

# Gender and "History": 1980s South African Women's Stories in English

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*It's very important for women to write what they feel. Really, we need more writing from women. I think women understand each other better when they are alone together than when there's a man around because then there is always the possibility of pretending and that's not communication. . . . So we should come together as women and try to do some creative writing—I mean writing that will help or encourage other people who might become our fellow-writers in the future.*

GCINA MHLOPE,<sup>1</sup> "Men Are Always Women's Children" (44)

*. . . the change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society—that is to say, history—and my apprehension of it.*

NADINE GORDIMER, *Selected Stories* (13)

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN the personal and the public orientation of these statements gives a present-day reader an important set of questions about the writing of South African women's short stories in English in the 1980s. Chief among these, given women's comparative exclusion from public life, is the extent to which writing as a woman and for other women could become a means of apprehending the "history" of that decade; within this is the question of whether or not black and white women writers, working out of different traditions and circumstances, can be seen to have had similar objectives.

One reason why the decade of the 1980s gives rise to these questions is that it saw such a sudden increase in the number of women short story writers, both black and white. Among the new figures are Sheila Fugard, Amelia House, Farida Karodia, E. M. Macphail, Nise Malange, Gcina Mhlope, Boitumelo Mofokeng, Rose Moss, Sheila Roberts, Agnes Sam, Gladys Thomas, Miriam

Tlali, Zoë Wicomb, and Rose Zwi.<sup>2</sup> The other reason is that it was a decade of such harsh State oppression and such determined resistance by ordinary people that the "history" one might expect to find is that of the alignments and conditions of armed racial conflict. There is one such vein in Ingrid de Kok's poetry, as when she writes of the "bird of state" which has "talons / and shit that drops like lead" and characterizes the unequal combat thus: "A stone against a tank is a stone against a tank / but a bullet in a child's chest rips into the heart of the house" (59). There are also short stories of anger and activism, stories such as Nadine Gordimer's "Something Out There," which depicts a group of saboteurs and the effect of their presence on the "civilian" relationships in a neighbourhood, and Tlali's "Point of No Return," which depicts a man's leaving his wife and child to join the freedom fighters. Polarized conflict is not at all, however, the most frequently chosen subject or mode of women writers at this time, and as a body their writing tends to keep to the quieter sphere of ordinary, domestic life. While their depiction of complex personal relationships is usually imbued with the realities of oppression, what it does not often take up is Mhlope's wish that women might write as though they were "alone together."

The ways in which black and white women writers positioned themselves in relation to the power struggles of the 1980s are clearly affected by the very different cultural antecedents which they brought to their craft and by the different circumstances in which they worked. As Lauretta Ngcobo has pointed out in the Introduction to Tlali's *Footprints in the Quag*, Tlali is the writer who really opened possibilities for black South African women writers in the 1980s when she began her regular column of interviews with women, "Soweto Speaking," in the first issue of *Staffrider* in 1978, and Tlali speaks of herself in similar vein in interviews such as that in *Between the Lines*. What she also indicates is that starting to write was particularly difficult because the Nationalist Government's determination to suppress opposition to apartheid had successfully cut off people like her from the previous generation of black writers. Thus she belongs to yet another generation which had to do the "plain, dutiful spade-work . . . in order to create [their] own readership and literary

support-systems" all over again (Gray). Most of the earlier writers who were lost to her (among them Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Bessie Head, Bloke Modisane, Dennis Brutus, Arthur Nortje, Alex la Guma and Daniel Kunene) were men who went into exile during the 1950s and 1960s. Their writings were banned in South Africa, sometimes under the laws of literary censorship and sometimes under political proscription (Barnett 25-29) so that, as Richard Rive puts it, "writing in English virtually became White by law" (14).<sup>3</sup> Besides the absence of possible male mentors, these conditions meant that the work of Head, who left South Africa on an exit permit in 1964, was not available to Tlali when she first began writing. This latter loss is particularly significant to writers of the 1980s for, looking back on that period, it is now evident that Head and Gordimer are the writers who best represent the two paradigms used in women's short story writing: the traditional tale telling of black communities and modernism's short story.

