

**Rethinking the Writings of Nadine Gordimer and  
Apartheid: Racial Capitalism and the World-System**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the work of South African writer Nadine Gordimer, considering how the form and content of her work allows readers to conceive of apartheid not simply as a system of racial segregation but as a form of 'racial capitalism'. This thesis therefore considers Gordimer's oeuvre from a Marxist perspective, examining how her work invites critique of apartheid as a specific manifestation of economic domination within the wider capitalist world-system.

The introduction reviews existing critical approaches to Gordimer's writing and conceptualises a Marxist understanding of apartheid as 'racial capitalism' in relation to Gordimer's own sense of social responsibility as a South African writer.

Chapter 1 starts by addressing the very 'representability' of capitalism and the world-system in the form of the novel, through a reading of Gordimer's first two novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*. Specifically, I examine how the political and spatial formation of racial capitalism in 1950s South Africa, and the country's place in the world-system, is narrated and represented in Gordimer's early work through a form of 'cognitive mapping'.

Chapter 2 analyses *The Late Bourgeois World*, a text that has received a dearth of critical attention despite its formal complexity and importance as a turning point in Gordimer's writing, both politically and in her use of more experimental forms. My reading engages with two central questions emanating from the text that have not yet been attended to. Why is the world of 1960s South Africa 'bourgeois'? Why is this bourgeois world 'late'?

Chapter 3 explores the association between capitalism and violence in *The Conservationist*. Specifically, I examine how the narrative represents capitalism as an economic system founded on a necessity of structural violence, which is most pronounced in the racial-capitalist model of 1970s South Africa. My key claim is that the novel articulates this structural violence through the 'symbolic violence' of its form and language. This chapter therefore demonstrates how Gordimer's writing is useful to the growing body of research seeking to develop the definition of violence beyond physical forms of assault to include the systems, processes, and practices that cause suffering to human beings.

Chapter 4 examines a selection of the short stories Gordimer published during apartheid, reading how the collections' focus on personal relationships and the 'break-up' of life in South Africa form an extended allegory of the destructive capacity of racial capitalism. Reading her stories as an ongoing process of disruptive fragmentation, I focus critical attention on the formal capacity of Gordimer's short stories to communicate her defining political concern with raising social consciousness.

## **Declaration**

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"Wishes come true, not free." –Stephen Sondheim

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"We're all born naked—and the rest is drag." –RuPaul

"Take good care but, more importantly, take good care of those in your care."



## Introduction

This thesis examines the previously overlooked centrality of the capitalist world-system in the work of Nadine Gordimer. The starting point for this project was the conviction that criticism of Gordimer's work has not yet adequately developed beyond the identity politics of race and gender. The most prominent studies of Gordimer's writing have been preoccupied with the racial context of apartheid, while my project argues that her work is equally concerned with economic oppression, which cannot be divorced from the issue of race in South Africa. Key to this critical position is the understanding that apartheid in South Africa was not simply a system of racial division but that it was, beyond segregation, a system of racialised capitalism. Apartheid, as a state of separateness, exploited race in order to directly support capitalist accumulation. Moreover, while Gordimer has been widely viewed as a South African writer writing for South Africa, I argue that her work allows readers to reconsider the history of apartheid by situating South African racial capitalism within the wider context of the capitalist world-system, of which apartheid was a corollary. This thesis therefore considers Gordimer's oeuvre from a Marxist perspective, examining how her work invites critique of apartheid not only as a system of racial domination but as a specific manifestation of economic domination within the wider capitalist world-system. As such, this thesis hopes to renew criticism of Nadine Gordimer's work, which has received relatively little critical attention since the official end of apartheid, by considering her work's portrayal of race in relation to questions of class, capitalism, and Marxist theory.

In so doing, I reconsider the formal qualities of Gordimer's literary output in order to examine how her writing allows readers to consider the history of South Africa in that history's complex relation to capitalism, a relationship that critics have usually disregarded. I examine how the form and content of Gordimer's fiction work together to direct the attention of her readers to the specifically capitalist development of apartheid situated within the much broader global context of the capitalist world-system. I therefore read Gordimer's work in concert with Marxist theories of apartheid as a system of racial capitalism, before proceeding to foundational Marxist critiques of capitalism more generally, as well as specifically in relation to capitalism as an all-encompassing world-system. Marxism, in the context of this thesis, relates both to the foundational writings of Karl Marx *and* the body of work that has followed Marx's theoretical groundwork.

In short, this thesis sets out to examine how the form and content of Gordimer's fiction work together to allow readers to conceive of apartheid as a form of racialised capitalism

and, in so doing, situate South Africa in the much broader global context of the capitalist world-system. This thesis therefore responds directly to Bruce King's call for critics to reconsider the forms of Gordimer's fiction, by asking 'what are the novels saying and why has she chosen these forms?'<sup>1</sup> King previously suggested that Gordimer's fiction 'evolved so rapidly in new directions that there [has been] considerable puzzlement about what she is doing and why', perhaps because she is so frequently pigeonholed as a realist.<sup>2</sup> I understand Gordimer not just as a realist but as a novelist who employs a variety of techniques and modes of expression to offer a textual response to the challenge of representing apartheid South Africa and its place within the world-system.

By emphasising how Gordimer's fiction conceives of South Africa's place within the world-system, this thesis follows more recent accounts of South African history that have acknowledged the country's complex configuration within the international context of colonialism and globalisation.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Afrikaner-oriented interpretations of South Africa as isolated and exceptional to global capitalism, South African Marxists have continually sought to remind us of the international dimensions of apartheid. As Bernard Magubane asserted, 'to understand South African history [...] it is important to place developments there in the broader context of the emergence of capitalism as a world system'.<sup>4</sup> And, as Peter Dwyer has more recently argued:

Any attempt to understand and contribute to the social and economic processes unfolding in South Africa will be partial if it does not situate them within the context of Africa's economic crisis and that of international capitalism [...] It is important to remember the international nexus to which South Africa has long been bound.<sup>5</sup>

To consider how Gordimer's fiction situates South Africa within the world-system, I approach her writing through the lens of world-systems theory. As I explore further in Chapter 1, world-systems theory was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, who places

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce King, 'Introduction: A Changing Face', in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> King, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Adrian Guelke, *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid: South Africa and World Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2004) and Rob Skinner, *Modern South Africa in World History: Beyond Imperialism* (London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Magubane, *The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa 1875-1910* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996), p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Dwyer, 'South Africa under the ANC: still bound to the chains of exploitation', in *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa*, ed. by Leo Zeilig (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), pp. 187-211 (p. 187).

the capitalist world-system as the primary unit of analysis within a historical process that has shaped a 'core' and 'periphery' of accumulation. For Wallerstein, 'the modern world-system is a capitalist world-economy, whose origins reach back to the sixteenth century in Europe', distinguishing the current world-system's roots first in mercantilism and later in colonialism.<sup>6</sup> Wallerstein's interpretation of the world-system reiterates the Marxist view that 'the usefulness of capitalism as a term is to designate that system in which the structures give primacy to the accumulation of capital' and where 'production tends always to be for profit rather than for use'.<sup>7</sup> Approaching apartheid in South Africa from a world-systems perspective therefore entails understanding the country's racial-capitalist development not only in its internal political-economic context but also in its structured location within the capitalist world-economy. Through my readings of Gordimer, I demonstrate why a sensitivity to the world-system expands our understanding of apartheid in South Africa by locating the country's transformation from 1948 to 1994 within the broader historical, political, and economic context of an increasingly globalised and incompletely decolonised capitalist world.

Chapter 1 builds on this introductory chapter to address how a Marxist understanding of capitalism as a world-system is useful to a critical engagement with Gordimer's writing, leading to an analysis of Gordimer's first two novels, *The Lying Days* (1953) and *A World of Strangers* (1958). Specifically, I examine how capitalism is narrated and represented in Gordimer's early work, addressing Fredric Jameson's question of the 'representability of capitalism' and how the novel form can begin to represent the 'totality' of the capitalist system. My reading responds to Jameson's contention that understanding the way a society functions as a system is difficult because, although its effects are manifest, its totality is abstract and it can therefore be difficult to locate or identify the deeper structural origins of those effects. Apprehending how capitalism can be represented in the form of the novel at the outset of my examination of Gordimer's writing, I consider the notion of 'cognitive mapping' as well as world-systems theory in order to understand how both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* locate and represent the specificity of South African racial capitalism within the context of the capitalist world-system. Conceptualising Gordimer's treatment of South African apartheid in relation to the capitalist world-system illuminates rather than dilutes an understanding of racial capitalism, particularly in both novels' dramatisations of the

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<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 271. See also Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16:4 (1974), 387-415 (p. 390); Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origin of our Times* (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy*, p. 272.

complicated postcolonial reification of British culture in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.

Chapter 2 analyses *The Late Bourgeois World* (1964), a text that has received a dearth of critical attention despite its formal complexity and importance as a turning point in Gordimer's writing, both formally and politically, in relation to her transition from liberalism to socialism. My reading engages with two central questions: why, according to the narrative, is the world 'bourgeois' and why is this bourgeois world 'late'? I argue that *The Late Bourgeois World* invites a critique of capitalism as a system of economic organisation in the context of both South Africa and the world-system by addressing concepts of 'lateness' and 'uneven development', which I delineate through my reading of the text. I argue that the text addresses a dissatisfaction with a bourgeois social order, characterised by economic exploitation as well as racial inequality, which is not only unsustainable but also obsolete, and is a constituent part of a worldwide malaise. After all, the novel is not called 'the late bourgeois South Africa' but *The Late Bourgeois World*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Gordimer's work can be used to understand the 'lateness' of capitalism as a historically-limited stage rather than a fixed or permanent system, due to the unsustainability and moral objectionability of a bourgeois social and economic order that produces such great technological achievements while large proportions of the world exist in poverty.

Chapter 3 explores the association between capitalism and violence in *The Conservationist* (1974). My reading expands on the theorisation of 'structural violence' under capitalism as the specific suffering caused by the social injustice that is produced and exacerbated by capitalist social relations. The unevenness and inequality structured into both apartheid and the capitalist world-system reached a crisis point in the 1970s, as global financial crises led to international instability and exacerbated domestic social tensions in South Africa, and my reading examines how structural violence is articulated at the level of form and language in *The Conservationist*. I argue that the text allows readers to critique the cost of human suffering underpinning the capitalist accumulation of wealth through the narrator's domination over language, meaning, and representation. The chapter therefore explores not only how structural violence is produced by the capitalist economic system of organisation but how such an abstract notion of violence is articulated and represented at the level of form in Gordimer's writing.

Chapter 4 examines a selection of the short stories written by Gordimer during apartheid to consider how her engagement with the short story form can be read for a wider allegory of racial capitalism, in the subversive and fragmentary narratives of Gordimer's short stories, which register the need for social and political transformation. I

argue that allegory offers a useful way of understanding Gordimer's thematic preoccupation and political concern with the racial-capitalist structure of apartheid. I refer to Gordimer's own non-literary writing on the form of the short story to understand why the multiplicity of voices and meanings available in her short stories offers an important counterpoint to the perspectives and points of view offered in a narrative like *The Conservationist*. By concluding this project with a consideration of Gordimer's short stories, I underline the versatility of her work as a writer in her attempt to offer textual responses to the complexity of South Africa's historical situation, in relation to apartheid and the country's place within the historic and systemic totality of the capitalist world-system.

### **Existing Critical Approaches to Gordimer's Work**

Michael Wade's *Nadine Gordimer* (1978) was the first monograph to focus solely on Gordimer's writing. For Wade, Gordimer's fiction developed 'the most inclusive presentation we have of the multiracial totality of South African experience'.<sup>8</sup> As the first critic to publish a monograph-length study of Gordimer's fiction, it is perhaps understandable that Wade structures his analyses as a process of discovery, guiding readers through the content of each novel. His book relies heavily on extended quotations, many taking up the majority of his pages, some of which he argues are 'so clear as to require little comment'.<sup>9</sup> Or, as J. M. Coetzee rather scathingly asserted in his review, 'Gordimer leads, while Wade trails behind'.<sup>10</sup> Coetzee notes that Wade's book functions best as a 'guide, familiar with the social realities [Gordimer] depicts, faithful to the text, deeply in sympathy with what she aspires to do, responsive to the movements of her thought, sensitive to her nuances'.<sup>11</sup> Wade was clearly a sympathetic reader of Gordimer's novels, demonstrated by his engaging examination of her various characters. However, his overall argument assumes that Gordimer is a realist writer whose work sets out to 'record the realities of South African life [...] establishing a new South African historiography'.<sup>12</sup> This primary emphasis on Gordimer as a realist writer in the process of recording history set the tone developed by subsequent critics of her work, forming what

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Wade, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Coetzee, 'Review: *Nadine Gordimer* by Michael Wade', *Research in African Literatures*, 11:2 (1980), 253-256 (p. 255). Indeed, Coetzee goes on to say that 'Wade is better at following thematic patterns than at tracing formal relations. Although he quotes extensively (too extensively), his detailed analysis of Gordimer's prose is pedestrian: one detects a certain dutifulness toward the rituals of Practical Criticism' (p. 256).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Wade, p. 228.

I refer to as the critical orthodoxy on Gordimer's writing.

Historical realism was the primary style of writing attributed to Gordimer in the two subsequent monographs that addressed her work; those by John Cooke in 1985 and Stephen Clingman in 1986, both entitled *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, with Clingman's book having the subtitle *History from the Inside*. Cooke's own subtitle, *Private Lives/Public Landscapes*, is indicative of two central themes he drew out in Gordimer's work, connecting the author's personal life with her outspoken public politics, alongside an examination of how the symbolic landscape of apartheid permeates her characters' most intimate moments. Cooke drew on Gordimer's own words from an interview with *London Magazine* in 1965, where she asserted that texts can confront South African politics even in the most intimate of scenes, "even in the most private situations, they are what they are because their lives are regulated and their moves formed by the political situation. [...] My private preoccupations [are intertwined with] the influence of the political".<sup>13</sup> For Cooke, a major thematic preoccupation in Gordimer's writing is 'the liberation of children from unusually possessive mothers'.<sup>14</sup> This theme is motivated by what he sees as 'the formative event of Gordimer's childhood, her mother's sequestering of young Nadine at the age of nine on the pretext of what the daughter later learned was a very minor heart ailment'.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, I argue that the possessive nature of the mother figure in *The Lying Days* can be read productively as a response to the political uncertainty and increasing materialism of post-war South African society, rather than a personal and profound reflection on Gordimer's childhood. Indeed, Gordimer would later go on to distance herself from readings based on authorial intentions, in her 1989 essay 'The Gap Between the Writer and the Reader'.<sup>16</sup> There she not only demonstrates her awareness of literary theory, referring to Roland Barthes and "work done in the sixties [...] in which the whole emphasis of literature passed from writer to reader", but explicitly rejects any tendency towards biography in critical interpretation.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, Gordimer criticises the

process of taking the writer's creation as a kind of documentary basis for what is more interesting to explore: his/her life. It's not what you write, it's who you are.

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Ross, 'Nadine Gordimer: A Writer in South Africa', in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 33-42 (p. 35).

<sup>14</sup> John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Gap Between the Writer and the Reader', in *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 438-447.

<sup>17</sup> Gordimer, p. 439.

This guesswork on the processes of the imagination is surely a denigration, if scholarly unconscious, of literature: the act of creation itself. Fiction cannot be 'explained' by autobiography.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to say that Cooke's preference for connecting themes in Gordimer's work to experiences in her personal life is without merit, particularly for readers wanting to understand Gordimer's prominence in South Africa as a public intellectual, but to only read her fiction biographically cannot develop the broader meanings and formal complexity available in her writing. For Gordimer, acts of literary reading develop and are developed by shared terms of reference 'formed in us by our education – not merely academic but in the broadest sense of life experience: our political, economic, social and emotional concepts'.<sup>19</sup> Reading should not involve a narrow focus on the biography of the author. My thesis develops those political, economic and social concepts made available in her writing, following Gordimer's own appreciation for the role of the reader as critic.

Clingman is generally, and rightly, regarded as the most prominent of Gordimer's critics, having written most extensively on her oeuvre, contributing one of the most informed monograph studies of her work and multiple journal articles, as well as working with Gordimer to edit a collection of her essays, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics And Places* (1988). Clingman has led criticism of Gordimer by arguing that she sought to 'present history as historians cannot', emphasising the value of her work as 'a certain kind of historical evidence'.<sup>20</sup> His argument emphasises the primacy of the South African context as the setting for all of Gordimer's novels, allowing us to read 'Gordimer's texts in historical terms' for their contribution to a 'historical consciousness of South Africa'.<sup>21</sup> While Clingman provides an important and extensive study of Gordimer's novels, my thesis diverges from the historical realist emphasis he places on her work, a reading that I argue does not fully attend to the formal versatility of her oeuvre or its responsiveness to Marxist theory. By contrast, my analysis of Gordimer's work seeks to demonstrate the formal versatility of her oeuvre, as opposed to Clingman's central argument that 'Gordimer's work is valuable in so far as we are able to use it to explore South African

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<sup>18</sup> Nadine Gordimer, "'To You I Can": Gustave Flaubert's *November*', in *Telling Times*, pp. 669-673 (p. 669). Indeed, Gordimer prioritised understanding an author "through the work itself" in contrast to certain "schools of literary criticism, rapacious fingerlings, [who] resort to the facts of the author's life before they can interpret the text.", p. 473.

<sup>19</sup> Gordimer, p. 441.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 1.

See also Stephen Clingman, 'Literature and History in South Africa', *Radical History Review*, 46:7 (1990), 145-159.

<sup>21</sup> Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, p. 20.

history' in its realist capacity.<sup>22</sup> While Clingman acknowledged Gordimer's 'participation within a Marxist discourse', the way in which Gordimer's writing helps to illuminate characteristically Marxist debates and the forms in which it engages with these debates has not been appreciated within the scope of his project and has not developed as a broad theme within the wider catalogue of existing Gordimer criticism.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of attention to Gordimer's responsiveness to Marxist understandings of apartheid and capitalism is perhaps a result of the popular view that Gordimer's politics change 'markedly from novel to novel, ranging in their ideological implications from the liberal variants of *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, to the socialist affirmations of *A Guest of Honour*, to the revolutionary alignment of *Burger's Daughter*.<sup>24</sup> However, as I argue here, a Marxist reading of Gordimer's work offers valuable insight and new lines of enquiry even in the case of her earliest novels, which is why my first chapter begins by revisiting *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*. Gordimer's fiction should not be constrained by the notion that novels can be read in the same way as historical documents, particularly when considering her position within anti-apartheid discourse, so as not to make it appear as though her apartheid writing is out-of-date or extraneous to readers in the post-apartheid era.

Criticism of Gordimer's work peaked in the early 1990s and has sharply declined since the official end of apartheid in 1994, since when there has been a relative dearth of new material discussing the value of Gordimer's oeuvre. A post-apartheid decline in critical attention may be due to the perception that Gordimer was an apartheid writer whose task was effectively complete, a view that may have crystallised when she won the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. Neil Lazarus also notes that postcolonial studies has been constrained by a tendency towards critical orthodoxy within an unnecessarily restrictive canon, positing that: 'scholars working in the field have tended to write with reference to a woefully restricted and attenuated corpus of works [...] in the 12 essays and 280-odd pages that make up *The Location of Culture*, for example, there are only two or three pages on Nadine Gordimer'.<sup>25</sup> Judie Newman's *Nadine Gordimer* (1988), Bruce King's edited collection of essays on *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* (1993), Dominic Head's *Nadine Gordimer* (1994), and Kathrin Wagner's *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (1994) comprised the last major contributions to Gordimer criticism in this period. The titles of King's and Wagner's work suggest a sense of climax to both the output of

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<sup>22</sup> Clingman, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Clingman, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Clingman, p. 215.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Lazarus, 'The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism', *The European Legacy*, 7:6 (2002), 771-782 (pp. 771-772).



Gordimer and interest in her work; Gordimer, however, continued to write for another 20 years. Yet her writing has since attracted relatively little critical attention in comparison to the studies of her work undertaken during apartheid. A small number of articles have appeared, with the only prominent extended work being Newman's edited collection of essays, *Burger's Daughter: A Casebook* (2003), and the controversial publication of Ronald Suresh Roberts' unauthorised biography, *No Cold Kitchen* (2005), which appeared against Gordimer's wishes after substantial disagreements over the book's account of her deceased husband, Reinhold Cassirer. Roberts also added insult to injury with his rather disparaging assertion that since 1994 Gordimer appears to have 'rested on her historical oars as if crossing an historical finishing line'.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the clearest indication of both the critical orthodoxy and gradual silence that has formed around Gordimer's writing was the reissuing of Newman's *Nadine Gordimer* by Routledge following Gordimer's death in 2014. No changes were made to the book's 110 pages of content, which, though decidedly disappointing considering 26 years had passed since it was first published, was not altogether surprising considering the critical orthodoxy surrounding Gordimer.

Newman's contribution, nevertheless, offers extremely insightful and careful analyses of Gordimer's work, observing how it is both 'politically committed and formally innovative' in its intertextuality and combination of 'European and indigenous cultures'.<sup>27</sup> For Newman, previous criticism had not adequately attended to issues of gender and sexuality in Gordimer's writing, and so Newman focuses attention on the writer's 'doubly marginalized' position in South Africa 'as a white and as a woman'.<sup>28</sup> Correspondingly, Newman's analysis weighs heavily on the female characters present in Gordimer's novels and the 'sexual radicalism' of her writing. Indeed, though it is otherwise rarely acknowledged, sex features often in Gordimer's work, from graphic loss of virginity and the sexual fantasies of female characters, to contraventions of South Africa's 1950 Immorality Act, which banned whites and non-whites from engaging in sexual relations. Newman's study is therefore important for having illuminated (what we can understand as) Gordimer's intersectional sensitivity to the politics of sex and gender in South Africa, which cannot be divorced from the socio-economic context of apartheid.

King, in his introduction to *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, expanded on Clingman's readings, affirming Gordimer's position as 'a realist concerned with detailing the manners, ideas, and changes in her society, including its politics and racial

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<sup>26</sup> Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), p. 527.

<sup>27</sup> Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Newman, p. 17.

injustices'.<sup>29</sup> However, King also posited that Gordimer's writing offers 'an unusual interest in the symbolic, the psychological as well as the art of fiction'.<sup>30</sup> That said, King argues that many readers and critics are left 'confused by the rapid changes in the style, manner and form' of Gordimer's work.

For some critics her [later] writing is even too consciously high art in its nuances, its increasingly elliptical consciousness, sense of multiple ironies and the self-conscious awareness of the traditions of the novel. While Gordimer seems better-read, more at home with, and more responsive to ideas, especially socialist and Marxist theory, than do most contemporary novelists, she also gives voice to the body and its desires [and] to the specifics of South African society and politics.<sup>31</sup>

While critics of Gordimer have rightly focused attention on the historical context of South African identity politics, I explore how Gordimer's writing can be more fully understood and, crucially, what her writing illuminates and brings to life, in relation to the concerns of Marxist theory. Gordimer's political concern with the complexities of apartheid motivated her pursuit of styles and forms that could allow her to encourage in readers a greater social consciousness and even help to achieve a more egalitarian society for South Africa. Experimentation, in Gordimer's words, was key to "finding [her] own style as a writer".<sup>32</sup> What might look on first sight like a self-conscious or even self-indulgent experimentation in 'high art' is actually a response at the level of form to what King calls the changing 'specifics of South African society and politics' and therefore to the prospects of social and political transformation. Whereas King claims that 'her later novels remain focused on family relations, manners, morals and their effects on individual actions', I argue that the ostensibly private sphere of individual actions and family relations is always weighed against issues of public and collective responsibility, which I proceed to explore in relation to Gordimer's own sense of social responsibility as a writer.<sup>33</sup> In Gordimer's work, the personal is always and by definition intensely political.

Head's *Nadine Gordimer* and Wagner's *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* offer two

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<sup>29</sup> King, *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> King, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> King, p. 1 and pp. 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Gordimer, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 225. Gordimer asserts here that "You experiment on the basis of all sorts of things you have learned, to find a new way to express your particular vision. For me, style and content must be married completely or the approach to a piece of writing does not work".

<sup>33</sup> King, p. 3.

highly divergent readings of Gordimer's work. Head addressed what he perceived to be the incremental 'postmodernism' of Gordimer's writing through her 'increasing stress on textuality'.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to Clingman, Head's examination focuses attention on how Gordimer's 'responses to political events in South Africa are manifest in a continuous development and innovation in literary form rather than through detailed historical reference'.<sup>35</sup> Head shares my own concern with the historical realist critical orthodoxy surrounding Gordimer's work, criticising Robert Green's assertion that 'when the history of the National Governments from 1948 to the end comes to be written, Nadine Gordimer's shelf of novels will provide the future historian with all the evidence needed to assess the price that has been paid'.<sup>36</sup> Crucially, Head observes the 'literary self-consciousness' in Gordimer's writing, arguing that her work moves between critical realism and modernist trends, settling on a postmodernist combination of 'realist reference and modernist self-reflexiveness'.<sup>37</sup> Head's reading of Gordimer emphasises her 'ontological concerns' about living in South Africa under apartheid, which inevitably and continuously conflicted with Gordimer's moral sensibilities, to the extent that her writing is inflected, as he argues, with a 'postmodernist anxiety over states of being'.<sup>38</sup> Though Head does not specifically refer to the world-system, his attention to Gordimer's form gestures to her broader frame of concerns when he asserts that her: 'modernist concern over ways of knowing, expressed in fragmented and uncertain narrative forms and perspectives, is, effectively, intensified into an anxiety about the nature of our existence in the world'.<sup>39</sup> In my reading, what Head identifies as Gordimer's anxiety about 'the nature of our existence in the world' is understood more specifically as a response to the nature of our existence in *the world-system*, to the social injustice of apartheid in its racial-capitalist configuration and to the systemic and all-encompassing nature of global capitalism. Attention to Gordimer's formal complexity in Head's discussion of realism, modernism, and postmodernism offers a useful contrast to previous readings of her work. Reading Gordimer as a novelist is to consider the different forms in which she responded to the challenge of representing apartheid South Africa and its place in the capitalist world-system.

By contrast, Wagner's 'rereading' is positioned as much as a critique of Gordimer

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<sup>34</sup> Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xiii.

<sup>35</sup> Head, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Green, 'From *The Lying Days* to *July's People*: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 14 (1987-88), 543-563 (p. 563).

<sup>37</sup> Head, pp. 182-183. For a useful analysis of Gordimer's fluctuations between forms of realism and modernism in relation to Georg Lukacs, please see pp. 12-18.

<sup>38</sup> Head, p. 184.

<sup>39</sup> Head, p. 184.

herself as it is of Clingman. Wagner inverts Clingman's notion of 'history from the inside' to understand Gordimer's writing as a contradictory 'history of the submerged guilts, fears and repressions of a white consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> Wagner criticises what she sees as the inherent contradiction of a 'Eurocentric writer' trying to uproot a system from which Gordimer unavoidably benefits.<sup>41</sup> In Wagner's terms, Gordimer 'implicitly and explicitly urges onward a historical process whose revolutionary phase must destroy the comfortable contexts within which she writes', adding that Gordimer's position is troubled by a contradictory identification with 'the political aspirations of a black community in which, as a white writer, she can have only observer status'.<sup>42</sup> In a review of Wagner's book, Judie Newman took issue with Wagner's conclusion 'that Gordimer encodes at subtextual level the mental perspectives and mindsets which underlie the prejudices which she overtly rejects'.<sup>43</sup> Newman adds that in Wagner's highly revisionist rereading 'Gordimer is convicted of anti-feminism, Liberalism, idealization of blacks, ignoring class realities, emotional coldness and various forms of thoughtcrime'.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, my readings emphasise the social responsibility inherent to Gordimer's position as a writer, in her desire to offer a variety of textual responses to South African apartheid that invite critique of a system that provided luxury and comfort to the white minority while the country's black majority lived in penury. By considering Marxist critiques of apartheid as racial capitalism, my thesis finds Gordimer's fiction to be highly attentive to class realities, which can in turn be understood through the dual importance Gordimer herself placed on a writer's social responsibility and formal versatility.

### **Gordimer, Form, and Social Responsibility**

Gordimer has written frankly about what she terms her 'essential gesture' as a writer, in reference to her "social responsibility in a divided country".<sup>45</sup> As a white South African writer observing the oppressions of apartheid, Gordimer saw "a political responsibility to raise the consciousness of white people who [...] have not woken up" to the country's social injustice.<sup>46</sup> For Gordimer, acts of literary reading offered a platform to raise consciousness of moral and political issues, challenging readers through forms that were

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<sup>40</sup> Kathrin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 56.

<sup>41</sup> Wagner, pp. 4-6

<sup>42</sup> Wagner, p. 5

<sup>43</sup> Judie Newman, 'Review: Kathrin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 41:2 (1995), 383-385 (p. 383).

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Essential Gesture', in *Telling Times*, pp. 409-424 (p. 418).

<sup>46</sup> Gordimer, p. 417.

not possible in non-literary writing: "the *transformation of experience* remains the writer's basic essential gesture; the lifting out of a limited category something that reveals its full meaning and significance only when the writer's imagination has expanded it".<sup>47</sup> Gordimer's essential gesture becomes an inclusive sense of social responsibility, in her ambition to write narratives engaging those who "have not woken up" to the racial and economic oppression perpetuated through apartheid.

Gordimer's meditation on responsibility, as Clingman explains in his notes on *The Essential Gesture*, offers 'a reflection on the writer's dual commitments: to society, and to writing itself'.<sup>48</sup> While Wagner criticises Gordimer for supposedly claiming a 'superior insight and vision for the writer', I see Gordimer's emphasis on social responsibility as key to understanding why Marxist theory is an appropriate lens through which to discuss the readings available in her work.<sup>49</sup> Gordimer was not claiming a 'superior insight' for the process of writing but marking out for her readership that her own position as a writer is rooted in a "political, professional and artistic responsibility".<sup>50</sup> In her laudable ideal of fostering social progress, form and narrative were important tools with which Gordimer as a writer could fulfil her social responsibility. As Gordimer explained in an interview with Susan Sontag:

In my case, being born in a country like South Africa, white, automatically privileged, living, brought up in the colonial life, as I was, if I was going to be a writer there would have to be a time when I would see what was in that society, when I would see how it had shaped me and my thinking and that I would bear, automatically, a certain responsibility for it as a human being. And since a writer is an articulate human being, there would be a special responsibility to respond to it in a certain way.<sup>51</sup>

Gordimer's project as a writer was shaped by her knowledge of the inequality or, to use a more Marxist term that will recur and be elucidated in the course of this thesis, the *unevenness* of human existence in South Africa. Her social responsibility as a writer, as she expresses to Sontag, was to respond to the oppression 'in a certain way', in different

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<sup>47</sup> Gordimer, p. 422 [original emphasis].

<sup>48</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. by Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 285.

<sup>49</sup> Wagner, p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> Gordimer, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 313.

<sup>51</sup> Nadine Gordimer and Susan Sontag, 'Writers and Politics', in *Voices: Writers and Politics*, ed. by Bill Bourne, Udi Eichler and David Herman (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1987), pp. 25-39 (p. 26).

forms and modes of expression that confront and interrogate the country's social reality.<sup>52</sup>

This thesis expands on *how* and *in what form* Gordimer's writing endeavours to raise consciousness, by emphasising her engagement with the social conditions of capitalism in the context of apartheid and within the wider capitalist world-system. From the confusions of consciousness expressed in the early Bildungsromane, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, to the rejection of an immoral social order in the fragmented form of *The Late Bourgeois World*, and the conflicting ideological affiliations that position the narrators of *The Conservationist* and *Burger's Daughter*, the experimentation with form in Gordimer's oeuvre can be read valuably within a sustained Marxist framework to understand the political interventions her writing makes available. This thesis therefore complements existing critical approaches to Gordimer's work that have emphasised the racial context of apartheid, by considering how the form of her writing illuminates and questions South Africa's distinctly racial-capitalist order.

As Graham Huggan argues, an awareness of Gordimer's commitment to social responsibility allows future readers to consider and question 'the Marxist aesthetic that informs much of Gordimer's work'.<sup>53</sup> For Huggan, Gordimer's 'essential gesture' demonstrated 'the realization that her primary responsibility as a writer is towards a predominantly white, middle-class readership, in her own country and elsewhere, whose complacency has insulated them from the daily realities of oppression under the apartheid system'.<sup>54</sup> More specifically, Gordimer's responsibility as a writer is as much about fighting for those who are oppressed as it is about compelling to action those who cannot yet perceive their own participation in forms of oppression. However, while Huggan appreciates Gordimer's responsibility to raise the consciousness of both a 'white' and 'middle-class' readership, readings of her work have too often stressed whiteness at the expense of class, thus focussing attention on the racial history of South Africa without addressing the wider influences of the capitalist economy. Apprehending a Marxist aesthetic in Gordimer's work, I consider the class implications of Gordimer's repeated choice to use white narrators in her writing, and how the formal presentation of these narrators from various positions of privilege functions as a response to the unevenness and racial-capitalist oppression inherent to apartheid. Key to this thesis, therefore, is my

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<sup>52</sup> Gordimer: "Art is on the side of the oppressed. [...] What writer of any literary worth defends fascism, totalitarianism, racism [...] In Poland, where are the poets who sing the epic of the men who have broken Solidarity? In South Africa, where are the writers who produce brilliant defences of apartheid?", in *Telling Times*, pp. 414-415.

<sup>53</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Collector's Art, Collective Action: The Search for Commitment in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction', in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Bruce King (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 33-44 (p. 35).

<sup>54</sup> Huggan, p. 34.

claim that it is unhelpful to view Gordimer's fiction as a reflection on racial struggle without paying due attention to her work's investment in representing and even fostering class struggle.

Gordimer's commitment to social responsibility may explain why so many critics have focused on her role as a historical writer of apartheid in relation to race, considering the empirical obviousness of racial oppression in South Africa. As King asserted, Gordimer's fiction 'has its origins in the opposition between the personal and the political [...] and the need for political self-realisation through commitment', emphasising the 'personal' in predominantly racial terms of identity politics, while omitting the totality of capitalist oppression.<sup>55</sup> Although some scholars may assume that Gordimer's leftist leanings are obvious, there has been a failure to combine readings of her work with Marxist accounts of South African apartheid, particularly those developed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite the lack of critical attention to her work's representations and explorations of racial capitalism, Gordimer herself discussed how 'capitalism and racism in South Africa are totally integrated and entwined', highlighting at least her own awareness that South Africa's racial segregation was in part the function of an encompassing capitalist system.<sup>56</sup> Gordimer argued that "racial problems, both material and spiritual, can hope to be solved only in circumstances of equal economic opportunity".<sup>57</sup> As I will explore in my readings, Gordimer's writing is imbued with her belief in a more socially equitable world, where liberty for individuals is secured and enhanced by collective provision and, therefore, collective security. Gordimer's work invites readers to consider a different kind of politics where society is organised as a community working together for the common good.

While acknowledging the value of historical readings such as Clingman's, my thesis reads against the bifurcation of race and capitalism in the context of apartheid and interprets Gordimer's oeuvre as a textual response to the ongoing social injustice caused by capitalism in both South Africa and the wider capitalist world-system. In this dual concern, my examination of Gordimer's work allows readers to consider the ongoing political significance of her writing. As Fredric Jameson sets out in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, with his insistence on the 'priority of the political interpretation of texts' in relation to class struggle, Marxist readings can help uncover the ways in which fictional forms and narratives dramatise and raise our

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<sup>55</sup> King, *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Boyers, et al., 'A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer', *Salmagundi*, 62, (1984), 3-31 (p. 29).

<sup>57</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Relevance and Commitment', in *Telling Times*, pp. 303-312 (p. 303).

consciousness of the unfinished history of class struggle.<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx asserted famously that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'.<sup>59</sup> As such, a Marxist critique of Gordimer's work is significant not simply to re-envision her importance as a versatile novelist at the level of form but to think about how her work's forms illuminate the racial-capitalist configurations of apartheid.

By situating Gordimer's texts as a response to both South African racial capitalism and the capitalist world-system, my readings are able to draw out the connections between the social injustice of apartheid and the related injustices produced at a structural level by capitalism as a fully global system of economic organisation. Although all of Gordimer's novels are set in South Africa, my readings demonstrate how her work raises important questions about the structural relation between apartheid as a national context, postcolonial independence movements in the regional context, and the ongoing inequality or unevenness within and between states in the even larger context of the capitalist world-system.

As should now be clear, my thesis seeks to move beyond the critical orthodoxy that appears to suggest Gordimer mostly produced strictly realist forms of writing that function as historical evidence. My readings seek to understand the ways in which the various forms of Gordimer's works dramatise particular experiences of racial and class oppression. I form a link between Gordimer's sense of social responsibility, an appreciation of her formal complexity and versatility, and her desire to challenge and raise the consciousness of her readers. What I wish to stress most insistently is that Gordimer's commitment to achieving national liberation from racial and class oppression in South Africa was made possible through her acute awareness of form. Gordimer questioned to what extent a writer could be radical if they were only ever to use the same form in their writing: "if the writer accepts the social realist demand [...] will he be distorting, paradoxically, the very ability he has to offer the creation of a new society?"<sup>60</sup> The tendency to view Gordimer within the scope of a historical realist critical orthodoxy has, as Julián Jiménez Heffernan has more recently acknowledged, led to an antagonistic approach to Gordimer's writing that may disregard her versatility as a novelist:

There is some critical consensus regarding the dialectic that has informed

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<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 219.

<sup>60</sup> Gordimer, *Telling Times*, p. 419.



Gordimer's fiction since the full revelation back in the 1970s of her modernist credentials. This consensus establishes that her fiction sways, more or less antagonistically, between a primitive allegiance to third-person, conventional forms of realistic narrative, supposedly inherited from the nineteenth-century European tradition, and a fidelity to the modernist techniques of perspectivism, stream of consciousness and [free] indirect style.<sup>61</sup>

As Heffernan points out, Gordimer uses a range of techniques that demonstrate the literary quality of her work beyond it functioning simply as a series of historical reflections. More specifically, Gordimer is a versatile writer whose narratives offer much more to readers than just a 'naturalistic' portrayal of South Africa.

Affirmations of Gordimer's so-called realism may also be explained by the immediacy of South African politics and therefore the 'realness' of the content of her work, which should not be assumed to be the same thing as literary realism. In Neil Lazarus's reflections on 'Realism and Naturalism in African Fiction', he posits that 'the apparently natural priority of realism is very largely taken for granted'.<sup>62</sup> The implication is that literary realism is often confused with naturalism, particularly in the case of postcolonial African fiction where the critical and radical nature of form is often overlooked. Whereas naturalism is so-called for the way it seeks to replicate reality, Lazarus argues that realism is an 'analytical mode, not a documentary one, concerned to portray and not merely to report'.<sup>63</sup> As Gordimer also asserted in her speech in receipt of the Nobel Prize, "nothing factual that I write will be as truthful as my fiction".<sup>64</sup> Gordimer's fiction is compelling because she pushes against the surface of reality in forms that allow readers to question the social meanings and contradictions of apartheid rather than absorbing her work's representations of everyday life in South Africa as nothing more than spectacle.

Furthermore, Heffernan adds to the debate by arguing that Gordimer's realism is more complicated and sophisticated than readings of her work have made it seem. Heffernan criticises what he sees as Clingman's 'narrow understanding of realism' and how 'this simplistic version of realism reappears in Judie Newman's reading of *The*

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<sup>61</sup> Julián Jiménez Heffernan, 'Unspeakable Phrases: The Tragedy of Point of View in Nadine Gordimer's *Get a Life*', *Research in African Literatures*, 41:4 (2010), 87-108 (p. 92).

<sup>62</sup> Neil Lazarus, 'The Retrieval of Naturalism: The Politics of Narrative in Radical African Fiction', *Critical Exchange*, 22 (1987), 53-62 (p. 55). See also Lazarus, 'Realism and Naturalism in African Fiction', in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 340-341.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Writing and Being', *Living in Hope and History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 195- 206 (p. 199).

*Conservationist*, significantly entitled "Realism Deconstructed" [where] realism is here reductively described as a "linguistic creation, a code which fosters an easy, unthinking acceptance of its signs as 'natural'".<sup>65</sup> The stylistic antagonisms Heffernan has already identified may have led critics and readers to view Gordimer as a purveyor of only one style of writing, within such a critical orthodoxy as I have identified, instead of developing an appreciation of the manifold techniques and forms of expression she used to represent the complexity of apartheid. By contrast, Lazarus reads Gordimer's work for its 'oppositional' relation to the history of South Africa, specifically through '*the manner* in which this work enters into history – or, more precisely, refuses to be encoded seamlessly into history' by adapting modernist forms.<sup>66</sup> Gordimer's sense of social responsibility as a writer appears key to Lazarus's emphasis on the modernist potential of her writing in its 'marginality and acute self-consciousness', shaping his view that white South African literature is 'so *ethically* saturated, so *humanistic* in its critique of the established order, so concerned to *represent* reality'.<sup>67</sup> Gordimer cannot be viewed singularly as either a realist or a modernist and, while her works may adapt realist techniques, her fictional forms offer a more complicated relation to history than is often assumed.

