizos saw value in producing legal language for Gordimer’s fiction suggests that imaginative literature and law are interrelated, yet narrative language in fiction never can become a stand-in for a legal document that has immediate effects on very real persons, for instance. Instead, one of the important lessons that Gordimer’s fiction teaches is that a novel like *My Son's Story*, in opening new ways of thinking, might be able to alter the theoretical positions from which law ultimately is created.

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By “the Flash of Fireflies”: Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer’s Late Short Story Cycles



Nadine Gordimer’s late short stories in *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* and *Loot* use a fragmentary, non-linear form to depict their contemporary society as a multi-temporal present that is haunted by its colonial past. By blending different narrative modes, including moral fable, political allegory and social realism, the stories engage with the injustices of a capitalist world-system in post-apartheid South Africa that are manifested simultaneously across different temporal and geographical scales.

The scope of social and political critique in Nadine Gordimer’s short stories as well as her reputation as a short story writer rather than a novelist are subjects of some dispute, especially because her short stories have tended to be underestimated. Early critics regarded her primarily as a short story writer; for instance in his 1974 monograph, Robert Haugh lauds the poetic intensity and technical perfection of her short stories, and considers her novels as technical failures in comparison (161). John Cooke reiterates this in his summary of the early critical reception of Gordimer’s works, noting that she was known “as an accomplished short story writer [...] in the fifties and sixties; until the publication of *A Guest of Honour* in 1970, her novels were considered at best promising but seriously flawed” (54). This changes drastically in later criticism: for example, Stephen Clingman’s defining study of Gordimer’s novels in 1986 argues that

the novel is both intensive and more extensive historically than the short story could ever be; it is a question of degree; but one that approaches “kind.” [...] [T]he novels, due to the sheer expanse of their exploration in space and time, of necessity investigate their social and historical situation in greater depth and at greater length. Their project is more substantial historically, their need to make meaning of history more decisive. (16)

It is only later that scholars like Dominic Head, in his 1994 book, respond to Clingman’s position and find value in Gordimer’s short fiction, noting that the features that are integral to her novels – “contradictions, silences and gaps” (Head 163) – are evident in her stories as well. But even Head privileges the novels, conceding that the scale of the novels makes them more expansive, involved and sustained in their engagement with social and political questions. Other scholars acknowledge the importance of Gordimer’s short stories against this wider tendency to disregard them. Judie Newman, in her short book on Gordimer, notes the value and the importance of the short stories, but excludes them from her study for pragmatic reasons having to do with space and the focus of her book, suggesting that they would merit a separate study on their own (13). Graham Huggan likewise examines the scope of social critique in Gordimer’s short fiction in a 1994 article. More recently, Graham Riach gives sustained attention to the subject of the post-apartheid short story in a forthcoming book.

This dispute resonates with a wider debate in the theory of the short story, especially in the context of postcolonial writing. Practitioners of the short story, including Gordimer herself, argue that the short story form is intrinsically suited to engaging with the politics of modernity because of its brevity and formal closure, and conversely that the intensiveness and extensiveness of the novels emphasised by Clingman are significant

weaknesses. Some critics see the short story as “particularly suited to the representation of liminal or problematised identities” (Hunter 138), not because of characteristics intrinsic to the form but because of extrinsic circumstances to do with their publication and circulation: Adrian Hunter and Paul March-Russell regard it as a “minor” form, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, hence a form which is “deterritorialized” and therefore “suitable for strange and minor uses” (Hunter 139; March-Russell 248). Deleuze and Guattari define a minor literature as that which “a minority constructs in a majority language” (16). The defining characteristics of a minor literature, they continue, are its “deterritorialization” (i.e. a displacement of language due to colonial domination), the fact that it is always politicised (as the exigencies of empire compel writers to engage directly with politics), and a conviction that literature has a collective value and revolutionary function (16-8). For March-Russell, short stories have this minor status through their publication in little magazines – being separate from the bourgeois form of the novel and the moral influence of institutions such as libraries – which enables them to be heterodox and subversive (67). It is this minor status, Hunter expands, that various writers have deployed as a medium for postcolonial dissent. He dismisses Frank O’Connor’s suggestion that the short story form inherently speaks to and about people within ruptured colonial and postcolonial societies (see Hunter 138), instead proposing the weaker claim that the short story form has been used effectively by writers in these contexts to advance a critique of empire. Subsequent accounts of the postcolonial short story, such as that by Barbara Korte, appreciate this emphasis on particularity rather than inherent characteristics of the form as it suits the heterogeneity of different colonial and postcolonial contexts (42).

This paper intervenes in the wider tendency to regard Gordimer’s short stories as lesser works than her novels, and intends to refocus attention on how the non-linear and fragmented form of Gordimer’s short story cycles responds to specific political urgencies of post-apartheid South Africa. In response to Hunter’s critique of O’Connor, I defend the stronger claim that the form is intrinsically suited to engaging with the vicissitudes of imperialism, particularly the combined and unequal development of late-capitalist modernity. However, I am not suggesting an absolute division between the novel and the short story. Practitioners of the short story have made absolute claims about novels and short stories, and Gordimer herself describes in one of her lectures what she feels are the novel’s weaknesses compared to the short story (see *Telling Times* 169). However, more recent formal innovation in the novel suggests that novels can approximate some of these formal structures that have traditionally been characteristic of the short story. For example, a novel like Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) employs a multi-focal, fragmented form to engage with intersections of gender, class, caste and capital through complex and dispersed temporalities.

Gordimer’s metaphor for the short story is that it is like seeing by the “flash of fireflies” (*Telling Times* 170), suggesting that the form is characterised by multiple, simultaneous, transient, and instantaneous glimpses of a political reality. I will examine the ways in which such a non-linear and multi-temporal negotiation of a historic moment illuminates various intersecting social and political contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa in ways that the linear, historic sweep of her novels do not. My motivation for emphasising form is a two-fold dissatisfaction with the framework of minor literature that Hunter and March-Russell employ: the reading of the short story as minor liter-

ature is dependent upon circumstances of literary production and consumption which have a significant impact in determining the politics of the form. These are nevertheless contingent circumstances that are subject to change with the evolving landscapes of literary production. This leads to what March-Russell calls the "legitimation crisis": if the short story becomes more widely accepted in the academy or what is considered the mainstream of literary production, it will lose this subversive edge (see March-Russell 68). This would not provide a stable or reliable critical framework for understanding the politics of the short story form. Moreover, in the context of Gordimer's short fiction, the complex language politics of South Africa means that there is no clear-cut distinction between majority and minority languages: while the key political figures spoke Afrikaans, they also enjoyed the widespread support of English-speaking whites. Moreover, Afrikaans was not just the language of the ruling elite, but also of the people designated "coloured."

Rather than use the framework of minor literature, I will consider, firstly, how the style and texture of Gordimer's post-apartheid short stories are non-linear and multi-temporal, as they are haunted by the colonial past. Subsequently, I will examine her blending of different narrative modes across different stories in a short story cycle, including realism, fable, and postmodern metafiction, and how the multiple, telescoping perspectives offered by the blending of these modes register the simultaneity and multiplicity of inequalities of a late-capitalist modernity manifested across different spatial and temporal scales.

Multiplicity of the Present in the Short Story

In an illuminating account of its form, Mary Rohrberger characterises the short story as "an analogical mode [that] defied linearity and arrested time and moment in an eternal and continuous present" (8). Her account of time in the short story derives from Henri Bergson's distinction between time as it is measured on a clock and the psychic experience of duration (Bergson 75-7). Clock time is a homogeneous magnitude that can be measured as when one counts the individual oscillations of a pendulum. However, duration is simultaneously both a succession of individual oscillations, and a series in which each oscillation is not identical but instead contains all oscillations preceding it. This is created through the mental synthesis of these successive states through their accretion within consciousness. Duration, then, is what Bergson describes as a qualitative multiplicity, or a multiplicity in which heterogeneous temporal states coexist and permeate each other in consciousness. Bergson's analogy is to think of this as notes in a tune: while the individual notes succeed each other, they are perceived in their totality and therefore melt into each other (72, 75).

For Rohrberger, Bergson's notion of clock time "seems to define the novel's temporal base" while duration (Rohrberger uses Bergson's term *durée*) "seems perfectly fitted to the short story" as "synchronicity defines the short story's base" (8). However, the way in which she applies Bergson's notion of time to the short story is unclear: she introduces within the discussion terminology that has the potential to be misleading, particularly the distinction between "synchronicity" and "diachronicity" which Bergson himself did not use. While Rohrberger's characterisation of clock time as diachronic is straightforward, there is a tension in her emphasis on the synchronicity of duration/*durée*. Bergson himself would resist the characterisation of duration as synchronic, as

different temporal states do not, in his view, exist simultaneously. They are only synchronous insofar as they form part of a larger unity. Rather, duration is diachronic, but a diachronic series in which all states influence each other. Moreover, what Rohrberger describes as the “arrested time” and “eternal and continuous present” of the short story seems to be the very kind of presentism that Bergson resists through the concept of a qualitative multiplicity. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the short story form do reflect this sense of duration in a Bergsonian sense, such as the moment of epiphany which contains within it the totality of duration of the entire story, “parenthetically enclosed by the story’s beginning and end, both of which are implicit in the epiphany and coterminous with past and future” (Rohrberger 9). Rather than thinking of duration and the form of the short story as synchronic, it is more useful to approach them in terms of qualitative multiplicity.

