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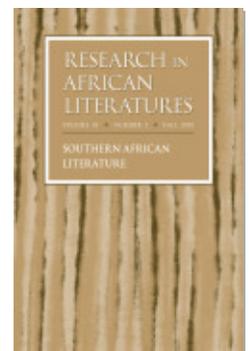
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# Apartheid Inequality and Postapartheid Utopia in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay makes the argument that Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) contains both a dystopian critique of apartheid South Africa and utopian projections that anticipate a more egalitarian postapartheid dispensation. Gordimer criticizes chiefly white South African liberals for failing to recognize that their material well-being owes a great deal to the discriminatory policies of apartheid. Although they reject the color bar, white liberals, she finds, resist redistribution of South Africa's material resources. In addition, one of the central burdens of the essay is to show that Gordimer's use of utopia in *July's People* accords with the postmodern rejection of prescription and grand narratives. Gordimer does not imagine a full-fledged postapartheid South Africa; rather, she merely adumbrates possibilities for a more equal co-existence between blacks and whites. If apartheid, with its policies of racial segregation, tipped the economic balance in favor of whites, Gordimer envisions a postapartheid future where whites would remedy the economic disparities between them and their fellow black South Africans.

Published in 1981, thirteen years before the official demise of apartheid, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* foresees the inevitable collapse of white South Africa and the emergence of new political and social realities that would require white South Africans to fashion the contours of a new identity. The question for Gordimer in this novel is not so much who will eventually rule South Africa. She assumes that blacks will emerge victorious from their struggle for political and economic justice, and whites will find themselves in a subordinate position, ruled by blacks. What is of more significance to Gordimer is the utopian vision of a democratic South Africa, led by the black majority, and the role South African whites would play in the new dispensation. *July's People*, however, dwells less on the pending demise of white South Africa and on the utopia of an alternative future, and more on the difficulties that arise from the attempt to

surpass the pitfalls of the old order in anticipation of a new one. The epigraph of the novel, culled from Antonio Gramsci, sets the tripartite timeframe of the narrative: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." The past of South Africa is defunct; however, attempts to transcend it towards a better future must face a recalcitrant interregnum.

Although *July's People* is not a traditional utopia in the sense that it prescribes an ideal commonwealth, it nonetheless contains utopian projections that adumbrate the proper form racial interactions should take in a postapartheid South Africa. Gordimer deploys the utopian impulse in an effort to indicate possibilities beyond the impasse of apartheid and to affirm "the principle of hope," in Ernst Bloch's sense.<sup>1</sup> Yet, she does not map out the future or imagine a full-fledged social order. The utopian horizon she offers belongs to the kind of utopian narratives Bülent Somay describes as "open-ended" (26), and Philip E. Wegner sees as presenting "an emerging space" (17).<sup>2</sup> Gordimer's recourse to utopia, most notably at the end of the novel, stems paradoxically from her realization that South Africa under apartheid has degenerated into a dystopia. For, as Krishan Kumar observes, "utopia and anti-utopia [or dystopia] are antithetical yet interdependent" (100). "Most commonly," he adds, "the anti-utopia [or dystopia] appears as the existing contemporary society, to which the author offers his utopia as the solution to present ills and discontents" (105).<sup>3</sup> As a dystopian novel, *July's People* draws a grim picture of South Africa in order not only to expose the social and economic consequences of apartheid, but also to open up utopian horizons beyond it. To use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's terminology, Gordimer deterritorializes some recalcitrant facets of apartheid and reterritorializes the space she empties out with fresh alternatives that anticipate an egalitarian postapartheid South Africa.

## I

Gordimer sets the plot of *July's People* in a dystopian future in order to warn of catastrophic consequences if the economic exploitation of Africans and the political hegemony of Afrikaners that apartheid has instituted continue unabated. Yet, the revolution, the disruption of social structures, the impasse in interracial interactions she portrays had been evident in white South Africa as early as the fifties, and in a more sustained fashion since the Soweto uprising in the seventies (Thompson 212–13). To adapt Kumar's assessment of nineteenth-century dystopias, the white South Africa Gordimer writes about in *July's People* was "already so far anti-utopian [or dystopian] as to require little in the way of futuristic elaboration" (110). In fact, as Gordimer points out in an interview conducted in 1987: "In the few years since [*July's People*] was written [. . .] many of the things which seemed like science fiction then, have begun to happen, and it's not because I'm a seer or prophet, but because it was there. We'd been doing things that would bring this about" (qtd. in Bazin 119).<sup>4</sup>

*July's People* opens with white South African Maureen and Bamford Smales in a shack provided to them by their former black servant July. They have escaped war-torn Johannesburg to the African bush where July is offering them shelter among his family and people. Their new life is a far cry from and is starkly contrasted to the sumptuous life they have led before the war undermined the props

that supported their privilege. Bam and Maureen owned “a seven-roomed house and swimming-pool” (25), could afford to hire live-in servants, went on frequent hunting trips, had “growing savings and investments” (8), threw extravagant parties—in short, they led a comfortable middle-class life. As the civil war, pitting black revolutionaries against the racist white government of South Africa, creates what Tom Moylan calls in his definition of dystopia a map of social hell (112), the Smalesees find themselves in the same situation of deprivation Africans have suffered for years, that is, without the most rudimentary comforts of modern living. The rigors of their new life force them, especially Maureen, to reckon with the origins of their social and economic privilege and with some of their unquestioned assumptions about racial equality in South Africa.