For black women who chose to write stories (as against telling them) and to write them in English, questions of education and opportunity are what would first have controlled their activity; attaining literacy and a general education was even more difficult for them than it was for black men. Then factors like publishing opportunities would have come into play; as has been said, it was the appearance of *Staffrider* in 1978 that gave some black women an opening. For anyone trying to reconstruct the beginnings of black women's short story writing, it is particularly regrettable that the editors of the anthology, *Ten Years of Staffrider*—Andries Oliphant and Ivan Vladislavic—did not accurately represent the extent of women's contribution to this magazine (Mofokeng 6-10). And the difficulties of access to an accurate picture are even greater for the earlier period. It seems that *Drum*, which launched most of the male writers of the 1950s, received very few submissions from women. Nothing was included in a recent anthology from *Drum* itself (Chapman), but in her anthology of women's short stories, *Raising the Blinds*, Annemarié van Niekerk includes Doris Sello as "one of the few women writers who had a story published in *Drum* magazine during the 1950s" (271). At this time, Head was working on the weekly

supplement of the newspaper *Golden City Post*, "Post Home," where she edited a column for teenagers but she seems not to have used her position as an opportunity to publish stories. Instead, she and Dolly Hassim had to produce, or adapt, the diet of escapist romance that that paper offered its women readers (Eilersen).

Although black women have recently begun to see themselves as writing more or less directly for other black women as though they were "alone together," the long-standing inequalities in South African education mean that even now these women may seldom be their actual readers. Nevertheless, stories such as those by Mhlope<sup>4</sup> signal that the "essential spade work" of creating a readership of women is consciously being done and, even more importantly, that the writers are increasingly confident in giving fictional representation to the full complexity of their worlds. Critics have, however, like most anthologists, been slow to recognize the pioneering work of these women. For example, Njabulo Ndebele's strictures against the use of mere "surface symbols" (23) of conflict in South African protest writing were first published in 1984 and have been widely influential, but in making his point he seems not to have seen that in the stories of women such as Head and Tlali he could have identified the very qualities he wished to champion (Daymond).

The literary and social contexts of white women's writing are very different. They have inherited a continuity which goes back to Olive Schreiner in the nineteenth century, Pauline Smith and Sarah Gertrude Millin in the early years of this century, and Gordimer from the 1940s onwards. As the eminence of these writers in the present configuration of South African literary history would suggest, white women have faced neither the same practical problems of publication nor that of finding a literary context, let alone that of shaping an alien language to express their particular experiences. Nor have they known the same pressure to thin their material down to simple racial protest. It does seem, however, that white South African women writers, like their black compatriots, have been forced by the effects of patriarchy to contend with a problem that is powerful if elusive in its working. This is the matter of resisting the invitation of patri-

archally established literary conventions so as to be able to reshape language and form as the need arises.

Cultural historians have long pointed out that white patriarchy, the socially structured belief that a single authority must control individual lives and that the power to do this inheres naturally in men, was a cornerstone of settler ideology. This colonial will-to-rule seems also to have appropriated to its purposes the gendered traditions of the indigenous peoples of South Africa so as to establish a hegemony which has lasted for three centuries. Dorothy Driver has outlined the paradoxical consequences that patriarchy had for white women writers in frontier times: while their circumstances demanded that they act like men, exhibiting courage, resourcefulness, determination, and independence, when they came to write about their lives as women they felt compelled to (mis)represent themselves within the patriarchal norms of femininity. White women also had to speak with a double voice in the racial hierarchy; Driver argues that the allocation of sentiment to women under patriarchy made it permissible for them to feel for the oppressed, but at the same time they were obliged to act (and write) in ways which would uphold white power. A story from the 1980s such as "Pregmancy" by Macphail, which represents the relations of a white housewife and her servant, indicates that this double functioning of white women has continued. Although the white woman employer is appreciative of her black servant's practical wisdom and resilience, Macphail directs attention to the linguistic and structural limitations on communication between employer and servant. These produce a series of simultaneous openings and closings, one of which is conveyed through the unintentional pun in the black woman's word "pregmancy" and a sphere of operation that is beyond any white employer's power to exploit. The capacity to resist from below is conveyed through humour, as when the servant Josephina, who also works for another woman in the neighbourhood, allows a friend to usurp her in that job knowing that her friend will be there for a short time only because she too "has pregmancy" (127).

While the wish to resist a patriarchal subject position is clear in Mhlope's call for black women to write for each other, their

imprisonment in the "feminine" is more complex than it is for white women in that it has an alien material cause as well as an indigenous cultural origin. Traditional black patriarchy seems to have allocated to women roles which were profoundly disrupted by the arrival of colonizers, leaving them simply subordinated and powerless. For example, when the labour requirements of urban life drew men to the cities as migratory labourers, rural women found themselves having to fill the place of their absent men, but they had to sustain traditional culture and economy without the social recognition needed to give authority to their endeavours and their capacities. Because this labour system has refused workers a settled family life in the cities, many urban wives (including those rural women who managed to follow their husbands to the cities) also found themselves fending alone for their families, and again, like their rural sisters, without the authority they needed.