Arguably, the broader critical orthodoxy on Gordimer's writing may also have been reinforced by unnecessary comparisons between the two doyens of South African literature, Gordimer and Coetzee. Lazarus stresses that 'the specific ideologies [...] are quite different, and *even on occasion categorically so*. Nobody could confuse the sharp-edged radicalism of Gordimer's vision with [the work of Brink, Coetzee, or Breytenbach]'.<sup>68</sup> However, in various considerations of white South African writing, Coetzee often appears to be regarded as the future of modernism and even postmodernism in South Africa, while Gordimer has been cast as a more traditional and even prosaic writer by comparison. As Clingman later acknowledged:

A standard element in the critical iconography of white South African fiction has been the establishment of a binary opposition between its two dominant writers. According to this model, now received and perpetuated all-too-easily, Nadine Gordimer is the traditional, realist writer, concerned primarily with social issues, while J. M. Coetzee is the postmodern writer of metafiction whose politics—if it

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<sup>65</sup> Heffernan, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> Neil Lazarus, 'Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature', *Cultural Critique*, 5 (1986-1987), 131-155 (p. 135) [my emphasis].

<sup>67</sup> Lazarus, p. 148 [original emphasis].

<sup>68</sup> Lazarus, p. 148 and p. 136 [my emphasis].

exists—is that of the textual. The opposition (as such things do) often contains an implicit hierarchy.<sup>69</sup>

Head's argument in favour of Gordimer's own postmodernism has attempted to move away from the binary between Gordimer and Coetzee. He emphasises Gordimer's complex 'literary identity', where 'the extension of narrative possibilities [...] is a crucial aspect of her quest for a literary form appropriate to her situation, because the cultivation of narrative relativity, of a plurality of voices, is a way of conveying the complexity of the historical situation'.<sup>70</sup> Head recognises that in Gordimer's 'experimentation' with form, 'narrative voice can be used for progressive Utopian ends'.<sup>71</sup> However, David Attwell reads Gordimer's writing as an immediate textual response to its historical situation. He contends that 'life under apartheid seems to demand a realistic documentation of oppression. [...] There can be little doubt that South Africa's most accomplished realist in the genre of prose narrative today is Nadine Gordimer'.<sup>72</sup> Attwell discusses Gordimer's and Coetzee's contrasting positions in 'the debate on realism' in *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, recognising that Gordimer's narratives have avoided criticisms of 'ethical evasion' levelled at the work of Coetzee.<sup>73</sup> While Attwell agrees that 'it is possible to overstate these differences', he argues that Gordimer's fiction 'often takes the form of a record of a particular consciousness' and refers to Clingman's own emphasis on her historical realism.<sup>74</sup> In so doing, Attwell maintains that the forms if not the ethical and political aspirations of Gordimer's and Coetzee's fictional projects remain distinct. In his words, 'Gordimer, through future projection, challenges apartheid's system of meanings within the scope provided largely by language and characterization in realist discourse, [while] Coetzee conducts his critique in terms of the basic elements of narrative construction'.<sup>75</sup> As I see it, however, the opposition between Coetzee and Gordimer is hard to maintain. Comparing and contrasting Gordimer and Coetzee's particular textual responses to apartheid may only serve to miss the moral concerns and political praxis that both writers sought to engage. It would also be a false dichotomy to

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen Clingman, 'Review: *Nadine Gordimer*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 42:4 (1996), 906-908

(p. 906).

<sup>70</sup> Head, p. 16. For an interesting discussion on distinctions of realism and modernism in relation to Gordimer's writing, see Head, pp. 13-18.

<sup>71</sup> Head, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 12 and p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Attwell, p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Attwell, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Attwell, p. 71.

read Coetzee and Gordimer as opposite poles either of a modernist/realist divide or of South African fiction in general. Gordimer's textual responses to apartheid are varied and complex in their own right and should not be negated in comparison to the changes and adaptations in Coetzee's literary style.

I am less interested here in categorising Gordimer definitively and categorically as either a realist or a modernist and more interested in engaging with how the forms of her work have changed to illuminate the subject at hand, that of racial capitalism and the capitalist world-system. As David Lodge argues in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, it is quite possible for writers to exist between realism and modernism, alternating between varying forms of experimentation to utilise literary forms best suited to preoccupying themes and subjects.<sup>76</sup> It is also quite possible to argue for the plurality of Gordimer's writing, in that it contains a diverse range of styles and techniques, from multi-perspective, decentred narratives, free-indirect discourse, fragmentation, and the avoidance of objective narration. When questioned on the issue of form in a 1977 interview with Pat Schwartz, Gordimer asserted that she makes use of "many different techniques. I use the forms of short stories and of novels and within those separate forms I use different techniques [...] It is a very delicate and complex question, the matter of technique. For me it is a matter of finding the approach that will release the most from the subject. The form is dictated by the subject".<sup>77</sup> Gordimer's point here is instructive for critical engagement with her work, in that form cannot be discussed separately to or at the expense of content. At the same time, Gordimer was not writing historical documents; she saw herself primarily as a writer of fiction, and it is therefore the literary characteristics of her output that are most interesting. What distinguishes her works from historical documents are the forms in which their content is expressed.<sup>78</sup>

Coetzee himself weighed the significance of Gordimer's political development as a writer, arguing that Gordimer's essays on social responsibility in *The Essential Gesture* mark her 'politics in a broader sense, she nails her colors to the mast. She can no longer

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<sup>76</sup> Lodge suggests that 'the pendulum of fashion in its movement between realism and modernism has speeded up to the point where all possible modes of working between two extremes are now simultaneously available to a single generation of writers [...] Some writers, perhaps most writers, are unhappy with a tolerant aesthetic pluralism [...] but there is surely no reason or excuse for literary critics to do the same.' David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 64.

<sup>77</sup> Gordimer, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 78.

<sup>78</sup> This can be understood as Gordimer's 'message-plus' definition of literature, in that fiction through the use of form and narrative method can actually offer more than a simple retelling of history.

believe in the capacity of Western capitalism to bring social justice to Africa'.<sup>79</sup>

Gordimer's dedication to social progress was reiterated in her non-literary writings but, as I argue here, was advanced primarily as a textual response to oppression both within the context of South Africa and the wider capitalist world-system. This thesis therefore places the utmost significance on the dialogue between Marxist theory and Gordimer's writing to explore why her fiction is read productively through the lenses of world-systems theory and Marxist theorisations of South African apartheid.

### **Conceptualising Racial Capitalism**

Marx was, of course, committed in his work to analysing an economic system (capitalism) that prioritises capital accumulation at the expense of human need. Such a system, as I will go on to explore more fully in Chapter 1, assumes class distinctions between the owners of capital and a majority who are exploited and even immiserated by capital. Marx's analysis, as well as the wider Marxist project – in which this thesis participates – is propelled by the motivation that resources might be deployed in a more just and egalitarian way. Likewise, as I have established above, Gordimer's project as a writer was undeniably rooted in ideals of social justice. Gordimer's commitment as a writer was avowedly political in her public opposition to the injustices of racial capitalism. This thesis demonstrates that Gordimer's writing in both its form and content responds to the structural conditions of capitalism in South Africa and the wider world-system, and that her development as a writer can be traced through her consideration of how socio-economic conditions can be represented, questioned, and interrogated through fiction.

Using Marxist concepts to understand how Gordimer's fiction allows readers to explore the system of racial capitalism, as well as South Africa's place within the capitalist world-system, will hopefully enable a better understanding of Gordimer's versatility as a writer and allow readers to reconsider the history of apartheid in a much broader global context. With previous studies of her work having primarily focussed on the identity politics of race and gender in South Africa, conceptualising apartheid as racial capitalism is one of the main contributions made by this thesis to the criticism of Gordimer's work. While emphasis on the perpetuation of racial categories in South Africa is understandable, considering that the most visible aspect of apartheid was race, a race-reductionist definition of apartheid alone is insufficient. Race reductionism reduces

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<sup>79</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 385.

understanding of apartheid to focus purely on the context of race, whereas Marxist accounts demonstrate that segregation under apartheid was rationalised in a specific relation to the economy. As I go on to explore, South African Marxists argue that apartheid was not implemented primarily on a cultural basis but to suit the specific economic demands of the white minority. Race-reductionist accounts of apartheid are insufficient because they discount the fundamental connection in South Africa between ideology, racial politics, and the economic system.

South African Marxists in the 1970s and 1980s reconsidered the ideological nature of apartheid, arguing that apartheid was not merely a system of racial division but that racist oppression was integral to the process of capital accumulation at a specific stage in the history of South Africa. This view in no way detracts from the conception of apartheid as an instrument of appalling racial abuse but it understands that the purpose of racist policy and ideology was not only to maintain segregation but to function as the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. Apartheid was to be understood as a specific manifestation of economic oppression, a racialised form of capitalism. Harold Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Frederick Johnstone, Bernard Magubane, Shula Marks, and John Saul were some of the key contributors to this debate. Wolpe's 1972 essay, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', was seminal in conceptualising a theory of racial capitalism. Through a discussion of colonial development in South Africa, Wolpe posited that the implementation of apartheid by the National Party under the racist ideology of Afrikanerdom was only a constituent part of the existing bourgeois capitalist ideology:

Apartheid cannot be seen merely as a reflection of racial ideologies and nor can it be reduced to a simple extension of Segregation. Racial ideology in South Africa must be seen as an ideology which sustains and reproduces capitalist relations of production.<sup>80</sup>

For Wolpe, segregation in South Africa was not an arbitrary development in relation to capitalism. Racial oppression was a conditional underpinning to capital accumulation in South Africa. Afrikaner nationalism, particularly in its ideological rejection of Britain as a colonial power in the post-war years, was contingent on the exploitation of black labour to maintain and advance the Afrikaans-speaking minority's accumulation of wealth and resources.

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<sup>80</sup> Harold Wolpe, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', *Economy and Society*, 1:4 (1972), 425-456 (pp. 453-454).

However, as Wolpe expanded upon in *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*, attention to the class dimension of apartheid appeared 'surprisingly underdeveloped' in academic literature and analyses of South Africa, as simplifications of the South African political and economic system too often made apartheid appear to be 'exclusively a racial order'.<sup>81</sup> Wolpe criticised the view of apartheid as a simplistic continuation of colonial-style racial oppression for failing to acknowledge that the systematic and comprehensive exploitation of black labour was integral to the specific capital accumulation of the Afrikaner community in South Africa's transition from a dominion of Britain to a Republic (in the period from 1948 to 1961):

That capitalism and white domination, which owe their origins to the colonial period, continued to be reproduced after 1948, is beyond dispute. What is in contention, however, is the character of that reproduction. The simplified notion of continuity subordinates diversity to identity and in so doing assumes that the structure of racial domination is constituted as a fully integrated, monolithic, and homogenous unity that is neither subject to uneven development nor riven by contradiction but remains in an unchanging relationship with the capitalist economy.<sup>82</sup>

Existing criticism of Gordimer's work has often failed to think through the ways in which her novels, in representing and thinking about racial domination, are also exploring a wider, more entrenched, and more durable system of economic power. This is not to say that racial oppression under apartheid is incidental to economic oppression, merely that the two must be understood together.<sup>83</sup> Wolpe's point about the character of racial domination in South Africa following the 1948 election victory of the National Party is also important in relation to the periodisation of this thesis. Apartheid – here as in most historical accounts of South Africa – refers to the period between 1948 and 1994, the specific period within which the National Party held power and implemented its white Afrikaner-oriented system of racial capitalism, up until the country's first multiracial election and the victory of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress.

Legassick's analysis further addressed the specific form of capitalism that

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<sup>81</sup> Harold Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (Paris: UNESCO Press, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Wolpe, p. 60.

<sup>83</sup> As the Trinidadian Marxist historian C.L.R. James asserts, 'the race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to [consider matter of] imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental'. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 283.

manifested in South Africa under apartheid.<sup>84</sup> For Legassick, economic exploitation favouring the needs of white Afrikaner nationalism was the key determinant in the National Party's expansion of the apartheid state apparatus:

The national oppression of the African people is inextricably interwoven with, and at the same time only an aspect of, the class exploitation of workers, and in which there has always been and continues to be an interaction between struggle for national liberation and struggle for social emancipation.<sup>85</sup>

Legassick traced segregation in South Africa back to British colonialism, which formalised and nationalised the racial divisions that have been perpetuated for economic ends in the region since the first colonial settlements of the Dutch-East India Trading Company in 1652. In Legassick's view, the white minority 'used political devices to secure a non-white labour supply and to distribute it to the requirements of mines, farms and secondary industry, while perpetuating the African 'reserves' as a labour pool in which traditional institutions could minimize the costs of social welfare'.<sup>86</sup> Johnstone, in his essay on 'White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today', also criticised the liberal assertion that racism happened in South Africa *despite* capitalism.<sup>87</sup> Contradicting the liberal view that the post-Second World War flourishing of capitalism would lead to socially progressive changes in South Africa, Johnstone argued that the racial segregation of apartheid strengthened the capitalist accumulation of the white minority. The implication in the theoretical formation of racial capitalism, therefore, is that even the de-racialisation of capitalism in South Africa would not necessarily or inevitably lead to a more egalitarian social system.

The Marxist conceptualisation of racial capitalism informed the Black Consciousness Movement's determination that class struggle was key to achieving a more

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<sup>84</sup> See Martin Legassick, 'Capital Accumulation and Violence', *Economy and Society*, 3:3 (1974), 253-292 and 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post-1948 South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1:1 (1974), 5-35.

<sup>85</sup> Martin Legassick, 'Records of Protest and Challenge', *Journal of African History*, 20:3 (1979), 451-5.

<sup>86</sup> Legassick, 'South Africa: Forced Labour, Industrialization, and Racial Differentiation', in *The Political Economy of Africa*, ed. by Richard Harris (New York: Halsted Press, 1975), pp. 227-270 (p. 267). See also Legassick, 'British Hegemony and the Origins of Segregation in South Africa, 1901-14', in *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, ed. by William Beinart and Saul Dubow (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 43-59.

<sup>87</sup> Frederick R. Johnstone, 'White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today', *African Affairs*, 69: 275 (1970), 124-140. See also Frederick R. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).



equitable economic order for blacks in any post-apartheid South African system.<sup>88</sup> Steve Biko examined the connection between capitalist exploitation and the abuses of white racism in the early 1970s, arguing that

There is no doubt that the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons. The leaders of the white community had to create some kind of barrier between black and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification for the obvious exploitation [...] The racism we meet does not only exist on an individual basis; it is also institutionalised to make it look like the South African way of life.<sup>89</sup>

To implement apartheid, the Nationalist authorities pioneered the social construction of racial identities for state purposes. The National Party's ideology of 'separate development' for their socially-constructed racial categories can be understood in relation to capitalist uneven development, as explored in Chapter 2. Moreover, the deprivation and social injustice of a system that structured relations through racial-class boundaries can be understood in relation to structural violence, as explored in Chapter 3. However, as the Black Consciousness Movement demonstrates, racialised urbanisation through apartheid policies such as the 1950 Group Areas Act and the 1952 Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act, commonly referred to as the Pass Laws, led to what John Saul and Stephen Gelb described as 'growing African worker consciousness'.<sup>90</sup> Before his murder in police custody at the age of 30, Biko warned against policies that stratified South Africa's population as 'appendages to white society', arguing that 'we are all oppressed by the same system. That we are oppressed to varying degrees is a deliberate design to stratify us not only socially but also in terms of aspirations'.<sup>91</sup>

As Biko's death only served to strengthen the resolve of those struggling against apartheid, this example of state brutality demonstrates the at times contradictory implementation of racial capitalism, where the *physical* violence meted out by the authorities hindered the stable accumulation of capital accrued through the system's *structural* violence. White domination and capitalism were 'simultaneously functional

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<sup>88</sup> For further reading, see David Hirschmann, 'The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28:1 (1990), 1-22.

<sup>89</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Ravan Press, 1996), pp. 87-88.

<sup>90</sup> John Saul and Stephen Gelb, *The Crisis in South Africa: Class Defense, Class Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), p. 68.

<sup>91</sup> Biko, p. 51 and p. 52.

and contradictory', as Wolpe showed.

At certain times racial ideology was and is functional for the accumulation of capital, whereas at other times it could be dysfunctional. So there is no necessary connection, it is a contingent one [...] This is of course a different thesis from the liberal thesis, which is that racism is allegedly dysfunctional in regard to capital accumulation.<sup>92</sup>

More specifically, racial capitalism in its extremity and brutality fostered the conditions for its own demise. Racial-capitalist apartheid was functional for the accumulation of capital by the white minority in South Africa but dysfunctional to a far greater extent in that the system was ultimately so flagrantly unjust and uneven, so inefficient even in its own terms and so vulnerable to internal resistance and international pressure, that it proved to be not only illegitimate but unsustainable. The propensity to produce suffering and social injustice in the process of accumulation, therefore, is key to understanding the moribundity of both South African apartheid's racial-capitalist system and, indeed, that of the wider world-system.

To summarise, theories of racial capitalism conceptualise apartheid in South Africa not only as the cultural product of racist ideology but as the function of a ruthlessly unequal and uneven process of capital accumulation. More specifically, the cause of suffering in South Africa under apartheid was not only racism but racialised capitalism through the specific configuration of racial policy in the country's economic system.

### **Gordimer's Socialist Vision**

My argument follows that an awareness of racial capitalism is important to readers of Gordimer's work if they are to fully consider the history of South Africa and the country's place within the wider capitalist world-system, of which apartheid was a corollary. Reading Gordimer's work for its responsiveness to and engagement with Marxist discourse and vice versa is as important to rethinking the complexity of her writing as it is to the study of apartheid. Moreover, examining how the forms of Gordimer's writing are able to represent and invite a critique of racial capitalism and the capitalist world-system allows for future research to trace this theme historically and systemically in Gordimer's post-apartheid writings. As I will go on to explore in the final chapter's

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<sup>92</sup> Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*, p. 8 and pp. 115-116.

discussion of allegory across the breadth of Gordimer's apartheid writing, Gordimer had ongoing concerns about a post-apartheid context that would result only in the de-racialisation of capitalism and the replacement of a white ruling class with a black ruling class, as part of the wider oppressions of the capitalist world-system. Gordimer continued to explore this theme in her post-apartheid writings up to and including her final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012).

Examining the various forms and techniques Gordimer utilised in her writing to challenge apartheid will hopefully illuminate how the act of writing can represent and, indeed, how modes of reading can redress, the social injustice of capitalism both in the history of South Africa and the wider world-system. For Gordimer, attentive and critical readership was key to progressive discourse and conversation; in her view, "a literary culture cannot be created by writers without readers".<sup>93</sup> Gordimer's writing should not be viewed only as a series of realist, historical, evidential accounts as a witness of oppression in South Africa. Rather, Gordimer's work offers readers a textual response to the challenge of representing apartheid South Africa and its place within the capitalist world-system. It gives readers a morally-engaged aesthetic *experience* of apartheid (as opposed to a scientific or statistical knowledge of apartheid), for which a Marxist social critique provides relevant conceptual knowledge of the racial capitalism and wider capitalist world-system that occupy such a prominent place in Gordimer's work. As Terry Eagleton asserts in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 'the difference between science and art is not that they deal with different objects, but that they deal with the same objects in different ways. Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation; art gives us the experience of that situation'.<sup>94</sup> What my readings in this thesis demonstrate is that the textual responses of Gordimer's fiction allow readers to consider the capitalist accumulation of wealth in an altogether more critical manner against the status quo. The rereading of Gordimer's oeuvre undertaken by this thesis considers her works' capacity to dramatise experiences of suffering and social injustice, both in the specificity of South Africa's racial-capitalist apartheid system and the wider capitalist world-system. I hope to illustrate why Gordimer's work enables readings that are, as Benita Parry has called for, capable of 'advancing Marxist/Marxisant positions' that challenge 'the capitalist trajectory of the imperial project'.<sup>95</sup> In so doing, this thesis seeks to shed further light on the social and ultimately *socialist* vision that informed Gordimer's sense of social responsibility as a writer.

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<sup>93</sup> Gordimer, 'Turning the Page: African Writers on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century', in *Telling Times*, pp. 485-493 (p. 490).

<sup>94</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 17.

<sup>95</sup> Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

## Chapter 1. Mapping the Capitalist World-System in *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*

### Introduction

"Socialism is the horizon of the world. [But] we are living in what I have called *a state of interregnum*", declared Nadine Gordimer in a conversation with Susan Sontag, filmed in 1985 as part of the Channel 4 series *Voices*.<sup>1</sup> Gordimer's use of the term 'interregnum' is explained in her 1983 essay, 'Living in the Interregnum', in which she describes apartheid as a state of antagonism, where the "South African consciousness" is divided "not only between two social orders but between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined".<sup>2</sup> Gordimer's definition of apartheid as an interregnum between two social orders and, crucially, two identities is useful if we are to consider her attempts to represent the dysfunctions of capitalism within the forms of her fiction. The emphasis Gordimer places on the social and historical antagonisms within South African consciousness compels a consideration of how voice, point of view, language, and characterisation represent the conflicted racial and capitalist dimensions of apartheid. Moreover, Gordimer's claim that socialism is the horizon of the 'world' in totality also compels a concern in locating the specificity of South African apartheid in relation to the wider capitalist world-system.

Interregnum, from a Marxist perspective, constitutes the specific rejection of capitalism as an inequitable but persistent social order and the as-yet unrealised potential of a more egalitarian socialist system of economic organisation. This possibility of a more egalitarian social order that could replace world capitalism thus forms Gordimer's so-far unrealised, and therefore unknown and undetermined, 'socialist horizon'. This perspective also helps explain Gordimer's reference to the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, when she characterises interregnum as a period of contradiction and destruction that exists:

not only in the country where I come from, South Africa, where it is most marked, because there it's a perfect illustration of Gramsci's statement: the old is dying and the new cannot be born. And in the state of interregnum there arise

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine Gordimer and Susan Sontag, 'Writers and Politics', in *Voices: Writers and Politics*, ed. by Bill Bourne, et al. (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1987), pp. 25-39 (p. 36) [my emphasis].

<sup>2</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', in *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 374-395 (p. 375 and p. 381).

many morbid symptoms.<sup>3</sup>

The state of interregnum, therefore, is a worldwide condition. Gordimer's emphasis on the historical developments in South Africa as a way of framing this state of interregnum as a global predicament inspires the specifically Marxist and world-systems approach to her work undertaken in this chapter and in the thesis overall. Gordimer's definition of interregnum, her reference to Gramsci, and her vision of the world's socialist horizon all recognise a common historical struggle against the morbid symptoms of capitalist economic organisation. Considering Crystal Bartolovich's more recent complaint against the neoliberal triumphalism of the supposed 'untranscendable horizon' of world capitalism, my readings illuminate the ongoing political urgency of Gordimer's writing.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines how *The Lying Days* (1953) and *A World of Strangers* (1958) represent the political, social, and economic changes taking place in South Africa in the 1950s as morbid symptoms of the country's racial capitalism, with a particular sensitivity to the wider historical changes taking place in the world at the time, by mapping the interconnectedness of accumulation and dispossession within the capitalist world-system. As first-person narratives, both texts respond to the early implementation of apartheid in South Africa during the 1950s by 'cognitively mapping' their narrators' antagonistic positions of privilege as wealthy whites attempting to navigate continual manifestations of deprivation and inequality. This chapter approaches *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* from a world-systems perspective to argue, primarily, that the texts' formal arrangements map the political imposition of social and economic disparities between South Africa's black and white populations, as well as situating the rise of apartheid in a global relation to the declining cultural influence of Britain and the increasing economic dominance of the United States and its Cold War ideology in the 1950s. Both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* follow a single protagonist on a journey through multiple cores and peripheries: in movements between South Africa's mining towns and cities, such as Johannesburg, shaped by the divisions between wealthy white areas and impoverished black districts; and in movements between Europe and Africa, mapping South Africa's historical place in the world-system.

*The Lying Days* follows Helen Shaw from her gold-mining hometown on the periphery of Johannesburg, to the city itself, culminating in her prospective emigration to England. The narrative of *A World of Strangers* joins Toby Hood having left England

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<sup>3</sup> Gordimer, *Voices: Writers and Politics*, p. 36. See also Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p. 556.

<sup>4</sup> Crystal Bartolovich, 'Introduction', in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by C. Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

destined for Johannesburg; initially socialising in wealthy white suburbs, Toby's journey culminates in his experience with the mining towns and black townships that act as periphery to the city. The relationship between the wealth and race of the narrators is mapped by their mobility, travelling freely across continents and within South Africa without the restrictions of South Africa's pass laws, which required non-whites to carry an internal permit at all times (particularly for urban areas designated 'white'). Toby's transnational movements, funded by his inherited wealth, do not mark any sense of global belonging but exemplify the social exclusivity of his position, which defines his initial identification with Johannesburg's elitist social circles; and it is mining profits that allow for Helen's capricious lifestyle and her planned relocation to England. Although both novels dramatise socio-economic relations in South Africa from opposite spatial starting points, both narratives offer the reader a similar mapping of the capitalist networks of exploitation operating on a local, national, and global scale functioning as part of the capitalist world-system.

This chapter is concerned with how Gordimer's writing explores and *represents* capitalism through form and language, responding specifically to the problem Fredric Jameson has described as the 'representability of capitalism' in the 'postmodern' period, following the unprecedented economic growth and internationalisation of business in the post-war era, during which time the formal end of empire was replaced by a replication of capitalist social relations on a global scale. As this post-war globalised form of capitalism is exceptional, Jameson argues, 'the problem is still one of representation, and also of representability: we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks [...] yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modelling them, however abstractly, in our mind's eye'.<sup>5</sup> Jameson describes this as a 'cognitive problem' that can be addressed through 'an aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system [...] the world space of multinational capital [...] in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion'.<sup>6</sup> This chapter examines how Gordimer is able to *represent* capitalism through the form of the novel, by situating her narrators within the world-system's complex global network as it manifests at the local, national, and international levels. I emphasise her work's ability to dramatise the interconnectedness of wealth accumulation

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<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, p. 54.

at one end of the social scale and deprivation at the other, in the context of South Africa's burgeoning racial-capitalist apartheid state in the 1950s and in a wider view of the post-war capitalist world-system. My aim in this chapter is not to pinpoint where Gordimer's writing discusses capitalism as if the novels are historical documents (naturalistically or transparently registering and providing knowledge of the system) but to show *how* her writing represents, approaches, and dramatises manifestations of capitalism at the level of form.

By grasping the notion of interregnum, I aim to highlight how Gordimer's early writing articulates the antagonism of being caught between conflicting social systems and identities, which Gordimer describes as a process of "discovering reality, coming alive in a new way—I believe the novels and stories I have written in the last seven or eight years reflect this—for a South Africa in which white middle-class values and mores contradict realities has *long become the unreality*".<sup>7</sup> Previous critical reflections that relate Gordimer's early work to her discussion of interregnum have focused on the racial context of this 'unreality' in South Africa. Stephen Clingman interpreted Gordimer's emphasis on interregnum as the 'subject of revolution' between apartheid and 'liberation' from racial segregation.<sup>8</sup> My work, by emphasising the representations of capitalism in Gordimer's writing, broadens Clingman's focus on race in order to consider interregnum as a relation between a moribund capitalism and the world's 'socialist horizon'. By emphasising the centrality of capitalism in her work, I argue that her writing during apartheid was not only concerned with the system's racial implications but also with its economic implications. Resituating Gordimer's early work as a textual response to apartheid in both its racial and capitalist dimensions is crucial to my overall ambition in this thesis. Gordimer herself castigated "the pact of capitalism and racism that is apartheid".<sup>9</sup> For Gordimer, "race oppression is part of the class struggle" and her textual response to apartheid aimed to find modes of expression that illuminated this struggle and stressed its importance and urgency.<sup>10</sup> Although Gordimer's narratives are predominantly set in apartheid South Africa, her insistence that this state of interregnum exists 'not only in her country' but in the whole 'world' indicates that the interregnum is not a direct product of apartheid but inherent to the global economic system within which South African racial capitalism flourished. It is not simply South Africa – in this historical moment – that is caught in such a period of interregnum but the entire capitalist world-

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<sup>7</sup> Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', p. 390 [my emphasis].

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History From The Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', pp. 392-393.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 382.

system as a post-war construct. Cognitive mapping therefore offers a useful way of approaching Gordimer's early work, to consider how the narratives dramatise the post-war developments of capitalism in the 1950s by mapping South Africa's place within the world-system.

### **Cognitive Mapping**

'Cognitive' approaches to mapping, more generally, aim to consider how individuals perceive, understand, learn, and process information about the space they inhabit, whether locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally. As Chris Perkins, et al, put forward: 'each individual possesses a "cognitive map" of the world; that is a mental construct that allows them to process and synthesise spatial information and guides spatial decision and choice making'.<sup>11</sup> Spatial 'information' can relate literally to cartography, such as physical maps and map-making, but can also be understood figuratively, in relation to identity and culture. Key here is a postcolonial understanding that space is almost never mapped as a neutral representation but is inherently bound by an individual's cultural context and a whole range of identity markers. For Edward Said, spatial information is gained through a process of *imaginative* geography, by which 'imaginative [and] figurative value' is invested in to the environment so that 'space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning'.<sup>12</sup> This imaginative value maps a *fictional* reality on to the physical environment so that 'all kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own'.<sup>13</sup> Literary responses to the notion of mapping therefore offer a useful way of approaching the totality of capitalism as a *spatial* representation, particularly as conceptions of the world-system will be bound by the unstable circumstances of class, race, gender, and so on. As Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, 'just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is [...] not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings'.<sup>14</sup> I therefore examine how both novels can be read as a textual response to the way that struggles over land, rights, and resources can be imagined, represented, and mapped through narrative.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin and Chris Perkins, 'Cognition and Cultures of Mapping', in *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 298-303 (p. 298).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.



For Jameson, cognitive mapping offers, at least in part, a way of understanding and approaching the representability of capitalism. Jameson's conceptualisation of cognitive mapping builds on the work of cultural geographer Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*, which describes how urban environments are understood not only or even predominantly by their physical reality but by subjective existential experience. Jameson extrapolates 'Lynch's spatial analysis to the realm of social structure [...] to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale'.<sup>15</sup> In his essay, 'Cognitive Mapping', Jameson sets the widest possible range for approaches to cognitive mapping, 'from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself'.<sup>16</sup> Jameson's theorisation of cognitive mapping is therefore relative to the ubiquitous influence of capital, which is simultaneously specific, historic, and systemic. As such, cognitive mapping carries a sense of the 'global social structure' put in place by capitalism as it operates at the level of the world-system. For this reason, Jameson suggests that 'an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project' because it anticipates 'a process of proletarianization on a global scale. "Cognitive mapping" [is] in reality nothing but a code word for "class consciousness"'.<sup>17</sup> While thematically the novels can be seen to oppose apartheid (as Gordimer would say, "the system damns itself"), the narratives, as incomplete bildungsromane, or unfinished journeys towards self-consciousness and political consciousness, provide readers with an incomplete consciousness of South Africa's place within the world-system. However, in their first-person accounts of journeys between Europe and Africa, and between South African cities, rural locations, and mining towns, both novels are distinctly concerned with notions of mobility and spatial fragmentation, and it is therefore this process of mapping that I am most interested in here. The social relations encoded and embodied in these spatial representations are only partly visible to the narrators, whose first-person narratives develop a sense, but only a burgeoning and fragmented sense, of this connectedness. As an incomplete cognitive mapping, the novels dramatise Gordimer's concept of apartheid as a specific period of interregnum in South Africa, in which the established order was insupportable but the possibility of a new social and economic order was neither visible nor yet achievable.

As I proceed to argue, both novels enable readers to consider the all-

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<sup>15</sup> Jameson, *Cultural Logic*, p. 416.

<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 347-357 (p. 351).

<sup>17</sup> Jameson, *Cultural Logic*, p. 416 and pp. 417-418.

encompassing totality of capitalism as a world-system by mapping the interconnectedness of South Africa's localities, nationally and internationally, in their complex structural and historic connections, which are, as Raymond Williams describes, 'not only of the country and the city, in their most singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of social and [spatial] organisation'.<sup>18</sup> Cognitive mapping therefore offers a particularly useful way to conceive and recognise the social and spatial organisation of people under capitalism, which is often perceived to be natural because the global movement of capital is by and large an invisible process. The spatial organisation of capitalism is therefore part of the problem Jameson identifies as the 'representability of capitalism', because, as Williams points out, awareness of capitalism as an all-encompassing system is not easily known or 'simply communicated, but [has] to be revealed, to be forced into consciousness'.<sup>19</sup> This problem of representation and perception exists because capitalism is not a singular, readily-identifiable process but defines all social relations, existing on a global scale without a single nerve centre or capital city; it exists in all cities, everywhere. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle assert that this is 'precisely why [capitalism] poses an *aesthetic* problem, in the sense of demanding ways of representing the complex and dynamic relations intervening between the domains of production, consumption and distribution, and their strategic political mediations, ways of making the invisible visible'.<sup>20</sup> This concern with the representability of capitalism is emphasised in the titles of the two novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, both of which direct attention to the duplicitous nature of capitalism, in relation to its deceit, exploitation, and corruption, as well as what Jameson describes as the reification and obfuscation of exploitative social relations by the ideology of market exchange. If the word 'strangers' communicates a sense of alienation, the word 'lying' can be read as a reference both to the crookedness of uneven market exchange and the excessive privilege and consumption of the capital-owning class. Gordimer's early novels make these invisibilities visible by offering a response at the level of fiction to the perennial aesthetic problem of how to represent (in this case, to cognitively map) the systemic nature of social, economic, and geographical inequalities that are otherwise obfuscated.

Both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* represent the relation between South African racial capitalism and the world-system through the paradigm of market relations. Frequent references are made in both texts to the market as a physical location,

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<sup>18</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p. 289.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (London: Zero Books, 2015), pp. 24-25 [their emphasis].

that is, to actual marketplaces, but also by extension and analogy to South Africa's placement within a world market, albeit one that facilitates not fair exchange but ruthless accumulation. The narrator of *The Lying Days*, Helen, lives in a South African mining town, the centre of capitalist accumulation in the country, yet her narrative portrays a troubled narrator uncertain of but increasingly prepared to question her place and role in the country's exploitative social order. Gordimer's representations of South African racial capitalism though these first-person narratives of developing consciousness show that the problem of the interregnum, of a society caught between an oppressive system and its potential for egalitarian alternatives, exists even and fundamentally at the level of consciousness. Williams explains this as a crisis of perception under capitalism:

identity and community became more problematic, as a matter of perception and as a matter of valuation, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organisation increased. [...] The growth of towns and especially of cities and a metropolis; the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community – *a whole community, wholly knowable* – became harder and harder to sustain.<sup>21</sup>

More specifically, the increasing division and stratification of people through location and labour ruptures our ability to be conscious of socio-economic realities, making the totality of a 'knowable community' and its social relation unknown. 'Such spatial disjunction', as Jameson argues, 'has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole'.<sup>22</sup> For both Williams and Jameson, existing as a more egalitarian 'whole community' can only be achieved through an understanding of (and organised resistance to) the perennial divisions of the capitalist world-system. Cognitive mapping of this system thus responds to the need for a recognition, as can be traced in the narratives of Gordimer's early fiction, of the 'whole community'. Although the narrators themselves remain unable to fully form a critical response to the various and systemic forms of oppression they experience and witness, their combined narratives present the reader with a society structured on exploitation and inequality. Conceiving of apartheid as a specific manifestation of capitalism through this form of cognitive mapping potentially enables an incipient consciousness of the capitalist world-economy,

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. by Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 43-68 (p. 510).

a possible first step towards transformational political agency.

By offering uncertain and incomplete responses to capitalism, as they experience it in the racial-capitalist context of 1950s South Africa, the narratives of Helen and Toby dramatise the condition of being caught between 'two social orders' and 'two identities', Gordimer's definitive state of interregnum. The novels end with both characters in apparent personal turmoil over the oppressive lifestyles of the capitalist ruling class in South Africa yet unable to reconcile themselves either to non-racial discourse or to anti-apartheid political action. Their individual narratives are themselves formed as a state of interregnum. While this chapter does not claim that any tangible manifesto on the form of Gordimer's aspired 'socialist horizon' can be traced back to *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, what the novels do make very starkly apparent are the "morbid symptoms" reinforced by the National Party's implementation of apartheid in the post-war context of the 1950s.

### **Mapping 'Capitalism' and the 'World-System'**

As Marx sets out in *The Communist Manifesto*, exploitation forms the foundation of the capitalist economic system; the 'exploitation of the many by the few' to maximise profit and power.<sup>23</sup> Capitalism does not entail the fair cooperative exchange and division of equivalent-valued goods and resources but instead encourages self-interest and self-aggrandisement. More specifically, Marx argued that 'the driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is the self-valorization of capital to the greatest possible extent, i.e. the greatest production of surplus-value [to maximise the accumulation of wealth and resources]', which relies on 'the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist'.<sup>24</sup> While the capitalist marketplace does lead to wealth creation for some, Marx's critique shows that the uneven nature of capitalist production and exchange inherently leads to the impoverishment of others. Thus, in *Capital*, Marx asserts that the 'accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole'.<sup>25</sup> These social conditions define the marketplace of the global capitalist system. It is these gross structural inequalities that are identified by Gordimer as 'most marked' in the 'morbid symptoms' of South African apartheid.

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Volume I)*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 449.

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 709.

As Marx expressed simply in his M-C-M' equation, the defining feature of the capitalist market is not a particular acquisition of commodities per se but accumulation. Capitalist accumulation as expressed by this equation, where M' is larger than M because of an added or surplus value gain, would not be possible if equal values are being exchanged.<sup>26</sup> However, because the capitalist marketplace is often defined and instituted as a 'free market', this distinct pattern of exploitation remains invisible and obscured by an implied essence of choice and freedom. Generalising these capitalist market values and relations to the societal level implies that the capitalist society is one where 'the process of production has mastery over Man, instead of being controlled by him', meaning that human interaction is controlled and consumed by the market, or capitalist social relations. In this sense, Marx adds that capitalism is not simply an abstract economic process but a 'social relation between persons that is mediated through things [and commodities]' to the extent that the 'wage-labourer [...] is compelled to sell himself of his own free will'.<sup>27</sup> Capitalist social relations are therefore made universal by the ubiquity of the capitalist mode of production and consumption. Marx also asserted that 'the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the [ruling class] over the whole face of the globe', and this all-encompassing nature of capitalism as a 'world-system' is unavoidably important when considering the specificity of racial capitalism in South Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Suffice it to say that there are varying definitions of capitalism, which have either expanded on Marx's original thesis or fundamentally disagreed with his negative assessment of the antagonistic nature of capitalist economic organisation. This thesis takes an avowedly Marxist approach to capitalism, based on Gordimer's own denunciation above of the 'morbid symptoms' permeating the world's capitalist social order. Gordimer's novels dramatise not only the links between white accumulation and black deprivation in South Africa but the all-encompassing nature of capitalism as a world-system. In his essay on the nature of 'States, Markets, and Capitalism, East and West', the world-systems theorist Giovanni Arrighi identifies how a specifically capitalist dynamic controls the world economic system:

'The top layer' of the world of trade [...] consists of those individuals, networks, and organizations that *systematically* appropriate the largest profits, regardless of the particular nature of the activities (financial, commercial, industrial, or

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<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 266.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 932.

<sup>28</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 57.

agricultural) in which they are involved. [Fernand] Braudel distinguishes this layer from the lower layer of 'market economy', which consists of regular participants in buying and selling activities whose rewards are more or less proportionate to the costs and risks involved in these activities.<sup>29</sup>

A top layer of networks and organisations exists as a result of the concentration of power and wealth. Perpetuated through inheritance and hegemony, this concentration has created an unequal and uneven economic system that structures the globe. This structural unevenness is what Immanuel Wallerstein describes as the 'core and periphery' relations of the world-system. As the capitalist model of uneven market exchange is replicated at the level of the world-economy: 'all states cannot "develop" simultaneously *by definition*, since the system functions by virtue of having unequal core and peripheral regions'.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, an overprivileged and overdeveloped 'core' accumulates wealth at the direct expense of an exploited and underdeveloped 'periphery'. The novels map this as a relation not only in the historical and systemic example of the world-system, between Africa and Europe, but also within South Africa, between areas demarcated along artificial racial divisions to benefit the accumulation of the white minority.

The novels situate South Africa historically and systemically within the wider movements of the world-system, by mapping the changing economic influence of Britain in South Africa, as well as the encroaching global dominance of America, in the post-war period. Specifically, the novels are sensitive to the political and economic developments that took place in the world-system following the end of the Second World War in 1945, with the overall collapse of European hegemony and a global shift to the US as an economic, military, and cultural hegemon. Arrighi traces this seismic shift in global power in his magnum opus, *The Long Twentieth Century*, noting that 'the two world wars and their aftermath were decisive moments in the redistribution of assets from Britain to the United States which hastened the change of leadership in systemic processes of capital accumulation'.<sup>31</sup> While 'victory in the First World War translated into a further expansion of Britain's territorial empire [...] the costs of empire had begun exceeding its benefits by a good margin, thereby preparing the ground for its dismantling by the

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<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, 'States, Markets and Capitalism, East and West', in *Worlds of Capitalism: Institutions, Governance and Economic Change in the Era of Globalization*, ed. by Max Miller (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 109-145 (p. 127) [my emphasis].