It is true that Bam and Maureen have sought to dissociate themselves from the extremes of apartheid: they treated their black servants decently, found the racist policies of white South Africa unacceptable, and even tried, though unsuccessfully, to join “political parties and ‘contact’ groups in willingness to slough privilege it was supposed to be their white dog nature to guard with Mirages and tanks” (8). Even so, we know from the history of apartheid that their wealth and easy life owed a great deal to the policies of the South African nation-state under white rule. Apartheid, Leonard Thompson points out, sought both to afrikanerize state institutions, such as the civil service, the police and the army, and to promote a large and wealthy Afrikaner business community.<sup>5</sup> The obverse corollary of this policy was the systematic impoverishment and repression of blacks, and, to a lesser extent, the coloureds and Asians.<sup>6</sup> The majority of white South Africans, supporting and supported by a racist government, had profited from the Manichean world apartheid fostered.<sup>7</sup> Given the economic benefits that accrued to whites as a result of apartheid, Gordimer, I will argue, believes that attempts to undermine the political hegemony of the white South African nation-state must also target the economic implications of its racist policies. An egalitarian South Africa can take shape only if whites recognize and act on the imperative to share with blacks access to resources, skills, and wealth.

In many of her novels, essays, and interviews, Gordimer exposes the imbrication of white South Africans, including the liberals, with the racist policies of their nation-state. She is especially critical of South African liberals because she considers their opposition to apartheid to be ineffective.<sup>8</sup> As liberals, Maureen and Bam want to belong to a multiracial society, but, as I will argue, they hold on jealously to their material possessions and privileges. They fail to associate their sumptuous life before the revolution with the racist policies of white South Africa, and seem unaware that, in the words of the African National Congress (ANC), of which Gordimer is an active member, “the institutions, laws and practices of apartheid are basically extra-economic devices to secure the processes of capital accumulation through the maintenance of the black majority as an easily exploitable source of cheap labor power” (qtd. in Wolpe 30). The wealth of white South Africans cannot, therefore, be disconnected from the structures of racial discrimination erected by apartheid.

To what extent are the Smalesees responsible for “the past and its retribution” (36), that is, for apartheid and, therefore, their own dispossession? *July’s People* does not show the Smalesees either as victims or villains; however, as Nicholas Visser observes, it exposes their unwitting collusion with apartheid:

The Smaleses are, to be sure, limited, and those limitations are explored at length; nevertheless, the novel does not in any straightforward way condemn the Smaleses. What it does, and does unrelentingly, is expose the intractable contradictions inherent in the lives of such people. (63)

The Smaleses have striven to avoid the racist attitudes of the majority of white South Africans, but their attempts to overcome the color bar have blinded them to the economic component of apartheid. In fact, throughout the novel, they resist redistribution of wealth, seemingly oblivious to the fact that, before the revolution, the racial laws of apartheid tipped the economic balance in their favor. The capitalist ethos that property is inalienable informs their economic views. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it, "Struggling unsuccessfully to maintain the rights of possession, the Smales couple manifest the 'morbid symptoms' of a dying consumerist culture in which identity is created by ownership and relationships are mediated by objects." With "[a] psyche shaped to the specifications of Western consumer capitalism" (109), they refuse to share one of the last vestiges of their life under the *ancien régime*, namely the bakkie, their vehicle.

The conflict over the bakkie starts when July, without seeking the permission of the Smaleses, drives it, with the help of his friend Daniel, to the Indian store some forty kilometers from the village, where he buys groceries and other necessities. The Smaleses accuse him of theft and find it hard to countenance his claim on the bakkie. Their reaction to his assertive use of the car betrays the limitations of their liberalism. As long as July was obedient and vulnerable, they felt outraged by the racism of apartheid, but as soon as his relationship with them entails material equality, they resent him. In disbelief that July has contested his exclusive right to the bakkie, Bam complains, "I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct" (58). The black man has overstepped the limits; he does not know his place any more.

What is at issue, it is important to note, is not that the Smaleses irrevocably forfeit the bakkie. July contests their *exclusive* right to it. It is true that July keeps the keys of the car with him, but he does not seek to steal the car from the Smaleses. In fact, he takes pains to reassure them that he uses the car for two main purposes: to purchase groceries from the shops and to learn how to drive with the help of Daniel. When they pay a visit to the chief of the village, July, unbidden, does not occupy the driver's seat. It is Bam who does the driving. However, with an inveterate capitalist mentality and a failure of imagination, the Smaleses continue to insist that July has stolen the car from them. July's assertive claim on it is in line with the argument Gordimer makes in "Living in the Interregnum," a lecture that recapitulates some of the concerns of the novel. In the lecture, Gordimer urges white South Africans to give up sole possession of South Africa's economic wealth and institutions:

In the eyes of the black majority which will rule, whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures. From the all-white Parliament to the all-white country club and the separate 'white' television channels, it is not a matter of blacks taking over white institutions, it is one of conceiving of institutions—from nursery schools to government departments—that reflect a societal structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privilege. (264–65)

Gordimer does not expect that whites will readily share power and property. If need be, "a more equitable distribution of wealth may be enforced by laws" (265). But in the anarchy of the interregnum, July becomes a law unto himself.