There are thus considerable difference between the ideological and material conditions of writing for white and black women. With these in mind, however, a basis for relating and comparing their work may be found in the common purposes upon which these writers have ventured. Although their subject matter is as varied as a heterogeneous and forcibly divided society would lead one to expect, women writers in the 1980s do seem to have been moving towards a common objective—what Mary Jacobus has described as speaking "both for and as a woman (rather than 'like' a woman)" (15). When Mhlope continues her plea for more women writers by saying that "we depend on each other's strength," and when she testifies that "when I'm with another girl I'm very free and relaxed . . . [b]ut when I'm with a man, I have to be very careful about what I'm doing or saying" (44), she is expressing something that all women, white or black, can recognize. Roberts, for example, demonstrates a more acute and more painfully internalized version of the contradictions of patriarchy when she speaks of herself as a woman writer:

Since my childhood I have been humiliated for being a girl. I have grown to understand the nature of that humiliation and its tenacious clinging to the spirit. I understand the forced passivity; the desire for

approval; the learned contempt for other women, equally humiliated. I cannot ever myself stop being appalled at my femaleness. I disguise it in various ways. But that humiliation and ability to be appalled comes through, however muted, in my writing. (51-52)

If Roberts's anguished sense of writing as a woman can be aligned with Mhlope's more optimistic sense of what a community of women writers and readers offers, the next question is how these apprehensions of gender as a shaping factor relate to Gordimer's "apprehension" of the shaping power of "history." Here it will be useful to turn to theoretical commentary on the short story as a form and to the larger literary context, as represented by Head and Gordimer, within which women were writing in the 1980s.

The nature of the short story has consistently defied answer; theorists have tried formal, contextual, and essential approaches only to be defeated by the endless variety of the form.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, theorists whose work can be applied in order to illuminate the implications of women writers taking up the different traditions embodied in the work of Head and Gordimer. As one of these theorists, Walter Benjamin begins his reflections from the observation that the ancient practice of tale-telling has been lost to modern life. His explanation of this loss is familiar but warrants repeating here as it has particular bearing on Head's writing: as the fragmented nature of modern society destroys the sense of a knowable community, people no longer have a shared foundation for experience and no longer feel the possibility of relating their lives to each other. Instead, having become strangers to one another, people want information, and, as Benjamin says, information (as in newspapers), with its emphasis on "prompt verifiability" coupled with the apparently explanatory power of the "plausible" (89), has tended to kill the tale.<sup>6</sup> Folk tales and legends, which have their foundations in submerged but shared experience, do not have to be informative and so can resist the requirement of plausibility. They can retain their liberty "to borrow from the miraculous" (88-89), whereas more recent forms of the short narrative have to hold their own in the context of newspapers, radio, and television. Benjamin adds that modernity's replacement form, the short story, does not permit "that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent

layers . . . layers of a variety of retelling" (93), which is characteristic of the orally transmitted, communal tale.

Benjamin's picture of an irrevocable loss is both confirmed and resisted in the life and work of Southern Africa's foremost black short story writer, Head. She has often recorded how, faced with the destruction that apartheid wrought on her desire to create stories, she chose exile in Botswana. There she first wrote novels, but as she immersed herself in local history she found herself increasingly able to enter the villagers' memories of their history and to use in her own short fiction the stories and legends that they told her (Mackenzie). In this sense her journey was away from modernity and counter to the historical trend outlined by Benjamin. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head has recorded that despite the compulsion to make room for modernity, the people of Botswana have preserved for themselves considerable continuity of being and are able to know themselves through their traditions in ways now almost lost to South Africans, black and white. Their inwardness with tradition, the "layered voice" of the people, is what she records in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and it is what informs such a story as "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration" from her collection of short fiction, *The Collector of Treasures*.