This qualitative multiplicity manifests itself in the stories in Gordimer’s late collections, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* and *Loot and Other Stories*. This is evident not just in the narrative conventions of the short story form – the epiphany or the compressed aesthetic intensity of the story – but it is even more prominent in the specific characteristics of Gordimer’s late style in her short stories that depict time as something that oscillates irresolutely between past, present and future. The post-apartheid present that the stories describe is overlaid with the legacies of the past as well as the uncertain and conflicted future. The titular story of “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black” foregrounds the persistence of the legacies of the colonial past in the present moment. The protagonist, a white academic and former activist named Frederick Morris, searches for black relatives possibly in order to claim privilege through kinship with the new dominant class in post-apartheid South Africa. To this end, he speculates that his great-grandfather would have had affairs with black women when he was in Africa mining for diamonds, and he goes to Kimberley to explore the possibility that he would find his great-grandfather’s mixed-race descendants from these illicit affairs. But his search for supposed family in the present is overlaid with the tumultuous history of apartheid racial politics and colonialism, even when he performs the most mundane of tasks like looking up “Morris” in a Kimberley telephone directory:

The telephone directory didn’t give much clue to where the cousins, collaterals, might be found living on the territory of diamonds; assuming the addresses given with the numbers are white suburban rather than indicating areas designated under the old segregation which everywhere still bear the kind of euphemistic flowery names that disguised them and where most black and colour-mixed people, around the cities, still live. (*Beethoven* 11-2)

What is ostensibly a statement about the present – that “the telephone directory didn’t give much clue” to where these cousins might be found – is encroached upon by signifiers of the colonial past: the diamond mines and apartheid racial segregation. The tense of this sentence further complicates the way in which time operates. While the main verb of the sentence is, like the rest of the narrative, in the present tense, the relative clauses subsequently change tenses. The neighbourhoods that Morris is searching are described by the phrase “*designated* under the old segregation” (italics mine), with the past-tense verb and the modifier “old” alluding to a past of colonial racial segregation. At the same time, these neighbourhoods “*still* bear the kind of euphemistic flowery names” and are places where black and mixed “*still* live” (italics mine): the adverb “still”

in both cases suggests continuity, both in the sense that the present-tense verbs are continuous, even if they are not grammatically given in the present continuous tense, and that there is a continuity in these forms of injustice and segregation alluded to in the previous clause. By alluding simultaneously to the past and to the continuous present, this run-on sentence has the effect of invoking the entire sequence of historical events in a single moment, but rather than flattening it into a single, present moment, it preserves its diachronic sense of motion. The present tense narrative here, far from being uniform, is rendered uneven by the haunting presence of the past. Not only does this sentence show the way in which the present moment is striated by the racial and economic divisions resulting from the colonial past, this constant shifting between tenses creates within the present a sense of multiplicity of the subjective experience of historical movement.

This qualitative multiplicity is evident not just in the texture of the prose, but also in the ways in which the settings of Gordimer's late stories relate to the history of the colonial past. In "Mission Statement" and "The Diamond Mine" in *Loot and Other Stories*, signifiers of the colonial past decorate the spaces that the characters traverse. In "Mission Statement," Roberta Blayne, Assistant to the Administrator of an international aid agency, embarks upon an affair with Gladwell Shadrack Chabruma, Deputy-Director in the Department of Land Affairs. Blayne's grandfather, it is revealed later in the story, was the manager of a mine in South Africa. There are instances where the politicians and aid workers are critical of the depredations of the colonial past, as when they blame colonial game hunting for the decline in wildlife in the country or in the shame that Blayne feels for the fact that her grandfather ran his mine like a slave plantation and addressed his black housemen in terms that were racist and dehumanising. Both Blayne's act of confessing her ancestry to Chabruma and the financial aid that Britain provides through the Agency are characterised as expiation for historical wrongs, and Blayne reads Chabruma's reticence about voicing overt criticism of colonialism as his "strength of character," as a sign that he does not dwell in the past but instead merely pursues "the way forward" out of his "largesse of forgiveness" (*Loot* 24). However, the relationship with the colonial past is far from a uniform sense of atonement, as the administrators and officials reiterate previous regimes of segregation and control. The institutions of power and governance that are central to the plot, like the various Government ministries or the aid agency, occupy colonial buildings: Blayne lives in a suburban bungalow dating from colonial times, and likewise the official residences of Chabruma and other cabinet ministers and diplomats are in suburban houses. The features of these houses, such as patrolled guard-houses, swimming pools and tennis courts, are reminiscent of spaces of racial segregation where black people were historically denied entry. They are now repurposed into signs of wealth and status for the new political elite. It is likewise especially revealing that following a long meeting, Chabruma and Blayne retreated to a bar where

from his [Chabruma's] side, the conversation in the beer-reeking dingy nook built during colonial rule in nostalgia for an English pub was being conducted as a continuation of the afternoon meeting where the Agency's agenda [...] and the Government's counterpart were trawling for accommodation. (*Loot* 16)

The way in which these signifiers of a colonial past are reiterated in the echelons of power and administration does not suggest a straightforward moral or political equiva-

lence between colonial rule and the new government. Rather, the implication here is that the new political class has moved into the spaces previously held by white colonial administrators and has begun employing the various inequalities of class and status – represented here through the architecture of houses and the value of property – in ways that serve both the political interest of the independent state and the private wealth and power of the new ruling elite.

A further point worth emphasising is that the characteristic narrative features of the short story, such as its concentration on a single moment and its independent, self-contained structure, allow for the story to create this qualitative multiplicity within the experience of the present. This is particularly prominent in “Mission Statement,” whose opening paragraph recounts the anecdote shared by Blayne’s grandfather about the black servants whom he treated like slaves on a plantation when he used to manage the Buffalo Mine. The story shifts immediately and seamlessly into the present day, and it becomes unclear what relevance that opening passage has to the plot, as none of the characters or events are mentioned again, until the passage is repeated again later on, this time rendered in italics as the narrative focalises through Blayne’s perspective, when she drives past the mine (*Loot* 41-4). Just as in “Beethoven,” the narrative seems to be contained within a loop, only here it is the past memory and its reiteration that frames the experience of the present, rather than a hypodiegetic narrative in the present conjuring up the past. It is at this reiteration of the anecdote about the mine that the relevance of the opening passage to Roberta’s life is first implied, before she confesses the same explicitly to Chabruma later on. She thus creates a dramatic revelation for the reader that draws into coherence subtle details that were introduced earlier on, such as her relinquishing her maiden name or her shame at being British motivating her aid work. The story presents this epiphany on two levels: for Blayne as she confesses and repents for the guilt and shame of her ancestry, and for the reader for whom this sudden revelation creates the effect of a single moment that brings together all of Blayne’s past and gives meaning to the entire arc of the narrative, both past and future. This epiphanic moment constitutes the unity through synthesis in psychic experience that, for Bergson, is central to the notion of the qualitative multiplicity of the present.

It is through their combined use of epiphany and allusion to the vestiges of the colonial past that individual stories from Gordimer’s late collections reflect the ways in which the temporality of the present is uneven and complex. The narrative of the short story, by virtue of its formal density, completeness and complexity, creates a subjective experience of time that is a qualitative multiplicity, unifying the past and the present. In Gordimer’s stories, this qualitative multiplicity characterises the way in which the present is striated by the combined and uneven development of capitalism and colonial history. There is, moreover, a further level at which Gordimer’s stories present a qualitative multiplicity, and that is through their arrangement as a short story cycle. This anthology allows for a composite and multi-focal perspective on the unevenness of time in the present by juxtaposing different stories that depict heterogeneous and oppositional scales of time and place.

Telescoping Perspectives

Having considered how individual stories depict the persisting injustices in the present, I will examine how the short story cycle as a macroscopic form is particularly adapted

to engaging with the vicissitudes of imperialism and inequality in a late-capitalist world-system. In their analysis of literature in the global capitalist world-system, the Warwick Research Collective advance a framework of "combined and uneven development" which they trace from the works of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky to Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti. Within this framework, the global capitalist economy is striated into regions of cores, peripheries and semi-peripheries whose development is "combined" in that they are dependent upon each other and mutually implicated within a larger macroeconomic structure, and "uneven" in that these relationships are asymmetrical and hierarchical, with core regions benefiting from the exploitation of peripheries and semi-peripheries (Deckard *et al.* 10-2). The various forms that this capitalist world-system takes, manifested in different macroeconomic structures and institutions such as multinational corporations, international aid or global finance, operate simultaneously in the present across different scales. For Sharae Deckard, an aesthetic that is critical of this world-system must

mediate sensoriums of the contemporary as profoundly uneven and heterogeneous, structured by the asymmetries of uneven and combined capitalist development that striate the global North and South, in which history is represented as synchronic and multi-temporal. (2)

The critique of such complex polygonal relations poses distinct formal challenges, as Deckard observes. She notes three approaches that are inadequate as aesthetic responses to these structures: maximalist novels that try to accommodate simultaneity and multi-focality at the level of the sentence become unreadable and incomprehensible; encyclopaedic novels which attempt to reproduce totality within themselves end up being bloated; mere linear chronological approaches to history are schematic and hollow, with mechanistic plots, flat characterisation and reductive psychologisation (3-4). It is difficult to find a form that is multi-focal and simultaneous while at the same time not compromising the complex interplay of human subjectivity, desire and agency within these structures of capital. In light of this critique of the challenges faced by a globalist novel, I argue that the short story cycle is a form that accommodates the simultaneity and synchronicity of capitalist modernity through its qualitative multiplicity.

March-Russell identifies some of the key approaches to the short story cycle: firstly Forrest Ingram and Susan Garland Mann's approach according to which short story cycles have a formal unity constituted by recognisable patterns and the elaboration of consistent themes; the second of Robert Luscher and J. Gerald Kennedy, who argue that it is an accumulative process of the progressive development of themes and motifs through a particular sequence of stories; and the third by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, according to which the short story cycle is a "composite novel" that blends genres and modes (104-5). Any kind of commentary on the short story cycle is complicated by the fact that short stories are usually published as stand-alone pieces in periodicals and only later anthologised into a collection. It is therefore difficult to make formal assumptions about their composition. But all of these strands of critical opinion on the form of the short story share the intuition that the short story cycle is in some ways greater than the sum of its parts, and they only differ on the details of how this is the case. I would resist the temptation to consider the meaning of short stories as a sequence or composite novel, as this would entail the need to read

the stories in order and undermine the flexibility of the form that gives it its unique advantage. Nevertheless, especially in the case of Gordimer's works, there is a sense in which her late story collections have a sense of unity in terms of the patterns created by themes and motifs that are addressed in her works. They are also to some extent composite works, mixing different modes like fantasy (as in "Dreaming of the Dead"), allegory and parable ("Loot" and "Tapeworm"), metafiction ("Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black"), or social realism ("Mission Statement"). And even though most of these stories were originally published as stand-alone pieces, the editorial process of their anthologising and the authorial control over them would support reading them as singular works with a sense of unity of purpose. By presenting a succession of different short stories, each narrated from a different vantage point, a short story cycle is able to telescope different perspectives. This makes the short story cycle what Deckard would consider a multifocal and multi-temporal form that allows it to engage with the different temporal and geographical scales at which these forms of combined and uneven development are manifest.