The Smaleses protest that they would have willingly lent the bakkie to July if he had simply asked them. But the sense of dependency involved in asking them is, perhaps, what July's assertive act seeks to avoid. An index of his low social and economic status when he worked for the Smaleses was his need constantly to seek their permission. At the end of the novel, Maureen finally understands what it meant for him "to ask for everything. An aspirin. Can I use the telephone. Nothing in that house was his" (155). His very residence in the town hinged on Maureen's good will, as she signed his pass every month. As an African he had few rights and many obligations—a condition that placed him in a state of "total dependency" (155). His refusal to ask for permission to use the car indicates his rejection of the Smaleses' previous status as white bosses and a reminder to them that the old order is defunct. With the "explosion of roles" (117) that the revolution effected, he now *imposes* his demands and wishes.

By challenging the Smaleses' claim to the bakkie, July also impugns the strength and value of their opposition to apartheid. Like the young female character of "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" the Smaleses struggle with the native to retain control of their property, but, unlike her, the dubiousness of such an act eludes them. Unlike her, they do not address the relevant, though unpleasant, questions: "Why did I fight, she thought suddenly. What did I fight for? Why didn't I give him the money and let him go?" (96). Gordimer undercuts the Smaleses' accusation that July has stolen their car by subtly questioning its validity. In her desperation to procure malaria pills for her children on their way to the bush, and because of the anarchy caused by the revolution, Maureen loots a pharmacy. Through this act, she accepts that theft under duress may be justified. However, she does not apply the same moral relativism to July's perceived theft of the bakkie. As she watches him leaning his back against the wheel of the car, she resents this gesture, finding it informed by unwarranted proprietary pride: "Pride, comfort of possession was making him forget by whose losses possession had come about" (94). There is here, I believe, a profound irony that results both from Maureen's attempt to cast herself as the victim of July's theft, and from her failure to recognize that her comment mercilessly captures her own forgetfulness of the origin of her wealth in the exploitation of blacks and their exclusion from the resources of their country.

In addition, the novel makes it clear that the Smaleses' safety and the integrity of their property in Johannesburg were guaranteed by state violence. Bam would find such a suggestion no less than obscene. But the extent of his dependence, unconscious as it is, on the protection of the police and the military during apartheid dawns on his wife as she watches his reaction to the theft of his gun. In his anger and helplessness, as he rummages through the hut, looking for the gun, Maureen witnesses the white boss willing to resort to coercion to protect what he regards as his inalienable possession: "[I]f he couldn't pick up the phone and call the police whom he and she had despised for their brutality and thuggery in the life lived back there, he did not know what else to do" (145). In the absence of the police, Bam reacts to his losses with bathos and sarcasm. This is how Gordimer describes his response on realizing that July has taken the car to the shops without his permission:

[He] got up [from bed] and had the menacing aspect of maleness a man has before the superego has gained control of his body, come out of sleep. His penis was swollen under his rumpled trousers. He went off round the huts, from one to another [. . .]. There was nowhere to run to. Nothing to get away in. All he could say to Maureen was that it was July. July. (39–40)

If the loss of his bearings indicates his difficulties in coping with the new realities of the interregnum, his recourse to scathing comments throughout the novel to cut July down to size acts as a weapon, a surrogate for the police.

Unlike her husband, Maureen is constantly reflecting on his and her attitudes towards July and the extent of their implication in apartheid. However, despite seeing through her husband's liberalism, and despite her self-examination, Maureen's liberal views equally show cracks under pressure from the uncharted world of the interregnum. On one occasion, she commandingly sends for July to come to her hut in an apparent attempt to replay the hierarchical structure that characterized their relationship in Johannesburg: "Go and say I want to see him" (68). When he appears without any sign of having conceded defeat, "her little triumph in getting him to come turned over inside her with a throb and showed the meanness of something hidden under a stone" (68). What is hidden is obviously her ingrained sense of superiority over July. Understanding well the hierarchical nature of their relationship, July refuses to concede that they are equal—a recognition she is anxious for him to admit. While she pleads, "When did we treat you inconsiderably—badly? I'd like to know, I really want to know" (71), he insists on calling himself "her boy," and calling Bam, "the master," "as if there were no term to replace [them], none that would express exactly what the relationship between [them] and him was, for him" (111). July willfully refuses to relieve them of the guilt of being white South Africans by collapsing the division they have insisted and prided themselves on maintaining with racist whites.

The extent of Maureen's imbrication with apartheid is made even clearer when she recalls planning to visit July's village before the revolution. Here Gordimer shows Maureen to be detached from the material reality of Africans. "Her separation from what is observed" (170), to use John Cooke's phrase, betrays not only a gap between her perception and the African world she seeks to engage, as Cooke contends, but also the proximity of her attitudes to those of apartheid South Africa. She recollects having imagined "walking in [the bush] with presents for [July's family], all lined up clapping their hands together in greeting. Telling the kids, this is his home, this is how he lives, see how cleverly July builds houses for himself. Telling everybody at home we actually drove him all the way to the bundu, visited him as a friend" (38). The condescending manner in which she imagines the huts of July's village as quaint and his people focusing their gazes on her as though in awe of a divinity enables her to reify the village into an exotic but alien world. Absent from her vision of the village is its historical and economic dimension. Thus, what she takes to be an act of charity and a measure of her liberal beliefs simply reinforces her position as a white South African. As she reckons with the failures of the past and the difficulties of the interregnum, Maureen admits her distance from "[July's] real facts of life" (73). This distance has insulated her from a recognition of her share, oblique and unconscious as it is, in the destitution of Africans.