Gordimer's response to enforced division and modernity in South Africa has been different. She has steeled herself to face it and to provide "information" about racism; as historian of its political processes, her grand subject is the effect of racial domination on those who impose and those who suffer it. She is Benjamin's "secular" chronicler, who gives "the multicoloured fabric of a worldly view" of "the course of things" (96). There is, however, one major difference between Gordimer and Benjamin's chronicler: he allows such a writer a certain freedom, a certain escape from responsibility, when he speaks of the chronicler's being concerned with "the way . . . [particular events] are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world" (96). For Gordimer, there is nothing inscrutable about what has shaped the course of South Africa's history.

Most other women writers in the 1980s also seem to have been drawn by the imperatives of the modern world, for they write in



ways closer to those of Gordimer than of Head. Rural, peasant life and the promise of continuity that it could still carry had not become in the 1980s the subject matter of any black South African short story writer, male or female (Ndebele 19). Although the value of orality, of spoken testimony, is everywhere evident in Tlali's stories, as well as in her *Staffrider* interviews, and although her work is a constant reminder of the customs and traditions informing speech and of the communal function of memory, the fact that she writes from within an urban setting has meant that her subject matter is not that of continuity and tradition. It is rather the constant strain that city life imposes on cultural traditions. Although black women writers have not so far deployed the inwardness with a traditional community that Head found in Botswana, this is likely to change, as has been indicated in Lauretta Ngcobo's brief and moving recovery of one of the functions of women's traditional narrative. She recounts hearing her mother and grandmother use the ceremonial recitation of the "maternal family line" in order to resolve conflict between them. When it arose, her mother would approach the "great house" and

a hundred yards from the door she would start reciting the maternal family line first, followed by the paternal line, pass the doorway without stopping, walking in measured steps, another hundred yards to the end of the yard, turn back again and finally walk in. By the time she would sit down, still reciting, my grandmother would be nodding in concurrence and that would mark the end of the discord. (3-6)

Ellen Kuzwayo has pointed out in her autobiography that very few black people actually possess their family history but even for those who do, there can have been little opportunity for such a leisurely invocation of its layered meanings in the conflict-ridden 1980s.

If black writers of the 1980s are engaged in sociopolitical realism rather than in tale-telling, their writing can still be distinguished from Gordimer's example in the way that they tend to give importance to the ordinary choices made by women in their daily lives. On Gordimer's stage, political power is the great actor, as earlier stories like "The Smell of Death and Flowers" and "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (1983), and as "City of the Living: City of

the Dead” as well as the title story in her 1980s collection, *Something Out There*, would suggest. It is the cumulative picture of the history of oppression that she values, and this led her to a comment in “The Prison-house of Colonialism” which captures the official oppositional outlook of the decade: she considered a writer who concentrated on the specific needs of women to be misdirecting her (or his) attention away from the national need to combat racism. In some contrast with Gordimer’s foregrounding of racial power as the issue, Wicomb’s depiction of the racist hierarchy in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* is a less dramatized but still destructive presence. Her protagonist’s initial eagerness to straighten her hair, for example, is shown to be the sexually specific form of an imposed racial inferiority which pervades everything in her characters’ lives. Similarly, for writers like Roberts, Macphail, Mhlope, and Tlali, the racial structure of power tends to be all-encompassing rather than singled out in their representation of women’s lives.

Within this similarity there is, however, a discernibly different and unexpected trend. Mhlope and Wicomb both, in their different ways, represent women who attain an independent subjectivity, and Tlali’s stories testify to women’s capacity to empower each other. On the other hand, for the white protagonists in stories by Roberts and Macphail, self-reliance and the power to make choices is much more obviously circumscribed by gender politics and is, interestingly enough, a rather less vigorously confronted matter. But, beyond such differences, what these stories have in common is their showing that generally it is adversity, not opportunity, which pushes women into asserting themselves.

For the protagonists in stories by white writers, a sense of powerlessness is not a direct result of national (that is, racial) politics; it stems more from their customary roles in marriage. In “This Time of Year,” Roberts’s protagonist, Hannah, is at the point of deciding which way her life will go—remarriage to Sam or remaining with her child on her father’s farm where she has taken over “the chores of the farm-wife” (9). Whichever way she decides, Hannah will still be dependent on a man. Her power to resist both her sexual attraction to Sam and her upright father’s

stern protection comes from her feeling that the farm itself offers her something even more important that she needs: on it, she finds she can love "her own presence in the autumn twilight that stirs her to want to keep living, to experience earthliness, earthiness" (10). But while this gives Hannah a reason to stay on the farm where she plans to help paint the barn and to plant more vegetables in the spring, her decision still does not offer her material independence. She has exchanged one housekeeping role for another, Sam's fecklessness for her father's stern righteousness, and furthermore Roberts gives little sense that Hannah's choice will enable her to grow. If one asks what might have held Roberts back from a more optimistic outcome, then the constraints of the protagonist's class and gender assert themselves as having ensured that Hannah never learned to like herself enough to be able to imagine self-reliance.