The stories in *Loot* converge on different meanings of the title: "loot" as wealth that is acquired through plunder, the very act of looting and the greed that motivates these acquisitive desires, and a word of Hindi origin whose etymology encodes the colonial encounter. In an interview with Hermione Lee, Gordimer describes the title story as a "political fable," containing a little bit of both a "moral fable" and "political allegory" (316). Graham Riach elaborates upon the fact that this story was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1999, around the time when Thabo Mbeki assumed the office of the President (1086). According to Gerard Steen, a parable is an anecdote with a specific moral teaching. While a fable has a pithy explication of the story's moral in the end, a parable does not, and it leaves its meaning more open-ended. Whether "Loot" is a fable, as Gordimer suggests, or a parable depends on how one interprets the closing line: "Full fathom five" (*Loot* 6). Far from rounding off the moral teaching of the story through this explication, this invocation of *The Tempest* as an intertext seems to open up further questions – to do with Prospero's hubris, his vow in the end to bury his staff and books, the significance of Caliban's transgression – and render its moral conclusions ambiguous. This suggests that Gordimer's story is more of a parable than a fable. What defines a parable, according to Gila Safran Naveh, are its didacticism, allegoricity and its enigmatic and oblique representation of reality (6). Inherent in this are two kinds of doubleness; the first is a doubleness of its didactic purpose: a parable is intended to instruct while at the same time obscuring the truth that it needs to convey; the second is a doubleness of its treatment of reality: the parable must refer to the reality of the real world but only indirectly through allusion. A similar doubleness between the reality of South African politics and the fictional fantasy of the parable is signalled by the opening line of the story, "Once upon *our* time" (*Loot* 3, italics mine): although uncannily reminiscent of folklore, fantasy and fairy tales, this phrase, through the pronoun "our," resists the convention of these modes to set the story in a non-specific time with the indefinite article "a," and instead grounds the story within its immediate political context of critiquing Mbeki's presidency and a shared collectivity between the narrator and reader.

Central to Naveh's account is the parable's reliance on the appeal to a truth that transcends the real world, like that of an all-powerful "Other" authority like a god in

order to obtain a moral lesson (7). An act of god is manifested in the story through the tidal wave that drowns the looters as punishment for their greed. The story seems to be reaching towards an objective and transcendent moral authority. However, the modern parable, as opposed to classically Biblical ones which most definitions take as their starting point, is nevertheless circumspect about its affirmation of an objective truth. Naveh notes this is particularly significant in the works of Franz Kafka, whose parable-like stories, through their doubleness of surface and implied meaning, articulate a "covert attack on metaphysics" because of the human subject's inability to grasp reality (149). It is worth noting that Kafka's works are likewise central to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a minor literature, as discussed earlier. One could perhaps argue that the deterritorialization and linguistic indeterminacy of minor literatures make them especially suited to articulate such metaphysical crises. However, as I had outlined previously, my approach is concerned with an analysis of the formal characteristics of the short story rather than the contexts of publication that render it a minor literature. A similar metaphysical crisis is evident in "Loot": while the story is an objective, moral condemnation of greed and corruption during Mbeki's assumption of the presidency, it nevertheless foregrounds its own fictionality. This epistemic disjunction characterises a sense of political stagnation: there is a search for a new form of sustained political commitment in the story, manifested in a didactic purpose, while the story nevertheless harbours a nascent and subdued disavowal of these political ideals as truths through a narrative mode that emphasises its own fictionality. Moreover, the distant and abstract terms through which the story engages with the politics of Mbeki's presidency allegorically, allows it to operate on a scale that is universal and non-specific, addressing greed abstractly rather than talking about a specific party or government.

However, "Mission Statement," which follows immediately after "Loot," is the opposite kind of story: it is not abstract or allegorical, but is a realist interrogation of the nexus through which foreign aid and tenders for government projects are brokered. The characters are agents within the various institutions, such as government ministries, aid agencies, private companies, *et cetera*. The story is grounded in the specific conditions of macroeconomic structures of capitalist expansion. While "Loot" appeals tentatively to an external morality, "Mission Statement" foregrounds the contingency of its meaning through the metafictional undermining of its own perspective. A greater part of the story is bookended by the anecdote about black workers' necks that Blayne's grandfather would share to entertain his guests at parties. The opening anecdote frames the story within the legacy of mining and the guilt associated with this colonial inheritance. But the way in which the anecdote is reiterated in Blayne's mind (41-2), and the way in which she rejects her grandfather's story and criticises it for its colonialist language later on signals a metafictional gesture that critiques the politics of the story's own narrative. But in contrast to the parable form, there is no greater moral force like an act of god that gives the story an external moral appeal.

If one were to read these two stories in succession, the sudden and drastic change in scale and perspective would have a disorientating effect. While these stories vary in their perspective and mode, and are all independent of each other, there is a sense that, when taken together, their meaning is more than the sum of their parts. These varied yet congruous perspectives allow the form of the short story cycle to be a qualitative multiplicity that depicts simultaneously the different scales of space and time at which

these conflicts and injustices persist in the newly-independent state: abstract parables, personal lives, family histories, government institutions, university campuses, *et cetera*. Each story correspondingly operates on a different scale at which it registers the underlying racial and social contradictions of this society: for example “The Generation Gap” follows a group of siblings in a middle-class, white family who deal with their shared outrage at the news that their father has left their mother and begun a relationship with a woman who is the same age as the youngest sibling. The four of them are confronted with their own racial prejudices when they are appalled at the thought that this woman already has a child from a mixed-race father, and their father would now be looking after him. “Look-Alikes” is set in a university campus that has homeless black squatters, and the story represents the state of anxiety and disorder surrounding the dissolution of boundaries of race and class within ideological state apparatuses like university campuses and academia. This qualitative multiplicity enables the stories to register and critique the complex polygonal and multi-temporal material conditions of combined and uneven development of the capitalist world-system in post-apartheid South Africa. The disorientation caused by the frequent changes in scale and perspective has the further advantage of depicting the sense of ethical and epistemic flux that characterises literature of the periphery.

The Polygonal Form of the Short Story

Gordimer’s novels are complex interrogations of social and political injustices in South Africa during and after apartheid. I do not dispute Clingman’s and Head’s claims that the expansive treatment of space and time in Gordimer’s novels allows them to consider fraught ethical and political questions with a depth that short stories do not offer. Such a deep focus was especially powerful when engaging with a widespread, state-sponsored form of structural violence like apartheid. Instead, what I argue is that there is a specific context in which the fragmentary and multi-temporal structure of Gordimer’s late short stories is better adapted to critique aspects of imperialism and injustice that the expansive, linear structure of the novel cannot adequately apprehend. The nature of a late-capitalist world-system, particularly as manifested in post-apartheid South Africa, is one of polygonal and multi-temporal contradictions, where injustices and corruption occur simultaneously on different scales and intersect with each other. The narrative sensorium of Gordimer’s short stories is a qualitative multiplicity that allows one to register and critique the simultaneous and multiple articulations of power and imperialism across different scales.

My argument has implications not just for how Gordimer’s works are valued, but also for a more general debate on the postcolonial short story. While my method has been a formal analysis of the short story and the short story cycle, and their treatment of space and time, a question that remains open, following March-Russell’s reading of the short story as a minor form, is what impact the contexts of production and publication of the short story have on its meaning. There is perhaps a further argument to be made that the publication of Gordimer’s stories in contexts separate from the bourgeois form of the novel enables her fiction to focus on perspectives and voices that are different from the middle-class, liberal elite who are the protagonists of her novels. It is for both the formal advantages and the social plurality offered by this non-linear form that Gordimer’s use of the short story remains, as with her long fiction, a radical

political gesture, and one that becomes especially relevant during her late career when critiquing the post-apartheid dispensation.

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Experience's Potential and Potential Experiences: Subjectivity, Alterity, and Futurity in the Late-Apartheid Novels of Nadine Gordimer



This article begins by scrutinizing divergent critical views of Gordimer's subject position and authorial agency, which locate her variously on a spectrum ranging from liberal-humanist autonomy to historical-materialist determinism. It then considers how Gordimer's nonfiction articulates a parallel ambivalence about the reach of the writer's imagination (and its dependence on "the *potential* of his own experience"), particularly regarding the ethics and feasibility of creating racially "other" characters. Its main part reads *July's People* (1981), in relation to other Gordimer novels, as a similarly self-reflexive engagement with subjectivity and alterity: the otherness of the imagined future (a "potential experience") facilitates fresh socio-political perspectives, even as the novel expresses philosophical scepticism about such imaginative extrapolation and its textual representation. The article concludes with a new reading of the novel's "open" ending as a projection of this epistemological conflict.

Subjectivity: Gordimer's Late-Apartheid Critics

By place I don't mean a predetermined place [...]. You are consciously or unconsciously creating a position in your society. (Gordimer, in Gray 180)

Amongst the proliferation of literary criticism on Gordimer produced between the publication of *July's People* (1981) and South Africa's transition to democracy (1994) are two major books that offer contrasting conceptions of Gordimer's subject position and authorial agency: Stephen Clingman's benchmark *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986), which elucidates the linear development of Gordimer from "liberal" to "radical," hinging on *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966); and Kathrin Wagner's iconoclastic *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (1994), which refutes this historical linearity. Clingman reads Gordimer's novels as articulating a "history from the inside" in the dual sense that Gordimer is writing from the midst of the history she is describing even as it shapes her inner consciousness (and those of her historically embedded protagonists): "At the same time as she engages with history she is moulded by the patterns and forces she must try to assess" (2). He gives Gordimer much credit, both for the sensitivity with which she registers the nuances of her times and for her unrelentingly tough examination of her own relation to these times; Gordimer, he points out, "has never let up on herself ideologically" (26). In this view, Gordimer, like Helen Shaw at the end of *The Lying Days* (1953) – the autobiographical *Bildungsroman* with which Gordimer made her novelistic debut – has at every stage been resolved to accept "disillusion as a beginning rather than an end" (367). Nevertheless, Clingman acknowledges that Gordimer's "history from the inside" is "not only privileged but also confined by its 'inside' position" (2). Gordimer's perspective, he argues, is doubly limited, socially and temporally, by her "split position" (206) as a dissident yet privileged white in apartheid South Africa: her novels are implicitly addressed to black South Africans and to a post-revolutionary future, from both of which she was cut off by apartheid.