Maureen's liberal views and her humane treatment of her servant before the revolutionary war do not go to the heart of the racist and discriminatory policies of white South Africa. They are cosmetic and leave intact the economic discrimination of apartheid. Through the Smaleses, Gordimer criticizes the liberal view, in the words of Harold Wolpe, "that the racial order is essentially a political/ideological phenomenon. It originates, and is reproduced, outside the modern industrial or capitalist economy" (25). Maureen and Bam do not object to the revolution; nor do they accept the racist policies of their nation-state. They treat blacks as equals and believe in their cause, but they are not ready to part with their possessions and privilege. This disjuncture between the Smaleses' political and economic views accounts for their inability to understand the nature of July's claim on their car.

Gordimer makes it clear that sharing property is the litmus test for the white South African liberal position. It is not sufficient, for her, to sympathize with blacks, reject racism, and object to the policies of apartheid. In "How Should We Look at Each Other Then?" she tries to stake a ground on which optimal relationships between whites and blacks should be constructed in a plural South Africa. She disagrees with "those subjectivists who believe that a spiritual change of heart is the basis of peaceful resolution," and aligns herself with "the objectivists—among whom I numbered—who believe that the basis has to be economic conditions" (144). She has no faith in the injunction "Love one another or perish" as a solution to the disparities between whites and blacks, because she doubts that "you [can] love me while I have a full stomach and you are hungry" (145). Gordimer calls for "a politics that will nurture material justice before we can hope to live in peace. A new constitution, new laws must change the economic circumstances of the majority; healing can take place only on that honesty of purpose" ("How Should We Look" 145).

## II

In *July's People*, Gordimer does not simply expose the impasse to which apartheid condemned interracial relations. She equally envisions a utopian future in which South Africans try to overcome their intractable social and economic problems. It must be immediately noted, however, that the postapartheid era Gordimer foresees does not offer a full-fledged ideal commonwealth, for instance, in the tradition of Thomas More's *Utopia*. Hers is a postmodern utopia that avoids prescription and contents itself with adumbrating fresh possibilities. In fact, Gordimer's use of the utopian impulse is consonant with Fredric Jameson's attempts to align utopia with the postmodern rejection of prescription, teleology, and naïve optimism. Jameson argues that "authentic utopia" is seldom prescriptive, serving, instead, as a beacon that points the way but isn't itself a harbor—the ultimate destination. It does not spell out the outlines of freedom; rather, it anticipates freedom. It does not lay claim to the future: it merely intimates it. Jameson maintains that "[t]he ideals of utopian living involve the imagination in a contradictory project, since they all presumably aim at illustrating and exercising that much-abused concept of freedom that, virtually and by definition and in its very structure, cannot be defined in advance, let alone exemplified" (385). According to this definition, utopia is neither apocalyptic nor doctrinaire: it rejects prescription and teleological visionary history.

Echoing Jameson, Ralph Pordzik argues that postcolonial novelists, including Gordimer, belong to a recent group of “utopographers” who have rebelled against the prescriptive closure of “classical utopian novels.” As a reaction against classical utopia, postcolonial novelists imagine “a more complex and open-ended utopia locus encompassing all those possibilities of change that have not yet been fully realized” (16). Thus, they are “hardly ever prescriptive in their conception of a better society” (18). *July's People* contains many layers of utopian projection that accord with Jameson's and Pordzik's definition of utopia. The most obvious one can be found in the ending of the novel. After July makes it painfully clear to Maureen in their final confrontation, where he berates her in his own language, that even communication, let aside understanding, is impossible between them, she finds her liberal views relentlessly put to the test, and her faith in them irreparably undermined; as a result, she reaches an impasse, as Rowland Smith observes.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when she hears the loud noise of a helicopter, she magnetically gravitates towards it, seeking it out, where it has landed beyond the river, crosses the river, and “runs towards it. She runs” (160). The novel ends here, refusing to tell the reader what will happen to her. Nothing about the helicopter indicates the identity of the people in it, whether they are revolutionaries or white soldiers, whether they bring salvation or doom, or whether Maureen has reason to welcome or dread them. Even its exterior adds to its mystery: “[S]he could not have said what color it was, what markings it had, whether it holds saviors or murderers; and—even if she were to have identified the markings—for whom” (158).

Critics have mulled over the cryptic meaning of the last scene of *July's People* without reaching a consensus as to its precise meaning and the nature of the future it anticipates. Stephen Clingman, for instance, recognizes the difficulty of identifying the message of the ending—“the circumstances in which [Maureen's running] occurs are ambiguous”—but goes on to say that “their significance surely is not. [. . .] She is running from old structures and relationships, which have led her to this cul-de-sac” (203). Since the present has proven impossible to reclaim from apartheid, the only egress that is left for Maureen is the possibility of change that the helicopter promises. Unlike Clingman, Nancy Topping Bazin holds that “Maureen's impulsive attempt to escape is more likely to be self-destructive than liberating” (124). Bazin contends that “the people most likely to exit from the helicopter are black revolutionaries who, under the duress of a revolution, would be more likely to rape and/or kill her than rescue and protect her” (124).<sup>10</sup> A different reading of the ending is offered by Visser. He makes the case that the description of the helicopter “in a language of aggressive sexuality” (64) and of Maureen's passive and hypnotic running towards it recalls the encounter between Leda and the swan in W. B. Yeats's great poem. The conclusion Visser draws from the similarities he finds between the poem and the novel is that, just as “Yeats saw Leda as the recipient of an annunciation that would found Greek civilization,” given that her rape gave birth to Helen of Argos, “whose abduction by Paris gives rise to the Trojan war,” so