Although the conditions of marriage are the context rather than the focus of Macphail's story "Modus Vivendi," and although the act of choosing does not appear as that of a specific moment but emerges only in retrospect, the protagonist, Louisa, is an even more helpless victim of the institution of marriage than Hannah. Although being middle class had meant that apparently greater opportunities in life were available to her, she has been rendered thoroughly helpless by the gender requirements of marriage.

When she was young she was not thought beautiful. She was considered bright. She had known, as did all the young women in her set, that eligible men like girls to be pretty, and if they weren't pretty then they should be bright. Jolly. Or they could be good sports. It was her brightness that had attracted Tom. (80)

Part of the price Louisa pays to maintain her cheer in her dull marriage is an increasing reliance on alcohol. It is a means which Charlie, her sympathetically helpful black servant, has been quick to notice and support.

By cutting from Tom's to Louisa's perceptions without narrative comment, Macphail foregrounds their failure to admit the nature of Louisa's dependence on Charlie and so leads the reader to register the subterfuge by which the family has managed to live an outwardly regular life. The real centre of familial

care is Charlie, and if his use of the sherry bottle is not the most desirable means of keeping Louisa happy, it is more than her husband has ever offered. Macphail places Tom's blindness as a matter of gender: from his stockbroker's world of men's clubs and stuffy dinners he has successfully ignored any possibility of his wife's being less than happy. Much less has he glimpsed the possibility that his family life is in all senses sustained by his servant. For her part, Louisa's blindness is not sexist, for she knows well enough the value of Charlie in her life; it is rather racial. It never occurs to her that what circumscribes her life has its exact equivalent in Charlie's. She has internalized South African political power structures to the point where she has denied herself the language that she would need in order to recognize Charlie as a person in his own right. All she dares to use in relating to him is a set of stereotypes (matching those which her husband uses for her) and with these she speaks to Charlie as one of "you Zulus" who seek excuses to go to the shops (where, as she knows, he actually buys her sherry) in order to indulge in some pleasurable "bragging" (79).

Roberts and Macphail rely on the resources of written narrative to create their effects; the contrast between their stories and those of Tlali is very great. She used the sub-title "Stories and Dialogues" for her 1980s collection, *Footprints in the Quag*, thereby indicating her reliance on speech, on the interview, the oral record of experience. In this, she is like Head; but unlike Head, Tlali is working in an urban environment so that when her women speak, it is not to recall their peoples' traditions. Instead, their memories are of constant police harassment for minor matters such as the illegal brewing of liquor. But even in this context, memory is important and Tlali uses a character like Aunt Lizzy, in "Gone Are Those Days," to demonstrate its contemporary social function. Although Lizzy's life has been dominated by a constant struggle against poverty, she can remember times when a degree of ordinary, pleasurable social life was known in her township and when the *shebeen* queens successfully outwitted police raids by hiding the drink in a coffin and pretending (as in the days of American prohibition) that they were holding a family wake. In the 1980s, when Tlali's police invade a

real funeral and arrest the mourners in complete disregard for the solemnity of the occasion, the women have little recourse but to imagine the kind of revenge they would like to inflict on their oppressors. But to find the capacity even to dream of revenge, they need the memory of their past games. In this way, the story's significant historical "apprehension" lies in the connection Tlali allows her women of the 1980s to establish between memory and the present power to dream.

Taking up the note of women's resourcefulness is Mhlope's protagonist in "The Toilet," who recounts her own act of choosing a direction in life. This young woman does have a formal education, but when she comes to town to test her opportunities, the first thing she finds is that there is nowhere for her to live. All she can do is hide in the room in a white suburb that her sister, by virtue of working as a domestic servant, is allowed to occupy. When she does find work, it is as unskilled labour in a clothing factory; when she seeks ways of expressing herself, through writing, the only privacy available to her is in a toilet in a park. The echo of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" may not be deliberate, but the story works at first on exactly the same claim: this woman requires and deserves a secure space of her own in order to be her full self. Once this feminist moment has been established, what is really unexpected is the way Mhlope's conclusion goes beyond it. When her protagonist goes to the toilet—which she has grown to regard as her own room—and finds it locked against her one morning, she does not collapse; she does not even wilt; she accepts that she has had no real claim on the cabin and, as she tells it, she "walked over to a bench nearby, watched the early spring sun come up, and wrote my story anyway" (7).