This liberal-radical teleology, which necessarily deferred much to a third, liberated phase, was subsequently nuanced by Judie Newman's concise chronological study

(1988), which foregrounded the “conditioning factor [...] of gender” and “the relation of genre to gender” (17). But the pre-eminence of racial politics as an interpretive framework had already been problematized by John Cooke’s monograph *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985), which considered Gordimer’s “major theme” to be “the liberation of children from unusually possessive mothers” (10) and her secondary concern its intertwining with the liberation of black South Africans from the repressive state. This wasn’t quite “history from the *outside*,” but it did de-privilege history by re-casting the “public” as an adjunct to the “private.” With post-apartheid hindsight, Michael Chapman (1996) similarly asserted that “[i]t is debatable whether Gordimer has produced many political novels that are not, at core, something more domestic: Freudian family romances” (235); and, reviewing Gordimer’s career after her death in 2014, Jeanne-Marie Jackson (2015) even suggested that “we might read Gordimer’s oeuvre as a single *Bildungsroman* that unfolds its own inversion; in other words, a coming-of-age narrative that results in individual sublimation or undoing” (55).

Like Clingman, however, Wagner privileges the category of “history,” but considers the novels to be more fundamentally limited – and, indeed, seriously flawed – by Gordimer’s subject position, and by Gordimer’s own underestimation of its constraints. Wagner argues that Gordimer’s “necessary entrapment in both class and historical moment in South Africa makes her unavoidably vulnerable to the unconscious inscription of its stereotypes and clichés” (70). While acknowledging Gordimer’s ideological vigilance, she distinguishes between Gordimer’s narrow conception of ideology as “the clearly articulated programmes of particular groups with specific social, political and economic agendas” (29), which reflect “overt cognitive structures,” and the “covert emotional structures” that often conflict with these at the level of the text (225; cf. v). Gordimer’s novels, Wagner argues, at a subtextual level more often than not confirm the apartheid orthodoxy they strive to confront, and ultimately succumb to the white repressions they are at pains to confess:

Much of the fiction can be read as paradoxically confirming the deepest nightmares of the beleaguered white imagination, and as supporting at a subtextual level precisely those conservative fears and prejudices which oppose change, and which the surface rhetoric of the texts implicitly challenges. (47)

While the “gradual politicisation” in response to an evolving regime (on which Clingman focuses) is registered at the surface level of the text, Wagner thus emphasizes “extraordinary continuities of perspective” informing Gordimer’s deepest responses to “the essentially unchanging immoral framework of apartheid” (164; cf. 41). Clingman’s understating of these continuities Wagner attributes to what she considers his failure to problematize the general concept of “history” (235n), and especially to his underestimation of the subjective nature of Gordimer’s particular version of South African history – a version which Wagner regards as over-expository in extent while sketchy and clichéd in content, and as therefore explaining the lack of domestic enthusiasm for Gordimer’s work relative to her lionization abroad (8, 33, 56). This hermeneutic contrast is reflected in the ways in which the studies are structured, for whereas Clingman’s chapters are chronological, Wagner’s are thematic. Thus while for Clingman Gordimer’s fiction is expressive of a developing perspective from an evolving subject position, for Wagner it is fundamentally predetermined by an essentially fixed position, every attempt to tran-

scend which results in its (often unconscious) codified transcription. Where Clingman sees modulation and progression, Wagner sees permutation and proliferation.

Perhaps the most significant feature of Wagner's analysis is the *inevitability* she detects in Gordimer's writing (Gordimer's historical "entrapment" making her "unavoidably" predisposed to stereotypes), which contrasts markedly with the constrained agency that Clingman diagnoses. On the one hand (Clingman), subjectivity is considered essentially active, operating like a verb – what is seen and described is the subject *of*, constituted *by*, and understood *in relation to*, the writer; on the other hand (Wagner), subjectivity is deemed fundamentally passive, functioning as a noun – what is seen and described is subject *to*, constituted *of*, and understood as *relative to*, the writer. This bifurcation reflects contrasting conceptions of writing: on the first view, a heuristic process undertaken *from* an evolving position; on the second, a predestined product *of* an essentially static position. In essence, whereas Clingman reads Gordimer's fiction as strongly influenced, but not determined, by her privileged position as a white in apartheid society, Wagner reads Gordimer's fiction as wholly determined by this position. While Clingman's reading could thus be considered a nuanced iteration of the once-popular image of Gordimer as apartheid South Africa's conscience, Wagner's reading reduces Gordimer to something for which apartheid is responsible.

Of the post-apartheid books devoted to Gordimer's apartheid-era fiction, perhaps most notable is Ileana Dimitriu's *Art of Conscience* (2000), a revisionist "'counter-chronological' reading" (27) animated by a "revindicated humanism" (18) that "permit[s] Gordimer a greater command of her own story and her own autonomy than Clingman [or] Wagner" (17). While it might be argued that Gordimer is less autonomous than Dimitriu suggests, and her failings greater than Clingman allows but lesser than Wagner insists, what interests me here is that the tensions between these readings, which seek to locate Gordimer on a spectrum ranging from liberal-humanist autonomy to historical-materialist determinism, mirror Gordimer's own engagement with her subject position over the preceding decades, an engagement apparent in her ambivalence about the reach of the writer's imagination.

Subjectivity and Alterity: Gordimer's Nonfiction

"How could it be true, that which both of us knew – that he was me, and I was him? [...] how could I recognize my situation in his?" (Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* 252)

"Exploitation, which the blacks *experience as their reality*, [...] the white artist [...] experiences [...] through a moral attitude or a rational empathy." (Gordimer, "Relevance" 139, author's emphasis)

In her "Introduction" to *No Place Like: Selected Stories* (1975), Gordimer expressed an enduring belief that the writer is gifted with "[p]owers of observation heightened beyond the normal" (12): for her, the writer is cognitively androgynous (a belief with which her feminist critics take issue) and imaginatively promiscuous, a "strange creature who can get into the skin of all sexes, all ages" (Marchant, Kitchen, and Rubin 261) and move "deep under the surface of human lives" by virtue of having "at least some faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception not known to others" ("Living" 277). Nevertheless, Gordimer has always been aware of the limits to empathetic perception that inhere in every human relationship, however close. For example, in a moving essay written in memory of the black writer Nat Nakasa (a close friend who left South Africa

on an exit permit to study at Harvard, and in 1965 committed suicide), Gordimer writes with a consciousness of the limits of empathy at the forefront of her mind:

So do the limits of human relationships constantly fling us back; so do one's hands fall, helpless, before the quintessential loneliness of each human being. It is keeping this in mind that I write of him, respecting the ultimate despair that took him beyond the understanding of friends, aware that what each of us knows of him was only part of what he was, and lived, and suffered, and that even when we have put it all together there will always be something – perhaps the unbearable sum of the total in itself? – that he kept to himself and died of. (“One Man” 80)

The contrast between this reverential helplessness before the limits of empathy and the audacious disdain of the creative artist for such limits, points up a suggestive ambiguity in Gordimer's descriptions of the writer's peculiar “powers of observation”: in what sense are these powers “beyond” the normal? On the one hand, Gordimer seems to be describing the writer as differing from her fellow human beings only in terms of the degree to which she has developed a common faculty of observation: her “powers of observation” are “*heightened beyond* the normal” (emphasis added). On the other hand, these “powers of observation” derive from a faculty essentially *different from* “the normal”: Gordimer seems to be describing the writer as a breed apart, a specially evolved “strange creature,” “looking pretty much like other human beings” but possessed of – even possessed by – “faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception not known to others” (“Living” 277). Acknowledgement that the writer shares a universal human limitation is set aside, and she asserts differences of degree and kind.

As is implicit in Gordimer's elegy for Nakasa, this ambivalence about the nature, and consequently the reach, of the empathetic imagination was increased by apartheid. As Wagner points out, Gordimer's

characteristically humanist belief in that fundamental brotherhood of man which allows the artist to enter imaginatively into the life of the other, regardless of gender, creed or colour, quickly found itself at odds with the political argument that, within the specific contexts of the resistance struggle, such an appropriation of the experience of the “Other” was unacceptably arrogant. (116)

Just as Africanists within the ANC, and advocates of the Black Consciousness that emerged from the late 1960s, felt it patronizing for liberal whites to represent (speak on behalf of) blacks politically, so it was felt by many that it was inappropriate, even exploitative, for white writers to represent (portray) black characters. At the same time, failing to engage with black politics or excluding black characters was arguably complicit with apartheid. Gordimer thus found herself in an invidious double-bind familiar to white South African liberal activists and writers alike. In her political nonfiction, this is acutely reflected in a statement – which Clingman justly describes as one of “extraordinary vulnerability and toughness” (“Introduction” 7) – towards the end of her 1979 address on “Relevance and Commitment”:

Although I am white and fully aware that my consciousness inevitably has the same tint as my face, when I have spoken of white attitudes and opinions I have not taken it upon myself to speak for whites, but have quoted attitudes and opinions expressed by whites themselves, or manifest (in my opinion) in their work. When I have spoken of black attitudes and opinions, I have not taken it upon myself to speak for blacks, but have quoted attitudes and opinions expressed by blacks themselves or (in my opinion) manifest in their work. (143)

Her essays and interviews (and, of course, her interviewers) are preoccupied with the related issue of whether it is politically appropriate to create black characters in fiction, but also with the question of whether she is imaginatively able to do it credibly. In her 1961 essay "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa" Gordimer considered that "there is little reason why a straightforward novel of events in which the protagonists are black men should not be written just as authentically by a white writer as by a black one" (44). However, with the entrenchment of apartheid and the rise of Black Consciousness, she becomes less sure, and in a 1972 note appended to the essay considered that "changes in South Africa since 1961" have so restricted blacks' and whites' experiences of each other, and so widened the gulf between separate black experience and white experience, as to restrict the areas of black life about which white authors are capable of writing:

[...] I now believe that George Lukács is right when he says that a writer, in imaginative creation and the intuition that comes with it, cannot go beyond the *potential* of his own experience. That potential is very wide; but living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa's has been under the colour bar, the writer's potential has unscalable limitations. There are some aspects of a black man's life that have been put impossibly beyond the white man's potential experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of a white man's experience. Both can write of the considerable fringe society in which black and white are "known," in a meaningful sense, to one another; but there are areas from which, by iron circumstance, each in turn finds himself shut out, *even intuitively*, to their mutual loss as writers. (52, author's emphases)

In an interview of the same year Gordimer similarly conceded:

there are some areas of life white writers can't enter into, even given the intuitive and imaginative powers that writers have. [...] when there are certain experiences that are outside your potential, that are inconceivable and could never happen to you, then your subject matter is restricted to some extent; and it's restricted in this country with its colour bar more than in any other. (Gray and Du Plessis 63)

Nevertheless, despite these qualifications of her imaginative precocity, Gordimer continued doggedly to insist on the existence and importance of the "considerable fringe society in which black and white are 'known,' in a meaningful sense, to one another": in 1962 she says that she has usually written "about the borderland, the kind of frontier where black and white *do* meet" (Terkel 16, author's emphasis); in 1980 she similarly insists on the literary viability for the white writer of "vast areas of actual experience – rubbing shoulders with blacks, having all kinds of relationships with blacks" (Gardner 168); and in 1982 she declares that when she has written black characters – "dared to do it from a black point of view," as she tellingly puts it – it "has always been within my orbit of experience, my close experience of blacks" (Boyers et al. 211; cf. Bazin and Seymour 222, 245).