the imminent convergence of Maureen and the helicopter, like the convergence of Leda and the god-swan, heralds a new civilization, a new epoch for South Africa that cannot, particularly from within a moment of interregnum, be described but can only be symbolically prefigured in a prophetic gesture of revolutionary optimism. (65–66)

Whatever the value of the echoes of “Leda and the Swan” that Visser identifies in the ending of *July’s People*, I agree with him that the last scene prefigures a future South Africa whose outlines are undefined, and that it contains a “Utopian vision—a future projection intimating a realm of possibilities beyond the interregnum” (66).

The critics cited have focused exclusively on what the helicopter bodes for Maureen and ignored what it may mean for the villagers. *July’s People* makes it clear that the events of the ending involve both of them:

[T]he whole village is out, now, poised in its occupations or its idleness, cringing beneath the hoverer, there is even some sort of cheer, probably from children [. . .]. They shriek all of them; a woman races past Maureen laughing in terror, the baby on back rocked amok. The whoop of their voices curves. (158)

The villagers “are exhilarated rather than frightened” (158) by the loud object that hovers above them, then lands in their village. Their response to the helicopter is characterized by a cacophony of “yells, exclamations, discussions and laughter” (159). Unlike the villagers, who are rather jubilant at the sight of the helicopter, Maureen is frightened by it: “[F]ear climbs her hand-to-hand to throttle, hold her” (159). Is it possible to read in the villagers’ laughter and exhilaration a recognition of their approaching salvation, the end of an era and the beginning of a new one? Are Maureen’s fears actuated by her uncertainty about how she would fare in a postapartheid South Africa? Are the celebration of the one and the apprehension of the other echoes of the same theme Gordimer evokes in “Living in the Interregnum” when she says, “[T]he black knows he will be at home, at last, in the future. The white who has declared himself or herself for that future [. . .] does not know whether he will find his home at last” (270)? The text is significantly silent on these questions. But there is no doubt that any reading of the last scene of *July’s People* must take cognizance of the fate of the villagers. The undetermined future will affect them as well as Maureen.

Despite the limitations of their views, Clingman, Bazin, and Visser recognize the utopian dimension of the novel. Smith, on the other hand, finds that Maureen’s running, while revealing “a total inability to live with the present,” leads only to a “traumatic impasse,” “a deadlock” (145). The implication is that the novel is devoid of any vision of a better future that may break the deadlock: “Even speculation is impossible, so total is the concentration in the writing on the intolerable present” (145). I agree with Smith to the extent that he finds the consequences of Maureen’s flight to be “inaccessible,” but I maintain that he neglects the utopian seeds in *July’s People* that gesture beyond the interregnum. If transformation of subjectivity constitutes a major thrust of utopia, as Ruth Levitas argues (14), then Maureen’s run towards the helicopter may be seen as utopian. Behind Maureen’s audacious dash, her “running from old structures and relationships,” in the words of Clingman, there may lie a desperate effort at seeking out a new identity, one that is different from the liberal identity she has cultivated under and in opposition to the political and social arrangements of apartheid. It may be triggered by her belief that the future, unclear as its lineaments are, contains utopian alternatives more enticing and potentially more viable than the interregnum. Moreover, it is significant that of all the people anticipating the helicopter it is Maureen who seeks it. Her run may

indicate Gordimer's belief that it is incumbent on white South Africans—more so than blacks—to take a leap of faith and embrace the unknown future. It would not be the first time that Gordimer places the burden of initiating change beyond the deadlock of apartheid on white South Africans.

Gordimer identifies in *July's People* some of the impasses, the “morbid symptoms,” of the interregnum, but she neither explicitly points in the ending to the means of transcending them, nor does she find them hopelessly ineradicable. Her refusal to define the outlines of postapartheid South Africa is consonant with the role she admonishes white South Africans to play in a new dispensation ruled by Africans. At the end of *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa comes to the realization that the problem with white activists against apartheid is that they tend to dictate the terms of the struggle for blacks. It takes a vexing but enlightening argument with Zwelinzima Vulindlela, a member of the Black Consciousness movement, for Rosa to realize that dissident whites should be willing to follow rather than lead (318–23). This position carries Gordimer's approval. In “Where Do Whites Fit In?” she warns that “even those of us who don't want to be boss (or *bass*, rather) have become used to being bossy. [ . . . ] The facts that we'll be well-meaning and that the advice may be good and badly-needed do not count; the sooner we drum that into our egos the better” (35). Gordimer has always criticized liberal whites for presuming to prescribe for blacks the right social and political order. Therefore, it should be expected that she would live up to her own injunction in her writing. The ending of *July's People* is utopian, avoiding closure and adumbrating the possibility of a world beyond the interregnum, but it resists disclosing the meaning of this horizon because Gordimer refuses here to prescribe for South Africans, white and black, the shape that their country should or will take.