<sup>30</sup> Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 17.

Labour government after the Second World War'.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, for the United States, victory in the Second World War led to an 'unprecedented concentration of world power' that cemented US hegemony in the world-system.<sup>33</sup> And yet, as Neil Lazarus asserts, the transition from European hegemony to US hegemony through the formal collapse of empire after the Second World War has only led to the further entrenchment of 'an inegalitarian, unevenly integrated, and highly polarized world-system'.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, the implementation of apartheid did not occur in a vacuum but should be understood, in part, as a response to the political and economic changes taking place across Africa and in the world-system. Decolonisation and liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean gained power in the 1940s and 1950s, as Britain's costly defence of democracy in Europe raised a glaring double standard in the country's continued possession of colonies and dominions in the rest of the world. While Britain's own national narrative may have focused on its European victories, the post-war image of 'global Britain' was also one of foreign occupation, meddling, and destruction, all made worse by the chaotic unravelling of its empire.<sup>35</sup> In many cases, Britain was forced to relinquish control of its colonies 'often as a consequence of indigenous anti-colonial nationalism and military struggle', as John McLeod notes in *Beginning Postcolonialism*.<sup>36</sup> Following the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and the 1948 partition in the British Mandate for Palestine, as well as the impending motion of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 'authoritarian solution of apartheid' appeared particularly attractive to white South Africans in the country's 1948 general election.<sup>37</sup> The rise of Afrikaner nationalism can therefore be understood more broadly as a response to the heightened sense of vulnerability, in the face of a perceived 'swart gevaar' ('black threat') and 'rooi gevaar' ('communist threat', otherwise known as the 'Red Scare'), surrounding the white minority's ability to maintain its disproportionate accumulation.

Through the novels, the reader can discern that while Johannesburg may be the economic centre of South Africa, the city is divided socially and spatially between white privilege and black dispossession. The narrators' movements between country and city map how the country's large natural supply of mineral resources and, crucially, the means

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<sup>32</sup> Arrighi, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> Arrighi, p. 283.

<sup>34</sup> Neil Lazarus, 'The global dispensation since 1945', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 19-40 (p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Whittle has explored how the post-war collapse of British imperial power is dramatised in increasingly multicultural literary responses in Britain, *Post-War British Literature and the "End of Empire"* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 5.

of production, remain concentrated in the hands of a small elite and so the country's wealth is unevenly distributed. The novels are also sensitive to the historic British connections to South Africa's mining industry, through which the reader is able to trace the country's more complex peripheral position in its historic and systemic relation to Europe and America. Johannesburg's working class and its peripheral mining towns are therefore doubly oppressed, by the rise of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism, which also serves the wider economic and political interests of Britain and America in the 1950s. The concerted economic interest that both America and Britain have historically held in South Africa is perhaps most simply illustrated in the name of the country's largest commercial conglomerate, the Anglo American Corporation, founded in 1917 by Ernest Oppenheimer with the financial backing of American banking group J.P. Morgan. The Anglo American Corporation monopolised the South African mining industry, after becoming the majority stakeholder in its rival mining group, De Beers Company, in 1929, and, as Francis Wilson notes, 'by 1958, the assets of this one group comfortably exceeded the combined resources of all the other South African finance houses'.<sup>38</sup> What the power of the Anglo American Corporation exemplifies, therefore, is the extent to which international control of South Africa's natural resources not only remained in place after the Second World War but was entrenched and flourishing. As Rob Skinner notes, 'Anglo-American expanded its interests across a wide range of industries and services, to the extent that by the end of the 1970s it was claimed that Anglo-American companies accounted for 50 per cent of the shares traded in the Johannesburg stock market'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, just as Wilson underlines why corporations such as Anglo-American flourished under apartheid, it is not unsurprising that the Corporation started meeting clandestinely with the African National Congress for transition talks even before the National Party did so in the late 1980s.<sup>40</sup> The Anglo American Corporation therefore demonstrates the complicated but overarching history of British and American involvement and exploitation in South Africa. The mining industry typifies the function of capitalist development in South Africa, as J. A. Hobson noted in the 1920s: 'nowhere in the world has there ever existed so concentrated a form of capitalism as that represented by the financial power of the mining houses in South Africa, and nowhere else does that power so completely realise and enforce the need for controlling politics'.<sup>41</sup> Mining, as a destructive process of extraction, also symbolises the pernicious role of capitalist

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<sup>38</sup> Francis Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Rob Skinner, *Modern South African in World History: Beyond Imperialism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 110.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, pp. 108-112.

<sup>41</sup> J. A. Hobson, *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 267.



endeavour in South Africa and the country's history of international 'investment' underscores the urgent need for Marxist approaches that connect apartheid to the world-system.

Both of the novels explore South Africa's complicated position in its affiliation to the old imperial core, on the periphery of the global economy while also being the economic and military regional core of southern Africa. South Africa was an important ally to Western Europe and America in the context of the Cold War, not only because of the country's strategic location and natural resources but also in its firmly anti-communist, capitalist ideology. Following their election victory in 1948, the National Party signed economically lucrative and politically important trade deals to supply America with the uranium that would help fuel its nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. The Nationals were keen to underline the shared ideological principles connecting South Africa's new Afrikaner government and the country's allies in the West. D.F. Malan, who became the National Party's first Prime Minister, vehemently denounced the global influence of communism as a common threat to the implementation of Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>42</sup> In this way, we can note not only the world-system's historical importance in relation to South Africa's development but also the outward significance of apartheid and white nationalism as a bulwark of Western capitalist values in a continent otherwise grappling with decolonisation and liberationist ideologies. While McCarthyism gripped public life in America, Malan campaigned with the slogan, 'A vote for Jan Smuts is a vote for Joe Stalin', and spearheaded the National Party's 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, which prohibited any communist activity within the rather vague category of 'statutory communism'.<sup>43</sup> *The Lying Days* was initially refused publication by South African-based publishers and *A World of Strangers* was banned outright by the South African authorities specifically because of its encouragement of a kind of political consciousness contrary to the National Party's ideology. By mapping 1950s South Africa, therefore, the novels do not simply tell a story but politically involve and incite the reader to reconsider the country's post-war transformation.

The worlds of these novels, including the narrators' points of view and the characterisation of their social relationships, are permeated by the specific practice of capital accumulation colouring and determining all of the social and political changes taking place in South Africa in the 1950s. As Dominic Head has previously noted,

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<sup>42</sup> Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), p. 488.

<sup>43</sup> See Bernard Magubane's 'Introduction' chapter in the South African Democracy Education Trust's *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 1 [1960-1970]* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), p. 2.

Gordimer's early work is concerned with 'the geopolitics of apartheid and its policies of spatial control'.<sup>44</sup> What interests me is the formal way in which both narrators are positioned on the edge of South Africa's political situation, alienated and often uncomprehending, hapless onlookers of the deprivation and degradation of the social world through which they move. My reading therefore considers how the narrators perceive, negotiate, and narrate the social, political, and economic transformations taking place in South Africa during the 1950s.

Between 1948 and 1950, Malan's regime passed extensive legislation to restrict the social and economic freedom of South Africa's black majority. Apartheid divided South Africa's population racially *and* spatially, with the 1950 Population Registration Act's division of the populace into four supposedly distinct 'racial groups', to be classified at birth: White, Coloured, Indian, and African (otherwise referred to in a pejorative anthropological fashion as 'Bantu'); and the enforcement of strict urban segregation under the 1950 Group Areas Act. The 1951 Bantu Authorities Act set in motion a 'Bantustan policy' to demarcate ten arbitrary African 'homelands', or 'Bantustans', as 'reserve areas' for the black population. The emphasis of all these laws was to ensure the primacy of white accumulation in South Africa, while attempting to legitimise racial separation and remove any moral burden from the National Party. The spatial emphasis of apartheid law was emphasised by the 1953 Separate Amenities Act, which extended racial segregation to all public places and transportation.

Apartheid is mapped across both novels through Gordimer's overlapping treatment of Sophiatown, a black township in Johannesburg. Sophiatown was widely regarded as a political and cultural hub for black South Africans in the 1940s and 1950s but the city authorities destroyed the township after the forced eviction of its residents, to make way for a whites-only redevelopment in 1955. Sophiatown is therefore representative of the socio-spatial relation of apartheid, whereby the black working class was continually pushed to the peripheries of the country's geography and culture. The 1950 Group Areas Act legislated the uneven allocation of space under apartheid, and the boundaries and hierarchies that were to reinforce white privilege. Urban space was to be locked as the centre of accumulation for whites only. This spatial unevenness also marks the key difference between the protagonists in the novels and the residents of Sophiatown, as Helen and Toby can move in and out of these divisions freely due to the privilege that comes with being wealthy and white. Both novels therefore offer an incomplete cognitive map of Sophiatown, as a nexus for black South African art and

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<sup>44</sup> Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xii.

ideas in Johannesburg, the economic centre of the country, and as a threat to white economic and ideological control.

*The Lying Days:*

**Mapping Capitalism in South Africa**

Cognitive mapping offers a useful way of reading Helen Shaw's narrative in *The Lying Days*, as the novel is thematically preoccupied with notions of mobility and spatial representation, and yet Helen's spatial perception remains fragmented and incomplete. The novel allows readers to consider the unrepresentable totality that is capitalism by mapping Helen's movements and experience across various economic spaces in South Africa. The narrative connects seemingly banal but crucially representative locations within an experience of South Africa's complicated economic network, connecting three parts of the country through the formative development of the novel's narrator between 'The Mine', 'The Sea', and 'The City'. Part one, 'The Mine', details Helen's childhood in the fictional Witwatersrand mining town of Atherton; part two describes her summer holiday sojourn to 'The Sea'; and part three explores an increasing isolation from her family's wealthy upbringing as she lives in 'The City' of Johannesburg. Michael Wade has read this narrative structure as response to Helen's fractious relationship with her mother, exploring the novel as a series of impulses to 'run away from home'.<sup>45</sup> Wade is right to consider the complexity of the novel's mother-daughter relationship, and my reading expands on his view that the narrative is a form of escape from the 'guilty environment' of family background by examining how Helen's isolation from her family can be understood as a process of alienation.<sup>46</sup> I therefore consider how the connection between these locations can be better understood through an emphasis on capitalism. Her narratorial rejection of 'The Mine', in favour of relocating from Atherton to Johannesburg, 'The City', emphasises the power and influence of South Africa's economic centre. Moreover, Helen's movement to Johannesburg from the Witwatersrand mining towns that existed purely to serve white capitalist accumulation, towns that Gordimer described as existing solely "to cater to the needs of the mines", also maps how the country's resources are exploited to support the flow of capital from periphery to

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

centre.<sup>47</sup> In Helen's move to Johannesburg, the narrative is only more deeply immersed in the centre of the political changes being imposed on the country's black majority by the National Party during the 1950s. My analysis examines how Helen's narrative maps racial capitalism in South Africa as a set of socio-spatial relations, between an economic core of white accumulation and the black majority that was continually forced to the urban and rural peripheries. I proceed by taking one example from each of the three parts that structure Helen's narrative in order to examine how her movements between Mine, Sea, and City offer a spatial representation of apartheid and articulate a fledgling form of class consciousness. These examples will also allow me to regard Gordimer's first major protagonist as a product of South Africa's complicated place in the capitalist world-system during the 1950s, with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the increasing redundancy of British cultural affiliations, and the encroachment of American capitalist mass culture.

As the novel starts with Helen as a child, the narrative allows us to explore how the dominant ideology of a given economic and political system shapes someone's world-view from childhood, inasmuch as Helen's child-like voice and point of view relate to her particularly privileged experience of capitalism. The use of language in Helen's narrative here emphasises the primacy of the material connections between Helen, her family and other inhabitants of 'The Mine'. The first scene of the novel, in which Helen runs away from home to go shopping following an argument with her mother, allows readers to consider her alignment to the language of the marketplace. The mother-daughter relationship is figured through material objects, from the first description of Helen's mother "pinning her hair ready for her tennis cap" and "looking straight back at herself in the mirror", ignoring Helen's presence.<sup>48</sup> The unique individuality of Helen's mother *as a mother* is non-descript and her characterisation is developed throughout the novel by a fetishism for the adornments and commodities in her possession. By contrast, Helen's mother demonstrates little attachment to her own daughter, despite Helen's belief that "her indifference was not real [...] new powder showed white where the sun shone full on her nose and chin; it seemed to emphasize the fact that she was ready and waiting and yet held back".<sup>49</sup> Instead, Helen's parents leave her alone at home while they go to their tennis club, with her mother asserting that "the back door's open and she can just be left to her own devices. If something happens to her it's her own fault. I'm not ruining my

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<sup>47</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Studs Terkel: Interview with Nadine Gordimer', in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 12-32 (p. 13).

<sup>48</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as *TLD*.

<sup>49</sup> *TLD*, p. 3.

afternoon for her".<sup>50</sup> The use of the phrase 'left to her own *devices*' gestures towards the importance placed upon objects and accessories to boost one's own individuality and agency. When Helen refuses to join her parents at their tennis club, the mother's metonymic reduction to her 'tennis cap' communicates the repressive nature of a material identity in which the daughter does not fit. John Cooke suggests that the mother is the 'dominant personality' in Helen's own story, in his reading of *The Lying Days* as an autobiographical work about Gordimer's own difficult mother-daughter relationship.<sup>51</sup> However, I contend that it is the materialism of her mother's lifestyle, and thus Helen's upbringing, that is really at stake in this scene, representing the permeation of capitalism in even the most personal of social relations as well as a root cause of Helen's self-diagnosis of "depression" later in the novel.<sup>52</sup> As the novel maps Helen's experience at the Mine, which represents all of her social and economic foundations, to the Sea and the City, her relationship with her mother reveals a commodity fetishism that exposes not only her privileged upper middle-class position but an obliviousness to the deprivation and inequality that has secured her own good fortune.

The mother-daughter relationship also exposes a specific kind of materialism permeating white South African culture during the 1950s, in the mother's attachment to commodities laden with a sense of Britishness. A cultural superficiality can be associated with her mother's tennis club membership, when Helen learns that her parents did not even play tennis but only went to the club for afternoon tea, an extravagant and ostentatious pastime of British culture. The use of the "mirror" as the surface through which Helen most frequently sees her mother underlines the mother's absorption in her own self-image. The feelings of isolation and alienation established during Helen's childhood are therefore not only a precursor to Helen's personal depression but a way of understanding the disrupted and dislocated formation of the novel as a *bildungsroman*. When her parents have left for the tennis club, Helen runs away from home to explore the market stalls and black concession stores on the periphery of the mine. This escape is an implicit rejection of her mother's British materialism but also a transgression of the white-black spatial boundaries that divide the mining town.

However, this transgression is not necessarily a conscious rebellion against apartheid, because it is expressed in a further form of material desire. Consumption on Helen's own terms becomes an act of empowerment in a society based on consumerism:

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<sup>50</sup> *TLD*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives / Public Landscapes* (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> *TLD*, see p. 283 and p. 305.

The smeary windows of the shops were deep and mysterious with jumble that, as I stopped to look, resolved into shirts and shoes and braces and beads, yellow pomade in bottles, mirrors and mauve socks and watch chains, complicated as a mosaic, undisturbed and always added to – a football jersey here, an enamel tiepin there, until there was not one corner, one single inch of the window which was not rich and complicatedly hung. Written out on bits of cardboard, notices said CHEAP, THE LATEST. In the corners drifts of dead flies peaked up. Many others lay, wire legs up, on smooth shirt fronts. From the doorways where blankets sombre and splendid with fierce colors hung, gramophones swung out the blare and sudden thrilling cry – the voice of a woman high and minor above the concerted throats of a choir of men – of Bantu music, and the nasal wail of American cowboy songs. Tinselled tin trunks in pink and green glittered in the gloom.<sup>53</sup>

It seems appropriate to reproduce this paragraph in its entirety because of the lengthy and fervent description that serves to communicate the sense of rushing excitement that defines Helen's window-shopping experience. Two long and descriptive sentences are punctuated by four short and fast-paced sentences; the marketplace is frenetic and the freedom of being away from her controlling mother is reflected in the opportunities to buy something else on display in the shop windows. The sense of adventure is heightened by the "American cowboy songs" that also act as a foil to the mother's attachment to Britishness. The image of the 'cowboy' as the archetype of the 'Western' genre is indicative of the burgeoning cultural influence of America in the 1950s. By positioning the "thrilling cry of Bantu music" almost in competition with the "nasal wail of American cowboy songs", the novel indicates the cultural antagonism of the cowboy figure, as a defender of a white American exceptionalism against the threat of Native Americans misidentified as 'Indians', which can be paralleled with the 'Voortrekker' ideal of Afrikaner exceptionalism in South Africa and therefore the repression of the country's black majority identified quite homogenously and reductively as 'Bantus' by the apartheid state.

The potent use of imagery in this scene sets up an immediate contrast with the dull and emotionless description of Helen's family home, against which the reader can understand Helen's pleasure in and attraction to the variety of choice offered by commodity culture. Yet a contradiction is made available in the way Helen's narrative

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<sup>53</sup> *TLD*, p. 10.

represents her mother reductively as a series of possessions and the power of Helen's own material interactions in this market scene. By looking in to the 'smear windows' of the concession stores, Helen "felt for the first time something of the tingling fascination of the gingerbread house before Hansel and Gretel".<sup>54</sup> The naivety of this childish comparison is particularly interesting for the contradiction between the desperate hunger of Hansel and Gretel, as described by the Brothers Grimm, and Helen's indulgent material desires.<sup>55</sup> As Helen describes in the above quotation, 'there was not one corner, one single inch of the window which was not rich and complicatedly hung', to the extent that even the 'drifts of dead flies peaked up' in the various corners would not deter her appetite to accumulate. The contradictory images here, of rich mosaics and depictions of death in the 'drifts' of dead flies, and 'tinsel tin trunks in pink and green' that offer both 'glitter' and 'gloom', presents something more readily sinister than the immediate benignity of the sugar house of cakes and confectionaries that tempted Hansel and Gretel. Yet, while in the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel become prisoner and slave to a wicked witch, Helen's narrative here, and throughout the novel, is rarely able to articulate or recognise any reasoning for the forms of deprivation she encounters. The contradiction between the great wealth produced by the mines and exploitation of workers who must buy "CHEAP" passes Helen by, despite the use of full capital letters, but the signs are also physical, in "bare rubbed dust that had been veld but had worn away beneath ill-fitting mine boots and tough naked toes".<sup>56</sup> The metaphorical links here between material production and destruction may be unavailable to Helen as a child narrator but they foreshadow Helen's subsequent experience of the mine's exploited labour force in Atherton and the deprivation of Johannesburg's urban black population. What is made increasingly apparent to the reader as Helen's narrative progresses is that this is not a children's story and the unnamed malefactors here are capitalism and apartheid.

It is fundamental to the novel that Helen never fully comprehends capitalism and apartheid in this way, and that Gordimer avoids writing a political tract, because the combination of excitement and terror in this shopping scene denotes the dangerous way in which commodity fetishism can obscure and render invisible some of the more pernicious aspects of capitalist production. Despite the apparent signs of gloom and hardship, Helen's 'trembling legs' carry her on to all 'the smear windows of the shops [that] were deep and mysterious'. In contrast to the lengthy and passionate description of the inanimate objects and dead animals, the black township residents are described as

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<sup>54</sup> *TLD*, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> "The two children had also not been able to sleep for hunger", Brothers Grimm, *Complete Fairy Tales* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> *TLD*, p. 13.

alien-like: "shadowy" and "strange" in their "concentration of spending money", a concentration necessary perhaps because their relative poverty limits their choices.<sup>57</sup> While Helen's unease may at first appear to be racially-motivated, the description may instead be inspired by jealousy: the excitement of shopping creates wants and desires that she realises she is unable to satiate because as a child she "had no money".<sup>58</sup> What Helen's narrative ironically recognises in this instance is a form of economic disparity, and so she runs back to her mother "tailing after her, after all" to enjoy the luxury of "crumpets [...] with fresh cups of tea".<sup>59</sup> The novel's recurring references to tennis and afternoon tea implicate a consumption of British cultural traditions that mask the exploitative core-periphery relation between South Africa and the former imperial centre. In the subsequent parts of her narrative, Helen becomes increasingly alienated from her parents' British affectations, which can be understood in what Homi Bhabha refers to as a 'flawed colonial mimesis', in the attempt to obscure and render invisible the system of racial and economic oppression pioneered by colonialism and continued by global capitalism.<sup>60</sup> The lingering significance of sporting activities such as tennis and cricket, followed by afternoon tea, offers a mimic representation of an idealised but fetishised Britishness, whereby white South Africans culturally reinforce a vision of their own continued domination by mimicking the supposedly superior tastes and practices introduced by European colonials. This act of mimicry is a fallacious nostalgia (the mapping of a false social imaginary) that fails to recognise that the British Empire was built to serve the interests and accumulation of a small, privileged few at the exploitation of both those in the colonies and the working class in Britain.

While Helen may be uncomprehending of the long history of economic inequality in South Africa, the interconnectedness of her luxury and the penury of others is mapped in a subsequent scene, where she encounters a group of mine workers on hunger strike. Helen describes how:

Every Sunday morning the Mine, and fainter, more distantly, the town, woke to the gentle, steady beats of drums from the Compound: the boys held war dances, decked in checked dishcloths and feathers from domestic dusters now instead of the skins of beasts and war paint, passing time and getting rid of virility the Mine couldn't utilize instead of gathering passion for battle; stamping the dust of a

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<sup>57</sup> *TLD*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> *TLD*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *TLD*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>60</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 121-131 (p. 125).



piece of veld provided by the Mine instead of their tribal earth. But this morning there were no drums.<sup>61</sup>

Before Helen even sees the striking workers, she knows something is wrong because she cannot hear the sound of the drums, and therefore the 'boys' are not performing in the way that is expected of them. Moreover, the ritual performance of 'war dances' on Sunday mornings appears to be a further representation of the Mine's power over its workers: they are rendered impotent by the standard mining policy in South Africa that forbade male mine workers from having families; they dance in 'dishcloths' and 'feathers from domestic dusters' that would appear to denigrate and belittle their customs; and the land on which they live is no longer their own tribal land but owned and 'provided' back to them by the Mine. The text also speaks back to itself, as the reader can compare the jubilant American cowboy songs with the enfeebled and lacklustre 'war dances'. When Helen joins her father to visit the Atherton mining company's Compound Manager, a social-spatial relation is made between the dispossession of the mine workers' tribal land and the accumulation of the mine's managerial class:

The Compound Manager, by virtue of his position, had a very large garden, laid out with the formality of a park and kept shaved, clipped and pared by bands of Compound boys who were always to be seen squatting like frogs on one lawn or another. Now the gates were open [and] about two hundred Mine boys blotted out the green.<sup>62</sup>

While the beauty of the manager's garden is maintained through the labour of the compound workers, their presence is also described in denigrating animalistic language. The observation that the striking workers "blotted out the green" makes it seem as though it is the workers having a destructive effect on the environment, rather than the production (and means of production) instituted by the mine itself. Instead, Helen is told by her father that the "Mine boys" had "behaved badly" because they "didn't like the food they were given, and so they all came together to Mr. Ockert's house to complain [...] they didn't refuse to work, but they wouldn't eat".<sup>63</sup> Rather, the labourers were striking against the mining company's food rationing system, a nuance made apparent to the reader through an overheard conversation between Helen's father and the Compound

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<sup>61</sup> *TLD*, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> *TLD*, p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> *TLD*, p. 30.

Manager, who disperses the strike by threatening to take "their Sunday ration of kaffir beer away from them".<sup>64</sup> From their tribal earth to their homemade beer, the local black workers appear to be continually faced with the threat of further dispossession.

Moreover, Helen's child-like narration here remains instructive to the reader: that something as serious as a hunger strike is treated by her father as "bad behaviour" on behalf of the mine workers is indicative of the way labour conditions are obscured and disregarded in capitalist society: no reasoning is provided from the workers' point of view for why the strike occurred, it is simply labelled as 'deviant' by the company's management. This scene's depiction of a stringent social order, in which the ruling class are in control and set the limits of labour and living conditions for the working poor, is further emphasised when Helen's father recalls "the 1922 strike of white miners, when there were shots in the street of Atherton".<sup>65</sup> By interweaving this historical example into the narrative, Gordimer underlines the long history of economic inequality and poor working conditions faced by South Africa's mining workers. Formally, the figurative language used by Helen to react to her father's historical example invokes the capitalist paradigm of the marketplace, as the image of shooting in the streets conjures "visions of excitement and danger" that appear to repeat her experience in the concession stores. The prospect of risking one's livelihood in strike action bears no greater significance to her than a form of entertainment, in the same way that mine workers' performance of 'war dances' has become little more than a fetishised recreational activity in the purview of the mine's white families. While the connection between white privilege and the mine workers' penury is not fully formed in the narrative, the reader is nevertheless able to discern these associations through the cognitive mapping of Helen's total experience in 'The Mine'.

Ironically, discussion of the hunger strike reproduces sensations of hunger in Helen, "whistling an empty passage right down my throat to my stomach – I twisted my hand out of my father's and ran [to the] bacon and egg put away for me in the oven".<sup>66</sup> Wade and Clingman have already explored the use of food as a representation for racial division here; however, what is also significant is the conflict between Helen's privileged indulgence as the child of a senior Atherton mining operator and the ongoing strike actions for better rations that are quashed by the mining company.<sup>67</sup> The strikers of 1922 were quelled by the "commando of burghers" and the strikers in the present setting

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<sup>64</sup> *TLD*, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> See Michael Wade, p. 12. See Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), pp. 28-30.

abandon their position in fear that their provision of beer will be reduced, drawing on both the physical violence and consumerist incentives used to discourage dissent against working and living conditions in an ongoing cycle of deprivation under capitalism. The limited class consciousness afforded by Helen's ideological upbringing allows her to confuse her own cravings and gluttony as a hunger equal to the workers' protest against inadequate food. Helen's supposed hunger leads her straight to the 'bacon', a recurring image in Gordimer's early writing that acts as a signifier for a commodified and reified relationship with food that blurs the physical conditions of its production. Consumption is therefore continually engaged with as a form of escape, rather than critically evaluated as a reason for (or problem leading to) this need; the self-perpetuating excess of materialism. The use of irony here serves to convey Helen's disassociation from the class reality of the strike, further emphasised by Helen 'running away' from the striking miners holding a sit-in at the Compound. Movement becomes representative of the outcome, as the working and living conditions of the miners consistently remain static and limited, while Helen has the ability to consume freely and at her leisure. Understanding the use of irony builds on Clingman's historical reading in his assertion that "what is noteworthy about the strike, however, is its essential quietude and provincialism [...] In her description of this tremor from the periphery Gordimer gives us a valuable insight into some of the daily realities of labour relations on the Witwatersrand in the 1930s and 1940s".<sup>68</sup> Clingman is right to recognise the deprivation of workers on the 'periphery' of South Africa's economic accumulation but Helen's narrative does more than reflect reality. It raises issues of consciousness and cognition through the specificity of the narrator's point of view. Indeed, as Rita Barnard has more recently argued, *The Lying Days* offers a materialist perspective that indicates how 'experience and consciousness are radically altered by the subject's "place in the economy" [...] the dialectic of person and place'.<sup>69</sup> Barnard's emphasised use of the phrase a "place in the economy", which she borrows from *July's People*, underlines the importance in Gordimer's early work of her wider concern with social relations, spatial representation, and the capitalist world-system.

'The Mine' allows readers to consider the hypocrisy of excessive materialism within the capitalist mode of production through its specific juxtaposition of poverty and wealth creation. Helen's family is so closely associated with their possessions and seemingly satiated by luxury while existing side-by-side with the deprivation of the

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<sup>68</sup> Clingman, pp. 29-30.

<sup>69</sup> Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 53 [my emphasis].

workers who are, in turn, exploited to produce the uneven distribution of wealth as represented in the text. While the objects in the shop windows take on a dazzling fantasy-like quality that obstructs even the most obvious signs of misery, Gordimer's protagonist encounters the exploitation of the country and its population throughout the course of the novel. In its mapping of South Africa's racial capitalism, *The Lying Days* starts in the mine as the epicentre of the country's historic and systemic patterns of exploitation. The novel captures the difficulty in registering the totality of capitalism because even though 'The Mine' places Helen at a primary site of capital extraction and accumulation in South Africa, she remains largely unconscious of the inequality and unevenness of the capitalist system from which she benefits.

### **From Mine to City in South Africa**

The second section of her narrative, 'The Sea', acts as a bridge between Helen's experience of life in the mine and the city, as Helen leaves Atherton to stay with the Koch family in the port city of Durban. The passive and ambivalent narration of her arrival emphasises her relative subordination to the train's economic role in South Africa and its operation within the wider network of the capitalist world-economy:

The train put me down on the siding paved with coal grit and blew back a confetti of smuts as it screeched off slowly over the brilliance of rails. When I took my hands from my eyes I was receding rapidly, alone on the glittering black dust.<sup>70</sup>

The passive voice used here demonstrates Helen's irrelevance within a wider network of trade and production: it is not the train that recedes but Helen; it is not Helen that gets off the train, the train ejects her. These subtle nuances not only account for Helen's sense of isolation at being left 'alone on the glittering black dust' but figuratively connect to Marx's assertion that, in the marketplace, the primacy of capitalist production assumes precedence over the needs and importance of human beings. Even on a holiday to the coast Helen cannot escape the processes of South Africa's mining industry, with the black dust blown in her face acting as stark reminder of the network of exploitation that extends across the country. The "confetti of smuts" spoils Helen's moment of arrival on holiday. The visual image is a reminder that her white privilege is relative to the deprivation of the country's black majority, whether she realises it or not. Moreover, Helen is presented as

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<sup>70</sup> *TLD*, p. 40.

inconsequential to the train, suggesting that the primary function of South Africa's railway infrastructure is not to transport the country's leisure class to their holiday retreats on the coast but to connect the mines to coastal ports so that the country's natural resources are fully integrated into the world's commercial markets.

The juxtaposition of mobility with an internal sense of dislocation offers a way of understanding the economic connections mapping together the fragmentation of Helen's narrative between 'Mine', 'Sea', and 'City'. 'The Sea', as a spatial category, carries symbolic meaning for the history of white settlement in South Africa, and the specific naval history that led to both the country's exploitation in the colonial era and its peripheral status in the postcolonial capitalist world-system. White settlement in South Africa was only established as a by-product activity of the Dutch East India Company, who needed a half-way station to better maintain their trade routes between Europe and Asia. As Leonard Thompson has highlighted, the initial colony formed by Jan Van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 was not intended to be a permanent settlement, but the ease with which armed European settlers could subdue the local African population and exploit their land was encouraging enough for Company employees to settle permanently.<sup>71</sup> Helen's journey to The Sea, therefore, is not merely a plot mechanism, but serves to speak more widely about the long history of European exploitation in South Africa, introduced and maintained through the country's coastal position halfway between Europe and Asia. As the only chapter heading with a descriptor of physical geography, rather than human geography, this section also serves to capture how production at 'The Mine' and the urbanisation of 'The City' has turned the natural environment of South Africa into spaces recognised purely for their role within the process of capitalist production.

Helen's train journey from the Witwatersrand to Durban, one of the largest and busiest trading ports in Africa, therefore maps the extraction of South Africa's natural resources from the country's mines to its coast, and the historical flow of capital out of South Africa within the exploitative network of the world-economy. As William Martin points out, 'railways in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa, Asia, and Latin America invariably served as engines of extraction and underdevelopment'.<sup>72</sup> While Helen's narrative maps the interconnectedness of South Africa, the integration of South Africa's natural resources into the world market in this way does not lead to any subsequent benefit for the country, its infrastructure, or its population as a whole. As Walter Rodney

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<sup>71</sup> See Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> William G. Martin, *South Africa and the World Economy: Remaking Race, State, and Region* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2013), p. 74.

argued, the underdevelopment of Africa in the service of European accumulation has its roots in the mining industry, the profits of which 'stimulated the building industry, the transport industry, the munitions industry, and so on. The mining that went on in Africa left holes in the ground [...] but, in Europe [...] mineral imports built a massive industrial complex'.<sup>73</sup> Both of these points are materially illustrated by Helen's frequent train journeys back and forth from the Atherton mine to the core areas of white capital accumulation in South Africa, whether in Durban, Johannesburg, or across to Cape Town at the end of the narrative for her transfer to England. While the mining towns are connected to vast transportation networks, the labour force itself is provided with such inadequate infrastructure that they live in slums and shanty towns, as in her experience of the township Mariastad:

the closeness of the place, the breath-to-breath, wall-to-wall crowding, had become so strained that it had overflowed and all bounds had disappeared. The walls of the houses pressed on the pavement, the pavement trampled into the street, there were no fences and few windows [...] all movement seemed violent here.<sup>74</sup>

The township is mapped here as a space of paralysing claustrophobia, overwhelming Helen's senses. It is not the movement that should seem violent but the deprivation of such squalid conditions. When Helen's narrative later shifts to 'The City', her own movement represents yet another dislocation from the inequalities to which she continually bears witness but is unable to make sense of. Her mobility, as part of the privilege granted to those who are wealthy and white in South Africa, is at the root of this system's violence "here". Her narrative suggests that this cycle of deprivation is intrinsic to the capitalist economic system because it proves so unavoidable.

Helen becomes so associated with the mines that she is known to her friend Joel as "Helen of Atherton".<sup>75</sup> Although this title is meant as a term of endearment, all other descriptions of life on the Atherton mine render it rather humiliating, particularly considering it was Helen's first lover, Ludi Koch, who told her that her "life on the mine is the narrowest, most mechanical, unrewarding existence you could think of in any nightmare [...] you live by courtesy of the Mine, for the Mine, in the Mine".<sup>76</sup> Such recurring descriptions of the Atherton mine company provide readers with an analogy of

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<sup>73</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2012), p. 180.

<sup>74</sup> *TLD*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>75</sup> *TLD*, p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> *TLD*, p. 49.

the destructive all-encompassing nature of capitalism itself: all of the land and resources are owned singularly by the Atherton company. Initially, it may seem somewhat ironic and humiliating that Helen would be so patronised by someone whose own alias, as Judie Newman points out, is 'ludicrously phallic'.<sup>77</sup> While Newman's observation informs her feminist reading of *The Lying Days* that seeks to understand 'The Sea' as Helen's 'flowering' from girlhood to womanhood, the symbolism of Ludi's role can also be understood in relation to Helen's desire to escape the patterns of white accumulation in South Africa. The experience of a small idyllic farm-holding on the coast of Natal, with a 'ludicrously phallic' lover called Ludi Koch, certainly offers a contrast to the alienated childhood account of life on the Mine. As Pradnya Ghorpade observes, Ludi represents part of Helen's 'rebellion against the materialist values of her parents'.<sup>78</sup> Ludi represents an antithesis to what Helen only later articulates is the constant desire in capitalist society to accumulate:

Houses, families, necessity for money and more money, all the things that you want to do pushed off into some vague future. [...] The idea of domestic life came to me as a suction toward the life of the Mine, a horror of cosy atrophy beckoning, and it was becoming impossible to ignore.<sup>79</sup>

Ludi's lifestyle therefore offers a form of escape from a restrictive domestic livelihood and the contradictory consumerist pressure of always wanting more without ever being able to fulfil one's materialist urges. However, as Newman rightly points out, Ludi Koch is a ridiculous figure, but not simply because of his phallic name but also because of his materialist hypocrisy. Despite his own condemnations of Helen's indebtedness to the profits of the mine, Ludi ends up becoming a shopkeeper like his parents, unable to realise that he too is assuming and fulfilling an inherited role within the small-town societies contained within and contributing to the perpetuation of South Africa's racial-capitalist system.

It is unsurprising, then, that Helen declares how "more and more I longed to leave the Mine and live in Johannesburg [...] I felt I was muffled off from real life", but her unsuccessful attempts to discard the social relations that extend outwards from South

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<sup>77</sup> Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Pradnya Vijay Ghorpade, 'Women as Political Activists in Nadine Gordimer's Novels', in *Studies in Women Writers in English*, ed. by Mohit Ray and Rama Kundu (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004), pp. 92-100 (p. 93).

<sup>79</sup> *TLD*, p. 244.

Africa's mines only serve to leave Helen more unfulfilled and alienated.<sup>80</sup> As Helen of Atherton, her mobility continually maps her indebtedness to the uneven distribution of wealth emanating from the mines. When Helen moves to Johannesburg to be "in the midst of people", the city space reinforces a sense of "the loneliness that is a failure to connect" in South Africa, where the city's divided urban spatial configurations reduce people to nothing more than "objects taken out of a box [so that] in the end there was only myself".<sup>81</sup> What manifests as Helen's loneliness and depression can therefore be read as a product of her own unwitting indebtedness and contributions to capitalism, as any sense of individualism she pursues through her relocations across South Africa only results in her own diminished self worth. What is being mapped in Helen's narrative, therefore, is not so much an escape from capitalism but revolving movements that dramatise some of the inescapable "morbid symptoms" of South Africa's racial-capitalist society, in her increasing sensitivity to the antagonisms and disruption caused by the implementation of apartheid.

'The City' section extends the novel's spatial conceptualisation of death and destruction in South Africa, whether in the concession stores in 'The Mine' or the township experience in 'The Sea', when Helen relates the relationship between Johannesburg and its townships:

the normal human wastage of a big industrial city, but a whole population, the entire black-skinned population on whose labour the city rested, forced to live in slums because there was nowhere else for them to live.<sup>82</sup>

This description is striking for its use of ironical language, as Helen is starting to recognise the 'human wastage' of capitalist society yet continues to employ the 'normal' rhetoric of white South Africa. The awkward juxtaposition of "rested, forced" also serves to map the closely-crowded but highly divided spatial hierarchy of the city, where the wealthy can rest while neighbouring communities are forced to live in slums. The white ruling class are symbolised here *as* 'the city'; they own the country's means of production and their wealth rests on the labour of the country's predominantly black working class. The ambiguity of these details also communicates an inability on Helen's behalf, as a narrator, to perceive the connection between the extravagant lifestyles of wealthy whites in 'The Mine' with the dilapidation of Johannesburg's black urban working class living in

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<sup>80</sup> *TLD*, p. 182.

<sup>81</sup> *TLD*, p. 339.

<sup>82</sup> *TLD*, p. 240.



slums and squalor. Moreover, as Helen moves to the centre of Johannesburg at the same time that the city's black population is being expelled en masse, the juxtaposition of these movements maps a more systemic relation between white appropriation and habitation of urban spaces and the continued dispossession and impoverishment of the country's black majority.

In 'The City', just as she did when she was a child in Atherton, Helen becomes witness to a working-class strike, as black township residents protested on May Day against the forced evictions being carried out by the city authorities following the Group Areas Act 1950. Urban townships across South Africa were targeted for eviction and destruction so that 'valuable' city spaces could be redeveloped for white commercial and residential property. In the novel, language and point of view emphasise the significance of Helen's white privilege, as once again the experience of civil disobedience against poverty and destitution are defined in shallow terms of 'terror and excitement'. Helen notes that "reports of bloodshed and violence followed in rapid succession", without noting whose blood was primarily being shed, and that the townships, such as Sophiatown, are in for a "night of terror".<sup>83</sup> The 'excitement' is propelled when Helen recalls that her boyfriend, Paul, had been providing 'Poor Relief' as part of a township housing project, and so she drives with some friends to 'rescue' him: "He had temporarily taken over Colored Poor Relief, which was administered separately from Native or Indian Poor Relief [in] a slum suburb of racial confusion".<sup>84</sup> For Helen, driving through the townships during their 'night of terror' was infused with a "pleasurable *illusion* of adventure", emphasising just how immaterial the social action is to a white woman such as herself, protected by the state and through her superior position of social and economic privilege.<sup>85</sup> Helen continues to express a confidence in her mobility, even in this moment of terror, because her position of privilege in South Africa has always been defended: "the ban on the entry of Europeans to native townships which would certainly be included in police security methods seemed as nominal as had been the posters illustrating air-raid precautions in our country which had never known a raid".<sup>86</sup> The reference to the Second World War further underlines the hypocrisy of South Africa's post-war position, having sent soldiers to fight totalitarianism in Europe and yet implementing its own repressive regime against the 'natives' of South Africa. The possessive undertone in Helen's phrase "our country" demonstrates that being wealthy and white was the only pass needed in apartheid South Africa. Indeed, Helen's apparent

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<sup>83</sup> *TLD*, p. 328.

<sup>84</sup> *TLD*, p. 261.

<sup>85</sup> *TLD*, p. 328 [my emphasis].