However, Gordimer's assertion of the validating power of experience is problematized by an ambiguity in her description of that experience's "potential." This ambiguity is evident in her two-fold description of the limitation of the white writer who "cannot go beyond the *potential* of his own experience" from which is missing "aspects of a black man's life [...] impossibly beyond the white man's potential experience," and latent in her description of "certain experiences that are outside your potential, that are inconceivable and could never happen to you": the difference is between one's

potential experience (experiences that one possibly could have in the future, positions into which one could imagine oneself being placed) and the potential *of* one's own experience (the potential contained within one's past experiences for imaginative extrapolation, including projection into positions in which one cannot conceive of being placed). This equivocal notion of experience's potential is indicative of the dual nature of Gordimer's understanding of subjectivity, for the conception of the "other" in terms of one's own and one's potential experiences implies a relatively passive subjectivity, whereas the conception of the "other" by extrapolating from one's own experiences by virtue of their innate potential implies a more active subjectivity. (This active extrapolation is, indeed, crucial to Gordimer's definition of fiction as "a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life" ["Introduction" 12].) Just as Gordimer's notion of the perceptual mode by which experience is constituted was equivocal, so too is her notion of the potential residing in the experience so constituted. Both equivocations would be exposed by Gordimer's imagining of a future revolution.

Subjectivity, Alterity, Futurity: *July's People* and "The Transport of a Novel"

There is, it seems to us,
 At best, only a limited value
 In the knowledge derived from experience.
 The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
 For the pattern is new in every moment
 And every moment is a new and shocking
 Valuation of all we have been.
 (T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" 199)

"How was she to have known, until she came here [...]" (Gordimer, *July's People* 98)

In *July's People* (1981), Gordimer's conflicting conceptions of the reach of the writer's imagination (hyperperceptive or limited), and of her experience's potential (contained *in* or contained *by* the writer's personal experience), are put under particular pressure by their application not just to alterity but also to futurity, an additional and analogous problem of subjective representation that is also posited as a solution to the problem of alterity. Set during a projected black uprising – a "potential experience" which, since the 1976 Soweto revolt, was felt to be imminent – *July's People* tells the story of the white Smales family who flee their Johannesburg suburb and take refuge in the rural village of their black servant, a migrant worker they call July, whose real name is Mwawate. In this space-time shift, the othernesses of the imagined future and the impoverished village present challenges that yield fresh socio-political perspectives (on the family's privileged past, and on their former employee), even as the novel expresses philosophical scepticism about such imaginative extrapolation and its textual representation.

While Gordimer's apartheid-era novels were predominantly set in the near-contemporary past, they were implicitly – and, increasingly, explicitly – future-orientated, being predicated on revolution. As a speculative fiction set during the predicted revolution, *July's People* extends and reifies this teleology. Nevertheless, the novel refuses to imagine the revolution itself and its inevitable violence, which are sketchily evoked by radio reports and ambiguously embodied in the helicopter that descends in the final chapter.

The novel is also limited in its refusal to imagine what might come after the revolution, remaining stalled in the “interregnum” adumbrated by its epigraph from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” Gordimer would subsequently extend the term “interregnum” backwards from its endgame to encompass the whole protracted period between the Soweto uprising and the expected post-apartheid settlement (“Living”). In terms of futurity, *A Sport of Nature* (1987), a later Gordimer novel that ranges from the 1950s to the projected inauguration of a liberated South Africa, is marginally more daring than *July’s People*. Only *A Guest of Honour* (1970), an earlier novel, projects a nascent postcolonial polity and post-independence strife, though its setting in a composite central African state, and one that has very recently been a British colony rather than an internally colonized settler republic, complicates its implications for South Africa. Gordimer is thus cautious in imagining South Africa’s revolutionary and post-revolutionary destiny, and *July’s People* turns back from these ineffable limits and inverts its own forward-looking linearity. As Clingman noted, “what appears to be a projection from the present into the future in the novel is from another point of view *seeing the present through the eyes of the future*” (201-2, author’s emphasis); and as Nicholas Visser put it, “the projected revolutionary moment carries a powerful defamiliarizing effect, laying bare the underlying social and material conditions of the earlier, prerevolutionary, way of life” (“The Politics” 70). *July’s People* is thus both speculative and peculiarly retrospective – a “future history,” which Michael Green defined as “works which seek to comment upon the past and present by projecting the implications of the past and the present forward in time” (14).

This temporal manoeuvre is also a spatial one, most fully explored by Rita Barnard: “a defamiliarization – effected in Gordimer’s novel through a geographical displacement – [...] allows one to see the quotidian practice of class society as unnatural and unjust” (57). The displacement is thus intra-national (from urban to rural) and across the nation’s racialized class stratifications (from affluence to poverty), but it might also be deemed transnational in the illegitimate terms of the Bantustan policy that sought to exclude black “homelands” from the white state (and so exacerbates the split identity of July/Mwawate), as well as in the temporal sense that the projected South Africa is on the cusp of becoming another country. Transnational displacements afford new perspectives on South African society in other Gordimer novels: the thought experiments of *A Guest of Honour* and *A Sport of Nature* (which travels to various parts of Africa and Europe); *Burger’s Daughter* (1979), in which Rosa Burger returns to the post-Soweto struggle from a sojourn in France; and *The Pickup* (2001), in which Julie Summers emigrates from post-apartheid South Africa to an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Though the transnationalism of *July’s People* is problematic and provisional, in all five novels new transnational perspectives entail the re-imagining of black characters as agents rather than subalterns.

In *July’s People*, as Visser’s and Barnard’s comments indicate, the defamiliarizing space-time shift enables a devastating critique of contemporary consumer capitalism and liberal humanism. Maureen Smales’s “belief in the absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings” (64) is displaced by a recognition of the determining power of “place in the economy” (65). Objects are divested of their former meanings and assume new significances, and subjectivities contingent on material possessions

collapse when dispossessed, exemplified by the disintegration of Bamford Smales, who derived his alpha-male identity from his gun and baakie (as suggested by his forename, an amalgam of “bam” and “Ford”; and by his surname’s sibilant prefixing of “males,” which facilitates a diminishing play on “small,” “smalls,” and “snails,” and suffixed to his forename suggests that he is more broadly representative of such hollow masculinity: “bamFord’s males”). The Enlightenment ideal of equality between human beings who are essentially free of social determinants, and therefore capable of dispassionate observation, is thus undermined. White South African liberalism is exposed as a particularly deluded and complicit instance of the ideal, and as incompatible with the Black Consciousness philosophy of self-esteem and self-liberation that provides an essential intellectual context despite not being named in the novel (Powell).

This critique is enabled by *July’s People’s* subversion of three major literary genres: the castaway novel (Titlestad and Kissack), especially *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; see Medalie); the imperial romance (Greenstein); and “the Countryman-Comes-to-Town theme,” which Gordimer lists as one of “five main [...] themes” in African literature (*The Black Interpreters* 33). In particular, *July’s People* inverts the white liberal paternalist version of “the Countryman-Comes-to-Town theme,” the so-called “Jim-Comes-to-Jo’burg” narratives epitomised by Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). Gordimer’s inversion, in which a black migrant “Jim” challenged by city life is replaced by urban white refugees confounded by the countryside, is foreshadowed by *The Conservationist* (1974), in which Johannesburg mining-magnate Mehring has his complacent proprietorship of a highveld hobby-farm undermined by the discovery there of a black corpse that refuses to stay buried.

As well as these intertextual revisions, *July’s People* poses more fundamental questions about books, particularly regarding the relevance of fiction and the reliability and efficacy of nonfiction. For Sonny, the bibliophile revolutionary of *My Son’s Story* (1990), which appeared almost a decade later, books are a “source of transcendence – a way out of battered classrooms, the press of Saturday people, the promiscuity of thin-walled houses, and at the same time back into them again with a deeper sense of what the life in them might mean” (17). For Maureen, however, such “transcendence” – and hence enlightened re-entry – has become impossible. One of the possessions brought along as the family flee is Alessandro Manzoni’s classic historical novel *I Promessi Sposi* (1827), “in translation as *The Betrothed*” (28):

But the transport of a novel, the false awareness of being within another time, place and life that was the pleasure of reading, for her, was not possible. She *was* in another time, place, consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as someone’s breath fills a balloon’s shape. She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination. (29, author’s emphasis)

A later attempt to achieve “transcendence,” the imaginative “transport” of immersive reading offered by the literal “transport” of the material book, is similarly stymied by Maureen’s new context: “she sat outside the hut and could not understand *I Promessi Sposi*. It was translated from the Italian but would not translate from the page to the kind of comprehension she was able to provide now” (138-9). Manzoni’s “account of bread riots in Milan in 1628” begs analogy with the present black South African revolt, but in Maureen merely produces “an olfactory impression of bread” that recalls from

her childhood her black nanny Lydia's indifferent baking (139). Manzoni's novel, and perhaps by extension all novels, seems as obsolete and irrelevant as the passbook that July is similarly reluctant to discard (137).