Where does this resourcefulness, this blithe stamina in the word "anyway," come from? Not from others, for the narrator has shown herself in relation only to unsupportive women: to a sister whose outlook has necessarily been constrained by her exploitative employers and to street-wise young women in the factory who scorn her for not playing the sexual game of survival as they do. Thus it must be that she draws entirely on resources within herself, but where do they come from? The story asserts, shows, and convinces, but it does not explain. The reader—the white

reader?—is left feeling that while Mhlope's ending signals her optimistic personality, it is also a sign from within the darker days of the decade of a new certainty of spirit in black women, of a verve which has little to do with politics at the level of public campaigns, but everything to do with what was to bring success to such campaigns. It is a long step from a woman's writing a story to a people's attaining freedom, but this glimpse of a woman's spirited choice, even of the capacity to imagine it, represents an inner strength which promises its external equivalent.

The freedom to write is what Mhlope's narrator's choice is primarily about; in Wicomb's story "A Trip to the Gifberge," writing becomes a means of attaining the freedom to choose. This story is unlike the others being discussed here in that it comes from a cycle of stories which trace, in loosely linked, self-contained episodes, the story of Frieda Shenton. In the cycle, Wicomb's writing gradually becomes self-reflexive as the connections are built up between her and her protagonist, who is also a writer. Wicomb employs metafiction chiefly when establishing the dynamics of Frieda's family relationships; in showing how her father's attitudes and her mother's inarticulate hostility to them affects Frieda's personal and authorial decisions, Wicomb makes gender relationships the context of choice in a way that is new. Thus on both counts, gender and metafiction, Wicomb is giving a new dimension to South African women's writing for the inward spiralling of metafiction that is present in her narrative had hitherto been confined to the practice of white male writers like J. M. Coetzee and Breyten Breytenbach.

The links between politics, personal choice, and writing are exposed in Wicomb's story when the reader discovers that Frieda's mother is not, as the middle stories of the sequence suggest, dead. The earlier references to her death have to be explained as narrative experiments that were necessary to Frieda as she sought ways of expressing the truth about her relationship to her father's values. She tries to get her mother to see her need to "use the real" (172) in this way, but for all her mother's own fight against her husband's chosen "respectability" Frieda's speculative use of matters like abortion and death in her stories remains intolerable to her mother. What lies behind the

mother's anger against her husband, and Frieda's discovery that his values have warped her own life, is a peculiarly ugly South African phenomenon by which people of mixed race, the so-called "coloured" people, are led to reject their own kind in an effort to identify themselves with their white rulers. Driven by memories of his Scottish grandfather, Frieda's father sought to maintain the apparent superiority of his family over those members of his social group descended from Griqua or Namaqua people. Thus he has raised his child to speak English (and not Afrikaans) and has sent her to the university set aside for "coloured" people. After university, Frieda's first choice was to flee from the humiliations of her life by going to England, but her subsequent memories of her fifteen years abroad indicate that once there she had simply found herself trapped in her father's legacy—that of self-hatred and of feeling herself permanently an oddity. While in England, she begins to write, seeking the release of a fictional expression of her past; now, her return visit to South Africa after her father's death suggests that she is at last ready to confront the past in deed as well as by word. Her first visit is thus to her mother who lives alone in the open, "arid plain of Klein Namaqualand" (179).

The first indication that all may not be lost between the two women comes when her mother announces that she wants Frieda to take her into the Gifberge—this is the name of an actual range, and translates as "mountains of poison." Her mother is seeking "a complete reversal of the image of herself in the wicker chair staring into the unattainable blue of the mountain" (179), but when they reach the heights, she finds that a fence prevents from her getting to the edge where she had hoped to find her new perspective—mirroring her daughter's needs. Then, in a move which also comments on her own creation of symbols, Wicomb has Frieda's mother reject the claims exerted on her by the protea—the flower which has been appropriated as a national symbol by those who oppress her. She wants a protea bush for her garden and, asserting her right to it, she declares roundly that "a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it" (181). By declaring her own freedom from symbols, her mother also frees Frieda. At the same

time, her words release the reader into further signification, for Frieda's return to Cape Town and probable involvement in the new radical political movements can be read as her choice to free herself from what was once "injected" into her. The mother's words also work in the narrative's metafictional mode, partially liberating the mountains from the symbolism that the writing has imposed on them. This is once again seen to be speculative and temporary; the reader is free to choose to see them as ordinary mountains and as the elevated moment of the reconciliation of two South African women.