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

trivialisation of the social and political upheaval taking place in South Africa during the 1950s suggests that such brutal suffering had become normalised and therefore banal: "on that night, eighteen natives were killed, thirty wounded. Two of the dead had suffocated in the burning cinema, sixteen were shot by the police".<sup>87</sup> If this matter-of-fact tone appears insensitive or careless, it is perhaps because Helen remains unable to respond meaningfully to the uneven and unequal social and spatial conditions of others living in the city of Johannesburg.

Helen's narrative in 'The City' represents her continued struggle to reconcile the social reality of South Africa for which she has limited vocabulary to respond. On one side, she appears increasingly aware of the brutal police measures used to quell the township residents:

over the week end, when the ban on public gatherings in African townships was already in force, a wedding party had been broken up by the police; a group of mourners, sitting in the small yard of a bereaved house after a funeral, as is the custom with Africans, were intruded upon by the police and ordered to go home.<sup>88</sup>

And yet she finishes reading the newspaper's report with the conclusion that "the anti-police attitude of the Africans was due to liquor".<sup>89</sup> Ironically, when they had 'rescued' Paul from the township, they themselves "drove straight to the nearest hotel" for "drinks", assuaging their inexplicable sense of fear through the comforts of consumption.<sup>90</sup> All of this contrasts with Helen's earlier declaration that Paul's work gave him a "closeness to life which she had never known before", which had led her to negatively reflect on her own life: "The Mine was unreal, a world which substituted rules for the pull and stress of human conflict which are the true conditions of life".<sup>91</sup> What Helen begins to recognise as the 'true conditions of life' in South Africa can be better understood as the country's specifically racial-capitalist exploitation of labour, as her narrative has presented black workers as cheap, controlled, and at the whim of white industrial needs. 'The City' accentuates Helen's experience of these conditions, in Johannesburg's role as an urban centre of exploited black labour. This burgeoning recognition is the narrative at its most explicit on the exploitative connection between South Africa's metaphorical country and

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<sup>87</sup> *TLD*, p. 329.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *TLD*, p. 334.

<sup>91</sup> *TLD*, p. 242.

city. Furthermore, South Africa's particular exploitation of labour follows wider patterns of urbanisation at the end of the Second World War that Williams has attributed to the decline of empire and the cementation of the post-war capitalist world-system:

at the other end of the imperialist process, intensely overcrowded cities are developing as a direct result of the imposed economic development and its internal consequences. Beginning as centres of colonial trade and administration, these cities have drawn in [...] surplus people and the uprooted labourers of the rural areas. [...] The last image of the city, in the ex-colonial and neo-colonial world, is the political capital or the trading port surrounded by the shanty-towns.<sup>92</sup>

Helen's experience of an urban township offers readers this 'last image of the city' in South Africa, as a place where great wealth clashes violently with extreme poverty. The narrative's cognitive mapping of Helen's position within the global economy dramatises what Williams describes as the 'imposed economic development' of the post-war world-system and 'its internal consequences'. This image of Johannesburg's townships not only draws on issues of overcrowding and uprooting but dramatises how the dual crisis of homelessness and joblessness intensifies the dehumanisation of the working class. Although Helen's narrative might not offer the reader answers to the concerns it raises, the fact that her psychological breakdown, as well as her desire to leave South Africa altogether, coincide with her increasing awareness of economic exploitation and inequality indicates a kind of incipient consciousness and even rejection of the system through which Helen moves but which she only dimly understands. As such, her narrative maps racial capitalism in South Africa even though she is unable to respond meaningfully to the increasing violence and destructiveness of the National Party's implementation of apartheid. Despite Helen's indebtedness to white accumulation in South Africa, she is also an unwitting and largely powerless pawn of a wider historical system that she does not openly contradict because of the gradual alterations but also the persistent limitations of her consciousness.

### **Britishness in 1950s South Africa**

Helen's ultimate 'escape' from South Africa at the end of the novel, in her planned emigration to England, further dramatises the way empire was set up to extract to Britain

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<sup>92</sup> Williams, p. 287.

all manner of wealth and resources produced in colonies, and therefore maps the historic and systemic patterns of extraction set up by colonialism and continued by modern capitalism. The ultimate attraction of Britishness within Helen's narrative, despite her dislocation from the mine and her parents, underlines the influence that Britain held in South Africa in the early 1950s despite the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. The Atherton mining company is itself described as a former British interest and the commercial and cultural links that remain between the mine and Britain are so strong that when Helen's parents travel to England it is described as "the visit of a lifetime which every Mine official waits for".<sup>93</sup> Once again, a colonial dichotomy is demonstrated between the mine at the peripheral end of the commodity chain and England as a place of enduring economic and cultural prestige. The fact that Helen's own narrative is structured as a movement between Atherton and Johannesburg, and eventually onwards to England, is emblematic of the neo-colonial capitalism discussed by Williams. The novel traces the persistent flow of wealth and people out of South Africa as well as exposing the capitalist system of exploitation and inequality left in place after the formal end of colonialism. The course of Helen's narrative, therefore, not only takes us back to the historical domination of South Africa's gold-mining industry by British imperialism (after the discovery of gold in South Africa by British settlers in 1886) but also serves to map the continuity of colonial relations that remain entrenched and fixed in the core-and-periphery formations of the world-system.

Indeed, because her parents become so preoccupied with the imminence of their 'trip', as "this crowning fulfilment of success, solidity and privilege was always referred to by Mine people", they evade both the political upheaval taking place in South Africa and the fact that Helen subsequently drops out from University before finishing her English literature degree.<sup>94</sup> And when Helen's parents return they bring luxury items for which her mother must make "space" for in the family home to showcase "the fact of having been to England".<sup>95</sup> Their materialist behaviour denotes the subservient and inferior position of South Africa in relation to the supposed luxuries and cultural elevation of Britain. The incongruity is that it is places like Atherton, from where South Africa's natural resources are exported to Britain, that supply the capital to support Britain's development at the cost of underdevelopment in Africa. Moreover, the notion that a British identity had become a characteristic that could be acquired by whites in South Africa through class, wealth, and materialism underlines not merely the legacy of

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<sup>93</sup> *TLD*, p. 183.

<sup>94</sup> *TLD*, p. 247.

<sup>95</sup> *TLD*, p. 275.

British colonialism in South Africa but, more importantly, the declining world power of Britain in the 1950s, as Britishness was no longer being superimposed by colonials abroad and was beginning to be fetishised, commodified, and absorbed by subjects as tourists. The novel allows readers to question the socially-constructed nature of white identity in South Africa, as well as in Britain, through a materialism that simultaneously disburdens any sense of conscience to the exploitations of British colonial history as it neglects the violence and injustice that maintains white accumulation. Imperial Britishness is unobtainable for Helen's parents just as the apartheid myth of a white identity superior in class and moral value is questioned as a fallacy towards the end of Helen's narrative.

The narrative here offers a response to racial capitalism in South Africa by mapping the formative experience of British colonialism as a cultural root underpinning the myth of white hegemony and subjugation, which itself is being extended by the new post-war domination of America in the world-system. The British obsession of Helen's parents contrasts with the repeated references to encroaching "Americanisms" and the increasing ubiquity of American products in South Africa, such as "American shirts", the "big, powerful American car", "magazines", "musicals", and even the pervasiveness of "American beauty", all of which serve to underline a shift in world power, both economically and culturally, with the material fashionability of American goods exemplifying America's post-war economic domination within the capitalist world-system.

By returning to the mother-daughter relationship towards the end of the novel, Gordimer exposes a cultural vapidness and moribundity at the heart of white South Africa, which propels the irreconcilable differences between Helen and her parents. When Helen's parents learn that she has been living in Johannesburg with Paul, with all that is symbolised by his work for the "natives", the socio-spatial boundaries between 'The Mine' and 'The City' are cemented by her mother's rejection of her daughter's supposed impropriety:

while she spoke coldness hardened into her face, it became something I have never known in the face of anyone else, possibly because the face of no one else could make that impression on me [...] "I don't want to see you," she said, and already it seemed in her face that she no longer saw me, "I don't want you in this house again."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *TLD*, p. 278.

The breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship is communicated as a spatial configuration through the reified identity of the bourgeois family home, in which there is pride of place for the mother's luxury items from Britain but no longer any *space* for her daughter. "How can women be such beasts?", Helen's mother asks, as if the perceived impropriety of Helen's relationship with Paul will somehow tarnish the success of their trip to England.<sup>97</sup> The final mention of Helen's parents in the novel is almost comedic, as Helen notes that "We even had tea before my father took me to the station. In silence as if someone had died", illustrating how bound Helen's parents are by their long-standing and self-sacrificing loyalty to Britain. As the British Empire itself was in terminal decline in the 1950s, the symbolic death being referred to in this scene emphasises not only the dissolution of Helen's family home but also the demise of a specifically British colonial way of life to which Helen's parents appear irrevocably tied. The mother's materialism, shaped by life at Atherton and cemented by a trip to Britain, thus pushes Helen further between Gordimer's description of two social orders and identities: one known and discarded, Atherton and her family home; and the other unknown and undetermined, her subsequent emigration from South Africa.

Only *after* the breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship does Helen begin to register the wider destruction that the mine is having on the natural environment. As she leaves Atherton for "the last time", Helen as a narrator finally sees the train journey as part of a wider cognitive mapping of the economic network in which it is situated, not simply between the mine and the city, mineral extraction and luxury mansion, but a complicated amalgamation of mine, town, 'dump' wasteland, and countryside:

the outcrop of the gold reef which ran along under the ground began to pass my window again: shaft heads, old untidy mine dumps with the cyanide weirdly hardened and fissured by years of rain, new dumps geometrically exact as the pyramids, towns like Atherton, brickfields, smoking locations, mines, clumps of native stores on the veld – the windows wired over for Sunday – another dump, another mine, another Atherton [...] it was so familiar, this repetition of mine, town, dump and veld I had known for so long, from so many journeys; and so far away.<sup>98</sup>

The personal and psychological damage of Helen's narrative therefore opens a more critical consciousness and sensitivity to the environmental destruction of capitalist

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *TLD*, pp. 317-319.

production in the gold mines of South Africa. She now sees the network of "towns like Atherton" as part of "man's interference with nature", recognising that "the dump" she describes as being "so familiar" is actually the toxic product of the mining extraction process, all of which she "had known for so long" without fully comprehending "something beautiful that was not".<sup>99</sup> Gordimer refers specifically to this failure in spatial perception, in her 1954 essay on 'Allusions in a Landscape', because in the Witwatersrand "any feature of the landscape that strikes the eye always does so because it is a reminder of something else; [because] considered on its own merits, the landscape is utterly without interest".<sup>100</sup> If we take landscape here as the 'reminder of something else', Helen's description destroys the fantasy of provincial clichés of rural 'peace, innocence, and simple virtue' as described by Williams, highlighting how such idealisations obscure the histories of violence, destruction and poor labour and living conditions on the economic peripheries (to which I will return to in my discussion of *A World of Strangers*).<sup>101</sup> For Gordimer then, the coal dumps were refigured as the child-like "Evil Mountain" to mask the brutal reality of the "great mounds of waste matter dumped on the surface of the earth after the gold-bearing ore has been blasted below, hauled up, and pounded and washed into yielding its *treasure* [...] it shares with Hades its heat and vague eternity".<sup>102</sup> Atherton's destructive effect on the local environment can therefore be understood through Williams' materialist critique of man's 'conquest of nature' as an essential aspect of capitalism. The novel thus draws attention to the ideological combination of 'imperialism and capitalism, whose basic concepts – limitless and conquering expansion; reduction of the labour process to the appropriation and transformation of raw materials' are *cognitively* mapped in the denouement of Helen's narrative.<sup>103</sup>

The brutality, and yet banality, of such destructive consequences, whether in the context of the Mine, Sea, or City, appear confused and disturbed in Helen's narrative, and it is this deficit of knowledge about the systems and concepts with a controlling influence on our world that implicates the reader as much as it does Helen as narrator. Focusing the novel into these three spatialised sections offers an extendable metaphor of journey, movement and flow pertaining to the division of South Africa and the flow of its natural resources from peripheral mining towns to cities at the core of South Africa's economy

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<sup>99</sup> *TLD*, p. 318.

<sup>100</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape', in *Telling Times*, pp. 3-27 (p. 5).

<sup>101</sup> Williams, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> Gordimer, pp. 4-6.

<sup>103</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Problems of Materialism', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso Editions and New Left Books, 1980), pp. 103-124 (p. 110).

and further outward to sea, to economic and cultural centres of capital in Europe and America. The structure of Helen's narrative not only dramatises the network of exploitation within and encompassing South Africa as part of the capitalist world-system but it is the paradigmatic presence of the market, and the recurring tropes of death and captivity as figurations of deprivation and exploitation, that provide a powerful and disturbing evocation of the morbid symptoms of the capitalist interregnum.

While Helen's narrative offers the reader selected experiences from a specific class point of view, my reading of *The Lying Days* shows how the text invites readers to critique Helen's socio-economic alignments. While it is uncertain whether Helen fully apprehends her own class position by the end of the narrative, the narrative allows the reader to become conscious of her privileged position within South Africa. If Helen's narrative in *The Lying Days* engages with the misrepresentations and falsehood of white superiority and accumulation in South Africa, the novel also offers readers a different kind of truth by cognitively mapping a more accurate spatial representation of the country's socio-economic divisions. If we understand the first-person narrative of Helen in *The Lying Days* to be a burgeoning consciousness that is fragmentary and incomplete then we can conclude that it is left to the reader to read between the connections not fully articulated by the narrator to make one's own cognitive map of the world-system dramatised in the text.

### *A World of Strangers:*

#### **British Colonial Legacy and South Africa**

Toby Hood's privileged position as the narrator of *A World of Strangers* is set up through the markedly hostile class viewpoint expressed in the opening line of the novel: "I hate the faces of peasants".<sup>104</sup> This hatred communicates Toby's initial self-interest and elevated sense of self through class identity. Moreover, the reference to peasantry indicates the continuation of country/city divides that become extremely pertinent to his encounters in South Africa. While Lionel Abrahams dismissed Toby's narrative as nothing more than a 'satirical social travelogue', Toby's journey from England to South

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<sup>104</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 7. Hereafter referred to as *WOS*.



Africa can be read as an inversion of Helen's movements in *The Lying Days*, mapping the experience of apartheid from an outsider's perspective.<sup>105</sup>

As in Helen's narrative, Toby is introduced to readers through his experience of shopping in a marketplace. *A World of Strangers* joins Toby already halfway through his transit from England to South Africa, ported temporarily in Mombasa. It is worth noting that Kenya was still a British colony in the 1950s, only gaining official independence in 1963, following the Mau Mau uprising. By starting the narrative in a part of Africa still formally controlled by Europe, a wider connection can be made to the ongoing networks of empire on which the post-war capitalist world-system was developing. In Gordimer's text, Mombasa continues to serve its purpose as a key stepping stone in the imperial economic network, having been developed as the sea terminal for the Uganda Railway, built by the British to connect the interior African continent with the Indian Ocean and Europe. Described by Christian Wolmar as 'a truly imperial project, built by the British government with little purpose other than to cement its colonial power', the Uganda Railway was constructed by slave labourers that the British transferred from India, many of whom remained in East Africa to set up trading communities.<sup>106</sup> Despite India's official independence from Britain in 1947, the text's depiction of diasporic "Indian jewellers" with "bundles of elephant tusks" at the market in Mombasa implicates not only the interconnected history of colonial exploitation but also contrasts India's freedom from British rule with the ongoing aspiration of Mau Mau fighters for political freedom in Kenya.<sup>107</sup> Although Toby's narrative refers to Kenya as part of the remaining "British protectorates of Africa", the reader is left to consider who or what exactly is being protected in the British arrangement, with the ongoing and fraught collapse of empire in the post-war period.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, Gordimer's attention to the exploitation of Africa's animal population, with the slaughter of elephants to produce ivory necklaces, frames the narrative with an undertone of violence indicative of the destructive capacity of capitalist enterprise.

Toby's movements are embedded in the history of European imperialism in Africa, mapping the capitalist world-system in the 1950s post-war context as a specific extension of the networks and patterns of accumulation forged by colonial exploitation. In so doing, the narrative connects Toby's experience of South Africa both to the colonial

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<sup>105</sup> Lionel Abrahams, 'Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego', *English Studies in Africa*, III: 2 (1960), 146-151 (p. 148).

<sup>106</sup> Christian Wolmar, *Blood, Iron and Gold: How the Railways Transformed the World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p. 182.

<sup>107</sup> *WOS*, pp. 9-10. See also Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> *WOS*, p. 21.

origins of capitalist accumulation on the continent and the racial-capitalist system being implemented under apartheid. Judie Newman notes that the journey from England allows Gordimer to frame Toby's experiences in Africa 'in ironically detached terms, through a Eurocentric literary lens'.<sup>109</sup> Newman makes romantic comparisons to Sinbad the Sailor and Dickens characters. In my reading, Toby's journey of discovery to Africa by boat is more reminiscent of Marlow, the central narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's influential exploration of European colonialism in Africa is echoed in Gordimer's reference to a "fellow passenger" who "had never before been stationed in Africa [and] was on his way to take up an appointment in the Belgian Congo".<sup>110</sup> This fellow passenger can be read as an allusion to Marlow and the steady flow of Europeans to Africa since the colonial era, which may remind attentive readers that 'the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much'.<sup>111</sup> If Gordimer is indeed alluding here to the transformative first-hand experience of colonialism dramatised by the central narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, she foreshadows the political awakening of Toby in *A World of Strangers*, as the novel dramatises his encounter with the divided and grossly uneven white and black spaces of South Africa. Indeed, despite his hatred for 'the faces of peasants', Toby comes face-to-face with South Africa's working class in both the country's urban and rural contexts. Moreover, the intertextual connection to Conrad is not limited to content but also characterises the form and structure of Toby's narrative, as a first-person account that uses an at times uncertain voice and detached point of view in its approach to the conflicted and antagonistic racial and capitalist configurations of apartheid.

Toby's narrative is first shaped by his sense of privilege and entitlement to the wealth inherited from his family, with his insistence that "luxury was one of the most important things in life" while acknowledging that his lifestyle was supported entirely by his father's estate.<sup>112</sup> The readers is told that Toby's journey to South Africa is to take up a managerial position in the Johannesburg office of his family's publishing company, which specialises in political activism, and so an immediate contrast is created between Toby's emphasis on leisure and his aloof narratorial tone on the one hand and the political remit of his new job on the other for which Toby "simply did not care at all".<sup>113</sup> However, while Toby initially states that he has no concern for "African labour conditions, housing

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<sup>109</sup> Newman, p. 23.

<sup>110</sup> *WOS*, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>112</sup> *WOS*, p. 21 and p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> *WOS*, p. 19.

or political emergence", the novel's mapping of South Africa in the 1950s acts as a revelation to the inequality and exploitation upon which his position of privilege rests.<sup>114</sup> Toby is unable to avoid the harsh reality of racial capitalism in 1950s South Africa. Indeed, as Gordimer described in an essay published prior to *A World of Strangers*, "the real South Africa was then, and is now, to be found in Johannesburg and in the brash, thriving towns of the Witwatersrand", the disparities of which can be explored in Toby's encounters with white and black residents of Johannesburg, as his narrative offers a journey of political development in his increasing exposure to the inequality of South Africa's racial-capitalist system.<sup>115</sup>

On his arrival in Johannesburg, Toby's intention is to avoid politics and to avoid "becoming what [his liberal friends would see him as], what they, in their own particular brand of salaciousness, envied me the opportunity to become – a *voyeur* of the world's ills and social perversions".<sup>116</sup> The repudiation of social concern in South Africa as merely voyeuristic becomes hypocritical when, sat in the hotel amongst other travellers and "glossy-looking people", he browses a tourist brochure advertising "AFRICA IN ALL ITS SAVAGE GLORY", "native war dances to be seen twice monthly at a Mine compound near Johannesburg", with "a picture of a beautiful black girl with an enchanting smile, dressed in a beaded tribal costume, but with plump bared breasts [advertising] THE UNSPOILT CHARM OF ZULULAND".<sup>117</sup> The voyeuristic image of the bare-breasted "beautiful black girl" appears to encourage the exploitation rather than preservation of the supposedly "unspoilt charm" of native South Africans, with 'unspoilt' seemingly a cover word for 'virginal'. The specific function of the tourist brochure allows readers to consider how a myth of South Africa is being culturally constructed to market the specific underdevelopment of racial capitalism as benign. The brochure's fictitious conception of South Africa's idyllic landscapes and prosperous, contented local populations, ignores both a violent colonial past and the brutal apartheid present, instead affirming an ideology that fits South's Africa's white middle-class market values.

Although the African population may appear to be presented here in non-antagonistic terms, the commercial incentives behind this representation are themselves violent in the desire to profit from a false celebration and consumption of African culture, particularly at a time when the National Party was legislating and enforcing a brutal programme of apartheid. The tourist brochure instead offers the commodification of a postcolonial 'exoticism' that is idealised, mythical, and therefore inherently and

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<sup>114</sup> WOS, p. 19.

<sup>115</sup> Gordimer, *Telling Times*, p. 27 [original emphasis].

<sup>116</sup> WOS, p. 36 [original emphasis].

<sup>117</sup> WOS, p. 45.

exploitatively reductive. As Graham Huggan has previously argued:

the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent quality to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness [...] The exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function.<sup>118</sup>

This otherness is also instructive as a power relation: exotic objects may be gazed upon but they should never look back. Toby's 'tourist gaze' as a European in Africa becomes an extension of the entrenched inequality that exists between the world-system's centre and periphery, bearing witness to the socio-economic differences that continue to sustain one while impoverishing the other. This exoticism also serves to reinforce the cultural superiority of the tourist and white onlooker, so that even when black African tribal culture is being held up as an attraction it is simultaneously being disparaged and downgraded. As Basil Davidson has previously put forward, white hegemony has continually served to 'destroy or downgrade Africa's own institutions and cultures'.<sup>119</sup> African culture is downgraded in its representation as provincial and tribal, a periphery in relation to the supposed white European cradle of civilization.

The brochure's claims about the 'unspoilt' charm of Zululand serve to ignore and conceal a history of exploitation in Zulu tribal areas meted out by invading Europeans, the Natives Land Act, and the recent implementation of apartheid legislation in the form of the 1950 Group Areas Act. The reference to Zulu 'war dances' located at a 'mine compound' suggests that *A World of Strangers* is in direct communication with *The Lying Days*, reinforcing what both texts say about South Africa's history of class struggle, particularly as the use of the word 'compound' here emphasises historical associations to enclosure and forced labour. Moreover, as can be explored in both Helen's and Toby's narratives, the processes of commercial mining and mineral extraction would not have left South Africa's natural environment 'unspoilt'. In its duplicity, the brochure exposes what Williams defines as the 'intense attachment to "unspoiled" places' used to perpetuate

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<sup>118</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 13-14.

<sup>119</sup> Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1992), p. 223.

comforting but 'illusory ideas of a natural way of life' that do not exist.<sup>120</sup> More specifically, tourist brochures such as these are exposed for the way in which they distort and conceal the actually existing social relations and conditions of capitalism and the economic exploitation that is often concealed in attractions aimed at tourists. Thus Toby is indeed implicated as a 'voyeur' of South Africa's 'social perversions'. The hypocrisies and fallacies of South African racial capitalism are shown to be unavoidable.

Toby's first social engagement in Johannesburg introduces him to those who profit most from South Africa's mining industry, through family-friend Marion Alexander, the wife of gold-mining "tycoon" Hamish Alexander, who is described as "second only to Ernest Oppenheimer in importance in the gold-mining industry".<sup>121</sup> The reference to Oppenheimer suggests that the Alexanders are part of the powerful Anglo American Corporation, which may help the reader understand why the Alexanders' mansion is referred to as 'The High House'. This egotistical name for a home takes Toby to the centre of what Gordimer aptly refers to, in her epilogue quotation from Federico García Lorca, as that of South Africa's "gold-minded whites", implying the predominance of the country's mining industry.<sup>122</sup> Attending parties in The High House, Toby socialises with a collection of Johannesburg's elites, many of whom are privileged like him by virtue of being the children of millionaires and wealthy landowners. The landowners idealise their farms in the country and Karoo villages but Toby's various invitations to stay are prefaced by materialist concerns stressing that he come only when they have "a second bathroom built on, and the painting will be done".<sup>123</sup> The 'gold-mindedness' Gordimer attributes to such wealthy whites indicates a shallow attachment to appearance but also their own accumulation.<sup>124</sup>

Accumulation at The High House is expressed through its associations with Britain, both in the building's appearance as "a bloated cottage, with a steep thatched roof curling up over dormer windows" and the guests who "spoke actor's English, with exaggerated stresses".<sup>125</sup> South African political historian Hermann Giliomee notes the dominance of English speakers in 1950s South Africa despite the rise of Afrikaner nationalism:

English-speakers were the key to future domestic fixed investment and to overseas investment, with Afrikaner entrepreneurs having just entered the

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<sup>120</sup> Williams, p. 293.

<sup>121</sup> *WOS*, p. 47.

<sup>122</sup> *WOS*, p. 5.

<sup>123</sup> *WOS*, p. 58.

<sup>124</sup> *WOS*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>125</sup> *WOS*, p. 48 and p. 54.

corporate world. The per capita income of English-speakers, by 1948, was more than double that of Afrikaners. Their level of education was much higher and they identified with a British culture that was vastly richer and more diverse than the Afrikaans culture.<sup>126</sup>

Accordingly, Toby's position of privilege in *The High House* is recognised by virtue of his British cultural heritage, as those who were "English accepted me with the airy freemasonry of those who know the privileges and disadvantages, for whatever they are worth, of their own order. Those who were not English all seemed to take travel in Britain and Europe as much for granted as a journey in a suburban train".<sup>127</sup> Of course, the only black people in *The High House* are servants, including the "African chauffeur" who collects Toby from his hotel and who makes a point of crossing "the new Queen Elizabeth bridge" in Braamfontein.<sup>128</sup> Toby's impression of "the exquisite orderliness of wealth" in *The High House* and his observation "that nothing in Hamish Alexander's empire would be dust and stones" suggests that the cultural legacy of the colonial era has left a particular notion of Britishness tied to upper class identity for those who profit from the exploitation of South Africa's resources.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Queen Elizabeth II was head of state of apartheid South Africa from her coronation in 1952 until the country's declaration as a republic in 1961, so Toby's movement across the bridge is a figurative way of tracing Britain's role in apartheid all the way to its monarchy. *The High House*, with its exclusive parties to which only the city's rich elites are invited, symbolises the structural inequality of wealth distribution inherent to the capitalist system and the cause of so many of the problems mapped out in both Toby's and Helen's narratives. *The High House* becomes a spatial metaphor for capitalist accumulation as a kind of ongoing luxurious party to which only capital-owning elites are ever invited. *The High House* becomes symbolic of the concentration and centralization of wealth in the hands of a self-recognised 'elite', or ruling class.

In contrast to his experience at *The High House*, Toby also attends a party in a black township after meeting Anna Louw, an Afrikaner working as a black-rights lawyer, whom Dominic Head recognises as 'the novel's only evidently socialist character'.<sup>130</sup> While Head notes that 'the relationship between Toby and Anna is brief and insubstantial', I, however, see her character as important for widening Toby's social

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<sup>126</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 492.

<sup>127</sup> *WOS*, p. 55.

<sup>128</sup> *WOS*, p. 48.

<sup>129</sup> *WOS*, p. 58.

<sup>130</sup> Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, p. 51.

experience in Johannesburg.<sup>131</sup> As Newman notes, Anna is the only character who 'sidesteps the delusions of this world' as it is represented in Toby's narrative.<sup>132</sup> In Anna's company, black characters are introduced into the narrative as equals. By contrast, Toby also pursues a sexual relationship with Cecil, a female guest he meets at The High House, who only engages with black characters as servants, which Toby will later see as a sign of her ignorance: "Cecil regarded Eveline as a first-rate servant, and took this, as I have noticed people who have a good servant tend to, as some kind of oblique compliment to herself: as if she herself deserved or inspired Eveline's firstateness".<sup>133</sup> While Cecil regards the 'firstateness' of her servants only as a reflection of herself, the black South African characters introduced through Anna's party allow Toby to engage with the other side of apartheid, as he befriends black residents of Sophiatown and begins to map the city not only as a social environment but also one of inequality and violence.

### **Visual Culture and the South African Landscape**

South Africa's racial-capitalist socio-spatial configurations are mapped and made particularly visible through the narrative's treatment of visual culture, specifically in relation to motifs of painting and landscape. While the millionaires at The High House discuss painting materialistically as part of room renovations, when Anna's friends are "talking about painting" the conversation becomes political.<sup>134</sup> Toby overhears one of the guests declare:

if I painted in this country – I'd revive literary painting. There are too many landscape painters here. They don't know how to deal with man, so they leave him out. Or if they do put him in, they use only the picturesque aspect – they treat a face or a figure as if it were a tree.<sup>135</sup>

This image of people as "picturesque" objects in landscape that serve a purely aesthetic or ideological purpose builds on the previous scene with the travel brochure exploiting fetishised images of black women to advertise the "unspoilt" charm of South Africa. What both encounters implicitly point to is not only the objectification of Africans but, by extension of this process, ongoing forms of depersonalisation and dehumanisation

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<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Newman, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup> *WOS*, p. 167.

<sup>134</sup> *WOS*, p. 86.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*

rendering people irrelevant, inanimate, or invisible. In his chapter on 'The Picturesque and the South African Landscape', in his book on the politics of *White Writing*, J. M. Coetzee describes how the removal of Africans in landscape paintings of South Africa can be read in the wider context of the country's historical and material appropriation by Europeans.<sup>136</sup> Coetzee goes on to assert that the idealised 'picturesque' landscape is 'by and large a traveller's art intended for the consumption of vicarious travellers: it is closely connected with the imperial eye – the eye that by seeing names and dominates – and the imperial calling'.<sup>137</sup> As a traveller himself, Toby's narrative maps out Coetzee's key contention. Despite his reluctance to become a witness to South Africa's "social perversions", Toby's ability to enjoy such freedom of movement is due to the long history of appropriation and exploitation instituted to suit the needs of white accumulation at the expense of any meaningful development for the country's black population, who "can't pop in and out of Africa" like he can.

The moulding of South Africa to suit white needs is further communicated to the reader in the repeated Anglicisation of Toby's encounters, from his own introduction to Anna's friend Steven Sitole as "Toby Hood, just from England" to his ignorance of their African names, "I met the two Africans with whom Steven had been talking [...] They had long unpronounceable names, but they were also called Sam and Peter".<sup>138</sup> Aesthetic value is continually re-inscribed through Toby's Britishness, in a country where "the names of places that belonged to a known and predictable way of life would have been a respite".<sup>139</sup> At the same time, as he continually finds by virtue of being British, Toby's "out-of-placeness is part of the place", in a country where the connection between the land and white identity must be enforced.<sup>140</sup> The American philosopher Edward Casey refers to this process as 're-impacement', to specifically define "the ways in which places are altered and transmuted even as they are reinstated in paintings".<sup>141</sup> Re-impacement accounts for the way representations of landscape do not accurately reflect or emulate place but *revise* and therefore misrepresent. The former assertion that there are "too many landscape painters" becomes a political statement on the extent of white accumulation in South Africa, where the black population is being removed from consciousness and concern through visual depictions of South Africa that render working people invisible.

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<sup>136</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 61.

<sup>137</sup> Coetzee, p. 174.

<sup>138</sup> *WOS*, p. 85 and p. 88.

<sup>139</sup> *WOS*, p. 218.

<sup>140</sup> *WOS*, p. 180.

<sup>141</sup> Edward Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. xv.



This form of artistic re-implacement in landscape painting is what Toby first encountered in the tourist brochure in its attempt to render invisible the exploitation of South Africa's natural resources and people. The desire for an idealised 'picturesque' also offers further explanation for Toby's assertion at the start of the novel, "I hate the faces of peasants", which is contrasted with his sexual attraction to Cecil for her picturesque quality: "the painted, stylized woman's face of Cecil Rowe, so pretty above the hollow collar-bones".<sup>142</sup> Cecil's 'painted' face, in contrast to the vapidness of her 'hollow' bones, offers a similarity to the materialistic figure of Helen's mother in *The Lying Days*, to present the reader with a privileged white woman idealising her own self-image by accentuating her own whiteness and superiority by applying make-up. These characterisations expose the socially-constructed nature of 'whiteness' in South Africa that needs continual reinforcement. The facade of Cecil's painted face, as with the reimagining of the South African landscape as people-less, thus represent the idealised but ultimately mythical and duplicitous view of the white presence in Africa. The superiority of white identity in South Africa, as Coetzee argues, can only exist 'in the failure to image a peopled landscape [and in] an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self'.<sup>143</sup> Depopulated landscape paintings that conceal the labour and existence of the black population are therefore as dehumanising as the painted effect of Cecil's attempts to conceal her age with a mask of make-up. The supposed exceptionalism of white identity, under apartheid, as part of a natural order in South Africa is therefore doubly unmasked here, whether in the artificial form of Cecil's supposed beauty or the specific role landscape painting played in concealing the exploitation of South Africa's land and population.<sup>144</sup>

Painting, in its various guises, therefore offers another way of characterising the underlying class interests behind the facade of apartheid's racist ideology, in the National Party's desire to divide South Africa on socially-constructed 'biological' grounds in order to artificially maintain the disproportionate accumulation of the white minority. Williams refers to the capacity of painting to stage "the separation of production and consumption", in that artistic idealisation offers an ideological construction (or re-construction) of existing landscape to reproduce the values of socio-economic elites – or, more simply, landscapes that reflect the desires of those in positions of power, rather than the people who would actually be living and *working* there. This separation can be seen as part of an ideological process akin to settler ideals of manifest destiny, where the land is deemed

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<sup>142</sup> *WOS*, p. 82.

<sup>143</sup> Coetzee, p. 9.

<sup>144</sup> See also Saul Dubow, 'Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid and the Conceptualization of 'Race'', *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), 209-237.

historically free of people and therefore free to be subjugated and controlled. Coetzee describes how such 'a landscape that invites freedom of movement promises freedom of personal and national destiny [...] first the United States and then South Africa rehearse familiar themes from the ideological repertoire of Western colonialism'.<sup>145</sup> More specifically, colonial and capitalist ideology operate synchronously to justify expansion, violence and domination for the purpose of accumulating capital.

However, as Williams notes, 'a working country is hardly ever a landscape', and this is exactly what Toby's narrative presents as he journeys outside of Johannesburg. Unlike the idealised accounts of "unspoilt Africa", the reality is "man-made to a startling degree [...] a man-made place in quite a different sense from that of a city".<sup>146</sup> On Toby's visits to the "small towns strung along the path of the gold mines of the Witwatersrand", he is "struck at once by the queerness of the landscape" and the "horizon of strange hills".<sup>147</sup> The sense of surprise and consternation in this description emphasises how such exploitation is all too easily unconsidered and unobserved by those who consume but remain separated from the production process. The physical landscape therefore offers a stark contrast to the idealised versions perpetuated by Johannesburg's white minority: "the people who had made *this* landscape had merely been concerned to dump above ground, out of the way, the waste matter that was incidental to the recovery of gold".<sup>148</sup> Although Toby's character becomes aware of this destructive reality, it is left to the reader to reconsider how the luxury of The High House is relative only to this 'waste'. The wealth accumulated by the gold-mining tycoons takes on a malignant quality when one considers how their positions of privilege come at the expense of the Witwatersrand's natural environment and local population. The novel maps the relation between impoverishment in the "ugly, cheap, and jazzily dreary" mining towns on Johannesburg's peripheries from which capital flows to mansions like The High House.<sup>149</sup> For Clingman, Toby's account allows for a symbolic reading of mining in the East Rand: 'uncovering its false naturalism, he interprets the cyanide mine dumps masquerading as hills as direct emanations from the subconscious of the culture that has produced them'.<sup>150</sup> The novel's mapping of the 'picturesque', as identified in Coetzee's writing, is what Clingman identifies as the 'masquerade' of a 'false naturalism', as the industrialised, polluted landscape of South Africa undermines the sacrosanct position of superiority assumed by The High House.

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<sup>145</sup> Coetzee, p. 61.

<sup>146</sup> WOS, pp. 116-117.

<sup>147</sup> WOS, p. 116.

<sup>148</sup> WOS, p. 117 [my emphasis].

<sup>149</sup> WOS, p. 117.

<sup>150</sup> Clingman, p. 65.

The masquerade we can attribute to *The High House* indicates a national desperation to enforce and maintain the myth of South Africa's white heritage, whether through associated values of class superiority inherited through Britishness or the direct imposition of apartheid policy. Both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* respond to Britain's role as a declining imperial power in relation to both rising Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa and the increasing economic dominance of America in the world-system. While many white English-speaking characters feel a sense of connection to the former metropole, this is contradicted by a struggle over the identity of white heritage in South Africa led by the National Party, which Toby's narrative is able to register in his position as an outsider: "the people at [the] Alexanders' were almost entirely preoccupied with the struggle between the Afrikaner and the Englishman; that is, the Nationalists and themselves [...] the squabbling of the two white peoples".<sup>151</sup> The cultural struggle that took place in the 1950s over the implementation of apartheid is succinctly described in Giliomee's *The Afrikaner People*:

Immediately after the 1948 election the government began removing the remaining symbols of the historic British ascendancy, abolishing British citizenship and the right of appeal to the Privy Council (1950); scrapping *God Save the Queen* as one of the national anthems and the Union Jack as one of the national flags (1957); taking over the naval base in Simonstown from the Royal Navy (1957); replacing the British currency (1961), holding a referendum on a republic (1960); and, after winning that whites-only referendum, [leaving the British Commonwealth and establishing the Republic of South Africa in 1961].<sup>152</sup>

The declining power and influence of Britishness in South Africa during the 1950s not only marks the rise of Afrikanerdom but also indicates the complicated changes taking place in the world-system, in Britain's imperial decline and the dominance of American mass culture. The usurpation of Britain's presence in Africa by America is figured across both texts through repeated references to American products and, most specifically, American cars, including the mixed advice Toby receives when he considers buying a new vehicle: "Sam said that I should get a new small British or Continental car that would be cheap to run. Steven plumped for a good second-hand job, a big powerful

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<sup>151</sup> *WOS*, p. 209.

<sup>152</sup> Giliomee, p. 494.

American car, a model of a reliable year, that, once overhauled would go like new".<sup>153</sup> America's supplanting of Britain in the world-system is perhaps best illustrated by Toby's eventual decision to go against his own sense of Britishness and buy American. What may at first appear to be the vapid cultural affiliations of white capitalist accumulation in South Africa can better be understood as characterisations of the declining value of Britishness and the increasing power and ubiquity of American products in the 1950s. The novel's interest in the collapse of British influence in South Africa, while also being sensitive to the increasing cultural and economic dominance of America, is underlined by Cecil's own shifting cultural affiliation, in her use of actor's English when meeting Toby to her affectation for the "American picture magazines to which she subscribed [but] which usually lay about unopened".<sup>154</sup> While the National Party was busy replacing Britishness with Afrikanerdom, America secured its dominant position in the world-system in part through mass culture and consumerism: a point that is emphasised in Cecil's apparently vapid admiration of American culture.

### **Counterculture and Sophiatown**

If *A World of Strangers* starts by mapping some of the historical associations that tie Britain and America to the implementation of apartheid in South Africa, Toby's acquaintance with Anna Louw and Steven Sitole also allows the novel to locate spaces of counterculture and resistance to the country's racial-capitalist ideology. The novel's treatment of Sophiatown maps the urban segregation laws implemented by the National Party, from the 1950 Group Areas Act to the 1954 Native Resettlement Act, which authorised the forced eviction of blacks from any area within and surrounding the district of Johannesburg. Apartheid authorities used the 1954 Act as a mandate to raze Sophiatown in 1955, thereby destroying a black township that was 'the heart of Johannesburg's counterculture in the 1950s' and had thus become a threat to the National Party.<sup>155</sup> For a novel concerned with 'a world of strangers', Toby's narrative maps Sophiatown not only as a site of protest (as it appears in *The Lying Days*) but as a communal space of entertainment and art. Sophiatown is mapped as a countercultural commons most particularly through Toby's visits to Sophiatown's shebeens (informal drinking bars and clubs operating in townships), which offered black residents a sense of community in response to the control and enclosure of their spaces by the apartheid

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<sup>153</sup> *WOS*, p. 120.

<sup>154</sup> *WOS*, p. 198.

<sup>155</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), p. 117.

authorities. In this way, Sophiatown's countercultural identity was as much a response to racial capitalism in South Africa as it was an expression of a black culture distinct from white associations to Britishness and the increasing cultural power of America. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* allows us to understand the position of Sophiatown in relation to a wider black counterculture that had an 'explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective' in relation to the world-system: 'the musics of the black Atlantic world were the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness' in response to 'the endless pressures of economic exploitations, political racism, displacement, and exile [...] openly indebted for its conditions of possibility to the Caribbean, the United States, and even Africa'.<sup>156</sup> Gilroy traces a link between black British counterculture, the Harlem renaissance, and the 'mutation of jazz and African-American cultural style in the townships of South Africa'.<sup>157</sup> Toby's experience in Sophiatown's jazz clubs and shebeens with Steven, who also runs an establishment called the 'House of Fame', therefore acts as a counterpoint to the novel's treatment of The High House and all that it represents in relation to white capital accumulation in South Africa.