More obviously relevant is a work of documentary non-fiction specifically about South Africa, containing a photograph of Maureen's childhood self with Lydia, which Maureen recalls a few pages after first attempting Manzoni's novel:

Years later someone showed it to Maureen Smales in a *Life* coffee-table book about the country and its policies. White *herrenvolk* attitudes and life-styles; the marvellous photograph of the white schoolgirl and the black woman with the girl's school case on her head.

Why had Lydia carried her case?

Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that, together?

Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason she and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn't know? (33)

Gordimer's second novel, *A World of Strangers* (1958), had expressed dissatisfaction with similar, often overseas, representations of South Africa. Englishman Toby Hood arrives in Johannesburg to work as a publisher's agent, measuring his experience of the place against "all those books about Africa [he] had been reading [...]. The bluebooks, the leaflets, the surveys, the studies – the thick ones by economists and agronomists, the sensational ones by journalists" (18); but, as Stefan Helgesson notes of this novel in which "the theme of print versus place is remarkably pronounced" (110), ultimately "history disallows a retreat from the symbolic realm of print," which "stages a comeback" in the final chapter (113) in the form of "two newspaper cuttings; and a letter" the departing Hood carries in his pocket (*A World* 265). *July's People* would similarly seem to reassert the power of print, for though Maureen's contemplation of *Life's* interpretation of the photograph ends with three questions, these are ultimately rhetorical as she is "forced to relinquish 'her role as observer and composer of the frame' [...], and she must recognize her inability to read the visual narrative of July's village" (Wright 87).

The questions, however, are less about the adequacy of print to capture – and intervene in – the experienced place than about the limitations of experience itself, making *July's People* "Gordimer's most radical renunciation of the knowledge yielded by observation" (Cooke 168). When July's wife grumbles that it was unnecessary for the burdensome white refugees to flee the city she has never visited, and the killing she hasn't witnessed, July counters: "You can't imagine those houses. [...] Unless you've been there, you can't understand how it is" (19); but the *Life* photograph encapsulates the more extreme point that even being "there" – perhaps *anywhere* – is not enough to enable understanding, and may in fact hamper understanding of broader "context." This is demonstrated by the retrospective revelation not just of what Maureen "did not know" but also, crucially, what she "*could not have* imagined or discovered through imagination" (emphasis added). The revolution's "explosion of roles" (117) that prompts her to re-think her childhood relationship with Lydia also forces her into a new understanding of her adult master-servant relationship with July, an understanding that would not otherwise have been possible: "*How was she to have known, until she came here*, that the special consideration she had shown for his dignity as a man, while he was by definition a servant, would become his humiliation itself [...]" (98, emphasis added). While Wright and Cooke are thus correct in affirming that the novel exposes the interestedness and unreliability of observation, what is striking is that the means by which July's wife might

“understand” and Maureen might have “discovered” or “known” things about others’ lives is *imagination*, and that imagination is shown to be contingent on experience. In the terms Gordimer deploys in the nonfiction discussed above, Maureen’s pre-revolution “experience” was so role-bound that it lacked the “potential” for her to understand July; the spatial and temporal displacement of revolution (a “potential experience” that Gordimer’s speculative fiction makes come to pass) gives Maureen a new experience – “an experience that couldn’t be forethought” (127) – that has the “potential” she formerly lacked. Futurity is required to enable Maureen’s retrospective understanding of alterity, reflecting a conception of subjectivity in which epistemology is firmly grounded in ontology.

But if *July’s People* thus seems to articulate Gordimer’s bleakest view of subjectivity – as a materially, temporally, and spatially contingent false consciousness – this is resisted by the very form in which it is articulated, which suggests a more sanguine view: just as *A World of Strangers* was itself a textual representation of the kind about which it expressed reservations, Maureen is herself an imagined character in a novel of the kind that she finds redundant – the kind that *does* allow discovery through imagination, not least, paradoxically, those things which Maureen is shown as able to discover only through the hindsight acquired by bitter experience. Maureen’s new “experience that couldn’t be forethought” *has* been “forethought,” by Gordimer in hyperperceptive mode.

This formal tension between limited and unlimited subjectivities is particularly apparent in Gordimer’s less audacious presentation of July, which takes up the idea, foregrounded by the inclusion of *I Promessi Sposi*, of translation as metaphor and technique. July initially speaks to the Smales family in a pidgin arranged in “the servant’s formula, attuned to catch the echo of the master’s concern” (95): “You like to have some cup of tea?” (1). In contrast, conversations with his wife Martha are presented in a standard English that is signalled as a translation from “their language” (20), Shangaan. Elsewhere, Shangaan words and sentences are occasionally included but left untranslated, as in July’s “teasing and encouraging” (141) words to the gumba-gumba man; for a non-Shangaan-speaking Anglophone reader, this reinforces a sense of otherness, even if the words are susceptible to translation and editorial glossing.¹ But when tensions climax with July haranguing Maureen in the “heavy cadences” (152) of his own language, July’s words are not even transcribed, making his reproach at least as inaccessible to the reader as it is to Maureen, who feels that “She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him” (152). Gordimer thus “neither ignores July’s story, nor presumes to tell it,” but rather than it “remain[ing] inaccessible to the white imagination” (Newman 89) she refracts selected aspects of his “story” into these four linguistic dimensions of varying accessibility. Though in her epiphanic moment Maureen felt that she “understood everything,” the narrative uses the language barrier to indicate the limits of empathy by implying yet withholding what lies beyond those limits. *July’s People* thus suggests that alterity, like futurity, has ineffable limits, for July remains almost as unknowable as the post-revolutionary state is unimaginable; but it

1. The estranging effect of such moments – and hence July’s otherness – is arguably diminished by Longman’s educational edition, which includes English translations in the end-matter’s “Glossary” (Nadine Gordimer, *July’s People*, ed. Jennie Sidney [Harlow: Longman, 1991]).

also implies that more futurity might enable better understanding of alterity, which it defers to a post-apartheid time. Though Gordimer criticized J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) – another “future history” set during an imagined South African civil war of uncertain outcome – for its protagonist's refusal of history (“The Idea”), her representational strategy here is not dissimilar to those of Coetzee, whose subalterns' opacities and silences resist white liberal desires for knowledge and self-validating reciprocity.

The famously “open” ending of *July's People* – in which Maureen runs away from July's village, fords a river (imaged as a baptism), and runs towards a helicopter (imaged as a rapist), not knowing “whether it holds saviours or murderers; and [...] for whom” (158) – might also be read in terms of a tension between the conceptions of subjectivity that the novel articulates and contrarily embodies. By 1994, when the revolution envisaged by *July's People* had been averted by the negotiated settlement that brought the ANC to power, the meaning of Maureen's flight had “become one of the standard debates of South African fiction” (Green 16). This debate had included perceptive analyses by Clingman, who considered that Maureen “is running from old structures and relationships [...] but she is also running towards her revolutionary destiny [...]. In part it is a flight from, but also it is a flight towards” (203), and by Visser, who observed that “Maureen has been overtaken by something far larger than herself” (“Beyond” 66). These analyses were to remain amongst the most-cited in post-apartheid criticism, including Ali Erritouni's materialist reading of the novel as a “dystopian critique of apartheid” and a non-prescriptive (“postmodern”) projection of a redistributive “post-apartheid utopia” (68). The debate as it stood in 2015 was summarized by Jackson: “Interpretations run the gamut from apocalyptic to utopian, but they generally share a sense of emergence from the paralysis of interregnum and of individualism giving way to collective implication” (68). However, building on Brendon Nicholls's suggestion that “Maureen's detachment from identity, family and community is linked to Gordimer's belief in the enlightened distance of the artist from their society” (33), the reading I am proposing shifts the emphasis away from a collective political impetus and back towards individual subjectivity and the artistic conundrums confronting the late-apartheid writer. In light of Gordimer's epistemological and ontological reflection on potential experiences and experience's potential, Maureen's action can be construed as her running *towards* a third phase of experience that might have the potential to make sense of the second (in July's village), just as the second proved to have the potential necessary to make sense of the first (in Johannesburg's suburbs); or, indeed, as her running *away* from such a limiting conception of subjectivity in which perception is contingent on position. Rather than a nebulous political prognosis, Gordimer's cliffhanger can thus be understood as a writerly projection encapsulating the central philosophical paradox of a novel that offsets a dystopian conception of subjectivity, in which experience is deterministic and even tyrannical, by warily endorsing – and, in the end, recklessly embracing – a utopian ideal of subjectivity as heuristic, in which experience has the potential to liberate.

If Gordimer's self-reflexive examination of “the transport of a novel” in terms of its imaginative engagement with alterity and futurity thus remains as unresolved as Maureen's potential physical transport by helicopter, it at least elucidates the difficult conditions under which, in late-apartheid South Africa, an author's reach might

tentatively exceed her grasp. It also draws attention to “the transport of a novel” as a material object itself susceptible, in apartheid South Africa and beyond, to situated interpretation and retrospective reevaluation. As Andrew van der Vlies suggests in his illuminating textual-cultural history of the book’s publication and reception in different editions at home and abroad, *July’s People* is “an instantiation of the representations it so teasingly offers its readers” (118). As such, its self-reflexive examination of subjectivity, alterity, and futurity – rooted in the unresolved ambivalence about experience’s potential apparent in Gordimer’s nonfiction, and reflected in divergent critical assessments of the historical conditioning of her fiction – should give the reader interpretive pause.

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Reviews

The Routledge Companion to World Literature and World History. Edited by May Hawas. New York: Routledge, 2018. 350 p. ISBN: 9-781315-686271. £140.