If the mood of white women's stories differs in the ways suggested in this discussion from that in stories by black women, the question still remains of what might have attracted so many women writers to the form. Here, it is useful to turn to Gordimer's own comments. In the late 1960s, she claimed that the short story can better catch "ultimate reality" than can the novel. In place of the "prolonged coherence of tone" that is required of a novel, a short story can content itself with the quality of "the present moment"; in such brevity it is less

false to the nature of whatever can be grasped of human reality . . . [where] contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness. . . . A discrete moment of truth is aimed at—not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives. ("The Flash of Fireflies," 29)

Although many of Gordimer's own stories are cumulative in that they trace a process in time, the political source and force of her generalization should be immediately obvious—it arises from the particular form of modernity created in South Africa, from policies which limited her to a racially defined area of experience.

Another commentator in the 1960s who was preoccupied with modernity, Frank O'Connor, also arrives at his insights into the short story through a comparison with the novel, suggesting that the short story is its rebellious cousin. In his strongly post-romantic view, he says that the novel presupposes "the concept of a normal society" and serves this normality by encouraging the reader to identify with a socially integrated central character. In the short story, on the other hand, there is the voice of



"a submerged population group," and a "sense of out-lawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo—Christ, Socrates, Moses" (17-18). His observations are suggestive but they are also problematic. As his choice of names suggests, O'Connor is working from within the androcentric traditions of Western culture; his sense of the novel's supporting a normal society through its central character is also dubious in the South African context. More broadly, it might just be appropriate for some nineteenth-century writing which uses a male protagonist; it is certainly not true of nineteenth-century women's fiction; nor does it work for modern fiction. But the hunch about the short story to which his comments lead O'Connor is nevertheless interesting in as much as it brings forward a connection between the short story's affinity with a "submerged group" and women's writing from within and against patriarchy. The difficulties of women's resisting their oppression in the very language which sustains their subordination has been extensively discussed by such critics as Elaine Showalter who has found useful an anthropologist's term: women, she suggests, can be seen as a "muted" group (29). Besides the question of language, there is that of form; here O'Connor's remarks are directly helpful. When women begin to search for ways of writing to resist oppression, as happened in the 1980s, the short form would seem to offer the best fit. The forced divisions in society were, as has been said, inhibitive if not prohibitive. In addition, personal resistance in daily life in any society is usually a sporadic and uncertain matter, full of inconsistencies and hesitations. Furthermore, women had hardly begun to articulate their cause in the 1980s. For all these reasons, resistance would seem best represented in the brevity of short fictional forms.

When it comes to considering whether there is an affinity between resistance to racial oppression and the short story, Gordimer and O'Connor are not as helpful. Certainly, black writers do not seem to be responding to quite the attraction that O'Connor sees in the form when he says that "the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic and intransigent" (21). The effect of racial legislation has

indeed been to render black people "remote" from the centre of power but, as Mzamane's account of the history of black short story writing shows, what these writers have done is to voice their sense of present injustice so that their work might form a unifying basis for a future community. For black women writers, it would seem that the short story offers both possibilities—that of the experience of being a "submerged group" and that of protest. In a writer like Wicomb, for example, it is clear that where gender oppression is the motivating force in her stories, it is still a subject which takes its specific forms within racial oppression.

This is probably why in the 1980s short stories by black women are expressive of a common purpose but not of the social structures which sustain a common being. As Tlali's story "Go In Peace, Tobias Son Of Opperman" shows, only vestiges of the ancient sense of community remain. When Nakedi, a twelve-year-old relative who boards with Tobias and Jessie, goes home for the school holidays, the old couple are left wholly and unhappily dependent on each other. The only outlet Tobias has is to walk the streets while the crippled Jessie stays home. The story achieves its effects by running in parallel the helpless, regretful, and angry inner monologues of husband and wife; at its end, Tlali provides a poignant reminder of what might have consoled them both in their suffering—it is a child who leads the exhausted "Oupa" (grandfather) Tobias home. The same child summons the neighbours when Tobias collapses. The communal features of the extended family—as well as their urban counterpart, "neighbourliness"—are just sufficiently available to Tlali for her to indicate how communities can be sustaining. Her narrative form, the paralleled monologues, has affinities with Macphail's use of dialogue, but its source is clearly that of her interviews; the echoes of traditional forms of speech in these monologues also suggest that Tlali draws her inspiration from the traditions of women's praise narratives, which Ngcobo remembers with such pleasure.