While the purchased "perfume, cosmetics, smoking gadgets, satin and nylon" from Britain and America that Toby associates with The High House are indicative of a reliance on mass-produced material objects, the House of Fame emphasises a freedom from cultural appropriation in that "people made their own music and danced and talked".<sup>158</sup> The novel maps the disparities in South Africa, drawn from Gordimer's own real-life experiences in Sophiatown and her visits to the township's popular House of Truth.<sup>159</sup> Sophiatown's reputation as a cultural hub is widely recognised. Miriam Tlali's *Muriel et Metropolitan*, for example, states that 'the most talented African men and women from all walks of life – in spite of the hardships they had to encounter – came from Sophiatown. The best musicians, scholars, educationists, singers, artists, doctors, lawyers, clergymen'.<sup>160</sup> In its early 1950s heyday, Gordimer spent a large amount of time in such company, 'when her involvement with *Drum* magazine brought her into contact with a large group of black writers, critics, and artists'.<sup>161</sup> The importance of this

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<sup>156</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 15 and pp. 81-82.

<sup>157</sup> Gilroy, p. 199.

<sup>158</sup> *WOS*, p. 195 and p. 193.

<sup>159</sup> Gordimer discussed the significance of Sophiatown and the symbolism of the 'House of Truth' in her interview for *Sophiatown Speaks*, reprinted in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 247-252.

<sup>160</sup> Miriam Tlali, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1975), p. 70. The first chapter of Rob Nixon's *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1994) provides an in-depth account of Sophiatown's cultural significance, in what he terms the 'Sophiatown Renaissance'.

<sup>161</sup> Newman, p. 16.

experience for Gordimer cannot be overstated, as her first friendships with black people formed from her connections to *Drum* magazine and Sophiatown, which she described as "a time of tremendous, memorable parties [that] I'll never forget for the rest of my life".<sup>162</sup>

If Toby's narrative captures the sense of freedom in Sophiatown, it should also provoke the reader to consider the more destructive capacity of the system that the novel is carefully mapping. Steven is killed in a police raid on the House of Fame, and the protests and forced evictions dramatised in *The Lying Days* are exposed as part of a wider gentrification process to claim the land occupied by Sophiatown for white housing development. By 1959, Sophiatown had been completely destroyed and replaced with a white suburb named 'Triomf' (Afrikaans for 'Triumph').<sup>163</sup> The ruthless destruction of Sophiatown is anticipated through the text in Toby's descriptions of Sophiatown both before and after Steven's death. Earlier in his narrative, Toby ironically notes the underdeveloped nature of the "African township" that "looked like something that had been razed almost to the ground. The mass of houses and shacks were so low and crowded together that the people seemed to be swarming over them".<sup>164</sup> After Steven's death, Toby foreshadows Sophiatown's destruction by noting how "the township smoked as if it had just been pillaged and destroyed".<sup>165</sup> Steven's death and Toby's survival, following the raid in Sophiatown, shatter the artificial sense of freedom the narrative set up in Toby's comparison between the House of Fame and The High House, the racial and spatial division of which is registered in Toby's realisation that "what I had known of Steven, a stranger, living and dying a life I could at best only observe [...] He was in the bond of his skin and I was free; the world was open to me and closed to him".<sup>166</sup> For all of Toby's revelry in Sophiatown, his life is without burdens in a world completely open to him through the privilege of race and wealth. The fate of Sophiatown's counterculture represents the unevenness of the capitalist world-system in which Toby can both comprehend "the world of dispossession, where the prison record is a mark of honour" while acknowledging that it is a "world I had watched, from afar, a foreign country, since childhood".<sup>167</sup> The irony is that Toby's narrative appears to communicate a sense of loss and isolation in his marginalisation from Steven's experience, in his increasing sensitivity to the fact that their difference is due to Toby's own racial and capitalist privileges. His

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<sup>162</sup> Bazin and Seymour, p. 250.

<sup>163</sup> For more details and photographic evidence, see Deborah M. Hart and Gordon H. Pirie, 'The Sight and Soul of Sophiatown', *Geographical Review*, 74:1 (1984), 38-47.

<sup>164</sup> *WOS*, p. 130.

<sup>165</sup> *WOS*, p. 255.

<sup>166</sup> *WOS*, p. 252.

<sup>167</sup> *WOS*, p. 265.

encounter with Steven and Sophiatown maps a more personal experience of apartheid than he wanted or anticipated on arrival in South Africa. Toby is no longer able to see the country's social problems merely as the "abstractions of race and politics", even if he is only beginning to perceive and acknowledge South Africa's racial-capitalist configuration.<sup>168</sup>

Toby's descriptions of township life offer a direct contrast to the 'world of strangers' that the novel's title suggests as an appropriate description of South Africa and the world-system in the 1950s. Toby's narrative points towards a sense of community and egalitarianism in Sophiatown:

Every time I went to a township I was aware of this sudden drop in the horizon of buildings and rise of humans [...] They lived, all the time, in all the layers of society at once: pimps, gangsters, errand boys, washwomen, schoolteachers, boxers, musicians and undertakers, labourers and patent medicine men – these were neighbours, and shared a tap, a yard, even a lavatory.<sup>169</sup>

The narrative's attention to the simultaneous deprivation and classlessness of Sophiatown marks both the township and the novel as a site of spatial resistance to the hierarchical economic and social relations of apartheid. Indeed, we can also assume that another reason *A World of Strangers* was banned for 12 years was that the novel maps the cultural resistance of Sophiatown and its subsequent destruction by Johannesburg's authorities. As Deborah Hart and Gordon Pirie note, much of the available literature concerning Sophiatown was 'banned by South African censors from local circulation and citation'.<sup>170</sup> On one level, the representations of space in Sophiatown enable the novel to dramatise the exploitation and inequality of the capitalist system. On a further level, the razing of Sophiatown at the end of *A World of Strangers* demonstrates the extent to which apartheid authorities were threatened by the township's position as a political and cultural epicentre of black community. By mapping out the riots, forced evictions and subsequent razing of townships like Sophiatown in both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, the novels indicate the extent to which such violent exploitation was repeatedly encountered in apartheid during the political upheaval of the 1950s.

The novel's representation of Sophiatown as a classless, egalitarian space within the

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<sup>168</sup> *WOS*, p. 36.

<sup>169</sup> *WOS*, p. 130.

<sup>170</sup> Hart and Pirie, p. 38.

confines of the country's racial capitalism is what leads me to disagree with Clingman's assertion that Gordimer undermines the prospect of socialism for South Africa in *A World of Strangers*:

Socialism is in fact proffered as a possibility in *A World of Strangers*, but mainly so that it can be undercut. The only socialist character in the novel, Anna Louw, never represents any real historical option for Toby [and] she herself appears to have found any systematic form of socialism a dead end.<sup>171</sup>

Clingman sees Anna Louw's unsuccessful work as an attorney for black township residents facing forced eviction by the Johannesburg authorities as symbolic of the failures of socialist action during the 1950s. By contrast, I would argue that the responsibility for this failure is attributed by the novel not to individual social action but to a system that persistently frustrates and foils radical political projects. Toby's freedom to return to the wealth and safety of The High House, as well as return to England, following the destruction of Sophiatown, reminds the reader of the narrator's enduring position of privilege. As the narratives of both Helen and Toby end without resolution, with both characters on the verge of leaving South Africa, the narrators appear to avoid the process of cognitive mapping that may have formed an increasing sensitivity to their own privileged positions. In so doing, any sense of their commitment is left in doubt, perhaps because they are still not yet capable of attaining a politicised consciousness beyond their own separate interests. Whether Toby or Helen will indeed leave or stay in South Africa is, however, proven to be immaterial by their own process of mapping, as the reader may themselves see that the moral issues both have come to grapple with are ultimately unavoidable within the all-encompassing nature of the capitalist world-system.

## **Conclusion**

The workings of the capitalist system are in many ways abstract, rather than readily identifiable, and the negative effects of capitalism are not felt or understood by all in the same way. As such, Marxist theorists such as Fredric Jameson call for representations of capitalism that can capture its formation as a social structure, as a totality encompassing the entire world as a specifically capitalist world-system. Through an emphasis on cognitive mapping, I have therefore considered how Gordimer's first two novels may offer an aesthetic representation of capitalism as a social totality, particularly in the

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<sup>171</sup> Clingman, p. 56.



racial-capitalist context of South African apartheid during the 1950s.

Both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* answer this question about the representability of capitalism by mapping together an experience and consciousness of the frequently obscure and reified capitalist social relations that permeate the world-system. The first-person narratives offer a limited and partial access to South Africa during the National Party's implementation of apartheid in the 1950s. The varying spatial representations offer the reader a mapping of the totality so that individuals may navigate a heightened sense of place within the world-system. The novels map together crucially representative spaces within South Africa, as well as the country's complicated international connections, in the flow of capital from Witwatersrand mining towns to exclusive white areas of Johannesburg in contrast to the shared experience of dispossession and destruction of black townships such as Sophiatown.

In their denouements, both novels dramatise how in South Africa in the 1950s the narrators are moving *within* an all-encompassing socially unjust market system. What is ultimately symbolised by the ends of these texts is not only how that system renders invisible the victims of capitalist accumulation, but the fact that Helen and Toby are living in a radically divided and alienated social order, a 'world of strangers' indeed. By mapping the connections between white accumulation and black oppression, the novels may potentially negate the myths of apartheid and its 'triumph' over the countercultural resistance offered by places such as Sophiatown. Both novels conclude by subverting their starting point, taking Helen and Toby from an initial enthusiasm for the marketplace, and an uncomplicated relationship to wealth, to a much more conflicted and ambivalent position by the end of their narratives, with both characters on their way to the port of Cape Town. This is a location that does not allow them to escape, let alone negate, the divisions and oppressions to which they have borne witness but instead takes us back to the first point of arrival of Europeans in South Africa, and thus accentuates the unremitting durability of colonial power relations in South Africa. The narratives close with an air of irresolution and inconclusiveness, an 'interregnum', in which the predicaments, connections, and divisions of racial capitalism have been exposed but not yet replaced or even, from the point of view of these narrators, fully denounced.

The novels as narratives do more than simply record history, and in their points of view they provide something less than a critical account of history. Rather than viewing the narratives as a form of historical evidence or as a Gordimerian political tract, I see that the novels offer a form of cognitive mapping that requires readers' participation. What the novels succeed in doing is mapping the unequal flow of capital within South Africa, as well as within a world-system where America has inherited the economic and

cultural predominance of former colonial powers such as Britain. Although Helen and Toby cannot fully comprehend, overcome or ameliorate the social inequalities they encounter, the narratives nevertheless challenge readers to consider the way capitalism has operated systemically and historically. While the narratives of *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* provide a limited cognition of this totality, it is the reader that needs to engage with a social *critique*. The fact that both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* end ambiguously without resolution to the journeys of Helen or Toby can be taken as symbolic of the wider process of social transition Gordimer refers to in her concept of the interregnum. It is in this way that Gordimer's early work may be seen to point, though only subtly, to other forms of societal organisation that do not require a journey of movement but one of consciousness. The novels may not provide a formal alternative to racial capitalism as it is mapped out in the narratives, but perhaps this is because the 'socialist horizon' Gordimer aspires to can only be conceived by first acknowledging why the current system needs replacing.

## Chapter 2. Rethinking *The Late Bourgeois World*: Uneven Development and Late Capitalism

### Introduction

*The Late Bourgeois World* registers its manifold concerns in a title that, by signifying a temporal category, an ideological position, and a geographical-spatial context, addresses the moribundity of South Africa's racial-capitalist order and the wider capitalist world-system. The title's arrangement indicates how bourgeois dominance of the capitalist world-system is determined in both a spatial and temporal capacity: the *world* may be dominated by a *bourgeois* class and its ideology, but this 'bourgeois world' is *late*. Unpicking the title for its meaning reveals an inherent contradiction to the capitalist world-system, in the suggestion that the world is under bourgeois control but that this development is vulnerable to the deficiencies and unevenness of capitalism as an economic system. Accordingly, this chapter argues that *The Late Bourgeois World* addresses the contradiction of combined and uneven development, by which I mean the creation and accumulation of great wealth in capitalist society but the concentration of that wealth, and prosperity, in the hands of relatively few people, simultaneously producing gross and systemic inequality. Capitalism, as a system of unequal exchange, is therefore founded, fundamentally, on a permanently combined and uneven development.<sup>1</sup> Systemic uneven development thus contributes to the 'lateness' of capitalism as a failing economic system, in 'the contradiction between expanding social wealth and increasingly alienated and impoverished labour', as Ernest Mandel explains in his magnum opus, *Late Capitalism*.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this chapter is to argue that, at the level of its form, *The Late Bourgeois World* challenges the existing bourgeois ideology of the capitalist world-system, by exposing the contradictions of uneven development within the specific context of 1960s South African racial capitalism.

*The Late Bourgeois World* invites critique of South Africa's racial-capitalist order through the use of a first-person narrative of a white woman from a bourgeois position who becomes increasingly alienated from South Africa's bourgeois class. Her contradictory position within the narrative becomes a way of characterising the

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<sup>1</sup> As Neil Smith argues: 'It is not just that capitalism fails to develop evenly, that due to accidental and random factors the geographical development of capitalism represents some stochastic deviation from a generally even process. The uneven development of capitalism is structural'. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. by Joris De Bres (London: Verso, 1978), p. 263.

unsustainability of the country's existing social order. I argue here that the text's specific treatment of racialised class exploitation in 1960s South Africa, from an exclusively bourgeois perspective, fosters an understanding of the contradictions of uneven capitalist development, as the narrator begins to recognise and resist the gross unevenness of the country's system. The specificities of racial-capitalist development in 1960s South Africa can be located within the wider capitalist world-system, as the text engages with issues of combined and uneven development at the local, national, and global level. This chapter therefore examines the novella as a textual response both to the racial-capitalist 'bourgeois' ideology that defined apartheid South Africa in the 1960s and the ongoing ideological triumphalism of American-led global capitalism.

*The Late Bourgeois World* dramatises what is referred to in the text as the "sickening secret" of racial-capitalist society in South Africa through the narrative of Liz Van Den Sandt.<sup>3</sup> This sickening secret can effectively be understood as the exploitation and uneven development inherent to capitalism, with Liz's unravelling bourgeois ideological position linked to the understanding that her "richer quality of life" is inextricably dependent on others having a poorer quality of life.<sup>4</sup> The text takes a confessional tone as Liz's narrative dramatises an experience of exploitation and uneven development in South African bourgeois society: from the small-scale capitalism of her parents' shop that profits from selling counterfeit goods to black customers, to the larger-scale implications of her experience at exclusive parties where business leaders and government ministers came together "to keep the best for themselves".<sup>5</sup> In so doing, Liz's narrative allows the reader to observe a crooked world, with an economic system controlled by a powerful and exclusive elite serving their own interests.

In its form, *The Late Bourgeois World* offers a decentred narrative structure, which can be understood here to mean the text's persistently fragmentary form, non-linear temporal ordering, ambiguous shifts in reference, and the text's lack of closure. Because the text functions as a series of fragments, Liz is not fully established as the text's protagonist, with the narrative often consumed by her indirect characterisation of others, such as Liz's grandmother and Liz's ex-husband Max, a communist imprisoned for anti-apartheid activity but found dead at the start of the story. If Liz can sometimes be considered to be marginal within her own narrative, this is instructive in understanding her increasing recognition of and resistance to the contradictions of uneven development in South Africa's racial-capitalist system. Gordimer's experimentation with a decentred

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<sup>3</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 61. Hereafter referred to as *LBW*.

<sup>4</sup> *LBW*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> *LBW*, p. 23.

narrative and marginalised narrator can thus be read as an attempt to grapple with the desensitised and dehumanised nature of everyday life under apartheid.

The text's digressive and frequently interrupted narrative is quite unlike the highly linear format of Gordimer's previous novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, as discussed in Chapter 1. Specifically, the unstable temporality of Liz's narrative departs from the formal order of time and sequencing of events found in Gordimer's earlier, more strictly realist works. For while *The Late Bourgeois World* encompasses a single day in Liz's life, it also contains interrupting recollections about the past and conjectures on the future. Liz's narrative fragments between associative thoughts, observations, memories, and speculative digressions on matters moral, psychological, sexual, philosophical, historical and economic, all of which can be associated to Liz's burgeoning recognition of and resistance to the dominant mode of thinking that sustained racial capitalism in the 1960s. The novella's fragmentation and unstable temporality, its form, functions therefore to disrupt the National Party's unquestionable order of society in 1960s South Africa, what Gordimer calls "the myth of South African culture". Understanding *The Late Bourgeois World* as a decentred narrative helps us understand how the text operates at the level of form as a contradictory and dissenting response to the bourgeois world instituted by apartheid and sanctioned by the world-system.

It is important, therefore, to recognise the distinctiveness and originality of this novella in the context of Gordimer's oeuvre. As Gordimer's only novella, the relative brevity of *The Late Bourgeois World* contrasts with the length of Gordimer's preceding three novels, heightening the narrative's alienating devices of ambiguity and uncertainty. The novella form forces a sense of compression on Liz's first-person narrative, with the suggestion that time is running out not only for the text's narrator but also for South Africa's brutal racial-capitalist system, if not for American-led global capitalism. The 'lateness' of the bourgeois world is captured in the novella's disturbed, ambiguous ending, as Liz lies in bed unable to sleep, her thoughts oscillating between the American space programme and an invitation to join the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC): "the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive..."<sup>6</sup> And so the triumphalism of American-led capitalism, symbolised by the country's successful space programme, is juxtaposed with the novella's abundant images of mortality and death, with a narrator left in an increased but anxious state of self-consciousness. The text avoids a formal conclusion in its use of ellipsis, in an ending without words that expresses a state of flux for the narrator, the state of terror in South

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<sup>6</sup> *LBW*, p. 95.

Africa, and a world in a state of Cold War. The text's ending therefore captures Gordimer's notion of the interregnum, as the text is unable to reach a conclusive resolution, inviting a moral critique of a late capitalist world-system that produces such great technological achievement in one part of the world while elsewhere on the planet people struggle for basic social and economic freedoms. This contradiction is particularly the case in 1960s South Africa where the lateness of racial capitalism is most marked. That the story is left unfinished thus becomes a radical gesture that emphasises the urgent yet unfulfilled political struggles of 1960s South Africa.

My reading of *The Late Bourgeois World* responds, therefore, to two central questions to which the title is drawing attention but that have so far been neglected by critics interested in Gordimer's work: how is the text showing us that this world is 'bourgeois'? How is that bourgeois world 'late'? What is key to my own answer to these questions is Gordimer's use in the novella of the term "moral sclerosis".<sup>7</sup> Gordimer reconfigures a word used to describe the physical hardening of the body to symbolise a hardening of moral values, which can be read not only as a metaphor for the dehumanising alienation of bourgeois ideology but also for the internal disorder and terminal crisis inherent to the capitalist world-system. Whereas a physical sclerosis implies a hardening of the body's organs through a failure in the central nervous system, the moral sclerosis identified within *The Late Bourgeois World* offers a metaphor of decay and death appropriate for a society where such levels of fortune and misery exist side-by-side. The novel's capacity to expose the moral sclerosis of a system centred on accumulation is thus key to understanding why the 'bourgeois world' is 'late'.

So what is it exactly that makes late capitalism late? Ernest Mandel explains that a propensity to social and environmental destruction is the defining quality of 'late' capitalism. The capitalist world-system:

is not only becoming more and more uneven in general, its unevenness also manifests itself, in particular, in the decay of the countries which are richest in capital. The hallmark of [...] late capitalism is not a decline in the forces of production but an increase in the parasitism and waste accompanying or overlaying this growth. The inherent inability of late capitalism to generalize the vast possibilities of the third technological revolution or of automation constitutes as potent an expression of this tendency as its squandering of forces of production by turning them into forces of destruction: permanent arms build-up, hunger in the semi-colonies, contamination of the atmosphere and waters,

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<sup>7</sup> *LBW*, p. 31.

disruption of the ecological equilibrium, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

The key problem of uneven development as Mandel identifies here is that while there has been 'a more rapid increase in the forces of production in the age of late capitalism than ever before' this has not led to a rapid increase in social progress.<sup>9</sup> To put this in Marxist economic terms, the *forces of production*, in this case the increasingly advanced technology used in industrial production, are not improving the *relations of production*, which have resulted in and continue to perpetuate a class-based socio-economic stratification of society. This uneven development is what Mandel refers to as 'the contradiction between expanding social wealth and increasingly alienated and impoverished labour'.<sup>10</sup> The interrelatedness of expanding wealth and increasingly impoverished labour is why we can understand capitalist development as both 'combined' and 'uneven'. In the words of the Warwick Research Collective, 'capitalist development does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course'.<sup>11</sup> Uneven development thus constitutes the fundamental characteristic of bourgeois society.

My claim is that the novel draws readers' attention to this state of uneven development in South Africa and the world-system in the 1960s. Significantly, the novella's compression of Liz's narrative into the timeframe of a single day forces the death of Max into an awkward juxtaposition with the first American spacewalk. Juxtaposing the death of South African communists with the ascendancy of capitalist America in the Space Race allows *The Late Bourgeois World* to focus our attention on the competing ideologies at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s and the contemporary triumphalism of American-led global capitalism in an era dominated by the threat of "atomic tests".<sup>12</sup> The text's references to outer space exploration and nuclear weapons offer a deeper engagement with the ideological and material concerns of the period, when the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had led to a profound suspicion and even fear of the enormous destructive power of technological development. As Gordimer would later argue, it is a tragedy that human beings cannot "apply the kind of passion that goes into armaments research to research a socialism that progressively reduces [...] the

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<sup>8</sup> Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, pp. 214-215.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 263.

<sup>11</sup> Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *LBW*, p. 63.

[social] failure of capitalism".<sup>13</sup> The capitalist relationship between technology and domination is what Marx referred to as the capacity of machines to act both as forces of production and forces of destruction, as the drive for accumulation sees 'productive forces [...] become destructive forces', in turn pushing the 'contradiction between the classes [to] its extreme limit'.<sup>14</sup> I will proceed to draw on the work of Herbert Marcuse, whose work in the 1960s was concerned with technological development under late capitalism producing innovation mainly in the form of weapons, resulting in the domination of human beings and of nature, rather than working towards the progressive alleviation of social and economic under-development. It is this radically uneven and asymmetrical character of development under late capitalism that is brought sharply into view by the novella. By juxtaposing space exploration and racial capitalism, *The Late Bourgeois World* allows readers to observe a stark contrast between the awe-inspiring technological innovations produced in America and a correspondingly extreme level of social and economic *under*-development in apartheid South Africa.

Existing criticism of the novella has coalesced around an inaccurate orthodoxy that Gordimer was predominantly a realist writer. In comparison to Gordimer's other works, *The Late Bourgeois World* has received a dearth of critical attention. Kolawole Ogungbesan commented in an article published in 1978 that 'of Nadine Gordimer's six novels to date, her fourth [...] is the most neglected' but since then no further journal articles focusing solely on *The Late Bourgeois World* have been published and the critical attention it has otherwise received appears to have primarily come as a necessity in longer and exhaustive analyses on Gordimer's oeuvre in its entirety.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, this chapter provides an extended analysis of *The Late Bourgeois World* exactly because it offers such depth, with a complex narrative and formal experimentation that has so far been underappreciated by critics. Ogungbesan read the text as a treatment of the guilt of living in a society where white privilege is founded on black oppression but, rather than taking a Marxist approach to this subject, focuses his reading on the identity politics of South Africa's racial bifurcations.<sup>16</sup> In his seminal work on *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, Stephen Clingman argued that *The Late Bourgeois World* offers a realist 'historical consciousness' of 1960s South Africa, reproducing how anti-apartheid movements used violence and sabotage, alongside civil protest, in response to the

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<sup>13</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. by Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 283.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Free Development of Individuals', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 207-209 (p. 207).

<sup>15</sup> Kolawole Ogungbesan, 'Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*: Love in Prison', *Ariel* (9:1) (1978), 31-49 (p. 31).

<sup>16</sup> Ogungbesan, p. 35.



increasing brutality and terror of everyday life in South Africa in the 1960s, represented most disturbingly by the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre.<sup>17</sup> As a historical account of apartheid, Clingman uses *The Late Bourgeois World* to discuss the extent to which white resistance failed to make progress in a period of National Party triumphalism. Clingman's reading of the text's realist historical consciousness focuses on three key examples from its content, the novella's treatment of Max, the sexual relationship between Liz and her partner Graham, and the final scene between Liz and a PAC operative. By contrast, in associating the text's form with its radicalism, this chapter applies a Marxist critique of late capitalism to understand what these examples offer in relation to the unevenness of South Africa's racial-capitalist system.

Clingman reads Max as the text's primary character, arguing that Max's story as a communist saboteur is a realist reflection of the transition to violent resistance for anti-apartheid groups in the 1960s in response to the Sharpeville Massacre. While making due reference to the ANC's *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, Clingman emphasises the historical campaign led by the Liberal Party's militant wing, the African Resistance Movement (ARM), a predominantly white-led group, most notable for the 1964 bombing of Johannesburg Park Station's white-only platform.<sup>18</sup> Because Max was jailed for a failed attempt to bomb a railway line, Clingman argues that the narrative mirrors how violent protest against apartheid in the early 1960s 'was effectively all over by the year *The Late Bourgeois World* was published. Whereas in the first six months alone of 1964 there were 203 cases of sabotage, in 1965 as a whole there was none'.<sup>19</sup> This swift end to anti-apartheid violent protest came as a result of the National Party's own terror campaign, with widespread police raids, arrests, executions, and state repression.<sup>20</sup> As the leading members of ARM were arrested and executed in 1964, Clingman reads Gordimer's characterisation of Max as a response to the 'false start of the South African revolution and the outright victory of the counter-revolution', by which he means the National Party's consolidation of its apartheid regime in South Africa during the 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, my own reading of *The Late Bourgeois World* emphasises the ways in which the unevenly developed 'late bourgeois' milieu of South Africa in the 1960s is mediated by the novella's distinctive form. Indeed, it was the novella's radical engagement with the uneven development of South Africa's racial-capitalist system at the

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Clingman, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Clingman, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> See Saul Dubow, 'Sharpeville and its Aftermath', in *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 74-98.

<sup>21</sup> Clingman, p. 95.

level of form that led to the text being banned by the country's authorities for 10 years. The South African Censorship Committee's written report on the reasons for banning the work is particularly important to my argument, as the censors expressed explicit concern with the text's specific use of first-person, which was deemed an unjustifiable attack on the South African system in its personalised 'opposition to the established order in South Africa'.<sup>22</sup> The very structure of the text and the voice that it is written in were instrumental to the novella's censorship: 'the story is told by a speaker who is anxious and bitter [...] The viewpoint we have here is actually that of a specific woman'.<sup>23</sup> As Peter MacDonald notes in *The Literature Police*, the censorship committee was troubled most by Gordimer's use of the phrase 'bourgeois world' and her apparently negative dramatisation of 'a middle-class order founded on a glorification of the white skin, white "respectability" and scandalous white capitalist domination', the imminent destruction of which is implied by the word 'late'.<sup>24</sup> The novella's banning due to both its radical politics and its radical style therefore appears to be a crucial component to consider when critiquing *The Late Bourgeois World*, yet this aspect has been largely ignored in criticism of the text. In its brevity, ambiguity, and inconclusiveness, not to mention its manifest openness to an uncertain future that may or may not be created through political action, the novella controverts the apartheid state's air of permanence in the 1960s – a radical act of defiance in a period of intense state censorship and terror. Far from being timeless, South Africa's racial-capitalist system and the all-encompassing world-system through which it had been enabled are revealed by the novella's form to be 'late'. As MacDonald adds, 'South African readers, and, indeed, the regime, had to be protected from what amounted to a dangerously seditious mode of narration'.<sup>25</sup> *The Late Bourgeois World* was seditious because it resists what Gordimer refers to as the 'myth-making' of South Africa's racial-capitalist bourgeois ideology, which has made white hegemony appear natural and correct. By questioning the exceptionalism of white accumulation in South Africa, the novella invites readers to critique the attitudes and norms of everyday life in 1960s South Africa that perpetuated the dominant ideology of the dominant class. As Slavoj Žižek argues:

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<sup>22</sup> For a copy of the censors' report on *The Late Bourgeois World*, please see the Literature Police Archive, which can be found online at <<http://www.theliteraturepolice.com/documents>> [Accessed 21.11.2015]

The Literature Police Archive was developed as a catalogue of the evidence discussed by Peter D. MacDonald in *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For MacDonald's discussion of Nadine Gordimer, see pp. 227-232.

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald, p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> MacDonald, p. 230.

Certain features, attitudes and norms of life are no longer perceived as ideologically marked. They appear to be neutral, non-ideological, natural, commonsensical. [...] it is precisely the neutralisation of some features into a spontaneously accepted background that marks out ideology at its purest and at its most effective.<sup>26</sup>

The novella dramatises this state of existence while also violating its supposed naturalness through Liz's increasingly alienated position with the bourgeois world of 1960s South Africa.

*The Late Bourgeois World* represents a major turning point in Gordimer's project as a writer. As Gordimer acknowledged in an interview in 1979, the text marks her own personal development from the liberal values that defined her first three novels to the more radical socialist worldview that inspired her fourth:

*The Late Bourgeois World* from 1966 shows the breakdown of my belief in the liberal ideals. The main character in that book, Liz, must realize that she can get no further on the line she has been following; she has gone as far as her liberal ideals can get her, and her dilemma is now a new one: shall she turn radical and go on to a more binding commitment[?]<sup>27</sup>

From my interpretation of the text, Gordimer is thus expressing her matured political position. Although liberal ideals are socially progressive, making only small changes to the capitalist model will never truly rectify the uneven development and exploitation inherent to contemporary forms of capitalism. Gordimer recognises that a more radical approach would be required to deliver a state based on social justice and economic cooperation, which ultimately and inevitably equates to socialism.

Gordimer was in her 40s at the time of writing *The Late Bourgeois World* and was in regular contact with members and the leadership from the banned African National Congress (ANC), South African Communist Party (SACP), and the PAC. She wrote extensively in support of the SACP's leader, Bram Fischer, leading up to his trial, and was responsible for editing the 'I Am Prepared to Die' speech delivered by Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia Trial in 1964. The convergence of socialist thought with the

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<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2009), p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Johannes Riis: Interview with Nadine Gordimer', in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 101-107 (p. 101).

necessity for radical politics is aptly formulated at the end of Mandela's speech, expressing a collective desire for a 'free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realised. But [...] it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die'.<sup>28</sup> Although Mandela was later released after 27 years of incarceration, the imprisonment and death of Liz's ex-husband Max in *The Late Bourgeois World* serves as a sharp reminder that socialists were 'prepared to die' in the fight for equal opportunities. This historical context is crucial to understanding the novella's underlying philosophical, political, and socio-economic concerns, particularly in relation to Gordimer's developing understanding of Marxist social theory. Indeed, as Judie Newman points out in her reading, *The Late Bourgeois World* is 'profoundly influenced by Marxist thinkers', reflecting Gordimer's 'evolution away from liberal meliorism'.<sup>29</sup> If *The Late Bourgeois World* marks Gordimer's engagement with Marxist critiques of capitalist society, her experimentation with the novella form explains her desire to find new ways of recognising and resisting the social reality of 1960s South Africa.

### **Death and Alienation**

Death forms the catalyst for Liz's narrative in *The Late Bourgeois World*, opening on her receipt of a telegram stating that her ex-husband Max has been "FOUND DROWNED IN CAR CAPETOWN HARBOUR".<sup>30</sup> The intrinsic callousness of the telegram form, particularly in its ungrammatical sentence structure, immediately sets up the ruthlessness of life in 1960s South Africa, where violence and death have become banal, defining characteristics of the country's grossly uneven social order. Most importantly, while Liz immediately presumes that Max's death was a suicide, I think it is worth noting that the reader never learns if Max's death was indeed a suicide or a state-sanctioned murder covered up by the authorities. While Clingman accepts Max's 'death by suicide' at face value in his reading, the ambiguity of the telegram leaves itself open for interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nelson Mandela, 'I Am Prepared To Die' speech, dated 20 April 1964, in Nelson Mandela Foundation database  
<[http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS010](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS010)> [Accessed 04.10.2015].

<sup>29</sup> Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 35. Newman makes reference to Ernst Fischer and Gordimer's interest in finding a Marxist aesthetic that served her radical politics: 'In her 1985 Tanner lectures Gordimer referred approvingly to Fisher [sic], a Marxist critic, when arguing that art represents the freedom of the spirit and is therefore automatically on the side of the oppressed', p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> *LBW*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Clingman, p. 97.

The possibility that Max's suicide was in fact a political murder invites criticism of the National Party's brutal application of apartheid in the 1960s and would actually emphasise Clingman's point about the execution of the ARM's leadership. As the SACP declared in 1962, 'to maintain this system the Nationalists rely more and more on suppression, force and violence'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Gordimer wrote *The Late Bourgeois World* in the aftermath of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, and Max's death at the start of the text is a reminder of the state violence underpinning the gross unevenness of racial capitalism. Under the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, 10 years before the ANC and the PAC were outlawed by the 1960 Unlawful Organizations Act, the South African authorities had banned the SACP along with the blanket criminalisation of 'any political, industrial, social or economic change in the Union [of South Africa] by the promotion of disturbances or disorder'.<sup>33</sup> However, Liz's decentred narrative operates in a way that suggests 'disturbances and disorder' are inherent to the social relations created by South Africa's system of racial capitalism, particularly as the fragmentations in her narration directly follow the news of Max's death.

By disturbing Liz's daily routine, Max's death allows the reader to question and critique the daily activities that dominate everyday life for the bourgeois class in South Africa:

I had the curious freedom of a break in routine. Max was dead; I felt nothing directly about the fact except that I believed it. Yet it divided the morning before I had read the telegram from the morning after I had done so, and in the severance I was cut loose. Of course I can do what I like on Saturday mornings, but it's been weeks since I've done anything but have Graham in to breakfast, wash my hair, and perhaps go to the suburban shops.<sup>34</sup>

There is a striking disaffection to the opening narrative here, and so Gordimer begins by exposing the "sclerosis" at the heart of capitalist society, the "hardening of the heart, narrowing of the mind" that may make a bourgeois lifestyle easier on the conscience.<sup>35</sup> Liz's opening passage initiates the novella's use of physical imagery through the graphic

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<sup>32</sup> 'The Road to South African Freedom', Programme of the South African Communist Party 1962 (London: Inkululeko Publications/Farleigh Press Ltd, 1962).

<sup>33</sup> Suppression of Communist Act, Act No. 44 of 1950, dated 17 July 1950, in South African History Archive  
<[http://www.saha.org.za/nonracialism/the\\_internal\\_security\\_act\\_suppression\\_of\\_communist\\_act\\_act\\_no\\_44\\_of\\_1950.htm](http://www.saha.org.za/nonracialism/the_internal_security_act_suppression_of_communist_act_act_no_44_of_1950.htm)> [Accessed 15.10.2015].

<sup>34</sup> *LBW*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> *LBW*, p. 31.

phrasing "in the severance I was cut loose", which connotes divorce but also casual violence. Liz's initially cold response to the disruption that Max's death causes to her daily routine mirrors the harsh simplicity of the telegram. However, Liz's initially indifferent attitude to Max's death, her hard-heartedness, is unravelled through the course of her narrative, as the usual bourgeois comforts provided by leisure activities and "suburban shops" fail to placate her and she reconsiders the brutality of South Africa's capitalist model. As the narrative moves from the political death of Max to a dramatisation of white bourgeois life through Liz, *The Late Bourgeois World* allows readers to recognise how the high quality of life and comfort available for South Africa's bourgeois class is only afforded at the cost of widespread violence and a highly uneven asymmetrical socio-economic order.

By understanding the novella's depiction of everyday life in relation to bourgeois class structure, we can better understand the uneven development of South Africa's racial-capitalist system. Liz's narrative exposes various different social phenomena that can be understood as part of a Marxist notion of alienation, in the way that capitalist production orders society. Max is alienated, of course, as a communist involved in anti-government agitation, while Liz is alienated from the social expectations (and limitations) of her position as a white woman living alone in a bourgeois South African suburb. Alienation is also palpable in the way that social relations appear to be mediated by commodities and in the narrative's treatment of everyday patterns of consumption. Alienation, as a result of the division of society into classes with opposed interests, therefore manifests in profound and interconnected ways for different levels of society. As Marx explains:

An immediate consequence of man's estrangement from the products of his labour, his life activity, his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men. What is true of man's relationship to his labour, to the product of his labour and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, and to the labour and the object of the labour of other men. In general, the proposition that man is estranged from his species-being means that each man is estranged from the others and that all are estranged from man's essence.<sup>36</sup>

On one level, Marx demonstrates that social relations under capitalism, the relationships

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, 'Alienated Labour', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 85-94 (p. 91).

people have with each other in capitalist society, are dominated by the ruthless logic of capitalism: profit through unequal exchange. This uneven development thrives where humans are estranged, or alienated, from each other because social relations are being defined through the prism of profit and commodity exchange. On an additional level, alienation exists not only between the worker and the product of his or her work, but between workers as human beings. And so as capitalist patterns of consumption obscure the role of the worker behind the commodity, the combined and uneven nature of capitalist development may appear to be natural. This complex pattern of alienation is attested to when Liz describes in contradictory terms what she encounters as a "cheerful scene out of hell" driving through Johannesburg's mining periphery.<sup>37</sup> Observing "the new industrial areas that are making the country rich – or rather, richer" is set against the contradictory poor treatment of the country's working class, as the narrative encounters a convoy of trucks carrying local workers "made blacker by gleaming coal-dust, braced against the speed of the truck round a blazing brazier [...] They didn't care".<sup>38</sup> If the workers have no apparent care or hope to challenge their poor working conditions, this scene imparts a sense of naturalness to South Africa's existing uneven social relations, despite Liz's implicit observation that it is workers such as these who are helping in "making the country richer".<sup>39</sup> Moreover, that the workers are rendered in the passive voice through the description of the "gleaming coal-dust" making them "blacker" suggests how they have become estranged from their own humanity; or estranged from their 'essence', to refer back to Marx.

This form of estrangement and alienation is exemplified in the novella's dramatisation of even the most personal of relationships, first in Liz's relationship with her son and, as I later discuss, in relation to her grandmother. It is revealed that Liz and Max have spent little time with their son, whom they sent to a private boarding school to remove him from the everyday reality of apartheid. When Liz travels to the school to inform the boy his father is dead, the encounter is understandably awkward, but less as a result of the death of an imprisoned absent father, and more so because of the depth of estrangement between mother and son. The school's insistence on Liz calling her son "Bruce Van Den Sandt" within dialogue rather than the nickname "Bobo" that she uses within the narrative articulates their estrangement and her lack of agency within their relationship: "I hardly ever hear the name spoken. This is the other Bobo, whom I will

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<sup>37</sup> *LBW*, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> In his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre describes this estrangement in relation to the alienating forces that exist ubiquitously in everyday life where 'the modern individual is "deprived" not only of social reality and truth, but of power over himself'. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), p. 248.

never know".<sup>40</sup> Commodities function to give Liz the agency she feels she lacks as a mother: "Perhaps they'd let me take him out and I could buy him tea and cream scones [...] I'm the one for whom it is necessary to have presents".<sup>41</sup> It is particularly significant, then, that the few lines of direct speech attributed to Liz's son convey a desire for him and his mother to have had a closer relationship without the moral burdens of living in South Africa: "Sometimes I wish we were like other people [...] They don't care".<sup>42</sup> A parallel can therefore be drawn between the estranged mother-son relationship and the alienation Liz observed in relation to the mine workers. What exactly it is that these "other people" don't care about, I therefore argue, is the uneven development inherent to South African racial capitalism and the wider capitalist world-system.

The 'bourgeois' and 'late' aspects of South African society, as well as the wider capitalist world-system, are directly challenged within the narrative of the novella in a crucial scene between Liz and her partner Graham towards the end of the novella. While Clingman focused on the sexual liberation of Liz's character, the importance of her conversation with Graham is particularly useful for the purposes of this chapter. Liz asks "what could one say this is the age of?"<sup>43</sup> This is as much a question posed by Gordimer to the reader, as it is posed by Liz to Graham. She insists on a political and social definition: "Not in terms of technical achievement, that's too easy, and it's not enough about us – about people – is it?"<sup>44</sup> Liz's clarification that the age they are living in is "not enough about people" indicates not only that human beings are becoming secondary and subordinate to the needs of capitalist production and "technical achievement", but that human beings are also being oppressed, that the supposed technical achievements and productions of our age are not benefitting everyone. Capitalist production thus appears unsustainable but also morally objectionable in its uneven development.