Reviewed by Stefan HELGESSON

World literature and world history can seem like a match made in heaven. In her own contribution to this impressively wide-ranging companion, the editor May Hawas makes two claims in support of such a view. The first is that world history offers an understanding of the “maturation of global networks over time” (219). The second is that world-historical crises can be posited as nodal points through which we can study literary production and reception. Her key example is the Suez Canal, a pre-eminent geopolitical pressure point across two centuries – but also with an ancient history as an idea and a dream before it was finally built. By first establishing a dense historical context in this way, Hawas can then bring Arabic, British, American, French and Indian literary texts to bear on her discussion. Her focus lies on the short century from the canal’s opening in 1869 to the Suez crisis in 1956, which was as symbolic a marker of the new postcolonial era as the Bandung conference of 1955. Rudyard Kipling, Anthony Trollope, Langston Hughes, Rabindranath Tagore and others are in this way brought together under the aegis of an undeniably significant and conflictual historical site.

Hawas’s chapter clearly aims at disrupting entrenched (national and/or linguistic) habits of thinking about literature and history, and can be read as exemplary of her own ambitions with the volume. It is also hard to disagree with the hope she expresses in the introduction for a “convergence” (xvii) of world literature and world history. Although companions and edited volumes of world literature are rife today, no other book on the market brings world history scholars so decisively into the conversation. At the same time, the volume also illustrates many of the conundrums that such an ambition must confront. Divided into three sections called “People,” “Networks and Method,” and “Transformations,” the companion contains no less than 27 chapters, including two introductory surveys by the central scholars (in each respective field) David Damrosch and Patrick Manning. Just putting all of this together in one book is a tour de force, but it inevitably offers a kaleidoscopic, rather than neatly coherent, view of the issues at hand.

To engage with world literature is indeed to court paradox (I say this as a world literature scholar myself). If, on the one hand, critics want to give all literatures and languages their due, they gravitate, on the other, towards the dominant, hyper-central language of our time, English. Similarly, world literature is wedded both to “deep time” (prominent in this volume) and to the extremely contemporary (the “global novel”). And it can be both radically egalitarian (“minor literatures”) and ludicrously hierarchical (the slim “canon” of world literature). Some of these discrepancies play themselves out also here if one considers, for example, the distance between Piero Boitani’s astonishingly erudite historical survey pointedly called “Classics,” and Amal Equeiq’s engaged and engaging essay on ethnography and recent Mexican/Mayan and Palestinian literature.

World history seems not to be beleaguered by quite the same fractures, but Patrick Manning's claim that "world literature appears more fully developed as a field of theory and criticism than world history" (14) is intriguing. The flipside to this is his understated observation that world historians "may find themselves surprised by the breadth of generality of the propositions debated in world literature" (19). There we find, perhaps, a crucial difference in ethos between the disciplines of history and literature: at best, a productive contrast between empirical rigour and strong ideas.

But we must not be taken in by any illusion of parity between the two fields of knowledge. As Damrosch points out (8), history will always be the bigger fish in the pond. Although literary theory, in the heyday of the linguistic turn, could claim priority in the humanities (as evidenced by Hayden White's meta-history), contributions to this companion tend rather to defer to history, or implicitly argue that literature derives its value from providing a different form of historical knowledge – as in Nandini Dhar's superb reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. This is not necessarily a matter of deferring to history as a *discipline* in the strict sense, but certainly to the historical dimension of literature, and to literature as history.

Extrapolating on the ethical and political consequences of such a manoeuvre, Bruce Robbins suggests that world literature has still not fully worked through the implications of its commitment to deep-time world-historical perspectives. If world literature offers a narrative of "modernity as decline" (197) by projecting the nation-state and national literature as its big Other, this calls the vector of democratisation as a political ideal into question. The long and short of his argument is that the neutrally descriptive approach to literature in history will ultimately need to declare its position vis-à-vis democratic ethics.

In terms of method, Dhar's and Robbins's chapters illustrate the extreme scalar points between which the contributions position themselves: Dhar close reads a single novel, Robbins roams the epochs and the planet in his discussion. One could describe this as a contrast between (literary) experience and external description or analysis. If one takes the multilingual, deep-historical and transcontinental purview of world literature seriously, as Hawas does with her companion, this necessarily entails an attenuation of literary experience. I delight here in learning about the great Azerbaijani writer Nizāmī (1141-1209) in Michael Barry's account. Likewise, it is remarkable to catch a glimpse of Chinese-Vietnamese literary interactions in the fifteenth century in Liam C. Kelley's chapter. But hopelessly limited as my language skills are, I know that my experience of these texts will always be at least at one remove – if indeed I can be claimed to experience them at all. (A similar insight once prompted Franco Moretti to promote "distant reading" as the proper method for world literature.)

As though to offset the attenuation of experience, each of the three sections in the book begins with a chapter labelled "Artist in Action," where practitioners have their say: the writer/academic Tabish Khair, the writer/translator Maureen Freely, and the visual artist Shazia Shikander. These chapters serve as wise reminders of the force of aesthetic (and not just conceptual) practice, but they signal also the necessity not to impose closure on world literature or world history as fields of enquiry. It is the tensions and polarities themselves that constitute the fields, not any spurious one-size-fits-all methodology.

Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing, Edited by Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer. Cross/Cultures 203. Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2018. 215 p. ISBN: 9-789004-364967. €132.

Reviewed by Riaan OPPELT

Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing is a very important book. It sheds light on writings by Indian South African authors that are not often privileged in academic study, both inside and outside South Africa. At a time of the preponderance of decolonization discussions at South African universities and their attendant questions of selection, there may be further dangers of losing awareness of writing that emphasizes patterns of connection between diverse South African communities. Rather than a limiting either/or, which harks back to apartheid-era essentialism and categorisation, South African life has always been creolised and its literature cannot but reveal the cultural intimacies of exchange. This collection's introduction posits that "to understand [...] the South African Indian experience as a constitutive component of Indian Ocean thassalogy requires a more nuanced investigation of the relationship between self and other than that elicited so far." (9) The book's contributors do dynamic work at pointing out how much literary and cultural value has always been available in Indian South African writing.

The book is very well presented and edited (although uMkhonto weSizwe is misspelled, on p. 134), with the chapters carefully arranged and often speaking to one another. The seamlessness of the book's studies is prioritized, proposing a cohesive set voiced by eclectic contributors drawing on wide arrays of sources. None of the chapters are overly theoretical and the primary literary texts are often approached through close readings and compelling interventions.

Lindy Stiebel's chapter presents a survey of South African Indian writing and shares a focus on memory writing before and after the 150-year commemoration of the arrival of Indians to South Africa in 2010. At the core of the survey is Stiebel's study of "plantation literature" and she ends the chapter showing the continued diasporic reach of South African Indian writing to newer countries after 2000. Felicity Hand's chapter is neatly coupled with Stiebel's and presents a close reading of Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People*, including a critique of gender inequality in Hassim's writing. Hand also pays attention to how *The Lotus People* depicts a short-lived period of solidarity between Indian and Zulu South Africans during apartheid.

Juan Miguel Zarandona's essay on Ahmed Essop reveals the lack of international scholarly inquiry into certain South African writers, in this case on the work of Ahmed Essop in Spain. Zarandona's comparative selection of South African writers may be questioned but, at heart, the chapter is a strong motivation for further recognition of Essop's work. Salvador Faura's chapter considers historical connections between writing from different periods and the practice of re-inscription. Faura studies the fifteenth-century Middle Eastern poet Muhammed Fuẓūlī's *Layla and Mejnun* (with its own reinscriptions of the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's *The Story of Layla and Majnun*) and its influence on Achmat Dangor's complex *Kafka's Curse*, which in turn offers a South African reinscription of the classic tale.

Isabel Alonso-Breto's chapter on Farida Karodia is intriguing in that Karodia is an important writer but *Boundaries*, her most recent published work, is not an obvious

choice. Alonso-Breto writes about transnationalism and glocality in South Africa in the twenty-first century, yet *Boundaries* presents limited opportunities to engage with South African Indian points of interest within these focus areas. The inclusion of this chapter is persuasive, however, because of its theoretical framing of the “transnational turn” in South African literature after the year 2000. Esther Pujolràs-Noguer’s chapter on Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* is possibly the outstanding chapter in a strong collection. Border crossings, in terms of emigration as well as sexual and gendered boundaries, and the cartographies of desire that Pujolràs-Noguer traces in Sarif’s text are explored. Pujolràs-Noguer’s enthusiastic analysis looks at intimacy and Sarif’s female protagonists’ experiences of *becoming* Indian South Africans. The novel’s characters and their transgressions, development and creation of “home,” Pujolràs-Noguer suggests, show how Sarif “imagines a community at the crossroads of nowhere and everywhere” (120).

Modhumita Roy contributes a close reading of Ronnie Govender’s novel *Black Chin, White Chin* and concentrates largely on its form, which resonates given that Govender is better known as a playwright. The chapter highlights the novel’s fictionalized biographical elements and an initial *bildung* structure that transforms as the narrative progresses. M.J. Daymond’s chapter on Imraan Coovadia is an intricate reading of ambiguity, which is a feature of Coovadia’s work. The two Coovadia books discussed (one playful and comedic while the other is a layered variation of detective fiction), with their generational bind, look at pre-apartheid/apartheid history and post-apartheid disillusionment.

J. Coplen Rose offers a striking but lengthy piece on Ashwin Singh’s play *To House*, although it is striking how many different readings the play invites. Coplen Rose navigates theoretical possibilities with a rich analysis of the play’s characters. More chapters on plays, doubtlessly Govender’s, would have benefited the book. Farhad Khojraty’s chapter, “‘Doing Time’: Temporal Disruptions in Dr. Goonam’s and Fatima Meer’s Prison Experiences,” is a fitting conclusion to the book, a crucial reminder of Goonam’s and Meer’s prison experiences during apartheid.

While thinkers like Rajendra Chetty and Meg Samuelson would have been welcome in the collection, their work is often referenced by a number of the contributors and the book ensures that the field of study is being seriously engaged. Forthcoming work by Alexandra Negri also looks closely at the correlations in the representative literatures of “Coloured” and South African Indian authors. Meanwhile, one can hope that the reception of *Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing* will generate discussions and renewed interest in the primary texts which are studied here.

The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred. By Lyn McCredden. Sydney: Sydney UP, 2016. vii + 158 pp. ISBN: 9-781743-325032. AU\$30.

Reviewed by Jean-François VERNAY

Tim Winton has written his way to become the darling of Australian readers who enjoy his rich prose evocative of the south-western landscape which he calls home. He can be regarded as a left-leaning writer who has a close affinity with the people and especially the land which he celebrates in his stories. His coastal narratives invariably vividly depict rural communities functioning in harmony with the beach culture. Winton's focus is domestic, if not personal, fathoming the cultural and psychological impact of the Australian land.