In “Loose Ends: Aesthetic Closure and Social Crisis,” Russell Reising maintains that narrative endings follow naturally from the internal dynamics of the novel and from the political views of the novelist:

Whether the conclusion finalizes its narrative by confirming an excessively teleological structure or by adumbrating the vaguest, most projective openness, and whether the narrative has propelled us to its concluding moments with or without sufficient textual data to render its ending immediately coherent, even the most experimental conclusions [ . . . ] most commonly confirm, extend, complicate, qualify, or at least resonate significantly with the rest of the works they conclude. (319)

On the one hand, “narrative agendas” (321) determine the endings of novels. On the other, while conservative authors tend to use the endings of their novels to smooth out the tensions that their narratives generate, radical novelists understand the subversive nature of “anticlosure.” They shy away from smoothing out the rough edges of their novels because they generally seek to proclaim undefined utopian possibilities. When the novelist balks at prescribing for the reader an alternative reality, she recognizes and enables the reader's right to determine the substance of that reality. This politics of anticlosure accords with the aims of Gordimer in *July's People*.

The uncertainty of the ending is, however, comparatively tempered by other utopian projections in *July's People*. I have said that Gordimer resists prescription,

but this characterization needs to be qualified. In fact, as a white South African, critical of white oppression and white liberalism, she has suggested, often forcefully, ways for whites to fit in South Africa. This position has often made it impossible for Gordimer to negotiate her way out of prescription and didacticism. In *July's People*, she lives up to her belief that "the white writer's task as cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people" ("The Essential Gesture" 293): hence the prescriptive tone of some utopian elements in the novel.

The Smaleses' three children, Victor, Gina, and Royce, bear the burden of a postapartheid South Africa. The gist of the utopian impulse that they represent lies in enacting for whites the terms of a future, more egalitarian coexistence with blacks. Dominic Head notes that "the possibility of a post-revolutionary rebirth [is] carried principally by the Smales Children, the daughter Gina in particular" (134). The relationship Gina establishes with Africans defies the fears of racist whites of "going native," and rehearses Gordimer's passionate plea for a plural South Africa where whites are "merely ordinary members of a multicolored, any-colored society, freed both of the privileges and the guilt of the white sins of our fathers" (1959, 32). Unlike her mother who never learned Fanagalo, the black South African lingua franca, although she grew up in a mining town among Africans, Gina metamorphoses into an African girl, immersing herself in African language, manners, food, and perceptions, so much so that her new world has become the yardstick through which she perceives the rest of the world: "For Gina, what hadn't before been seen in this village was new to the world" (140). Instead of the Afrikaner lullabies she learned from her father, she now sings lullabies "she had learnt from her [African] companions, in their language" (79).

Gina's break with the old order is no more evident than in her relationship with African children. The lack of racial consciousness in her attitude towards them contrasts favorably with the inequality that characterized the friendship of the young Maureen and Lydia. Although Maureen regarded Lydia as her best friend and her confidante, their interactions could not completely evade the hierarchy of white and black. So naturalized and deeply rooted was her sense of the entitlements of her race that Maureen never questioned the propriety, the reason, and the fairness of Lydia carrying her school case on her head from school to her home. Margaret Lenta observes that "her milieu, [Maureen] has assumed, ought as far as possible to be exclusively white, and Blacks have had only a silent, servile role in it" (135). In contrast, Gina adopts the communal traditions of Africans in which the older children help raise the younger children: "[S]he walked in with the old woman's sciotic gait of black children who carry brothers and sisters almost as big as they are. She had a baby on her small back and wore an expression of importance" (41). The strength of Gina's friendship with Nyiko also bodes well for the future of the races in South Africa (156-7).

Gina's utopian relationship to Africa and Africans recalls Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the contact zone as "an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (7). In this "social space," transculturation takes place. Transculturation describes "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (6). While Pratt conceives of transculturation as largely consequent on asymmetrical power relations involving "colonizers and colonized,"

and as the attempt of the subordinated groups to construct liberatory identities by rewriting the history of Western conquest and domination in order to contest it and inflect it with their own revisionist versions, the position Gina assumes in the African bush is that of the descendent of the white oppressors, of the colonizers, who has finally broken with her inheritance and adopted African mores and values. For Gordimer, it is white South Africans who must redefine themselves by accepting the values of the majority group in South Africa. Since they have chosen to make Africa their home, they must equally assimilate its culture, language, and values. Gina thus hybridizes her identity by mixing her own cultural background with that of the Africans.

The optimistic characterization of Gina is, however, counterbalanced by that of Victor. Through Victor, Gordimer shows that the transition to a postapartheid South Africa will be tentative and fraught with challenges, and that one major part of that transition must include a new perception of ownership. Gordimer is fully aware that the induction of the white South African into an egalitarian economic system is not going to be unproblematic or straightforward. However, although redistribution of wealth may be the most difficult utopian goal to accomplish, it must be envisioned. Gordimer defines utopia as an ideal impossible of realization; yet it is an imperative, for a world devoid of utopian imaginings is bereft of hope and therefore bleak. In the words of one of her characters: "Utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it—taking a chance!—you can never hope even to fall far short of it. [ . . . ] Without utopia—the idea of utopia—there's a failure of the imagination—and that's a failure to know how to go on living" (*A Sport of Nature* 187). Having undercut the liberal claims of the Smalese for failing to account for the economic dimension of apartheid, Gordimer counters their failures with the vision of a young generation of South Africans who would create, although by fits and starts, an equitable economic system.