The Marxist influence on the novella's title is subsequently referenced in Graham's response to Liz. He remarks that he "just read a book that refers to ours as the Late Bourgeois World".<sup>45</sup> Although it is not revealed within the narrative, the "book" in question is most likely *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Perspective*, by the Austrian Marxist critic Ernst Fischer, who Gordimer also makes reference to in a number of her non-literary writings. Gordimer's references to Fischer are important to my reading here

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<sup>40</sup> *LBW*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> *LBW*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> *LBW*, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> *LBW*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *LBW*, p. 68.



because his writing calls for works of art that counter the narrative of 'the late bourgeois world' by providing:

a large vision of the future, a hopeful historical perspective. Despite disappointments, this vision still belongs to the socialist world. It is far more than a question of bread and space rockets, prosperity and technical perfection: it is a matter of the 'meaning of life', a meaning that is not metaphysical but humanist. [...] Human consciousness has lagged far behind technical progress.<sup>46</sup>

In view of humanity's technological achievements, Fischer questions the extent of social progress in capitalist society where consumption and accumulation are prioritised over human need. This ultimate contradiction is that of the combined and uneven development of the capitalist economic system. Fischer's inspiration to Gordimer underlines what I have said elsewhere in relation to her project's emphasis on raising social consciousness in South Africa and more globally: that writers have a "responsibility in the transformation of society [...] a bold global responsibility".<sup>47</sup> Understanding *The Late Bourgeois World* within a more Marxist context reinforces what we know of Gordimer's essential gesture as a writer and her desire to find forms of expression that could communicate her vision of the world's 'socialist horizon'. By questioning the state of apartheid, Liz's narrative also prompts readers to consider an alternative 'vision of the future'.

The lateness of the bourgeois world refers therefore to the capitalist system's demise being long overdue, particularly in light of the technological capacity to ameliorate gross inequality. Hope for an alternative economic system is signalled in Graham's response to Liz suggesting that the lateness of one system implies the prospect of another: "Defining one, you assume the existence of the other".<sup>48</sup> In other words, the lateness of the bourgeois world can be understood as an interregnum stage between a capitalist world and a socialist world. The text's openness to the possibility of alternative economic models also speaks to the novella's contemporary political climate of the Cold War and the two competing ideologies of capitalism and so-called communism. In Liz's alienation from capitalist society, *The Late Bourgeois World* does not just invite critique

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<sup>46</sup> Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 214-215.

<sup>47</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Essential Gesture', in *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 409-424 (p. 422). Gordimer explains that "the Marxist critic Ernst Fischer reaches anterior to my interpretation of [a writer's social responsibility]. [...] Art is on the side of the oppressed", p. 414.

<sup>48</sup> *LBW*, p. 68.

of racial capitalism in South Africa but with the capitalist world-system as a whole. As a textual response to the inadequacies of the capitalist model, the novella engenders not simply a social consciousness but a socialist consciousness.

In Gordimer's essay 'When Art Meets Politics', she refers back to Fischer and the importance of creating a hopeful socialist vision that people can aspire to: "the feature common to all significant artists and writers in the capitalist world is their inability to come to terms with the social reality that surrounds them".<sup>49</sup> As a textual response to the unevenness of the capitalist world, *The Late Bourgeois World* cannot "come to terms" with a capitalist mode of production where technological achievements are placed in the service of accumulation and appropriation. The "social reality" that Gordimer cannot come to terms with in South Africa is the country's racial-capitalist system of apartheid, perpetuated by a dominant mode of thinking that sees the division of society by race and economic class as natural. Fischer wrote that it is the social responsibility of artists to portray the bourgeois world as continuing beyond all appropriateness: 'in a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it'.<sup>50</sup> Fischer emphasises here how citizens who lack full political and social consciousness contribute to a 'decaying society', in which exploitation and injustice can continue unchecked and ignored. In the case of *The Late Bourgeois World*, Liz starts to recognise and resist the "deprivations of daily life under apartheid", an insight that the text implores its readers to replicate, in response to the uneven development of racial capitalism and the myths of white South African culture.<sup>51</sup>

### **"Myth of South African Culture"**

Gordimer argues in her essay 'The South African Censor: No Change' that the National Party's 1963 Censorship Act existed on the basis of "a single power group to decide what is culture", asserting that texts such as *The Late Bourgeois World* were banned to prevent transgression against the "myth" of an exceptional white "South African culture" to preserve the country's "class-and-colour hierarchy".<sup>52</sup> Gordimer explains the myth-making of white bourgeois culture in South Africa through reference to Roland Barthes'

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<sup>49</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'When Art Meets Politics', in *Telling Times*, pp. 548-552 (pp. 550-551).

<sup>50</sup> Fischer, p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Fischer, p. 423.

<sup>52</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The South African Censor: No Change', in *Telling Times*, pp. 347-357 (p. 355). Of course, as part of the 1931 Entertainments Censorship Act, it was already a bannable offence to portray 'scenes representing antagonistic relations of capital and labour', as published in the *Union Gazette* [5th June 1931], p. xxviii.

work in *Mythologies*: "Barthes points out that [whereas] traditional myth explains a culture's origins out of nature's forces; modern myths justify and enforce a secular power by presenting it as a natural force".<sup>53</sup> Gordimer's reference to Barthes here can help readers delineate the treatment of bourgeois ideology in *The Late Bourgeois World*, where bourgeois dominance is not presented as 'a natural force' but something that can be questioned and resisted.

Barthes examines the 'myths' of everyday life and everyday items that fashion the perception that disparity between economic classes is minimal and unnoteworthy, or worse, natural and ordinary:

This anonymity of the bourgeoisie becomes even more marked when one passes from bourgeois culture proper to its derived, vulgarized, and applied forms, to what one could call public philosophy, that which sustains everyday life, civil ceremonials, secular rites, in short *the unwritten norms of interrelationships in a bourgeois society*. It is an illusion to reduce the dominant culture to its inventive core: there is also a bourgeois culture which consists of consumption alone [...] this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theater, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, *a touching wedding*, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between the man and the world.<sup>54</sup>

Capitalist exploitation is not just materially visible, but coercive on a cultural level. Bourgeois 'myth' reduces and restricts consciousness of how 'capitalism' as a total system operates at the level of culture, reinforcing class hierarchy as fixed and natural. The mythology of capitalism, bourgeois ideology, is *not* made up of gods, demons, and the cosmology of the planets, but instead centres on mundane, everyday objects like cars, wine, and plastics. Bourgeois ideology makes gods from the worshipful materialism of everyday objects: consumerism is the new religion. In this way, *Mythologies* formulates a way of discussing a bourgeois ideology that centres on a materialist consumer culture, in which Barthes suggests that all items can be equally meaningful, or meaningless, whereby the latest models of cars, for example, are held as the equivalent of grand

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<sup>53</sup> Gordimer, p. 353.

<sup>54</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013), p. 252 [my emphasis].

cathedrals.<sup>55</sup> Or, as Jonathan Culler states, 'myth masks the radically different social and economic conditions under which people are born, work and die'.<sup>56</sup> Barthes' use of myth to better understand the commodity fetishism of consumer culture is useful in reading *The Late Bourgeois World* because the narrative's treatment of everyday life in 1960s South Africa also dramatises that side of 'bourgeois culture which consists of consumption alone'.<sup>57</sup> The myth-making objectification of consumer culture is therefore helpful in understanding the persistence of uneven development in capitalist society, as it is the successful 'myth-making' of South African racial-capitalist bourgeois ideology that Liz's narrative is recognising and resisting.

In *The Late Bourgeois World*, Gordimer takes the reader to the very top of South Africa's class hierarchy, with Liz's recollection of Max's family, rich landowners whose wealth is only ever described in murky references to "gold mines" and "various companies" supported by their "country club" and the United Party.<sup>58</sup> The obscure origins of Max's family wealth are indicative of a bourgeois class that designs itself to appear natural and ahistorical, rather than being rooted in South Africa's history of colonial violence and appropriation. The implication that social connections are key to the family maintaining its position also suggests that the capitalist mode of production and the concentration of power creates a privileged elite that become increasingly difficult to remove. The uneven development affording the bourgeoisie their disproportionate wealth is dramatised in Liz's recollection of the evening parties she attended in the home of the Van Den Sandts, where politicians and businessmen discussed and haggled over:

stocks and shares, the property market, the lobbying for support for Bills that would have the effect of lowering or raising the bank rate, on which they depended for their investments, industrial Bills on which they depended for cheap labour, or land apportionment on which they depended to keep the best for themselves – all this grew in a thicket of babble outside which we finished our plates of chicken *en gélée* and silently drank our glasses of chilled white wine.<sup>59</sup>

From dirty-dealing on "stocks and shares" and "the property market" to lobbying for votes on legislation that will benefit one group over another, prioritising wealth creation for the rich on the basis of "cheap labour" and land appropriation, the evening parties

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<sup>55</sup> Barthes, p. 169.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, p. 252.

<sup>58</sup> *LBW*, p. 23 and p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> *LBW*, p. 23.

symbolise the corrupt nature of South African racial capitalism in the 1960s. It is left to the reader to ponder whether the inherited property of the Van Den Sandts really falls into the category of "land apportionment" and appropriation encouraged by South Africa's Natives Land Act policies. However, this scene does provide the reader with an apt definition of racial capitalism, when the Van Den Sandts talk of the "natives" for whom "their labour was directed in various Acts of no interest outside Parliament" because "their lives were incidental to their labour".<sup>60</sup> The novella points to a collusion between big business and the state in the implementation of apartheid to exploit the labour power of the black majority by accentuating racial domination to fulfil white accumulation.

Liz's narrative draws attention to the structurally uneven development intensified by the National Party's regime, as the SACP protested:

the South African and foreign monopoly capitalists and large-scale landowners, who, together, are the real rulers of this country, have cultivated racial differences and prejudices as their most effective instrument in their insatiable drive for cheap labour and high profits [from] the maximum exploitation of [African] labour.<sup>61</sup>

That these recollections repeatedly interrupt Liz's narrative exemplifies her increasing recognition of and resistance to this corrupt system, and her awareness of the cheap labour and land appropriation feeding the country's uneven development. The specific language of Liz's narrative further reinforces the unscrupulous nature of these gatherings as a clandestine "babble", exclusive in an elitist but underhand manner; she describes the party as a "thicket", suggestive of concealment and illicit activity, while the word "grew" appears particularly damning as a connotation of a fungus or cancer on society.<sup>62</sup> The narrative's incriminating language is juxtaposed awkwardly with the image of guests enjoying rather delicately-worded choices of "chicken *en gélée*" and "chilled white wine", as though poverty and homelessness are banal conversation pieces over canapés. Gordimer's deployment of the French 'chicken *en gélée*' can be understood as part of what Barthes critiques as the bourgeois desire for 'ornamental cuisine', and traces a link back to

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<sup>60</sup> *LBW*, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Road to South African Freedom', Programme of the South African Communist Party 1962 (London: Inkululeko Publications/Farleigh Press Ltd, 1962).

<sup>62</sup> Capturing what Lefebvre refers to as 'the true critique of everyday life will have as its prime objective the separation between the human (real and possible) and bourgeois decadence'. Lefebvre, p. 127.

the French etymology of 'bourgeois' as a word.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the novella's repeated references to wine, as this particular scene attests to, function as a key symbol of the social and economic alienation fostered by bourgeois ideology in the fortification of racial capitalism. Wine has a mythological ideological function by hiding the true exploitations and poor working conditions of capitalist wine production, as Barthes argues in his *Mythologies* essay on 'Wine and Milk':

wine's mythology can help us understand the habitual ambiguity of our daily life. [...] There are indeed very engaging myths which are nonetheless anything but innocent. And the truth about our present alienation is precisely the fact that wine cannot be an entirely happy substance, unless we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation.<sup>64</sup>

Barthes draws a link here between the enjoyment of wine as an innocent pleasure and the terrors of labour exploitation and land appropriation. As the evening parties of *The Late Bourgeois World* dramatise, "chilled white wine" becomes both an alibi and supplement to the discussion of cheap labour and land appropriation. *The Late Bourgeois World* features numerous references to alcohol: eight references to wine, five references to brandy, two references to whisky, as well as repeated references to empty glasses and intoxication, all of which can be read as a symbol of bourgeois ideology and excess. While Barthes referred to French capitalism in the 1950s in his discussion of wine in relation to bourgeois social reality, *The Late Bourgeois World* invites readers to question how this link between wine and exploitation is inherent to the structure of capitalist production in South Africa.

Wine has an integral place in South Africa's history, with wine-making dating back to the primordial European figure of Jan Van Riebeeck, who is oft-quoted by South African winemakers for his diary entry dated February 2, 1659: 'Today, God be praised, wine was pressed for the first time from Cape grapes'.<sup>65</sup> Wine, then, has a direct historical connection to the European imperial project in South Africa. As Gavin Lucas has previously discussed, the wine industry led to the development of a strong domestic

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<sup>63</sup> The term bourgeois 'first appeared in eleventh-century French, as *burgeis*, to indicate those residents of medieval towns (bourgs) who enjoyed the legal right of being "free and exempt from feudal jurisdiction".' Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, p. 82.

<sup>65</sup> Tim James, *Wines of the New South Africa: Tradition and Revolution* (London: University of California Press, 2013), p. 23. South African wine-makers Shannon Wines still proudly refer to their 350-year colonial legacy on their website: <[www.shannonwines.com/shannonwines.htm](http://www.shannonwines.com/shannonwines.htm)> [Accessed 24.08.2015].

market for wine in South Africa by the 18th century, and by the '19th century it even started to be exported abroad'.<sup>66</sup> But Lucas adds that the wealth created by the wine industry was built entirely on exploitation of slave labour.<sup>67</sup> Just as Barthes suggests that French wine is 'a product of expropriation' in colonial Algeria, the modern South African wine industry thus has its roots planted in a combination of land expropriation and slave labour as a direct result of the first colonial enterprise in South Africa. And, as Daryl Glaser asserts: 'mining and agriculture are widely agreed to be partners in elaborating racial labour-repression in South Africa'.<sup>68</sup> What Liz is beginning to recognise is confirmed by Glaser's study: that big business operated in collusion with the national government during apartheid, as South African industries shared a mutual historic reliance on state-sanctioned land appropriation, cheap labour, a tolerance of poor working conditions, and minimal-to-absent workers' rights. As discussed by Alan Lester et al., when the Cape Colony was expanded in the late 1600s by European settlers seeking additional land for grain, wine, and livestock, they created:

a system of private landholding [that] was a critical feature of transplanted European capitalist society in the Cape [...] It facilitated the accumulation of tremendous levels of wealth among an elite now known as the "Cape Gentry", who were able to seize the most valued land [while creating] a corresponding relative poverty among those who were relatively or absolutely deprived of access to the land.<sup>69</sup>

This pattern of uneven development in the seventeenth century manifested most perniciously in South African capitalism under what has become known as the 'dop' system (also referred to as the tot system), where vineyard workers were not given monetary wages but instead paid either fully or partially with wine, usually surplus or rotten stock that the landowners could not sell. The dop system became a contentious issue during the 1960s and the government was forced to legislate against proprietors to stop the practice. However, South African wine businesses operated the dop system until the late 1990s; and the practice was only formally and finally banned in the 2003 Liquor Act. To this day, South Africa has by far the highest rate of fetal alcohol syndrome of any country in the world, with over 3 million South Africans registered with alcohol-related

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<sup>66</sup> Gavin Lucas, *An Archaeology of Colonial Identity: Power and Material Culture in the Dwaars Valley, South Africa* (New York: Spring, 2006), p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> Lucas, p. 92.

<sup>68</sup> Daryl Glaser, *Politics and Society in South Africa* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 47-48.

<sup>69</sup> Alan Lester, Etienne Nel, and Tony Binns, *South Africa: Past, Present and Future* (Abingdon: Pearson, 2000), p. 55.

birth defects since the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> For all of these reasons, the narrative's frequent references to the quaffing of wine, particularly over discussions about cheap labour and land appropriation, have a particularly damning historical depth.

Wine is further reinforced as a symbol for the exploitativeness of South African racial capitalism, as well as the corruption of bourgeois society, in Liz's recollection of a wedding ceremony for Max's sister. After drinking champagne, Max toasts his sister with an impromptu speech that quickly becomes a political tirade. His politics are undermined by his social awkwardness and his admission that he had not previously met the groom and "I don't suppose I know much about [my sister] either".<sup>71</sup> As Max's idealism turns to naivety in an apparent state of intoxication, his own consumption of the wine obfuscates his own criticisms against the contrivance of the ceremony and the state of South Africa under the rule of the National Party. What the reader can assume to be Max's sincere advocacy for social change becomes a scene of parody. The wedding guests respond in the full expectation that he is joking, with a "stir towards laughter" as if "to respond to a joke or innuendo".<sup>72</sup> This is the only occasion on which Max is provided with direct dialogue within Liz's interior monologue. Max's impassioned if naive sense of conviction is therefore juxtaposed with Liz's ongoing struggle to respond meaningfully to his death, from her own seemingly bourgeois position.<sup>73</sup>

Max's speech is worth quoting more fully here because, in Liz's recollection of this scene, it is noteworthy for its espousal of a socialist consciousness in response to the prevailing bourgeois ideology of South African racial capitalism:

'Don't let the world begin and end for you with the – how many is it? four hundred? – people sitting here [...] who have made us, and made this club, and made this country what it is.' (There was prolonged clapping, led by someone with loud, hard palms.) 'There's a whole world outside this.' (Applause broke out again) 'Shut outside. Kept out. Shutting this in...Don't stay inside and let your arteries harden, like theirs...I'm not talking about the sort of thing some of them have, those who have had thrombosis, I don't mean veins gone furry through sitting around in places like this fine club and having more than enough to eat-'

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<sup>70</sup> South Africa's Foundation for Alcohol Related Research, <[www.farrsa.org.za/library](http://www.farrsa.org.za/library)> [Accessed 28.08.2015].

<sup>71</sup> *LBW*, p. 30.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Sheila Roberts has commented that 'Elizabeth is hardly reliable [...] and the reader is left wondering whether Gordimer intends to convey the all pervasive influence of the late bourgeois world by providing us with a narrator as unequal to the demands life makes on her as the bourgeois world is to increasing social disintegration and change'. Sheila Roberts, 'Nadine Gordimer's "Family of Women"', *Theoria*, 60 (1983), 45-58 (p. 48).



(Clapping began and splattered out, like mistaken applause between movements at a concert). 'What I'm asking you to look out for is moral sclerosis.'<sup>74</sup>

As an interruption to the primary narrative, Liz is almost lost to the reader in this scene, were it not for interspersed bracketed reflections between the recollected dialogue of Max. Liz's withdrawal in this part of the narrative marks out her inability to respond in this moment and marks the contradictory position she now finds herself in, both in rethinking her past with the hopeful idealism yet failed naivety of Max and in contemplating her isolated future recognising and resisting the brutal racial-capitalist system that can no longer be endured. Indeed, most ironically, the intoxicated wedding guests clap and cheer at Max's furious descriptions of social injustice. For the "four hundred" wedding guests, who represent some of the most powerful people in 1960s South Africa, the uneven development that has provided them with such disproportionate wealth is a point of celebration. The lack of moral regard for other human beings thus explains what the text refers to as the "moral sclerosis" defining the late bourgeois world, as inferred at the end of Max's speech:

Moral sclerosis. Hardening of the heart, narrowing of the mind; while the dividends go up. The thing that makes them distribute free blankets in the location in winter, while refusing to pay wages people could live on. Smugness. Among us, you can't be too young to pick it up. It sets in pretty quick. More widespread than bilharzia in the rivers, and a damned sight harder to cure. [...]  
There was a second of silence and then the same pair of hard palms began to clap and a few other hands followed hollowly, but someone at the bride's table at once leapt up and thrust out his glass in the toast that Max had forgotten – 'The bride and groom!' All the gilded folding chairs shuffled and all the figures rose in solidarity – 'To the bride and groom!' I saw the determinedly smiling faces behind the glasses of wine as if they had turned on him.<sup>75</sup>

The wedding speech scene becomes even more sinister when considering "the determinedly smiling faces behind the glasses of wine", as though the wine has become a symbolic shield of class interest. Behind the mythological image of wine, the alienation of capitalist social relations has led to a situation where the excesses and abuses of capitalism are banal and mundane to the degree that they can be laughed off and

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<sup>74</sup> *LBW*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>75</sup> *LBW*, pp. 31-32.

applauded during a wedding ceremony. Wine's mythology, therefore, allows the guests to wrongfully forget, to refer back to Barthes, that their existence and indulgence is the product of expropriation and exploitation. The wine becomes a decoration or prop as part of the social gesture, act, and ceremony. It has literally become a means of separating and dividing Max and Liz from the "determinedly smiling faces behind the glasses", representing what Barthes terms the mythological anonymity of the bourgeois class. Indeed, the wedding guests are associated through commodities in Liz's recollection, remembered only as objects rather than people, forming a "solidarity" of "gilded folding chairs" against the radicalism of Max's speech. As the wedding guests are reduced to "hard palms" and "faces behind" glasses of wine, Gordimer's rendering of wine as a mythological function can be read as a dehumanising and therefore destructive form of commodity fetishism. If the myth of South Africa is self-destructive, this must inform its lateness.

The memory of the wedding serves as a significant interruption in Liz's narrative, with its various images and Max's speech inviting a rethinking of the commodity fetishism and myth of white South African culture. The moral sclerosis defining 1960s South Africa as a late bourgeois world is thus communicated through the hollow and performative nature of a wedding ceremony intended to be personal and meaningful, capturing the lateness of 1960s South Africa in connotations of dehumanisation and alienation of a society defined by uneven development. The impassioned tone of Max's wedding speech contrasts with Liz's cold narration of his supposed suicide at the start of the novella, and so the arrival of this scene partway through the narrative represents Liz's own burgeoning social consciousness of the so-called sclerosis effect. On one level, Max's death and his inability to realise the ideals announced in this speech capture what Clingman referred to as the failure of the 1960s revolution against the apartheid state, but on another level Max's suicide is itself the violent product of South African capitalism, a bourgeois world reliant on a combination of economic exploitation and ideological myth-making.

### **Critique of Everyday Life**

As the death of Max at the start of Liz's narrative is framed as a 'break in routine', the reader is positioned to question what routine, what pattern of daily life, is being broken. As the first-person narrative starts with themes of death and alienation, the fragmentariness of its form enables the dismantling of Liz's bourgeois background and what Gordimer calls the "myth of South African culture". Starting the novella with Max's

death is therefore doubly important in our understanding of 1960s South Africa through Liz, as an interruption to what Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross refer to as the 'routine, repetition, [and] reiteration' of capitalism in the form of 'everyday life'.<sup>76</sup> The breakdown of Liz's daily routine into a fragmented series of disturbing memories, thoughts, and questions allow the novella's form to register her burgeoning recognition of and resistance to the dominant mode of thinking in 1960s South Africa. As Liz continues with her day, the novella's form functions to disrupt her usual patterns: 'the myriad activities and conditions for existence that must be satisfied in order for relations of production to take place at all. Social reproduction – what we are calling here everyday life'.<sup>77</sup> The novella is therefore creating an immediate conflict between the routines and functions of capitalist everyday life and the symbolic death of a communist.

Critiquing everyday life does not mean simply describing daily activities, or the anthropological accounting of social practices, but what Michael Gardiner refers to as relating everyday life 'analytically to wider sociohistorical developments'.<sup>78</sup> The aim is 'to analyse asymmetrical power relations that exist between a [...] system and its users'.<sup>79</sup> As I see it, the novella works to observe and critique asymmetrical power relations at the level of everyday life. Uneven development is a lived experience.<sup>80</sup> As Henri Lefebvre argued, 'Marxism, as a whole, really is a critical knowledge of everyday life. [...] Marx wanted to change everyday life. To change the world is above all to change the way everyday, real life is lived'.<sup>81</sup> In other words, to rebalance an economic system that is crooked (in both meanings of the word), we must first understand why and how the system persists in its crooked state, which constitutes not only the system as an abstract totality but the seemingly banal and specific peculiarities of everyday life under capitalism. As Jameson has argued, the 'politics of daily life [...] must now be the primary space of struggle [...] we must focus on a reification and a commodification that have become so universalised as to seem well-nigh natural and organic'.<sup>82</sup> Redressing the system's unevenness must include an analysis of the peculiar naturalisation of commodification in everyday life under late capitalism, which perpetuates the

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<sup>76</sup> Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, 'Introduction', *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987), 1-4 (p. 3).

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> As Kaplan and Ross argue: 'To advance a theory of everyday life is to elevate lived experience to the status of a critical concept – not merely in order to describe lived experience, but in order to change it', p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), p. 148; and Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 2*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>82</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI, 2012), p. 212.

asymmetrical power relations between those at the top of the system and the rest of society.

The commodification of everyday life is stressed in the text's repeated reminders that the narrative's period of twenty-four hours takes place on a Saturday, where Liz is expected to fulfil certain patterns of consumption: "if I were dumped back in it from eternity I should know at once that it was a Saturday afternoon. It was in people's faces, *the pleasure of the weekend*, like the sweets clutched in children's hands".<sup>83</sup> The supposed "pleasure of the weekend" here is implicitly linked to consumption, emphasised in the warped sense of leisure and anxiety in the image of a child desperately 'clutching' their bag of sweets. The sense of desperation in being 'dumped back' into weekend pleasure speaks to a Marxist critique of everyday life in which 'far from being an escape from this realm, segmented leisure time such as the weekend is rather a final cog permitting the smooth functioning of the routine [...] within a weekly cycle of production [and] consumption'.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Theodor Adorno argued that weekends and the whole concept of having 'free time' outside of work are simply further appendages to the capitalist system.<sup>85</sup> In capitalist everyday life, leisure time functions primarily to provide rest so that workers are more productive, as Liz reminds herself in a mantra-like fashion: "I don't have to go to work on Saturdays".<sup>86</sup> However, weekend leisure time also becomes differentiated by the expectation to spend money on shopping and entertainment. How much money one wears becomes key to distinguishing one's economic class, something Liz identifies with "men in the rugged weekend outfit of company directors".<sup>87</sup> The pleasure of the weekend is unravelled as yet more pressure to participate in and exhibit prescribed acts of consumption.

Adorno has previously suggested that pleasure determined primarily by consumption represents the extension of commodification into everyday life, the subjugation of supposed 'free time' by profit-making business to dominate and sell people products, what he refers to ironically as the 'leisure industry'.<sup>88</sup> Leisure time is therefore constitutive of the process of uneven development, as human beings are divided by the leisure activities they are able to pursue in their free time, as well as identifying oneself primarily through commodities. Liz starts to recognise and resist her own identification with the repetitious and norms of her bourgeois lifestyle, setting herself apart from the

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<sup>83</sup> *LBW*, p. 56 [my emphasis].

<sup>84</sup> Kaplan and Ross, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Theodor Adorno, 'Free Time', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 187-197.

<sup>86</sup> *LBW*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> *LBW*, p. 21.

<sup>88</sup> Adorno, p. 189.

"clubs where people I know are likely to be on a Saturday night" and the shoppers "gathering together their weekend purchases [...] bottles of wine and whisky, the prawns and cakes and bunches of flowers, plain evidence of the superior living standards of white civilization".<sup>89</sup> Liz's detached point of view in this scene suggests that these patterns of consumption are a false and performative part of everyday life, particularly in relation to the racialised context of apartheid. Gordimer presents a society in which people have become individual material consumers rather than socially aware and engaged participants. In consumer society, shopping and consumption have become primary determining social concerns, encouraging both a desire and a pressure to accumulate, while ignoring the gross double standard of the supposedly superior white existence under apartheid. Liz's detachment allows us to question how the 'middle class' have themselves been consumed by an obsolete social reality:

I was brought up to live among women, as middle-class women with their shopping and social and household concerns comfortably do. [...] Most of what there was to learn from my family and background has turned out to be hopelessly obsolete, for me.<sup>90</sup>

A bourgeois lifestyle that revolves around "shopping and household concerns" not only appears dull and repetitive to an increasingly politically conscious female character such as Liz, but they are also hypocritical and obscene in the context of apartheid. Following Max's death, it appears as though Liz recognises that the carefree comforts of everyday life are hopelessly obsolete to her when the country urgently requires political change and social progress.

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, as discussed in Chapter 1, underlines how consumers have thus come to believe that the products they purchase provide intrinsic values and meanings to elevate their sense of self-worth, while ignoring the actually existing socio-economic conditions and reality of society. In this way, Lefebvre argues that patterns of consumption in everyday life contribute to a false sense of familiarity.<sup>91</sup> Liz's use of the word "comfortably" offers a double meaning: in its suggestion of the luxury and leisure of a bourgeois lifestyle, as well as the distraction that shopping for comfort items offers the consumer, drawing attention away from social reality. More

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<sup>89</sup> *LBW*, p. 89 and p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> *LBW*, p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> 'We need to think about what is happening around us, within us, each and everyday [and] this constant impression of familiarity' where no such familiarity exists. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 14.

specifically, the supposed but ultimately false familiarity of mass consumption generates both a disregard and ignorance of the socio-economic relations behind the production of everyday items that feed middle-class "shopping and social and household concerns". Even so, Liz fulfils her own shopping needs while simultaneously beginning to recognise and resist what appears to be a pattern of alienated consumption and false consciousness. The narrator's emerging realisations and raised social consciousness within a process of alienation offers a dialectical position that Gardiner explains in the following terms: 'the everyday must therefore be understood dialectically; it is simultaneously an alienated and potentially liberated state'.<sup>92</sup> What the novella therefore offers the reader is a way of critiquing everyday life as a means of potentially changing it: we must employ self-criticism in order to improve our social conditions.

Critiquing the novella's treatment of everyday life in 1960s South Africa thus offers an important means of understanding how bourgeois ideology is formed through the repetition and reiteration of actions that become normalised and appear natural. The supposed naturalness of false consciousness is what Jameson refers to as 'the underlying logic of the daily life of capitalism', which 'programs us to it and helps to make us increasingly at home in what would otherwise – for a time traveller from another social formation – be a distressingly alienating reality'.<sup>93</sup> Rhetorical questions punctuate Liz's narrative in an unanswered textual response to the hypocrisy of pretending to uphold a "decent" family life within the racial-capitalist construct of 1960s South Africa:

I don't think that the code of decent family life, kindness to dogs and neighbours, handouts to grateful servants, has brought us much more than bewilderment. What about all those strangers the code didn't provide for?<sup>94</sup>

Liz's bewilderment at how great wealth and poverty can be so obviously juxtaposed implicates the combined and uneven nature of accumulation in South Africa. Uneven development is thus combined: wealth accumulation, a "decent family life", is systematically linked to the exclusion of "strangers". Class division and poverty go ignored and may even appear as natural as a "code" of (presumably middle-class) expectation, even when such inequality is only artificially produced and perpetuated by the capitalist system of economic organisation. Liz's decentering from middle-class patterns of consumption allows readers to consider the extent to which everyday life has

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<sup>92</sup> Gardiner, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 225.

<sup>94</sup> *LBW*, p. 12.

been overly-determined by a repetitive cycle of accumulation and consumption. The lateness of a social reality defined in part by its alienation is underlined in Liz's visit to her dementia-suffering grandmother. Since her grandmother is ill and cannot leave her accommodation, Liz "drew up from the trance of age her old pleasure in streets and cities, and described an imaginary shopping trip I had taken in the morning".<sup>95</sup> This contrivance mirrors Liz's own experience, where commodities and consumption have become the distractions and comforts that ameliorate a state of decline, whether mentally in the context of the grandmother or morally in the context of 1960s South Africa. The grandmother thus becomes symbolic for the lateness of racial capitalism as an economic system.

Understanding the capitalist system's lateness in part as a state of mental and moral decline one can see that the alienation of consumer culture becomes key to defining the bourgeois world of the novella: "They were gathering together their weekend purchases all round me, the good citizens who never had any doubt about where their allegiance lay".<sup>96</sup> Shopping has become disassociated from its production. Consumer culture therefore breeds a false consciousness from which the "good citizens never doubt where their allegiance" lies. By contrast, the fragmentation of Liz's narrative is radical because it compels readers to answer the questions raised about the break of routine to her own everyday life and her sensitivity to the hypocrisy "all round me". Liz separates herself from a pervading bourgeois consciousness that perpetuates a consumer culture reliant on commodity fetishism that promotes a false social reality. While Ogungbesan uses this passage in his argument on white guilt to suggest that Liz represents 'an inconsistent rebel who yearns to return to her prosaic past', I would contend that, far from yearning to return to the blissful ignorance (or casual disregard) of a bourgeois lifestyle, it is her raised consciousness of the ignorance and individualism of those "who never had any doubt about where their allegiance lay" that compels Liz to reconsider her own social responsibility during this 'break in routine'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Ogungbesan's use of the phrase 'prosaic *past*' indicates that he may have missed the nuance in Gordimer's writing here, because despite the bourgeois ideology of South Africa's racial capitalism being "hopelessly obsolete", the "good citizens" are not referred to in a past tense but referred to in a present-future tense that indicates the ongoing nature of this bourgeois world that is obsolete but interminable.

While Ogungbesan argues that Liz's narrative focuses on 'prosaic' details, I

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<sup>95</sup> *LBW*, p. 61.

<sup>96</sup> *LBW*, p. 27.

<sup>97</sup> Ogungbesan, p. 36.

contend that the repeated discussion of banal activities in *The Late Bourgeois World* functions to uncover and politicise the repetitions of everyday life. Repetitive patterns of consumption within everyday life are what have led to the false consciousness Liz's narrative is now recognising and resisting. Shopping is not simply a mundane experience but a symbolic act, through which consumption becomes a form of buying into this oppressive system of economic organisation and thus perpetuating it. Consumption becomes a way to evade the separation between people and products as well as the feelings of alienation in an individualistic and harshly competitive social reality. In other words, consumption and accumulation become a means of deferring or negating social responsibility. Consumers may think they only need to consume or accumulate more commodities to feel better off, but the never-ending reproduction of products reinforces a dependency on consumer culture. Liz refers to her local "suburban shopping centre" as the locus of this bourgeois ideology where all ages are instructed and processed into consumer culture: "crowded with young women in expensive trousers and boots, older women in elegant suits and furs newly taken out of storage".<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the shopping area is "crowded" even though "it was almost closing time".<sup>99</sup> From social observations of other wealthy white women to the interrupting dialogue of a woman overheard verbalising her shopping list ("he hasn't got a silver cigarette case [...] he really needs one") the text is not simply reporting prosaic realist details but fragmenting Liz's narrative in order to communicate her raised consciousness and sensitivity to bourgeois culture.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, as the interrupting dialogue of the overheard woman suggests that the man in question "needs" a *silver*-coloured cigarette case (presumably in addition to his non-silver cases), these intrusions into the narrative exemplify an entitled sense of indulgence and extravagance defining the racial exceptionalism and uneven development of 1960s South Africa.

The reference to "closing time" also gives the sense that Liz's sensitivity to the falsity of bourgeois culture is overdue and that these issues of conscience have always been in the back of her mind. The 'closing' of 'time' conveys both a sense of urgency and lateness, suggesting that this way of life itself will soon be at an end. For moral and political reasons, these activities will inevitably be interrupted and suspended. Liz's observation of "demanding children shaping ice cream with their tongues" is suggestive of how consumer culture is normalised from childhood. Liz reflects on her own indulgences as a child, remembering "the summer I was seventeen, the summer I met

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<sup>98</sup> *LBW*, p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *LBW*, p. 22.



Max", when she experienced an unimaginable level of wealth: "I had not known that everyday life could be made so pretty and pleasant".<sup>101</sup> However, the narrative takes a confessional tone when Liz considers her own family background and the "sickening secret" that her parents' shop sells second-rate goods to black customers: "those watches didn't work properly [...] I knew there must be things more worth having than these, and an object in life less shameful than palming them off on people who knew nothing better".<sup>102</sup> The passage continues:

The shoddy was my sickening secret. And then I found that Max knew all about it; that the house he lived in, and what went on there, his surroundings, though richer and less obviously unattractive, were part of it, too, and that this quality of life was apparently what our fathers and grandfathers had fought two wars abroad and killed black men in 'native' wars of conquest here at home, to secure for us.<sup>103</sup>

This revelation exposes what Liz is reaching towards throughout the text, a social consciousness of the unevenness and lateness of South Africa's racial-capitalist system. She knows that the lavish properties and lifestyles of wealthy white families, and the foundations of capitalist society, in South Africa are founded on capitalist exploitation rooted in the history of colonial violence and appropriation. But because children are immersed in consumer culture, she recognises the difficulty some may have in questioning their social reality: "perhaps we can't help feeling that if we have the best climate in the world we must deserve it?"<sup>104</sup> By using the pronoun 'we', Gordimer demonstrates the conflicted position of Liz in her recognition of and resistance to a grossly uneven system while also accepting that she has been a beneficiary. The revelation about her childhood also demonstrates how Liz has always felt herself to be in a conflicted position in relation to the morally-objectionable business practices of her parents, from which she tried to extricate herself by finding a completely different line of work:

I've got my job analysing stools for tapeworm and urine for bilharzia and blood for cholesterol (at the Institute for Medical Research). And so we keep our hands clean. So far as work is concerned, at least. Neither of us makes money out of

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<sup>101</sup> *LBW*, p. 22.

<sup>102</sup> *LBW*, p. 61.

<sup>103</sup> *LBW*, p. 61.

<sup>104</sup> *LBW*, p. 26.

cheap labour or performs a service confined to people of a particular colour.<sup>105</sup>

On one level, this passage acknowledges the reprehensible nature of South African racial capitalism as a society founded on the exploitation of class and colour divisions.

However, there is a further irony to be explored here, considering that Liz thinks her hands are clean even though they are covered in blood and excrement at work. She quite literally has blood on her hands. Gordimer therefore provides the reader with a very stark visual image for the destructive brutality of racial capitalism. Moreover, this image underlines the suggestion that Liz's position as a wealthy white woman in South Africa inevitably benefits from the exploitation of others, in ways that she still may not yet realise. Capitalism is all-encompassing and it is impossible to keep your hands clean from the exploitation of labour because the system's unevenness is repeated continually in the products and commodities produced, bought, and used in everyday life.

The uneven development of 1960s South Africa is further reinforced in the reference to "bilharzia", a parasitic disease spread through contaminated, dirty water supplies, contrasting with the reference to "cholesterol". Unhealthy cholesterol levels are usually related to over-consumption, particularly the over-consumption of expensive or luxury foods rich in fat, such as oysters, lobster, and cheese. Uneven development thus exists to the extent that people do not have access to clean water supplies while others are struggling to maintain a good health because they over-indulge in their disproportionate access to rich foods. Liz's job thus becomes a useful way of understanding the destructive nature of consumer culture in relation to over-consumption, when considering all of the diseases related to high cholesterol. Ever-increasing accumulation and everyday patterns of over-consumption are physically destroying human bodies. In other words, as well as capitalist society exploiting the poor, bourgeois lifestyles are destructive to the bodies of the bourgeois. This destruction is symbolic of the lateness of the capitalist system, defined by exploitation and violence, but ultimately, death.

That Liz remains unable to register these ironies, despite her burgeoning resistance to the dominant mode of thinking in 1960s South Africa, demonstrates the way in which social reality is falsely related under capitalism, to the extent that the text's narrator is not necessarily reliable as an entirely authoritative voice. To refer back to Fischer, Liz's own implication within a bourgeois false consciousness represents how 'mystification and myth-making in the late bourgeois world offer a way of evading social decisions'.<sup>106</sup> It remains open for debate as to whether Liz has been *actively* displacing

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<sup>105</sup> *LBW*, p. 37.

<sup>106</sup> Fischer, p. 95.

social reality in this way, avoiding the sickening secrets, or simply failing to fully recognise her own bourgeois background. However, Liz's changing point of view and the narrative's dramatisation of everyday life is radical insofar as it begins to recognise and resist the cultural myths perpetuated in 1960s South Africa, what Gordimer herself refers to as the "myth of South African culture".

### **Space Race and Uneven Development**

The novella identifies the contradictions of uneven development not only in the specific context of South Africa but also in the wider context of the capitalist world-system. It refers repeatedly to the technological achievements of the American space programme. The success of the American space programme becomes the ultimate symbol for the contradiction between the maximum capability of the world's productive forces and the uneven development of the capitalist economic model. Liz begins to recognise and resist the uneven social reality of South Africa's racial-capitalist society in the same historical moment that American-led capitalism has reached a stage of consolidation in its extension into outer space.