Discounting a few slim study guides on selected novels, *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred* is the third single-authored monograph to appear within the span of two decades, and surely the most comprehensive one in terms of the perspectives explored. The fact that Michael McGirr's *Tim Winton: The Writer and his Work* (Macmillan Education, 1999) was mostly designed as a high school textbook and that Sahlia Ben-Messahel's more traditional approach in *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction* (U of Western Australia P, 2006) focused on a thematic discussion of the novelist's literary output partly accounts for the fact that McCredden's analyses can be considered as offering essentially new insights into an enigmatic writer.

In *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, Professor Lyn McCredden covers extensively the traditional foci of any classical study in literature (namely language, characterisation, plot, themes, narrative voice, genre, and literariness) rearranged as a series of lively discussions on a variety of engaging topics: the world-making function of Winton's art practice, Judith Butler-inspired gender preoccupations, ontological and psycho-emotional reflections, class identity issues, highbrow and lowbrow artistic ambitions, nationalism, literary reception and considerations about the marketplace.

In a string of thematically arranged essays divided into eight sections (excluding the introduction), McCredden gives an insightful analysis into the fictional works of Tim Winton, a hard-to-classify writer she sees as "a shape-shifter" (1) whose complex profile is not easy to delineate: a gifted wordsmith attuned to vernacular speech; a media-magnet who keeps a respectable distance from critics; a public intellectual who yet feels more comfortable with working-class culture; and a critically acclaimed writer whose work is not inspiring the same volume of critical response as, say, Peter Carey, Patrick White, or David Malouf. Although Winton has a wide international audience (especially in China and the UK), few of the thirty-odd prizes he has received originated from outside Australia. What is more, though he and Thea Astley are – to the best of my knowledge – the sole writers to have won four times the Miles Franklin Literary Award, Australia's most prestigious fiction prize, this does not seem to have given them greater literary stature than two-time Miles Franklin winners Christopher Koch, Patrick White, Thomas Keneally, Rodney Hall, or Alex Miller. To all intents and purposes, Tim Winton comes across as a protean writer who remains a literary conundrum for academia.

From the sound of her narrative voice, Lyn McCredden feels passionate about her subject-matter, which she has previously tackled on repeated occasions through essays, an anthology of criticism (co-edited with Nat O'Reilly, *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, U

of Western Australia P, 2014), and the odd column. To McCredde's loyal readers, the sacred dimension in the writings of Tim Winton – a Christian at heart – will therefore perhaps be of less interest than her more recent forays into the market-driven forces of the publishing industry discussed in the last section of the book. By trying to assess Winton's fictional narrative impact on readers, McCredde joins the more contemporary debates about the transformative power of fiction, which neuroscience tries to clarify by conducting experiments in a certain number of domains such as identity, personality, beliefs, empathy, psychological processes, brain connectivity and function, to mention a few. But McCredde does not draw on the critical material available in cognitive literary studies and so her discussions on that topic, in the absence of any scientific investigation, remain quite speculative.

Yet, it leads onto another concern that has emerged in the past decades in conjunction with the waning engagement of students in literary studies, that is, the calculus of the value of fiction. "The reasons for this state of affairs [has been] summed up [by Nicholas Jose] as a combination of changing intellectual approaches in the academy, including resistance to nationalist constructions of literature; shorter term, market-driven publishing arrangements in an increasingly competitive and globalised media environment; reduced responsibility for cultural heritage, especially literature, in public policy, and the changing habits of new generations of consumers."¹

Just like Thea Astley, Miles Franklin, Helen Garner, Dorothy Hewett, David Ireland, Olga Masters, Frank Moorhouse, or Alexis Wright, Tim Winton is a nationalist writer, and more specifically a regional writer. While Winton does not hesitate to write about sensitive environment-related subjects like some of his other prominent fellow writers concerned with ecology (Oodegeroo Noonuccal, Judith Wright, Xavier Herbert, Patrick White, and Richard Flanagan), no in-depth treatment has been given to his activism in *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred*.

Writing about Tim Winton's fiction inevitably induces comments on Australia. It seems to me that this regional dimension is Winton's quintessential trademark which stands for the core identity of his narratives, something that Australian readers are eagerly looking forward to discovering when grabbing one of his books. Thanks to Lyn McCredde, I would now be more attuned to this aspect. In all the existing scholarship in the field, *The Fiction of Tim Winton* stands out as a dense and exacting book graced with the ability to unravel the Winton mystery.

1. Nicholas Jose, *The Literature of Australia* (London/ New York: Norton, 2009), 2-3.

“Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* : Parcours Critiques.” Edited by Christian Gutleben and Vanessa Guignery. Special issue, *Cycnos* 34.3 (2018). 188 p. ISBN: 9-782343-162652. 21€.

Reviewed by Mathilde ROGEZ

The latest volume of the journal *Cycnos*, edited by Christian Gutleben and Vanessa Guignery, tries, like other volumes in the collection, to strike a balance between offering new critical research on a major author and presenting approaches to a work on the syllabus for the French *Agrégation externe d'anglais* which can be more immediately useful to students, a fact one cannot help taking into account when reviewing this publication. Mostly based on presentations given at a conference organised at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in October 2018, it offers a coherent and fairly comprehensive reading of the work of one of the most famous white writers from South Africa.

The volume is divided into three parts: generic ambiguities, an aesthetic of fragmentation, and the issue of language and codes – although the editors point to other links between and possible groupings of the various essays composing the volume. Indeed, one cannot do away with the necessity for contextualisation, which is provided by three essays written respectively by Rita Barnard, Stephen Clingman, and Liliane Louvel, and to a lesser extent in the essay by Susan Barrett. They are bound to remain rather schematic in that respect. Borrowing from David Lodge, the first essay analyses how Gordimer responds to the demands of her time by using a form of realism which can actually be combined with rather than opposed to the allegorical mode. The essay then turns to brief illustrations with reference to “Once Upon a Time,” “Spoils,” and “Loot,” the first story in Gordimer’s next collection. Using Jameson, Barnard thus questions too optimistic a reading of the concluding story “Amnesty,” which Louvel situates back into its context: Gordimer’s stories were written at a time when the country was precariously poised on the cusp of major historical and political changes. The most compelling essay of all three, for both researchers and students, is probably Clingman’s, who revisits issues of space and spatiality which are crucial in South Africa. He focuses in particular on the notion of home, a space that is constantly impinged upon by the authorities, turned inside out and made part of the public space, thus tying in with its oxymoronic correlative, the homeland. The essay opposes Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling” to Levinas’s “home,” the latter involving a reciprocal acknowledgement of the other, which further allows Clingman to consider openings both in terms of space and of temporalities. His analysis spans not only most of the stories in the collection, but also several of Gordimer’s other works, with which they thus engage.

Theoretical contextualisation has already been given in the editors’ introduction which provides a selection of key guidelines for students and proves extremely helpful to readers not familiar with Gordimer’s work, while perhaps, from the point of view of the researcher, not questioning enough the position of the reader who is somehow always posited as western – and probably white. J.M. Coetzee’s insightful essays on Gordimer’s dual readership and the way in which she negotiated that double allegiance in her writings, particularly in *Jump* (as a transitional collection of stories), would prove a useful complement.

Those various theoretical threads are developed in particular in the essays by Fiona McCann and Nicolas Pierre Boileau which skilfully combine strong theoretical positions with careful close reading. The former successfully articulates postcolonial concepts (Bhabha's liminality) and considerations on the genre of the short story, while providing a close analysis of several stories ("Jump," "A Journey," and "Home") which nevertheless seamlessly weaves into it references to many other stories to shed light on the concepts of "liminality" and "home." The latter, a Lacanian reading of Gordimer's stories, proves similarly convincing by never losing sight of the text which is always analysed rigorously through a lens that is refreshingly different from those most commonly used when speaking about Gordimer. Less theoretical but extremely commendable to students preparing the *Agrégation* is Christian Gutleben's clever use of metonymy, or "thwarted metonymies," as a tool to read "Comrades" and "Keeping Fit" in particular, in an essay which again offers connections to other stories.

Language, its potential, failings, and limits are the focus of two interesting articles by Susan Barrett and Françoise Král which respectively tackle miscommunication and symptoms "of an unreconciled nation." According to Král, its wounds are lanced, if not healed, by Gordimer's use of the "performativity of language" (when "language indeed means what it says and makes people do what they say they are going to do," 101), with fiction thus setting the conditions for the possible creation of a nation. Yet it is a language which, as Barrett also argues in a more loosely written essay which however covers most key issues, still often remains unarticulated, with the body or silence acting as paradoxically more "decipherable" signs than verbal exchanges (151), in stories that are themselves often misleading. The reader thus has to hunt for meaning. If sound in its use of theoretical tools (Derrida, Foucault, Ginzburg) and textual analyses, the last article by Hubert Malfray – which compares the theme of the hunt with the reader's task in decoding Gordimer's stories – is however slightly less convincing for South African specialists, as it lacks familiarity with some major traditions in South African literature. Even though it tries to conclude on links between Gordimer and her South African peers, this is where the analysis does not create the strong links one finds in Clingman's essay, although Malfray justly brings attention back to generic issues. Michal Tal's article is not without interest either, but offers more of a typology: if it can be useful to students preparing for the *Agrégation*, it adds rather little to the study of Nadine Gordimer's work.

The editors thus deserve praise for convincingly including texts by the most renowned world specialists of Gordimer and some excellent articles by other French academics; yet the volume ultimately reveals, comparatively, the dearth of specialists of South African literature in France, as well as the relative and continuing disregard for South African literature in particular, and South African studies in general, in French academia. This translates in the essays collected in this volume into a sometimes excessive stress put on context. It could be interesting to focus more on how narrative choices could be analysed to read the short stories – when language for instance means also languages, and there are indeed many coming into dialogue in texts by South African authors (something only briefly alluded to by Barrett). The *Agrégation* is known to sometimes lead students to pursue doctoral studies in the field afterwards; yet it is to be hoped that such an interest will not limit itself to already well-researched authors like Gordimer, and will also focus on the many under-studied but remarkably gifted authors South Africa has to offer.

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