Victor displays a good deal of the unduly aggressive sense of ownership that Gordimer finds objectionable in white South Africa. When he arrives in the village, he wants to impress other children with his racing-car track but urges his mother to "tell them they must not touch it. I don't want my things messed up and broken. You must tell them" (14). He also reacts with vehemence to the villagers using water from the tank which his father has installed: "Everybody's taking water! They've found it comes out the tap! Everybody's taking it! I told them they're going to get hell, but they don't understand. Come quick, dad." Undaunted by his parents' dismissal of his complaint, he insists, "It's ours, it's ours" (62–3). His sense of the inalienable rights of private property, however, seems merely a persistent remnant of a dying system. Offsetting his possessiveness is a growing understanding that property can be bartered—as when he exchanges the broken model cars from his racing track for "skeletal carts, home-made of twisted wire by the black children" (39)—and that acquisition can be the result of a communal effort—as when he joins the harvest for a share of peanuts. Despite his shortcomings, Victor, like Gina, represents a model for white South Africans to emulate.

Two contrary utopian impulses can, then, be located in *July's People*. One is uncertain, undefined, and enigmatic; the other is unequivocal and unabashedly prescriptive. The disparity between them is the result of a tension that owes a great deal to the racial divide that has characterized South Africa and Gordimer's response to it. On the one hand, Gordimer feels that, as a minority and, despite her

dissidence, a member of the oppressive race, she has no right to dictate to blacks the course of their struggle and the shape a postapartheid South Africa should take. On the other hand, she feels entitled to tell, often to dictate to, other whites the proper terms on which they may fit in Africa. The utopian impulse involving the Smales children owes its prescriptive tone to this attitude.

Believing with George Steiner that *"men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent"* (*"Speak Out"* 92; emphasis in the original), Gordimer has spoken against the racist policies of apartheid. To avoid collusion with apartheid, she has acted, to quote her, as *"the consciousness of [her] society"* (qtd. in Kamanga 25). Such a task cannot but involve a fair amount of didacticism. Gordimer maintains that the dissident South African novelist cannot afford to dissociate herself from her historical juncture and from the demands her society makes on her: *"The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read, and comes to realize that he is answerable"* (*"The Essential Gesture"* 285–86). Moreover, defining herself as *"a white; a dissident; a white writer"* (272), Gordimer has conceived of her role as lying in exposing the complicity of white South Africans with apartheid and in imagining ways for them to redeem themselves.

Despite her overt political commitment, Gordimer has consistently defended herself against the accusation that she adulterates the artistic integrity of literature with her ideological convictions. She contends that *"I am not a propagandist, not a politician; I am an imaginative writer"* (Powell 17). The writer, in her eyes, has a right *"to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from public conformity for political interpretation, morals and tastes"* (*"Three in a Bed"* 104). Gordimer's staunch espousal of the freedom of the writer notwithstanding, she has sought to strike a balance between the autonomy of the artistic expression and her commitment to a more equitable South Africa where blacks would gain access to civil, economic, and political rights: *"The tension between standing apart and being fully involved; that is what makes a writer. That is where we begin. The validity of this dialectic is the synthesis of revelation"* (114).

By conceiving of herself as an instrument of social struggle for equality and justice, Gordimer has aligned herself with the projects of many postcolonial novelists. Chinua Achebe, for instance, rejects art for art's sake—the idea that *"the hallmark of a true artist is the ability to ignore society"* (Morell 10)—and opts, instead, for an art that *"is, and was always, in the service of man"* (5). In *"Freedom of the Artist,"* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also locates intellectual endeavors within the matrix of social responsibility, speaking against power and advocating the rights of the oppressed:

Our pens should be used to increase the anxieties of all oppressive regimes. At the very least the pen should be used to 'murder their sleep' by constantly reminding them of their crimes against the people, and making them know that they are being seen. The pen may not always be mightier than the sword, but used in the service of truth, it can be a mighty force. (69)

Like Achebe and Ngugi, Gordimer believes that the writer's role is to "act as a spokesperson for [the oppressed]" ("The Essential Gesture" 287). She trusts that art can be effectively marshaled in the effort to resist the abuses of power: "In the long struggle against apartheid, it has been recognized that an oppressed people need the confidence of cultural backing. Literature, fiction including plays and poetry, became what is known as a 'weapon of struggle'" ("Three in a Bed" 13).

Despite her passionate exposition of the effects of apartheid on blacks, Gordimer has mostly explored the collusion, conscious and unconscious, of whites with apartheid, their failures to oppose it, and the possibilities of an equitable interracial coexistence that lie ahead. Although she has created well-developed and compelling black characters, she has, for a number of reasons, having to do with audience, authority, and access to relevant information, focused mostly on whites. As she admits in "The Essential Gesture," "I doubt whether the white writer, even if giving expression to the same themes as blacks, has much social use in inspiring blacks, or is needed to. Sharing the life of the ghettos is the primary qualification the white writer lacks" (294). Thus, the white writer has no choice but to address his work to other whites: "To be [a white writer] is firstly to be presented with a political responsibility if not an actual orthodoxy: the white writer's task as 'cultural worker' is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself have not woken up" (293). In her own writing, she has taken it upon herself to educate whites, informing them of the human and moral cost of apartheid and defining their place in a postapartheid society.