In the context of the novella, the technological achievement of the American space programme reinforces the myth of social progress in capitalist society, with the supposed 'leap forward for mankind' of the space missions that culminated in the Moon Landing at the centre of such myth-making around humanity's technological achievements. The novella highlights how the successes of space exploration in the 1960s offer a false sense of equality, because while the technological achievements have led to new productive capabilities, in reality this has provided extremely minimal material benefits or development for working-class people across the world. The Space Race thus operates as an ultimate symbol for the mythological relation between technological achievement and social progress under the capitalist model, where technology best serves those who own the means of production. Liz's narrative registers how the competitiveness of the Space Race, geared towards antagonistic national superiority rather than shared universal progress, has made the Americans appear petty in their achievement:

So the Americans have brought it off, too. They've had a man walking in space – look at this – Not able to touch the paper, I twisted my neck to see the front-page pictures of a dim foetal creature attached by a sort of umbilical cord to a

dim vehicle.<sup>107</sup>

The narrative inverts the technical achievement of "a man walking in space" to an infantilised image of an underdeveloped "dim foetal creature", highlighting how down on Earth the world has not changed and is not changing. This dual sense of progress and stasis is reflected in Liz's assertion that: "Time is change [but] there was no sense of the day of the week, no seasons either. Spring or winter it feels the same".<sup>108</sup> In this world of technological progress and social regression, of space exploration and extreme inequality, development both occurs and is thwarted. Development is, in a word, uneven. In the context of Liz's raised consciousness, the space walk is therefore less impressive than it seems and she is evidently underwhelmed. The Americans were not even the first nation to have astronauts walking in space, since they were second to the Soviets, a fact subtly alluded to in Liz's observation that "the Americans have brought it off, *too*". For Liz "there was no sense of the day", which can be related both to the underwhelming nature of the American space walk as a moment of social development, as well as the way her narrative's account of the Saturday has been shattered and fragmented. The fragmentation of her day allows Liz to reconsider the meaning of the space programme in its capitalist context: "space exploration isn't a 'programme' – it's the new religion", she says, in words similar to Barthes that emphasise the mythological quality bestowed on American successes in space.<sup>109</sup> The hope for a new era of social progress for humanity, led by the achievements of the space race, is displaced by what the terror of racial capitalism in South Africa represents to Liz: "raids, arrests, detention without trial" in a system policed by those who "fired on the men, women and children outside the Sharpeville pass office".<sup>110</sup> There is therefore a contradiction between the technological progress exemplified by human beings walking in outer space and the social regression exemplified by the terror and poverty of 1960s South Africa, marked most alarmingly by the Sharpeville Massacre.

The space programme thus becomes an extreme way to visualise the unevenness of the capitalist world-system. The technological achievements made in space demand leaps in social progress of the same order. However, while the space programme represents new possibilities for human progress, the actuality was that the American government's support for a national space programme was determined by ideological conflict, and the militarization and weaponisation of outer space, as Penny Griffin argues:

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<sup>107</sup> *LBW*, p. 64.

<sup>108</sup> *LBW*, p. 57.

<sup>109</sup> *LBW*, p. 92.

<sup>110</sup> *LBW*, pp. 54-55.

'the US approach to space was to consider it entirely an extension of Earth-bound warfare' in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, NASA was only set up in response to the launch of Sputnik 1, and the American space programme was an extension of Nazi research acquired after the Second World War. As part of the US government's Operation Paperclip, started in 1945, the Americans acquired and appropriated all Nazi military technology and expertise while preventing any scientific accumulation by the Soviet Union. The US space programme was a direct product of the captured technology and adopted scientists from the Nazi V2 rocket programme.<sup>112</sup> For this reason, Herbert Marcuse argued that the technological achievements of the space programme are not progress at all if they become instruments of the ideological conflict and destructive industrialisation of the capitalist world-system: 'Auschwitz continues to haunt, not the memory but the accomplishments of man – the space flights; the rockets and missiles [...] this is the setting in which the great human achievements of science, medicine, technology take place'.<sup>113</sup> The myth-making attached to the space programme therefore obscures its true setting within America's military complex. Marcuse's reference to Auschwitz may seem like a conflation but what he is, quite importantly, casting concern on is the historical trend of technologically-advanced societies to impose themselves on others quite destructively.

Relating the American space programme both to its historical foundation in Nazi brutality and its primary motivation to advance American military superiority therefore adds to the contradiction between increasing technological progress and widening inequality. This contradiction is what Marcuse describes as the 'unity of progress and repression'. This unity further illustrates the lateness of late capitalism, in which the technological advances of post-war capitalist production have produced weapons of mass destruction and systems of control and domination while also producing forms of entertainment and toys that continue to distract a dependent population and reinforce their false consciousness. As Marcuse explains:

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<sup>111</sup> Penny Griffin, 'The Space Between Us: The Gendered Politics of Outer Space', in *Securing Outer Space: International Relations Theory and the Politics of Space*, ed. by Natalie Bormann and Michael Sheehan (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 59-75 (p. 62).

<sup>112</sup> See Columba Peoples, 'Haunted dreams: Critical theory, technology and the militarization of space', in *Securing Outer Space: International Relations Theory and the Politics of Space*, ed. by Natalie Bormann and Michael Sheehan (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 91-107. See also Bob Ward, *From Nazis to NASA: The Life of Wernher von Braun* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2006).

<sup>113</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 248.

A large number of the achievements of science and technology have benefited aggression and destruction, or have served as gadgets, as toys, and sports for the compensatory interests of the dependent population and their gratification, and have reinforced subaltern consciousness. The unity of progress and repression facilitates the management of the politico-economic contradictions within the global structure of late capitalism. [...] Capitalism produces its own gravediggers.<sup>114</sup>

What makes the capitalist system 'late', therefore, is the contradiction and antagonism of a bourgeois social and economic order that produces such great technological achievements while large proportions of the world exist in penury. In this light, the word 'lateness' implies a system that is decaying and overdue, in that it is continuing beyond all appropriateness. The moral sclerosis identified in *The Late Bourgeois World* allows the reader to question the 'lateness' of South African capitalism as a historically-limited stage rather than a fixed or permanent system, while the uneven development represented in the novella's references to the Space Race point to the lateness of the wider capitalist world-system. The continuation of such extreme inequality and poverty 'produces its own gravediggers', as Marcuse suggests, because it is not only objectionable but unsustainable.

Uneven development therefore exists not only on the level of relations of production within society but on the global level, where in Ernest Mandel's words:

the concentration and centralisation of capital extends more and more on an international scale [...] But, at the same time, the era of late capitalism is characterised by the acceleration of technical innovation.<sup>115</sup>

Technological progress and social regression are therefore central, as Marcuse and Mandel set out, to the lateness of 'late capitalism'. The success of the American space programme therefore becomes a metaphor for the lateness of capitalism. For Liz:

What's going on overhead is perhaps the spiritual expression of our age, and we don't recognise it. Space exploration isn't a 'programme' – it's the new religion. Out of the capsule, up there, out of this world *in a way you can never be, gone*

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<sup>114</sup> Herbert Marcuse, 'Proto-socialism and Late Capitalism', *International Journal of Politics*, 10: 2/3 (1980), 25-48 (pp. 40-41).

<sup>115</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Introduction to Marxism*, trans. by Louisa Sadler (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 64 [original emphasis].

*down to the seabed; out of this world into infinity, eternity. Could any act of worship as we've known such things for two thousand years express more urgently a yearning for life beyond life[?]*<sup>116</sup>

Liz's reference to space exploration here encapsulates this notion of unevenness in an age that has already been identified in the text as late and bourgeois: technological progress is the new religion because it offers potential luxury for some while true social progress is impeded or completely lacking for others. The text therefore gestures back to Fischer and the dissonance between technological achievements and the inadequacy of social progress. Describing the space programme as "the new religion" reinforces the Barthesian sense of myth-making at the heart of bourgeois ideology, where the mystification of expansion into outer space, as with the mystification of wealth creation and its distribution, replaces critical consciousness. The success of human space exploration, as a pinnacle of innovation, in the context of the novella, exposes how we *could but so far have not* used such wherewithal to overcome the social failure and inequalities of capitalist development. As the eponymous scientist says in Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo*, 'The movements of the heavenly bodies have become more comprehensible, but the peoples are as far as ever from calculating the movements of their rulers [...] The gap between you and [mankind] may one day become so wide that your cry of triumph at some new achievement will be echoed by a universal cry of horror'.<sup>117</sup> While the American space programme may present itself as a benefit to all of humanity with its supposed "giant leap for mankind", at its core it remains symbolic of the uneven development and antagonistic competitiveness of the capitalist world-system.<sup>118</sup>

Capitalism, in this vision, is no longer simply a world-system but extending its frontier outwards into the solar system. Liz reconsiders human expansion into outer space as "a yearning for life beyond life", indicating a desire that is both distressing and hopeful in the yearning to exist outside of the late bourgeois world. Construing the space walk as a means of escaping "out of the capsule [...] of this world" underlines the lateness of a system that, for all its apparent flaws, is both terminal and yet seemingly extending for "infinity" and "eternity". The novella's conceptualisation of Earth from the view of outer space positions the inequality crisis encountered by Liz's narrative as an all-

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<sup>116</sup> *LBW*, p. 92.

<sup>117</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), pp. 108-109.

<sup>118</sup> Indeed, a recent US government commission on space exploration states directly the profit motive and economic exploitation of outer space: 'The human enterprise in space is as vast and endless as the universe itself [...] to the extent that men realize this challenge, they will make space the next free-market and human frontier', Edward L. Hudgins, ed., *Space: The Free-Market Frontier* (Washington D.C.: Cato Institute, 2002), p. xxvi.

encompassing global crisis. The internal crisis of Liz's narrative is thus connected to the crisis of the systems she inhabits, from the specificity of racial capitalism in South Africa to the wider capitalist world-system, both of which exhibit the morbid symptoms of lateness.

### **Understanding Lateness**

From Gordimer's myth of South African culture, to the myth of social progress embodied in the images of the Space Race, the lateness of the bourgeois world is also dramatised in Liz's encounter with her dementia-suffering grandmother. The grandmother's dementia can be read here as a state of capitalist dysphoria, in a social reality that has lost its meaning, within the meaningless nature of materiality in the everyday life of late capitalism. Her "distinguishing marks of social caste" are "distorted by illness" and so the declining state of the grandmother represents the moribundity of South Africa's racial-capitalist order.<sup>119</sup> The dually symbolic imprisonment of Liz's grandmother, physically confined within a facility only described to readers reductively as 'the Home' and mentally confined by her severe dementia, can therefore be read as the ultimate form of alienation from a bourgeois society where quite literally every *thing* has become meaningless. The grandmother's sense of mortality and death becomes an embodiment of how the state of apartheid is decrepit and obsolete.

The novella's previous representations of commodity fetishism and alienation in everyday life are reinforced through the grandmother's sterile existence in a nursing home where material replications provide her only comfort: "She loves plastics – artificial flowers, 'simulated' silk, synthetic marble, fake leather".<sup>120</sup> The artificial permanence of plastic flowers, as the reproduction of natural items, becomes a symbol for the grandmother's desire to avoid a state of decline. The immortality of the plastic flowers contrasts starkly with the description of the grandmother's mortal body, as her "hands with the sunken hollows between the knuckles [that] have never done any work" come to represent a generation that has thrived on the exploited labour of others.<sup>121</sup> But while Liz recognises that her grandmother had "lived on dividends all her life", there is a bitter irony in that "the expenses of her senility are eating up the last of her capital".<sup>122</sup> In this way, the lateness of the capitalist system is presented as a state of extreme senescence. Liz's grandmother is old and terminally ill. She "had all the things that have been devised

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<sup>119</sup> *LBW*, p. 57.

<sup>120</sup> *LBW*, p. 57.

<sup>121</sup> *LBW*, p. 59.

<sup>122</sup> *LBW*, p. 60.



to soften life but there doesn't seem to have been anything done to make death more bearable".<sup>123</sup> Stifled and infatuated with the synthetic, the grandmother is a kind of symbol for the senescence of a system that combines privilege and exploitation. This is a system, however, that cannot (yet) forestall its own demise with the assets it has accrued.

In this way, life for the grandmother is no longer bearable because it has lost all meaning, as she has lost her sense of agency in a country that has been socially and economically structured for her benefit. The grandmother asks Liz: "If I can't go out any more, what shall I do, then?"<sup>124</sup> The form of Liz's narrative briefly enters into a seamless exchange of dialogue, underlining Liz's inability to offer comfort or a meaningful response to her grandmother's desperation for answers to existential questions: "what happened?", "what shall I do?", "will I understand?", "tell me, what happened?"<sup>125</sup> By contrast, the artificial flowers present a comforting illusion, the myth of permanence, the delusion that death can be avoided. The bouquet of real flowers that Liz originally wanted to give to her grandmother had appeared so stark a representation of life that it was upsetting and suffocating: "the bunch of flowers under cellophane pressed like faces against glass".<sup>126</sup> In her dissatisfaction with what is real, the grandmother represents a form of bourgeois existence that has become nothing more than an act of consumption: the false consciousness unwilling to be confronted by reality.

Understanding the grandmother's dementia as a state of capitalist dysphoria also helps us understand the apparent insomnia that Liz suffers in the final pages of the narrative, as her clock races to midnight and she is unable to sleep. Both the grandmother's dissatisfaction with reality and Liz's inability to rest herself indicate the unnatural and destructive way of life that constitutes the South African myth. Both characters are entangled in a form of mental imprisonment, which mirrors Max's physical imprisonment for his political views. Liz's insomnia also acts as a formal device for Gordimer to end the novella on a state of inconclusiveness, with the narrative's open indefinite ending, as Liz lies in bed contemplating Max's suicide and the success of the American space programme, listening to "the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive...".<sup>127</sup> The story is thus left unfinished, suggesting that either Liz is struggling to find her own response to the contradictions of the 1960s, or, more politically, that Gordimer as a writer is unable to continue speaking out within the space of the text because state censorship forbids her

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<sup>123</sup> *LBW*, p. 62.

<sup>124</sup> *LBW*, p. 62.

<sup>125</sup> *LBW*, p. 62.

<sup>126</sup> *LBW*, p. 33.

<sup>127</sup> *LBW*, p. 95.

from concluding with a more explicit rejection of apartheid.

Indeed, for the South African censorship board, the first reason in the report's ruling of the book as 'undesirable' is that the novel's use of the word 'late' in the title implied an unacceptable threat that the South African 'way of life' was 'doomed to destruction'.<sup>128</sup> In Gordimer's use of ellipsis to close the story, Liz's narrative refuses to be a finished product and so its openness to interpretation contradicts the capitalist imperative to produce works that can be readily consumed by consumers. The novella's fragmentation and unstable temporality are radical because they decentre Liz's position as a bourgeois white woman in a racial-capitalist system that is being marked as reprehensible. In so doing, the narrative operates at the level of its form to contradict and resist the hierarchical expectations of South Africa's rigid bourgeois social order. Indeed, there is both a literal lateness at work here, with Liz literally awake late at night unable to sleep, as well as all the connotations of illness, disease, degeneration and death associated with bourgeois lateness over the course of Liz's narrative. *The Late Bourgeois World* was banned for 10 years not because it somehow reported abuses of the apartheid state in a strictly realist form but because it registers the internal conflict of a narrator recognising and resisting the racial *and* capitalist exploitations of apartheid. The specific form of Liz's narration, with her digressions on everyday life in 1960s South Africa, becomes a dangerous first-person invitation to readers to rethink their own conception of what the novella presents as a late and bourgeois world.

As the narrative is left unfinished in this way, the formal rendering of Liz's insomnia as an inability to conclude can be read as a final struggle against the supposed myths of bourgeois ideology that suggest a natural, fixed, and universal essence to the capitalist social order, both in South Africa and the wider world-system. Racial capitalism in South Africa should not, therefore, be seen as a fixed part of history, but an economic model that is a changeable part of history that can be unsettled. This challenge to South African racial capitalism is made possible exactly because the novella deviates from a plot about Max to refocus attention instead on the raised consciousness of Liz. It is therefore important that Liz is visited by Max's old friend Luke Fokase, who asks her to support the PAC, at the end of the novella because this comes only after Liz's political reconsiderations through the course of the narrative. Her inconclusive ending becomes a question asked of the reader about the possibility of participating in anti-apartheid political struggle. Liz realises that she can use the bank account of her senile grandmother to transfer funds to support PAC activities without being detected by the authorities, as only whites were legally entitled to make international bank transactions. As Liz has right

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<sup>128</sup> MacDonald, p. 228.

of attorney as her grandmother's guardian, she is now in a position to subvert the South African myth through which her grandmother's wealth was accrued. Luke thus operates as a foil to Max, offering Liz an opportunity to succeed where her ex-husband previously failed to undermine the developments of apartheid. Liz is therefore presented with the choice to challenge and redress the history of uneven development in South Africa by using her grandmother's bank account and quite possibly her profits from the mining industry to fight for a fairer and more humane socio-economic system. Indeed, Rob Nixon observed in his review of the novella that 'Liz's decision to abuse her authority over the account (at least in terms of bourgeois morality) can be read as a way of commandeering the spoils of apartheid to bring about the system's demise'.<sup>129</sup> However, while Nixon is right that this scene can be read as a symbolic restructuring of South African capital that addresses the country's uneven development, he is wrong in his suggestion that Liz *confirms* this 'decision to abuse her authority' because the narrative never reaches a conclusion in this regard. Instead, Luke and Liz part on a moment of innuendo, both sexually and in relation to her support for the PAC, leaving the reader with an uncertainty that defines the process of raised consciousness encountered through her narrative. In the opportunity to help support the PAC, Liz is offered a political decision to directly undermine apartheid and avoid the problematic position for white South Africans Neil Lazarus referred to as taking 'refuge in a scrupulous rhetoric of nonracialism while doing absolutely nothing to oppose apartheid as a social and political reality'.<sup>130</sup> As her narrative ends on the verge of a political decision, the text offers a radical position on the lateness of South African racial capitalism, in its suggestion that a new system is possible and worth fighting for, in the overturned point of view of a seemingly white bourgeois woman. Through such a reading, we can better understand why the text was perceived as so dangerous that it was banned for 10 years by the South African authorities.

## Conclusion

What I have shown here is that *The Late Bourgeois World* is more complicated and challenging in its form and politics than has previously been realised. It provides an important understanding of both the bourgeois ideology and uneven development informing the lateness of South African racial capitalism in the 1960s as well as the wider

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<sup>129</sup> Rob Nixon, 'Nadine Gordimer', *Scribner Writers Series: British Writers: Supplement 2*, ed. by George Stade (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> Neil Lazarus, 'The South African Ideology: The Myth of Exceptionalism, the Idea of Renaissance', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:4 (2004), 607-628 (p. 608).

capitalist world-system. John Cronin suggested in his 1967 review of the novella that 'Gordimer's future presents the greatest puzzle. It has been suggested that she may leave South Africa [...] to escape from the increasing tenuousness of the "white" world of South Africa'.<sup>131</sup> However, it is important to remember that the novella is not 'The Late Bourgeois South Africa' but *The Late Bourgeois World*, and Gordimer's text identifies a palpable unevenness on the local, national and global scale. As Franco Moretti reminds us, 'international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal* [...] bound together in a relationship of growing inequality'.<sup>132</sup> The novella's recurring references to the 1960s Space Race expose the world-encompassing nature of capitalism and remind us that uneven development should not be dismissed as a historical problem limited specifically to apartheid South Africa. *The Late Bourgeois World* develops the global perspective that emerged in Gordimer's first two novels, to critique the combined and uneven development inherent to the capitalist world-system. Technological advancements have not led to an acceleration of economic or social progress and therefore demonstrate the lateness of the capitalist system. This lateness is articulated through the form of Liz's narrative in its increasing fragmentation and sense of social alienation.

What is thus of critical importance in the novella is its capacity to simultaneously address a dissatisfaction with South Africa's bourgeois social order, characterised by economic exploitation as well as racial inequality, which is not only unsustainable but the demise of which is overdue, and which is only a constituent part of a worldwide malaise. This sense of decay dramatised in the novel, the connections sketched and increasingly perceived (by Liz) between consumption and visible technological progress on the one hand and poverty and suffering on the other, should make readers question the 'moral sclerosis' defining human interactions in the bourgeois world. In a world where the ruling class directly benefits from uneven development and economic exploitation, it is not simply a case of misery and fortune permitted to exist side-by-side, but, more than that, of misery and fortune going hand-in-hand: the true nature of *combined* and *uneven* development.

*The Late Bourgeois World* invites readers to form a better understanding of the 'lateness' of late capitalism, through a dissatisfied narrator in the process of unlearning the dominant mode of thinking that allows such a system of uneven development, such gross inequality, to continue. Liz's narrative remains unfinished because the political task of

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<sup>131</sup> John Cronin, 'Writer Versus Situation: Three South African Novelists', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (56:221), 73-84 (p. 84).

<sup>132</sup> Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54-68 (pp. 55-56).

redressing the failures, the lateness, of capitalist society remains outstanding. In Liz's political inaction, in the question mark over her commitment, the reader is implicated to take action. Everyday life must be radically challenged and altered if this system is ever going to change. How can one continue living in such a late bourgeois world without responding politically? And so the moral sclerosis identified in the novella forces readers to engage in a moral critique, what Caryl Phillips describes as the 'moral capacity of fiction to wrench us out of our ideological burrow and force us to engage'.<sup>133</sup>

Gordimer's work can thus be used to understand the 'lateness' of capitalism as a historically-limited stage rather than a fixed or permanent system, as a result of the unsustainability of a bourgeois social and economic order that produces such great technological achievements while large proportions of the world exist in poverty. This lateness defines the interregnum of late capitalism as an unsustainable, morally-objectionable system, what Rosa Luxemburg identified as the 'brutal triumphant procession of capitalism through the world, accompanied by all the means of force, of robbery, and of infamy', a system that 'has created the premises for its own final overthrow'.<sup>134</sup> Despite such contradictions, however, the survival of capitalism as a world-system continues, extending what is therefore defined here as its lateness. The inconclusive nature of *The Late Bourgeois World* registers how the transitional phase of the late capitalist world-system's decline is an extended form of interregnum, characterised by uneven development and defined by its lateness.

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<sup>133</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Color Me English* (New York: The New Press, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>134</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Junius Pamphlet', in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. by Mary Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2011), pp. 342-439 (p. 431).

## Chapter 3. Structural Violence in *The Conservationist*

### Introduction

This chapter re-examines Gordimer's most critically-acclaimed and widely-analysed novel, *The Conservationist*, published in 1974 and a joint winner of that year's Booker Prize. I aim to consider how *The Conservationist's* formal complexity offers a way of understanding manifestations of social injustice and economic oppression as a specific form of violence under capitalism. Building on theories that conceptualise the social injustice inherently produced by the structure of capitalist society as a form of 'structural violence', this chapter argues that *The Conservationist* allows readers to consider a more complex understanding of the manifold social injustice propagated by the gross unevenness of South Africa's racial-capitalist system. Specifically, this chapter examines how structural violence is articulated at the level of form and language in *The Conservationist*. I refer to Slavoj Žižek's understanding of structural violence enacted through a 'symbolic violence' born of the 'imposition of a certain universe of meaning', in this case the prevailing racial-capitalist bourgeois ideology of 1970s South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The primary narrator of *The Conservationist*, Mehring, articulates a grammar of violence in the syntax of a high-powered capitalist prospering from the uneven development of South Africa's apartheid system. Mehring recognises himself as a "prominent industrialist associated with the economic advancement of the country at the highest level" and his narrative's presentation of apartheid articulates the dehumanising ethos that has characterised racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Mehring's sense of entitlement and superiority, which is only reinforced by the novel's repeated depictions of deprivation, allows readers to critique the human suffering that underpins capitalist accumulation and, crucially, the way that structural violence can be registered through his narrative's efforts to legitimise the dehumanisation of others. In this case, symbolic violence represents the capitalist power and domination over language and meaning. Jacques Derrida refers to this type of symbolic violence as the South African myth in which 'the white minority [...] becomes the privileged subject, the only subject'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Gordimer referred to this symbolic status of the white minority as the key to understanding "the official South African consciousness", in which "the ego is white [and] has always seen all South Africa

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 319. Hereafter referred to as *TC*.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *For Mandela* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), p. 18.

as ordered around it".<sup>4</sup> The text allows readers to understand why structural violence is a less visible form of violence through Mehring's devaluation of other human beings into objects or resources that can be used and exploited, even converted into some form of actual or symbolic capital.

The form and grammar of Mehring's narrative, the very way in which his narration is put together in the text, exposes his indifference to the suffering of others, in an attempt to render their social relations to him as meaningless. The narrative maps various inequalities and social injustices inherent to the structure of South Africa's racial capitalism through Mehring's domination of language and participation in the act of silencing others, dramatised through his devaluation of other human beings into objects. When other speakers do not say what he wants to hear, he simply does not listen or refuses to understand, from encounters with his son Terry and his lover Antonia, to the workers on his farmstead. Structural violence is also registered in the narrative's treatment of urban and rural spaces, distinguishing South Africa's cities as centres of white accumulation in contrast to the under-developed 'reserves', or African 'homelands', set up by the National Party. The novel frames one such 'reserve' as the "location that lies between [Mehring's] farm and city", allowing readers to consider how 'separate development' was really the state's legitimisation of structural violence and uneven development designed to enhance white prosperity.<sup>5</sup> The historical context of land appropriation can also be approached through the inclusion of interspersed quotations from Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, a book published in 1870, containing interviews with Zulu people about their beliefs. Callaway's appreciation of Zulu history and culture underlines the fact that South Africa was inhabited long before the arrival of European colonists and the imposition of white rule and exceptionalism. The text acts as a reminder that South Africa *in its entirety* is an African homeland, not the meagre locations set aside as reserves by the National Party during apartheid. Formally, the text offers a competing voice, or counter-narrative, to that of Mehring, undermining the dominance of his position, what Homi Bhabha would refer to as the 'power play of presence'.<sup>6</sup> *The Conservationist* allows for a broader understanding of how capitalist authority relies on modes of domination constituting not only economic, social, cultural, ideological, and racial categories, but of language that hides the system's inherent structural violence. This chapter therefore expands on the growing body of research seeking to develop a definition of violence that does not simply refer to physical

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<sup>4</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 375.

<sup>5</sup> *TC*, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken For Wonders', *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (1985), 144-165 (p. 152).

forms of assault but also includes the systems, processes, and practices that cause suffering to human beings.

### **Theories of Structural Violence**

This chapter builds on the foundational work of sociologist Johan Galtung, who developed the concept of 'structural violence' to define any social structure or institution that causes systemic harm and suffering to human beings as a consequence of the system of organisation.<sup>7</sup> Galtung contrasts 'personal' violence, which constitutes directly violent acts such as murder and rape, with the notion of 'structural' violence, constituting various forms of social injustice present in society, from institutionalised racism and sexism to unemployment and poverty.<sup>8</sup> Galtung's definition therefore expands the notion of violence to include actions where 'there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure'.<sup>9</sup> He argues that structural violence differs from physical violence because it is 'built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances'.<sup>10</sup> Structural violence, in the context of this chapter, is directly linked to the unequal structure of capitalism, where systemic suffering is a consequence of 'resources [that] are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on. Above all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed'.<sup>11</sup> Social injustice can therefore be understood as a form of violence, in the systemic suffering produced by inequality and the violently harmful consequences of deprivation on quality of life.

Crucially, Galtung discusses why structural violence is rendered less visible as a form of violence than examples of physical violence, where the relation between perpetrator and victim is often more apparent. As Galtung explains:

Violence with a clear subject-object relation is manifest because it is visible as action. It corresponds to our ideas of what drama is, and it is personal because there are persons committing the violence. It is easily captured and expressed verbally since it has the same structure as elementary sentences in (at least Indo-European) languages: subject-verb-object, with both subject and object being

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<sup>7</sup> Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6:3 (1969), 167-191.

<sup>8</sup> Galtung, p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Galtung, p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*



persons. Violence without this relation is structural, built into structure. Thus, when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence. Correspondingly, in a society where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper as in the lower classes, violence is exercised even if there are no concrete actors one can point to directly attacking others, as when one person kills another.<sup>12</sup>

Personal violence is easier to perceive because the subject (perpetrator) and object (victim) relation is likely to be more readily identifiable. By contrast, structural violence is less perceptible because it is more difficult to register the subject/s committing or enabling actions of social injustice that result in violent consequences that are experienced across the breadth of a society. As Galtung argues, 'structural violence is silent, it does not show [...] Personal violence will be registered, whereas structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us'.<sup>13</sup> Structural violence under capitalism persists because the subject-object relation is rendered invisible through capitalist social relations. However, as Galtung notes, 'if people are starving when this is objectively avoidable, then violence is committed, regardless of whether there is a clear subject-action-object relation'.<sup>14</sup> As I will go on to explore, the matter of perceiving structural violence is communicated in the form of *The Conservationist* through Mehring's privileged position as the *subject* of apartheid, due to class and race.

More recently, Slavoj Žižek, Rob Nixon, and James Tyner have all developed Galtung's understanding of structural violence within a Marxist framework. In his book on *Violence*, Žižek also distinguishes between several types of violent relation. Žižek's identification of 'subjective violence' correlates with Galtung's understanding of direct violence, the violence produced by identifiable subjects that is readily visible in the physical form. The physical is contrasted with 'systemic violence', what Žižek refers to as 'the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Žižek contrasts 'directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent' with an objective 'systemic violence', constituting 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political

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<sup>12</sup> Galtung, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Galtung, p. 173.

<sup>14</sup> Galtung, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, p. 8.

system'.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Žižek identifies a third example of violence that exists in society, the 'symbolic violence' of language, denoting the 'imposition of a certain universe of meaning'.<sup>17</sup>

Žižek's identification of the symbolic violence in language is particularly important to a Marxist understanding of structural violence under capitalism because of the connection between communication and unequal power. Žižek's symbolic violence suggests that an examination of language allows readers to consider the violence and suffering of others embedded within the structure of society. Readings that are attentive to the notion of structural violence can therefore reflect on how social injustice is obscured by prevailing narratives and language that reinforce existing social relations. This attentiveness to narrative is particularly pertinent to this thesis' discussion of Gordimer's work, as her narrators all speak from positions of privilege within South Africa's racial capitalism.

Rob Nixon has further expanded on the notion of structural violence in his work on 'slow violence'. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon associates the structural violence of industrial growth in relation to environmental damage to understand how the capitalist exploitation of the earth produces doubly violent consequences for disempowered and dispossessed communities vulnerable to disaster. Nixon uses the term 'slow' to underline how structural violence is not necessarily blunt and ephemeral but constant and persistent. The slow nature of structural violence functions to further conceptualise its invisibility, as Nixon explains:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight [...] an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 2.

Nixon's emphasis on a 'different kind of violence' is crucial to my view here that it is the structural violence of capitalism that requires attention and redress. Structural violence, as Nixon asserts, is inconspicuous because it does not have the immediacy and spectacle of physical violence; it is an inescapable feature of capitalism. This chapter therefore apprehends Nixon's call for critics to engage with the representational challenge posed by the relative invisibility of structural violence by offering close readings of Gordimer's work to understand how structural violence manifests under capitalism and how this is articulated at the level of form and language within the space of the narrative.

Attentiveness to the form of narratives that allow readers to register and respond to structural violence is crucial if we are to call attention to the obscured relation between social injustice and capitalist society's socio-economic structure. The task is not to locate novels that instruct readers about the existence of structural violence but to develop readings of novels that allow readers to critique the structural violence made visible through the form of the narrative. This attentiveness to structural violence through form and language therefore allows readers to perceive modes of violence that may not necessarily be registered by the narrator. The structural violence of free-market capitalism is perhaps as abstract as the market itself.

James Tyner argues that the structural nature of social injustice is obscured because capitalism itself is commonly perceived to be the natural order of life: 'that these vital inequalities [...] are not (normally) seen as violence is itself a feature unique to capitalism, for just as the exploitation of labor is hidden by the myth of the free market so too is violence hidden in the 'naturalness' of the market'.<sup>19</sup> In *Violence in Capitalism*, Tyner asserts that:

Capitalism thrives on the illusion of freedom and choice; indeed, it is this illusory component that helps maintain order and stability. Because we want to believe that markets operate on their own and thus are realms of equality and freedom, we fail to properly scrutinize how the workings of the market actually concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. We fail to see that the appearance of the so called free market—a particular abstraction—is manifest in concrete conditions that significantly alter one's exposure to harm, injury, suffering, and premature death.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James Tyner, *Violence in Capitalism: Devaluing Life in an Age of Responsibility* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> Tyner, p. 71.

Tyner's assertion that capitalism 'thrives on the illusion of freedom' underlines the persistence of capitalist economic oppression where structural violence equates to Marx's understanding that accumulation of capital relies on the 'greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist'. The unevenness and inequality structured into capitalist society produce specific manifestations of suffering that constitute the system's structural violence. As Tyner asserts, 'violence under capitalism entails not only the direct, interpersonal force required to appropriate land and the means of production from the many to privilege the few; violence is also systemic and structural, built into the very foundation of capitalist relations'.<sup>21</sup> More simply, exploitation is inherent to capitalism and it follows that the process of exploitation produces suffering. Tyner therefore underlines that capitalist accumulation has inherently violent social consequences. These consequences are most marked in the case of apartheid, which reinforced both class and racial hierarchies.

Marx foregrounds the general proclivity of capitalism to structural violence in the notion of 'primitive accumulation', positing that 'it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part' in the genesis of capitalism, as workers are separated from the means of production through, in the British case, the violent enclosure of common land and the consequent bringing into being of a proletarian labour force.<sup>22</sup> Marxist geographer David Harvey refers to 'primitive accumulation' as 'accumulation by dispossession', explaining how primitive accumulation 'entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatized mainstream of capital accumulation'.<sup>23</sup> But for Harvey accumulation by dispossession is an ongoing process. Capitalist exploitation produces both environmental violence in the appropriation and destruction of the earth for resources, and what can essentially be understood as structural violence in the division of human beings into arbitrary classes on the basis of man-made inequality and poverty. As an economic system reliant on unequal exchange to make profit, capitalism constitutes not only a system of exploitation but a system founded on structural violence where profit is reliant on historical and ongoing forms of deprivation. The capitalist need for profit compels a system of accumulation that will always involve social and environmental exploitation.

Marx's theory was first expanded by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Accumulation of Capital*. Luxemburg argues that the brutal history of both primitive accumulation and,

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<sup>21</sup> Tyner, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Volume I)*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 874.

<sup>23</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 149.

subsequently, imperialism defines the structural violence inherent to the ever-expanding demands of capitalism:

Imperialism is the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment. [...] With the high development of the capitalist countries and their increasingly severe competition in acquiring non-capitalist areas, imperialism grows in lawlessness and violence, both in aggression against the non-capitalist world and in ever more serious conflicts among the competing capitalist countries.<sup>24</sup>

The foundation of capitalist accumulation in violence covers not only the history of colonialism and the 'decline of non-capitalist civilizations' but extends to the very way in which capitalism operates as a world-system. In the process of ever-expanding accumulation of capital, Luxemburg identified how capitalist exploitation constituted the structural and violent mobilisation of people to meet the demands of global capitalism: 'one of the fundamental conditions of accumulation is therefore a supply of living labour which can be mobilised by capital to meet its demands [...] to mobilise world labour power without restriction in order to utilise all productive forces of the globe'.<sup>25</sup> More simply, the accumulation of capital is an inherently violent process when profit is served at the cost of environmental and human exploitation.

### **Structural Violence and 1970s South Africa**

In his essay, 'South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence', South African Marxist sociologist Martin Legassick criticised the 'criminal' contradictions of apartheid in a hugely resource-rich country like South Africa.<sup>26</sup> Legassick's argument, which is worth quoting at length here for its relevance to conceptualising structural violence in the context of 1970s South Africa, was that:

South Africa's largely black labour force has been subjected to rigid forms of extra-economic coercion which have increased rather than decreased in recent

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<sup>24</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. by Agnes Schwarzschild (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 427.

<sup>25</sup> Luxemburg, p. 340 and p. 343.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Legassick, 'South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence', *Economy and Society*, 3 (1974), 253-291.

years. Such forms of liberal democracy as existed for the white oligarchy have been eroded. Censorship, detention without trial have become commonplace. Opposition to the system has been met with ruthless repression based on a powerful military machine and a sophisticated security police using refined and brutal methods of physical and psychological torture. At the same time South Africa has undergone rapid economic growth. A hundred years ago South Africa was almost entirely agricultural, with peasant producers and a small export sector in which the producers were separated from ownership of the means of production, and the level of the forces of production was low. Today in terms of gross national product, South Africa falls in a position midway between the advanced capitalist societies and those which are 'classically' underdeveloped. But this 'intermediate' level of GNP disguises gross disparities in the distribution of wealth, and *the nature of the forces of production*. On the one hand South African capitalism has the capability for the production of jet aircraft, nuclear weapons, and computers. On the other hand the majority of the population lives literally on the edge of starvation while the richest 10 per cent of the population receives of the order of 60 per cent of total income.<sup>27</sup>

Legassick identifies the contradiction *and the connection* between South Africa's post-war economic growth and the structural inequality and repression of racial capitalism. The power of the apartheid 'oligarchy' contradicts the illusion of capitalism as a free market that offers a fair playing field for all. Rather, Legassick argues that capitalist accumulation has been inherently violent in South Africa, a violence that became especially marked in the 1970s by the extremity of the country's unevenness and social injustice. As such, Steve Biko argued that 'there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless'.<sup>28</sup> Biko's emphasis on the socialist impetus that informed Black Consciousness was therefore a direct response to the failings and inadequacies of the capitalist model, which have only been accentuated in the case of South Africa. Legassick's work thus foregrounds how structural violence can be understood in relation to South African racial capitalism, particularly when we consider how apartheid was sustained through the 1970s.

Legassick's argument about the structural contradictions of South African

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<sup>27</sup> Legassick, pp. 253-254 [my emphasis].

<sup>28</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Bowerdean Press, 1978), p. 149.

apartheid is developed further in his essay on 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy', where he criticised the National Party's implementation of:

structures [that] sustain a situation in which it is whites (though not all whites) who are the accumulators of capital, the wealthy, and the powerful, while the majority of blacks (though not all blacks) are the unemployed, the ultra-exploited, the poor and the powerless. The existence of, or potential of percentage reform is less relevant than analyzing the conditions for redressing the situation. Surely, Vorster has insisted, 'the fact that you work for a man does not give you the right to run his affairs?' For blacks in South Africa, on the contrary, that right must surely point the only way to change.<sup>29</sup>

Legassick's reference to B.J. Vorster is particularly important in relation to the 'conditions' for redressing the structural violence of racial capitalism. As Prime Minister of South Africa from 1966 to 1978, Vorster sustained apartheid through the country's worst period of economic instability, and his name recurs as a byword for authoritarian violence in both *The Conservationist* and Gordimer's seventh novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979). Vorster reinforced the brutal apartheid policies of former Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd through the complete abolition of non-white political representation and by upholding the country's discriminatory educational system, censorship laws, and restrictions on non-white rights to free movement and abode. Vorster's continuation of Verwoerd's legacy built on his brutal record as Minister of Justice, having overseen Nelson Mandela's imprisonment at the Rivonia Trial, instituting South Africa's security police system, and effectively creating an authoritarian state.<sup>30</sup> Social conflict defined Vorster's era as Prime Minister in the 1970s, culminating with the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the death of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko under police custody in 1977, before his resignation in 1978 as a result of the Information Scandal.<sup>31</sup>

Increasing social conflict within South Africa through the 1970s and the gross inequalities perpetuated during Vorster's tenure as Prime Minister were also spearheaded

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Legassick, 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post-1948 South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1:1 (1974), 5-35 (pp. 29-30).

<sup>30</sup> P. Eric Louw, *The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of Apartheid* (London: Praeger, 2004), p. 65. Vorster was also notorious for his appreciation of Nazi racial ideology and membership of the Afrikaner pro-Nazi movement *Ossewabrandwag* during the Second World War.

<sup>31</sup> Breyten Breytenbach's banned 1972 poem 'Letter to Butcher from Abroad', addressed to the 'butcher Balthazar' (i.e., BJ Vorster), communicates the institutionalised violence of the 1970s under Vorster's regime: 'I stand on bricks, before my fellow man, I am the statue of liberation, with electrodes tied to my balls, I try to scream, light into this obscurity, while writing slogans in crimson urine, across my skin over the floor'.

by external pressures from the capitalist world-system. The 1970s were troubled by global economic instability and stagnation, stemming from two major events: the collapse of the existing international monetary standard, known as the Bretton Woods system, following the United States' unilateral decision in 1971 to withdraw the convertibility of the US dollar to gold, otherwise known as the Nixon Shock; and the 1973 Oil Crisis, which constrained the worldwide supply of oil and led to prolonged energy shortages. The notion that the liberal world order had created a stable lasting peace since the Second World War was shown to be a fallacy, as the 1970s demonstrated how fragile the global capitalist monetary system was and how deeply and ruthlessly the system's instability can affect people's lives across the world. The 1970s were, for many parts of the world, defined by deep recession, which only served to aggravate socio-economic inequality in South Africa, as historian Saul Dubow notes:

The international price of gold, for so long the mainstay of the South African economy, fell sharply during 1975-6, putting pressure on government tax receipts and forcing the government to seek expensive short-term foreign loans. The surge in the price of oil in 1973, and again at the close of the decade, considerably increased inflationary pressures. Ongoing political turmoil eroded investor confidence, leading to massive capital flight and serious depreciation in the value of the rand against the dollar.<sup>32</sup>

Recession in the 1970s not only marked the structural dysfunction of the capitalist world-system, therefore, but also increased internal economic pressures on the racial-capitalist structure of South African apartheid. The 1970s presented numerous social challenges for the South African authorities both economically and politically. Vorster relied heavily on the political support of conservative governments in both America and Britain.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, wars of independence against colonial rule were taking place across the African continent, most notably South Africa's neighbours Mozambique, in the Mozambican War of Independence (1964–1974); Zimbabwe, with the *Chimurenga* against the Rhodesian white minority in the War of Liberation (1964-1980); and Namibia, which was ruled as 'South West Africa' under South African occupation and apartheid rule, against which the People's Liberation Army of Namibia began its struggle

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<sup>32</sup> Saul Dubow, *Apartheid 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 177.