The fundamental political reason why O'Connor's sense of the difference between the novel and the short story is difficult for a South African to assent to, is that national life has never had a valid centre to which the majority of the country's people can

give allegiance. While black people were ruthlessly marginalized, the centre from which they felt themselves excluded in the 1980s was not one to which they aspired. Instead they sought to replace it. For this reason, their writing, in O'Connor's sense, does not either lament or celebrate the solitary "out-lawed figure." What the writing of those officially most remote from the white centre shows is a demand for an altogether new society in which their hitherto muted voices will be heard. Far from using the short story to represent a wish to opt out, these writers are using it to assert their right to opt into a quite differently centred society.

In formulating this demand, these writers are both endorsing and changing the implications of the observation that Benjamin made about a need for information in modern society. They are also liberating themselves from the versions of information about themselves that had been supplied by the apartheid regime. This again is a matter that Ndebele, who works from Benjamin's view of "information," does not acknowledge (24-25). Tlali has, for the past ten years, been writing regularly about ordinary women in the townships, as well as about great leaders like Lilian Ngoyi; through the informing function of her writing, she is re-creating the sense of community that racial legislation as well as the nature of modern urban life has denied women. Thus information, the disruptive sign of modernity which led Benjamin to see the demise of story-telling, has become, in the South African context, part of what it takes to re-create possibilities of community. Far from replacing the tale, the informative function of black women's stories may well fuse with traditional tale telling. Isabel Hofmeyr's recent study of women's communal tale telling points to the survival power of their gendered performances; it seems that in the community she studied, men's tale telling, being publicly performed, required physical contexts which were easily destroyed when people were forced to relocate. Being more private, the women's function seems to have been sustainable in any form of home. The general survival of story-telling can also be glimpsed in Ndebele's remark that skilled tale tellers entertain travellers on buses and trains and that at the end of a working day, black commuters make sure that they catch their favourite story teller's train (32). That ordinary

black people have retained some of these skills is also evident in Noni Jabavu's account of a bus journey that she took in the Transkei. Her record of the talk of the passengers shows that even when their lives demanded that they speak of the breakdown of tradition, it was still possible for them to draw on the features of communal speech that Benjamin attributes to tale-telling. A young, unmarried woman's account of how she had to seek work in the city and of how necessity led her to allow the fathers of her children to claim the sons that she bore, while she kept the daughters so that one day she might gain wealth (the bride-price) through their marriage, is recorded by Jabavu. The clash in this tale between custom and necessity saddens the other passengers, but the oral custom of presenting oneself via one's story is more than adequate to the needs of the speaker and her audience.

If the current recording of women's tales that writers like Tlali are undertaking succeeds in its objectives, then it may one day be possible that the store of traditional experience in the tale becomes fused with contemporary written narratives by black women. The way that memory is used in Wicomb's "Those Were the Days" as a source of imagining resistance in the present makes the crucial point about the short story's gendered apprehension of "history." In this story, the recovery of selfhood through history works at the personal level of the mother-daughter relationship, but in the dismantling of the symbol of past power, the protea, and in Frieda's respect for the resistance movement in Cape Town, the suggestion is that the women's new subjectivity will have significant public consequences. It is through their gendered selves—not, as Gordimer once would have it, despite a concern with gender—that these writers are producing women's vital, creative relationship to their past.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Published under the name Nokugcina Sigwili.
- <sup>2</sup> Besides the collections listed below, these women published in such South African journals as *Contrast*, *Staffrider*, *Upstream*, *Sesame*, and *the bloody horse*.
- <sup>3</sup> See Dubbeld's annotated bibliographies of short story writing in this period.
- <sup>4</sup> Mhlope has published a play, poetry, and several short stories and children's narratives. Her short stories have not been collected.

- <sup>5</sup> For example, Reid concludes his monograph with a chapter—"Essential Qualities?"—in which he says that despite Edgar Allan Poe's helpful suggestions about the distinctive unity and intensity of effect in short stories (45-51), there are no characteristics essential to all short stories.
- <sup>6</sup> The literary re-creation of what was possibly a lively oral practice of story-telling in early Afrikaner communities has been discussed by Pereira.

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