Gordimer is adamant that, unless he wants to align himself with the forces of oppression and court irrelevance, "the white writer has to make the decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order [ . . . ] or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born" ("Living in the Interregnum" 278). He may not succeed in changing the policies of his government, but "he brings some influence to bear on whites" ("The Essential Gesture" 294). His committed work is "a revolutionary gesture" that enables him "to offer the creation of a new society" ("The Essential Gesture" 295). In addition, his commitment to the revolutionary future involves "establish[ing] his relation to the culture of a new kind of posited community, non-racial but conceived with and led by blacks" ("Living in the Interregnum" 278).

*July's People* stands as a testimony to Gordimer's staunch commitment to a postapartheid South Africa. The interregnum it examines is Janus-faced: it locates the origin of current impasses in a past of inequality and complications, and sets its eyes on a potentially promising future that may break the unbearable deadlock of apartheid. Gordimer resists indicating the path in which postapartheid South Africa may find salvation; she refrains from speculating on the details of that future because it belongs to blacks more than whites to decide its content. But she does not shy away from discussing, often prescriptively, the kind of role whites should fulfill in a prospective democratic society, constantly urging them to stop claiming privileges based solely on race and to remedy economic inequality by sharing property and skills with black South Africans.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed analysis of Ernst Bloch's influential view of utopia as "the principle of hope," see especially Levitas. Briefly, Bloch argues that utopia injects optimism in and serves as an antidote to a largely defeatist and apathetic modernity. As I will argue, Gordimer refuses to stand apart from the social and political problems of her country and resists the anemic view that art must be self-indulgent, eschewing political engagement.

2. Bülent Somay finds that "[b]eginning in the late 1960's and extending into the 70's," many utopographers, "painfully aware of the dystopian critique of utopia," have sought "to disarm that critique" (25) by avoiding the doctrinaire prescription that plagued traditional utopia.

3. Like Kumar, Tom Moylan points out that "a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia" (xiii).

4. For a detailed analysis of the causes that eventually undermined apartheid, see Thompson 221–40.

5. Thompson observes that "by 1976, Afrikaner entrepreneurs had obtained a firm foothold in mining, manufacturing, commerce, and finance—all previously exclusive preserves of English speakers. Whereas in 1946 the average Afrikaner's income had been 47 percent that of an English-speaking white South African, in 1976 it had risen to 71 percent and continued to rise thereafter" (188).

6. According to Thompson, blacks, coloureds, Asians, and whites constituted "the four main racial categories recognized by the South African Government." In order to divide and conquer, apartheid created a racial hierarchy according to which whites occupied the highest rung, followed by the coloureds and Asians, while blacks were relegated to the bottom rung. Blacks were made up largely of "the Bantu-speaking Africans"; "[Asians] had begun to be imported from India to Natal as indentured laborers in the 1860's"; whites claimed Europe, chiefly the Netherlands and England, as their ancestral homeland; and the coloureds were largely an amalgam of indigenous people and people of mixed descent. In fact, there existed immense "biological and cultural differences among the Coloured People" (65): "Their ancestors included indigenous people and slaves from Indonesia, Madagascar, and tropical Africa" (113). As part of their opposition to the discriminatory policies of apartheid, however, many coloureds refused a separate designation from blacks.

7. Thompson: "For three decades, [since its assumption of power in 1948], the National party had the support of the overwhelming majority of the Afrikaner people" (187).

8. For a detailed examination of Gordimer's relationship to South African liberalism, see Wagner and Kamanga. See also Rowland Smith, who says in the introduction to *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer* that "Gordimer's analysis of the failure of liberalism in the South African context is one of her most insistent themes" (14). Smith also gives some information about the heated public exchange, in 1974, between Gordimer and Alan Paton, which was triggered by her dismissal of liberals as "people who make promises they have no power to keep" (15–16).

9. Smith argues that "Maureen sees herself and the life of her family as untainted by the grotesque prejudices of the white master-race norm. This belief is what collapses in her final confrontation with July" (148).

10. Lenta shares Bazin's opinion that "the fact that the nationality and loyalties of the crew of the plane are unknown to her, and that there has been earlier reference to several opposing South African and foreign contenders for power suggests strongly to me that Gordimer intends us to reflect on the negative meaning of her act: she is leaving, not joining" (135). Bailey equally argues that the helicopter is "a symbol of death rather than life [. . .] since it is more probable that the helicopter is manned by

black revolutionaries alerted to the existence of the white family by Daniel than that it represents an American *deus ex machina*. Even if it were the hoped for means of return to civilization, nothing in the novel suggests that Maureen is able to run to something new" (221). See also Michael Green's argument that Gordimer "is not seriously engaged with the future per se: of all South Africa's writers, Gordimer is most aggressively present-tensed, and her interest in the future is a perspective from which to speak posteriorly of the present. [. . .] In her attempt to make of *July's People* something more than a 'morbid symptom', Gordimer tries to reach beyond the 'interregnum' and in so doing throw meaning back over this sterile period, the present" (17). My understanding of Gordimer's use of utopia in the ending of *July's People* differs from Green's. I see Gordimer projecting onto the future a yet unknown but emerging order

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