<sup>33</sup> In 1971, Britain began selling weapons to South Africa against the advice of a United Nations voluntary arms embargo under the policy of Prime Minister Edward Heath. The United Nations embargo was later upgraded to a mandatory status in 1977 but successive conservative governments in America and Britain under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, respectively, failed to condemn apartheid.



in 1966 (and only gained independence in 1988). Violence manifested not only in physical bloody conflict, therefore, but also in the world-system's historic centres of capital, Europe and the United States, which produced, sanctioned, and benefitted from structural violence.

### **Reading for Structural Violence**

As Rob Nixon asserted above, readings that address structural violence need to attend to 'the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence'. Understanding how structural violence is produced by the capitalist economic system of organisation therefore requires a method of reading to recognise such encounters within the space of a narrative. As such, my reading apprehends Tyner's argument that a vital 'first step is to recast the theorization of violence within an explicit framework of social injustice'.<sup>34</sup> This chapter reads for structural violence by addressing how *The Conservationist* is able to articulate the structural nature of social injustice at the level of language and form.

What is clear from the theories and socio-historical reflections discussed above is that the relational aspect of structural violence is rendered less visible than personal and direct forms of violence, where the subject-object relation is clear. Language and form thus become crucial to understanding how capitalist social relations are 'structured around a valuation of life that fosters a particular abstraction of violence and crime'.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, the abstraction of social injustice as violence under capitalism renders invisible the structural violence of an economic system full of destructive contradictions and social consequences. This abstraction can be made visible and available for critique, however, through critical readings that are attentive to forms of narrative and language that represent and convey the unacknowledged violence of capitalist social relations.

Studies of *The Conservationist* have generally addressed apartheid violence through the symbolic significance of the black corpse found on the white-owned farm, what Galtung would describe as personal violence visible in action.<sup>36</sup> The direct physical nature of personal violence is more easily registered and articulated in literary readings, particularly as the physical act corresponds to conceptions of drama. Structural violence is more difficult to register because it is built in to the structure of capitalist society and

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<sup>34</sup> Tyner, p. 209.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) and Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 99-100.

social relations, which is why I am interested in how it operates and is reinforced within the structures and forms of language and narrative representation.

*The Conservationist* narrates 1970s South African apartheid from the privileged perspective of a wealthy white industrialist, Mehring, who has recently taken possession of a rural farmstead on the periphery of Johannesburg.<sup>37</sup> The reader never discovers Mehring's first name, thus emphasising the exclusive but depersonalised nature of his point of view. Mehring holds various business roles that allow the reader to place him at the top of South Africa's capitalist hierarchy, with various references to his "pig-iron" business and his unspecified, murky work as the "director" of an "investment fund".<sup>38</sup> The reference to pig-iron perhaps doubles up as a pun on the vernacular phrase 'capitalist pig'. However, Mehring associates capitalism with "the economic advancement of the country" and rejects being drawn into the ideological divisions that permeated South African society under apartheid: "that's how you justify what you condone [...] neither dirty racist nor kaffir-boetie. Neither dirty Commie nor Capitalist pig".<sup>39</sup> As Lars Engle has previously observed, Mehring sees his business role in South Africa as a facilitator 'for the social utility of large-scale industrial capitalism. Mehring concentrates on what capitalism does rather than on the forms of oppression with which it may be (and in South Africa obviously has been) complicit'.<sup>40</sup> As such, although Mehring's role as a 'conservationist' can superficially be related to his purchase of the farm, my reading underlines why his conservationism has a wider systemic relation both to the preservation of racial capitalism in South Africa and the continuation of a world-system that favours the historical hegemony of white capital. While Bruce King has noted that Mehring's conservationism is a form of 'private domination', it is a domination rooted in the uneven structural relations of racial capitalism and the wider world-system.<sup>41</sup> The centrality of the world-system's core-periphery hierarchy to Mehring's accumulation is mapped at the local, national, and international level between Europe and Africa, as well as "between [his] farm and the [local] shanty town", between city and 'reserve', and in the local politics between "the Boers and himself".<sup>42</sup> Mehring's position of privilege in South Africa is maintained and supported by a world-system receptive to his business pursuits, which is emphasised by Mehring's frequent international travel to secure trade deals.

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<sup>37</sup> *TC*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *TC*, p. 17 and p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> *TC*, p. 89 and p. 319.

<sup>40</sup> Lars Engle, 'The Conservationist and the Political Uncanny', in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Bruce King (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 91-107 (p. 103).

<sup>41</sup> Bruce King, 'Introduction: A Changing Face', in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 1-17 (p. 5).

<sup>42</sup> *TC*, p. 103 and p. 61.

These journeys capture a sense of the system's historical unevenness, as he moves between continents, but also of the system's lateness, with political change appearing almost inevitable as he travels "between the hour of Europe and the hour of Africa".<sup>43</sup> The impending "hour of Africa" suggests that Mehring's self-conscious "conservationism" is time-limited because he implicitly recognises that the National Party would not be able to sustain the white minority in South Africa indefinitely, or even much longer, in the face of widespread decolonisation and an increasingly empowered sense of African nationalism on the continent. Despite the focalisation of the narrative through Mehring as the text's primary narrator, the novel's complex form offers competing voices that fracture and fragment the dominant world-view of Mehring as a conservationist of capitalism.

As an indication of the text's modernism, its complicated narrative style switches between direct first-person narration; moments of interior monologue (or stream-of-consciousness) with interrupting memories and flashbacks; a third-person omniscience offering brief encounters with other characters with whom Mehring interacts and over whom he wields power; and interruptions of the text by an alternative source of material, the voices of Zulu people interviewed in Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu*. Considering that Callaway's text was published in 1870, just over one hundred years before the publication of *The Conservationist*, the symbolic weight of history is positioned against the white-capitalist system that Mehring seeks to conserve. The text's distinctive and often quite difficult style amplifies the structural violence made available in the text, particularly through the language of Mehring, who offers a self-centred grammar of the rich. Mehring's first-person accounts are largely subject-oriented and give the reader little direct information on the characters that populate his commercial and sexual pursuits in Johannesburg; his travels to and from South Africa on business; and his predominant focus on life at the farm. The discovery and unmarked burial of a black man on the farmstead at the start of the text violently implicates Mehring's possession of the farmland in a wider pattern of racial-capitalist domination and exploitation under South African apartheid. The myth of white South African culture in the apartheid era is upended by the end of the text when the corpse resurfaces (after flooding on the farmland), the farm's black inhabitants claim possession of their ancestral land, and Mehring's narrative collapses both figuratively (in an ambiguous final scene where he *appears* to die) and in the form of the novel's denouement.

However, the corpse should not be read merely as an inanimate object, as Mehring's world-view would have readers believe, nor is it only a symbol of death. The

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<sup>43</sup> *TC*, p. 150.

significance of the corpse is read more valuably if both the *Amazulu* quotations offered at the start of every chapter, as well as the moments of third-person omniscience where the reader learns more about the local black inhabitants, are registered as the extracorporeal viewpoint of the dead body found on the farm. Indeed, the *Amazulu* quotations only start appearing in the novel *after* the discovery and unmarked burial of the black man's body. Understanding the dead black man as *the other voice* in the novel makes the body formally significant as well as registering its importance in establishing the novel's plot. Reading the *Amazulu* quotations as the voice of the corpse therefore allows us to reconsider the significance of the black man's body, which resurfaces as the final culmination of its disruption to Mehring's first-person narrative and to the world-view that Mehring represents. Seeing the black corpse as a formal way of registering the struggles over representation and consciousness in South Africa, during the 1970s, expands on Dominic Head's argument that 'the body assumes a symbolic significance as Mehring's 'other', [when it] resurfaces after a storm, displacing Mehring in a gesture of symbolic decolonization [...] in a development which symbolizes the end of black African dispossession'.<sup>44</sup> Mehring's inhumane treatment of the black man's body at the start of the novel undermines his claim to be "neither dirty racist [...] nor Capitalist pig", and allows readers to consider how Mehring's language exposes a system where wealth creation is crucially dependent on exploitation and dehumanisation.

The devaluation of human life under South African racial capitalism is communicated to the reader through Mehring's language following the discovery of the dead black man on the farmland. As the body loses all human form, becoming only "the thing", Mehring tells his foreman on the farm, Jacobus, to "just leave it as it is" until the police come.<sup>45</sup> The banality of the corpse's discovery and the indifference with which it is registered in the text communicates the extent to which suffering was disregarded and treated as a mundane feature of life under apartheid by the 1970s. The institutionalisation of injustice within the structures of apartheid is dramatised in the official response of the local police force, who simply bury the body on the farm without any investigation. The way this is reiterated to Mehring by Jacobus allows the reader to view the police burial as a cover up of the murder both literally and symbolically: "They dig and they put him in, down there where we was, Sunday. Then they go away".<sup>46</sup> While the simplicity of Jacobus' language here serves to convey the casual disregard and racial bias of the local police, the precision of Mehring's grammar and the matter-of-fact tone in his response

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<sup>44</sup> Head, pp. 99-100.

<sup>45</sup> *TC*, p. 13 and p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> *TC*, p. 22.

communicates a conscienceless self-concern for his own estate: "If they don't want to be bothered to find out who killed the man, let them at least dispose of him themselves. But no. Just dig a hole and shovel him in, out of the way. On someone else's property".<sup>47</sup> The indifference displayed by the local police force is therefore explained in the capitalist logic of Mehring, who sees this human being as nothing more than an object to be disposed of. The violence of South Africa's class relations is emphasised in the exclusivity of Mehring's bourgeois lifestyle, when he calls the police to inquire about why they buried the body on his farm but realises he "does not want to hear the whole explanation" because "he has to get back to the city [for his] dinner parties".<sup>48</sup> What these early scenes in the novel communicate to the reader is that relations between Mehring and other characters in the text, whether his foreman, the local police, or even a corpse on his farmland, are callous and self-motivated. The reference to multiple "parties" reinforces the bourgeois characterisation of Mehring, which he appears to relish despite the obvious signs of suffering and inequality around him. The form of Mehring's interior monologue thus begins by dramatising the self-interest and individual ego defining the violent structural relations of capitalist accumulation in 1970s South Africa.

Violence as a structural feature of the apartheid state apparatus is further implied in Mehring's assertion that he will report his concerns about the local police force "to police headquarters at John Vorster Square and see someone responsible".<sup>49</sup> A double meaning is made available in the structure of the sentence, where the "someone responsible" may be physically located in John Vorster Square but also morally responsible for the violent social relations produced under apartheid. More specifically, the implication may be that Prime Minister Vorster is the 'someone' responsible for the dire state of policing in 1970s South Africa, as well as the social injustice plaguing the country through government policies on Group Areas, pass laws, and 'Bantu homelands'. The direct violence of the murder is indicative of the morbid economic conditions of the racial-capitalist order. Mehring sees it differently: "these things happen every day, or rather every weekend, everyone knows it, they are murdered for their Friday pay-packets or they stab each other after drinking".<sup>50</sup> Mehring locates the problem in "that enormous location [...] a hundred and fifty thousand of them living there".<sup>51</sup> But he does not acknowledge the structural injustice of apartheid that divides South Africa between white cities and black reserves, through the National Party's 'homelands' policy and its

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<sup>47</sup> *TC*, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *TC*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> *TC*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> *TC*, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> *TC*, p. 24.

insistence on black urban migrancy. The location, the reserve, is effectively a labour reservoir dependent on and subject to the needs of white capital. The novel thus sets up a contradiction between Mehring's awareness of social problems and his complete indifference to the structural causes that lie behind social misery. Gordimer's focalisation of the narrative through Mehring unveils this structural connection between his obliviousness to social misery and the deprivation of the thousands of black people in the reserve: Mehring's livelihood depends on their penury, even though he attempts to pass them off as drunks and murderers. For Clingman, the opposition of Mehring's wealth and the misfortune of the local black population is part of the novel's post-apartheid vision:

Just as Mehring represents the white world in its entirety, therefore, so the body represents the black; it is a symbolic 'everyman' victim of the systematic oppression, exploitation and abuse afforded to blacks under apartheid. In this guise it also prefigures an eventual return. Increasingly haunting Mehring's thoughts with its significance [...] The novel's vision is one of historical transfer.<sup>52</sup>

As I see it, the relation between Mehring and local black inhabitants allows readers to question the structural violence inherent to the racial-capitalist system, where systemic injustice delivered violent social consequences for the country's black population in the form of overcrowding, homelessness, unemployment, and poverty. And so when Jacobus tells Mehring that he has found another black man who is "Dead, dead, finish", what is also being articulated at a symbolic level are the violent consequences of white capitalist exploitation of the black majority, as the corpse in question is just another who has been "finished" by the system.<sup>53</sup>

The *Amazulu* quotations, by restoring a voice to the dead man "finished" by apartheid, therefore function as a textual response within the form of the novel to the symbolic violence of Mehring's narrative. This violence contrasts with one expectation of language, by which 'instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate, to exchange words, and such an exchange, even when it is aggressive, presupposes a minimal recognition of the other party'.<sup>54</sup> The focalisation of the narrative through Mehring's privileged point of view demonstrates this violence through language in his disregard and dehumanisation of those around him. For Mehring, the only social

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<sup>52</sup> Clingman, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> *TC*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Žižek, p. 51-52.

relation of value is that which supports his own accumulation and self-fulfilment. Mehring is the subject of racial capitalism where others are only ever the object. The precedence of Mehring's interior monologue is violent, to refer back to Žižek, in the way his 'language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity', exposing the structural violence of Mehring's hegemony through his language.<sup>55</sup> When Mehring introduces other white men to Jacobus, he refers to each as "*this* master", inferring the fallacy that the white man is naturally superior in South Africa. Master. Sir. Boss. Language choice continually reinforces the violent social relations and gross economic divisions that exist in capitalist society, as in the novel's dramatisation of 1970s South Africa. This symbolic violence is what Žižek calls 'a basic fact of language, of constructing and imposing a certain symbolic field'.<sup>56</sup> Language usage in the narrative, then, becomes key to both establishing and understanding the structural violence behind the racial-capitalist system's organisation of ownership and possession.

The form and language of Mehring's narrative reveal a narrator whose experience prohibits an effective understanding of his society. While in Mehring's point of view he is a wealth creator key to the prosperity of South Africa, the narrative exposes his relationships as manifestly exploitative in a system structured on social injustice. The novel's form challenges the ideological position embodied in and reproduced by Mehring's character. The text's internal conflict forms a way for Gordimer to represent the antagonistic and violent social relations structured into South African society. As Gordimer asserts:

my novels are anti-apartheid, not because of my personal abhorrence of apartheid, but because the society that is the very stuff of my work reveals itself. The suffering inflicted by White on Black, the ambiguities of feeling, the hypocrisy, the courage, the lies, the sham and shame--they are all there, implicit. If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself.<sup>57</sup>

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer shows that apartheid is even more damning when understood through a narrator such as Mehring who is ideologically biased to and directly benefits from racial capitalism. Rereading Mehring's narrative as a grammar of the rich

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Interview: Pat Schwartz Talks To Nadine Gordimer', in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 78-83 (p. 83).

thus allows us to make a wider critique of apartheid through the articulation of his position in relation to the country's racial-capitalist social relations. As Gordimer writes in 'The Essential Gesture', quoting Octavio Paz, "Social criticism begins with grammar and the re-establishing of meanings".<sup>58</sup> The internal conflict between Mehring and the figure of the black man can therefore be understood as part of the wider struggle in 1970s South Africa to re-establish and re-empower a black consciousness that had long been stifled and repressed by the country's white establishment. Repeated formal intrusions into the narrative can therefore be understood as a response to the violence of the imposed silence represented in the swift, quiet, and unmarked burial of the corpse to uphold the myth that white South African land ownership cannot be associated with acts of violence, even though it in fact depends on it. The departed voice of the "finished" black man forms a response to the contempt with which the black working-class population are treated within Mehring's narrative and the structures of the apartheid state.

The corpse resurfaces on the farm following flooding from Mozambique, evoking the anti-colonial struggles of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). The narrative offers a doubly important symbol in overturning Mehring's domination as his attempts to conserve the South African white bourgeois myth are fatally disintegrated by the changing tide of an African country on the verge of achieving independence for its black majority. The flooding from Mozambique offers a symbolic wave of independence for South Africa's oppressed black population, as the novel ends in the third person of the black man rising, with the ambiguous suggestion that Mehring has departed South Africa either through resettlement abroad or in death. When the black man's body is given a ceremonial burial at the end of the narrative, taking "possession of this earth, theirs; one of them", the farm workers coming together as one to sing hymns in their repossession of the farmland articulates a symbolic voice of the black majority. The final scene therefore makes apparent, and suggests an overturning of, the structural violence of Mehring's racial-capitalist hegemony.<sup>59</sup>

### **Language and Possession**

In the reversal of Mehring's hegemony, the novel allows readers to critique how violence is produced in the process of dispossession tied to certain forms of capitalist ownership. Mehring's social relations with characters throughout the narrative are structured in relation to his sense of ownership, treating his wife, mistress, workers, and son as objects

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<sup>58</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Essential Gesture', in *Telling Times*, p. 419.

<sup>59</sup> *TC*, p. 323.



rather than as real people because it is only he that "knows the world".<sup>60</sup> Mehring's assertion that "my possessions are enough for me" can thus be understood as a violent, dehumanising indication of his preference for relations where he alone is the subject.<sup>61</sup> The limited characterisation of other people within the novel can be understood as a result of the narrative's focalisation through Mehring, whose self-centeredness undermines not only their viewpoints but their very existence. Mehring's narrative positions others without identity to uphold and affirm his own worldview, the white South African culture he is seeking to conserve. As Tamlyn Monson writes, the 'many references to black people as "them" [implies] their collective identity as his objects rather than acknowledging any differentiation that might suggest an existence independent' of Mehring's world-view.<sup>62</sup> Specifically, people are treated as objects by Mehring because they are worth nothing more to him than the economic or social function they fulfil.

Communication is registered in the novel as a process of transaction, which helps the reader understand why Mehring's grammar often appears sharp or awkward: "Demand. Response. Counterdemand. Statement".<sup>63</sup> The simplicity but also the ruthlessness of Mehring's thoughts and speech can therefore be linked to his dehumanisation and objectification of others. A process of demand and counterdemand suggests that Mehring's approach to speech and language is influenced by the primacy of trade and negotiation. Anything other than an acquiescence to his "demand" is not necessarily applicable to Mehring, in a world where no one else matters other than his position as subject. As Eleni Coundouriotis asserts, any sense of 'universalism' in Mehring's narrative is 'only an excuse for white domination'.<sup>64</sup> In Mehring's consciousness, capitalism is a white construct and so the 'universalism' afforded by the world-system is really designed to accentuate and extend white accumulation and hegemony. Whether in the context of South Africa or international trade, the symbolic violence communicated by the form and language of Mehring's narrative reinforces the white ego, in his view that the country and state exists to serve his interests, and the interests of white accumulation.

The interruption of Mehring's narrative with quotations from Callaway's *Amazulu* interviews therefore serves to undermine Mehring's centrality in the narrative, as well as

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<sup>60</sup> *TC*, p. 178.

<sup>61</sup> *TC*, p. 127.

<sup>62</sup> Tamlyn Monson, 'Conserving the Cogito: Rereading Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*', *Research in African Literatures*, 35:4 (2004), 33-51 (p. 39).

<sup>63</sup> *TC*, p. 113.

<sup>64</sup> Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Rethinking Cosmopolitanism in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*', *College Literature*, 33:3 (2006), 1-28 (p. 23).

his ownership of the farmland and the related dispossession of the black inhabitants who appear to have come with the property deeds. The *Amazulu* quotations counterpose a more traditional indigenous relationship to the land based on community against the white-capitalist drive for individual ownership and possession. Against this alternative history of South Africa, Mehring must continually reassert his own position of dominance and claim to the land: "well-off city men buy themselves farms at a certain stage in their careers--the losses are deductible from income tax and this fact coincides with something less tangible it's understood they can now afford to indulge: a hankering to make contact with the land".<sup>65</sup> The sense of oppression tied to Mehring's ownership of the farm is further implied in his calculated plan to keep the farm just below productivity because otherwise "there would be an end to tax relief" because ultimately "he didn't depend on the farm".<sup>66</sup> By contrast, the first *Amazulu* quotation emphasises the value of productivity to benefit all; "I pray for corn, that many people may come to this village".<sup>67</sup> The contrast between the two accounts in the narrative here is that whereas for Mehring the idea of 'home' is a transitory acquisition that exists between Johannesburg and the farm, the *Amazulu* quotations denote home through the village as a centre of community. The effect is to consider that home is not about monetary ownership of land, but a deeper connection built on family roots and ancestry, rituals and local practices, and the ways of life, all interconnected to the landscape.

The *Amazulu* quotations place readers' attention on the long history of colonial oppression in South Africa, for which apartheid was a corollary, with the dispossession of black people from their land tied to Dutch and British colonial appropriations and the structural violence permitted in the name of 'Union' under the 1913 Natives Land Act. As Frederick Johnstone explains, 'the *de facto* distribution of land ownership was reinforced and given *de jure* legitimation by the Natives Land Act of 1913, which defined the great bulk of South Africa [approximately 80%] as "white areas"'.<sup>68</sup> Mehring's ownership of the farm is only available to him through the specific economic structure of apartheid, 'in which Africans were prohibited from the right to purchase or otherwise acquire land'.<sup>69</sup> Rather than register that local African inhabitants were already living on the land appropriated and divided by whites, Mehring reinforces his view that 'people' come with 'deeds' as though they are nothing more than objects. Mehring's desire of "being at one with [the farmstead] as an ancestor at one with his own earth" is inherently violent in its

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<sup>65</sup> *TC*, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> *TC*, p. 17 and p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> *TC*, p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Frederick A. Johnstone, *Class, Race, and Gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

falsity and subjugation.<sup>70</sup>

Read as the extracorporeal voice of the dead black man, the *Amazulu* quotations form a disruption to Mehring's attempts to conserve and advance the South African bourgeois myth of white domination. As Brian Macaskill has previously asserted, 'the first quotation from Callaway calls attention to its alien origin by interruptively appearing, without announcement, as italicized script on an otherwise unoccupied and unpaginated page itself preceded by a completely blank page'.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, by presenting the passages in italicised script without page numbers, the *Amazulu* quotations not only offer a dissenting voice of interruption for those dispossessed by the racial-capitalist system, they indicate the marginalisation and oppression of the black majority within the singular, monologic white narrative of apartheid. As Macaskill also acknowledges, in the apartheid fiction of Gordimer during the 1970s and 80s, 'the stylistic margins of her texts act as loci of ideological utterance, especially in the epigraphs, quotations and other often-italicized narrative supplements'.<sup>72</sup> From this understanding, the *Amazulu* quotations function to repeatedly discredit Mehring's bourgeois ideological perspective.

Reading Callaway's original work offers further understanding of the history of dispossession in South Africa, in his discussion of: 'The account which black men give white men of their origin. It is said the black men came out first from the place whence all nations proceeded, but they did not come out with many things; but only with a few cattle and a little corn [...] we came out possessed of what sufficed us'.<sup>73</sup> The testimonies recorded by Callaway reflect a culture where possession is related to need, rather than greed and accumulation. By contrast, white men are described in the interviews Callaway recorded as those who sought possession of 'property', knowing 'all things which we do not know' and so 'their works conquer us, they would conquer us also by weapons'.<sup>74</sup> Connecting Mehring's possession of the farm and the *Amazulu* quotations to the reading of Callaway's text underlines the history of dispossession, where colonial violence instituted a foreign system of property that stripped indigenous people of their ancestral land. The notion of 'possession' takes on a double meaning in Callaway's text as he records description of 'the Bouda', an evil spirit who will 'enslave the objects of his malice [and] subject them to nameless torments; and not unfrequently his vengeance will

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<sup>70</sup> *TC*, p. 191.

<sup>71</sup> Brian Macaskill, 'Placing Spaces: Style and Ideology in Gordimer's Later Fiction', in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Bruce King (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 59-73 (p. 63).

<sup>72</sup> Macaskill, p. 70.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu: in their own words* (London: J.A. Blair, 1868), pp. 76-77.

<sup>74</sup> Callaway, p. 78, p. 79, and p. 80.

even [bring about] their death'.<sup>75</sup> The Bouda's position as a subject that objectifies and subjects others to oppression offers an interesting parallel to the character of Mehring, who takes possession of the farmland and its people in a similar manner. As Callaway explains in his notes, 'The Bouda, or an evil spirit called by the same name, and acting with him, takes possession of others'.<sup>76</sup> When the farm inhabitants rebury the dead black man, the simultaneous overturning of the narrative's focalisation from Mehring to them can be understood as an exorcism of the white man's historical appropriation and possession of South Africa as a form of Bouda. The falsity of Mehring's claim to the farm is reinforced in the refusal of other white characters to reside there, such as Mehring's mistress, Antonia, who rejects his ownership of the land: "that bit of paper you bought yourself from the deeds office isn't going to be valid for as long as another generation. [...] The blacks will tear up your bit of paper".<sup>77</sup> The *Amazulu* intertext therefore foreshadows the collapse of apartheid itself, in the black inhabitants' repossession of the farmland, revoking the capitalist logic of individual property and Mehring's imposition of deed papers, and restoring the land as a communal space.

Nelson Mandela also spoke of the egalitarian system intimated by the *Amazulu* quotations, asserting that he was 'attracted by the idea of a classless society, an attraction which springs in part from Marxist reading, and, in part, from my admiration of the structure and organisation of early African societies in this country'.<sup>78</sup> Mandela contrasted the violent structures of apartheid with 'the structure and organization of early African societies [where] the land, then the main means of production, belonged to the whole tribe, and there was no individual ownership whatsoever. There were no classes, no rich or poor, and no exploitation of man by man'.<sup>79</sup> One can draw a parallel between Mandela's critique of apartheid and the theories of structural violence, in his condemnation of 'the grinding poverty of the people, the low wages, the acute shortage of land, the inhuman exploitation and the whole policy of white domination'.<sup>80</sup> Mandela characterised the morbidity of South African racial capitalism in his closing speech at the Rivonia Trial, where the social injustice of apartheid social relations is marked by what we can understand as its uneven development and structural violence: 'South Africa is the richest country in Africa, and could be one of the richest countries in the world. But it is a land of extremes and remarkable contrasts. The whites enjoy what may well be the

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<sup>75</sup> Callaway, p. 281.

<sup>76</sup> Callaway, p. 281.

<sup>77</sup> *TC*, p. 210.

<sup>78</sup> Nelson Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2010), p. 205.

<sup>79</sup> Mandela, p. 150.

<sup>80</sup> Mandela, p. 34.

highest standard of living in the world, whilst Africans live in poverty and misery'.<sup>81</sup> Mehring's interior monologue functions as a form of ideological opposition to Mandela's brand of egalitarianism, as Mehring articulates a bourgeois capitalist logic that "development [...] doesn't matter a damn [for] poor devils [who] don't know what's good for them".<sup>82</sup> A world with "no struggle between human beings" would be "too smelly and too close" for Mehring's comfort, "Let them eat cake, by all means--if production allows for it, and dividends are not affected, in time".<sup>83</sup> Much later in the novel, the reader can understand that Mehring's ideological position is defined most fundamentally by class, rather than race, in a scene where he abandons an unidentified woman to potentially be attacked, "He's going to run, run and leave them to rape her or rob her. She'll be alright. They survive everything. Coloured or poor-white, whichever she is, their brothers or fathers take their virginity good and early".<sup>84</sup> Mehring's denigration of both black and "poor-white" South Africans conveys his sense of superiority as the moneyed elite, in a grammar where class and race are hyphenated. The notion that poor people intrinsically lack morality and are therefore more susceptible and socially conditioned to, as well as more physically capable of withstanding, acts of violence, such as rape, is contradicted by Mehring's own lack of conscience in his abandonment of the woman to a potentially violent fate.

The language of Mehring's narrative therefore reveals his own conceit, as he is unable to recognise that his accumulation of wealth relies on the exploitation of others. The notion of 'turning a blind eye' is contrasted with the callous indifference that Mehring displays to the poverty of his workers, comparing "the famous indifference of nature" with "the sentimentalism of cut-throat competitors".<sup>85</sup> While Mehring boasts of the increasing value of the farmland, for which he "paid 100 rands an acre; high at the time, must be worth more than double by now", the narrative forms a structural connection between his accumulation and the deprivation of the families that live and work under his stewardship:

There the children are now, shouting in their thin voices as they come over the veld carrying those endless paraffin tins of water from the pump. Some of them as so small they appear to be paraffin tins with legs. But the parents don't care. [...] Hippos aborting their foetuses in dried-up pools, places like this. It's

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<sup>81</sup> Mandela, p. 177.

<sup>82</sup> *TC*, p. 89.

<sup>83</sup> *TC*, p. 89.

<sup>84</sup> *TC*, p. 319.

<sup>85</sup> *TC*, p. 240.

extraordinary how nature isn't squeamish about what to do in desperation.<sup>86</sup>

Poverty is presented as a natural condition, with some humans no better than animals. By contrast, the reader is left to unpick the contradiction between the high value of the farmland and the stark inequality dramatised in the image of the child labourers, carrying water to the farm and being deprived of an education. On the contrary, nothing is natural about the situation, suggested by the incongruity of water being carried in a tin designed for paraffin. What Mehring cannot see is that his wealth is being created here by families who cannot afford to send their children to school. For Mehring, social inequality and deprivation are never questioned; the dominant position of whites as a ruling class in South Africa, and the luxury of one class delivered by the exploitation and misery of another class. Child labour is a natural product of such a system. However, it is the subject-object relation of Mehring's point of view that exposes how they cannot possibly be responsible for their own poverty because they are not subjects with power but objects at the mercy of the apartheid state. In 1970s South Africa, it is only the white subject that is of consequence. Gordimer's readers are therefore able to perceive a form of structural violence through the language of Mehring's narrative, inviting critique of the symbolic violence Mehring displays in his harsh reflection on the supposedly natural state of suffering of other human beings.

In the image of the children carrying paraffin tins, their rights as human beings have undeniably become subordinate as objects in their relation to Mehring as the subject, who owns the farmland and sets the parameters of existence for its inhabitants. Mehring's language indicates a capitalist social relation that denies and negates any form of social responsibility or collective morality. It therefore communicates something about the capitalist logic that perpetuates structural violence: 'under capitalism the rationale for production is profit—not need or use in the abstract. There are many people in dire need of food, water, shelter, and medicine, but products that satisfy these vital needs are produced only to the degree that profits may be realized'.<sup>87</sup> That the children are being exploited for their labour, may be malnourished, will be uneducated, and even vulnerable to premature death, is not registered as a violence under capitalist social relations; it is as natural and as unproblematic to Mehring as "hippos aborting their foetuses in dried-up pools". The reference to 'nature' holds the implication that poverty is produced purely through personal failure, but individual responsibility is impossible when opportunities are simply unavailable or, in the South African case, prohibited because of your racial

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<sup>86</sup> *TC*, p. 43.

<sup>87</sup> Tyner, p. 96.

background. Without any social requirement to act morally, Mehring has absolutely no economic incentive to provide an education for these children because educated workers are not needed for the purposes of his industries, whether in pig-iron production or agriculture. Indeed, by keeping educational standards to a certain minimum, the structural violence of the capitalist system serves an additional benefit for the capitalist ruling class, because their hegemony is less likely to be threatened by an ill-educated, poorly-informed working class who do not recognise and cannot challenge their collective suffering. Indeed, the need for a collective consciousness and collective response to the suffering experienced by South Africa's black majority in the 1970s inspired Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, expanding on the socialist foundation to the ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter, which called for a national liberation of the economy by transferring the 'banks and monopoly industry [...] to the ownership of the people as a whole'.<sup>88</sup>

Mehring's notion of survival of the fittest is also warped by his own reliance on the labour of his black workers and, seemingly, their children. As Tyner argues, 'those who are the wealthiest in society, for example, are entirely dependent on the labor of others: someone must grow, process, and distribute their food; someone must ensure an adequate supply of clean water; someone must build their homes and resorts; someone must provide necessary medical and health care. We are all dependent; we are all entwined in a series of complex social relations'.<sup>89</sup> Mehring's dependency on his workers is dramatised best in his complete reliance on his foreman, Jacobus. Their complicated power relations symbolise the country's economic unevenness and the accumulation of white wealth on the exploitation of black labour. Mehring's authority is tested when the telephone connection to the farm from Johannesburg is destroyed by the flooding. In this scene, the disruption to Mehring's control is reflected in his secretary being ordered to schedule a meeting "to see the telephone manager", demanding that "repairs to the road should be begun at once", thus emphasising Mehring's reliance on the telephone as a tool of power in maintaining authority over his farmland.<sup>90</sup> However, when Mehring returns to the farm he discovers that Jacobus has kept everything under control and that "they really seem to have coped rather well", highlighting how Mehring's oversight is completely unnecessary.<sup>91</sup>

When Mehring abandons the farm towards the end of the narrative and the farmers decide to bury the resurfaced body, Jacobus' authority over the land is conveyed

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<sup>88</sup> As quoted by Nelson Mandela in *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 205.

<sup>89</sup> Tyner, p. 132.

<sup>90</sup> *TC*, p. 282 and p. 281.

<sup>91</sup> *TC*, p. 291.

partly in his symbolic commandeering of the telephone: "Jacobus had phoned the farmer in town at his office and asked for money".<sup>92</sup> Mehring is no longer the "master" and is now only mockingly referred to as "the farmer in town". As Judith Levy has observed, "When the [corpse] is finally given a proper burial by the black people on the farm, Mehring himself seems to have receded completely into the background, serving only to cover the costs of the burial".<sup>93</sup> In Gordimer's reversal of black dispossession, Mehring relinquishes his role on the farm to Jacobus "without questioning or difficulty".<sup>94</sup> The murdered black man takes "possession of this earth, theirs; one of them".<sup>95</sup> Mehring's voice is also removed, as the narrative switches back to its alternative third person view: "the farmer didn't want to hear about it".<sup>96</sup> Paul Rich reads this scene as having 'turned the pastoral myth of white settlement back upon itself [...] white settler society stands as rootless and divested of any real moral authority in a landscape that becomes identified with the folk traditions of the African majority'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Mehring's lack of moral authority sees him abandon not only the farm but South Africa as well, as it is noted that "he was leaving that day for one of those countries white people go to, the whole world is theirs", affirming his place and mobility within a capitalist world-system.

As Mehring relinquishes his control over the narrative, his final words are communicated indirectly: "He gave some instructions over the phone; Jacobus must look after everything nicely".<sup>98</sup> Despite these 'instructions', the irony is that Jacobus was already looking after the farm in his role as foreman throughout the text. Mehring's attempt to brand *himself* the farmer is now entirely overshadowed. By contrast, when Jacobus speaks Zulu in the final scene, "fast, loud, in the language they all spoke, and they all listened", his character transforms into an eloquent leader of the community.<sup>99</sup> The transformation of his character denotes the symbolic link between language, exploitation, and structural violence, as his presentation through most of Mehring's narrative as a stuttering and inarticulate foreman is dependent on the hegemony of white English-speaking structures. Uneven social relations under racial capitalism can therefore be articulated even in the form of language, as when Jacobus was "speaking English, which not all of them could do, not only his words were different" but his

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<sup>92</sup> *TC*, p. 321.

<sup>93</sup> Judith Levy, 'Narrative as a Way of Being: Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 4:2 (2006), 103-114 (p. 104).

<sup>94</sup> *TC*, p. 323.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Paul Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism 1921-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 135.

<sup>98</sup> *TC*, p. 321.

<sup>99</sup> *TC*, p. 67.



characterisation.<sup>100</sup>

The relative silence of Jacobus throughout Mehring's narrative, until the final scene where the extracorporeal voice of the dead black man assumes narration, conveys the symbolic violence of the apartheid system's inferiorisation of its black majority. As Coetzee's narrator Susan says in the novel *Foe*: 'In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story'.<sup>101</sup> In *Foe*, Coetzee inverts the former image of Crusoe teaching Friday to speak English by portraying Friday as a mute who has had his tongue cut out.<sup>102</sup> The implication in Coetzee's text is that Crusoe removed Friday's tongue to enforce his world-view through Friday's silencing, physically and symbolically: 'the cutting out of his tongue taught him eternal obedience, or at least the outward form of obedience'.<sup>103</sup> *Foe* develops the notion that language is part of a social structure that enables violence, just as Jacobus' partial use of English in *The Conservationist* implicates not only the lack of education afforded to non-whites by the apartheid state but the way in which language and voice is politicised and therefore laden with symbolic meaning. While education was free for white children, no such provision was made for blacks and, as Abraham Behr discusses in *Education in South Africa*, while the country's non-white population totaled approximately 82% in 1970, in the same year only approximately 30% of non-white children were in education.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the structural inequality of South Africa's education system, a scene towards the end of the novel in the extracorporeal voice of the black man, reveals that one of the young boys from Mehring's farm, Izak, whom Mehring describes as a child "good only for holding things steady" has been teaching himself Afrikaans by listening to the radio. Izak, who had been silent through the narrative, offers the reader a surprising revelation by communicating in both Afrikaans and English with the Indian shopkeeper's son, Jalal, who was told earlier in the novel that "they must mix English with everything to show how educated they are".<sup>105</sup> By educating themselves, both Izak and Jalal represent a new generation of non-white South Africans conscious of the power in their own expression. In this way, the novel demonstrates a prescient sensitivity to the antagonisms that led to the student protests that sparked the Soweto Uprising. While the Soweto Uprising plays a major role in *Burger's Daughter*, the preoccupation with

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 141.

<sup>102</sup> Coetzee, p. 37.

<sup>103</sup> Coetzee, p. 98.

<sup>104</sup> Figures quoted in Abraham L. Behr, *Education in South Africa* (Pretoria: Cape and Transvaal Printers, 1971), p. 353, and p. 394, respectively.

<sup>105</sup> Behr, p. 135. See also pp. 256-260.

language, voice, and possession in *The Conservationist* suggests that the politics of representation was a key issue defining Gordimer's response to apartheid policy in the 1970s. The comradeship invoked in the subversive image of black and Indian children speaking Afrikaans and English, appropriating the language of the white ruling class to represent and speak for themselves, therefore offers a powerful contrast with the ideology and symbolic violence of the narrative of Mehring. This scene therefore conveys the importance of language and education for the emerging political consciousness of a black generation searching for new modes of resistance against the entrenched apartheid state. As such, it becomes an even more striking counterpoint that Izak and Jalal's voices emerge in the moment following Mehring's abandonment of South Africa.

That Mehring is able to abandon his narrative in South Africa in the denouement of the text indicates Mehring's indebtedness to a world-system that protects its internationally mobile global elite, who have prospered most from the all-encompassing interconnectedness of global capitalism. Mehring's conservatism therefore not only points to the immediate structure of apartheid but the inherited ideology of European colonialism, which gave birth to the post-war world-system that remained dominated by the West in the 1970s despite the ongoing formal decolonisation of Africa. However, the revelation of Mehring's narrative (both to the reader and to himself) is the ultimate hollowness of his personal hegemony and the structural domination of the white minority in South Africa. For all of Mehring's wealth and power, he is unable to maintain the myth of white South African culture that he sought to perpetuate when he purchased deeds to formally appropriate the farmland.

## **Conclusion**

*The Conservationist* registers the structural violence of racial capitalism through the narrative's focalisation on Mehring, a wealthy white industrialist whose position of power and privilege is afforded by the country's structural inequality. Mehring's interior monologue imparts a vivid sense of the linguistic, ideological and material domination characteristic of South Africa in the 1970s. However, competing voices are made available in the text that disrupt and ultimately supplant Mehring's position of hegemony. The novel forms an internal conflict between its shifting points of view, in the narrative's primary focus on Mehring but its ability to give way to those Mehring deems inferior. This internal conflict is accentuated by the repeated interruption to the main narrative of quotations from an external source, which I have read as a way of giving voice to the dead black man found on Mehring's farm at the start of the story. The *Amazulu* quotations

allow the reader to conceive of the corpse as a competing voice that disrupts Mehring's claim to the land, while the Amazulu sense of community offers a competing system that eventually displaces Mehring's individual sense of ownership when he abandons the property at the end of the novel. Structural violence is therefore made more identifiable through *The Conservationist's* internal conflict, which makes the *relations* of suffering and social injustice visible and readable. Suffering in the form of poverty, dispossession, and environmental damage may be violent in their social consequences but these social problems, on which Mehring's accumulation relies, are not readily viewed as criminal. In Mehring's definition of capitalism, the system of economic organisation over which he presides does not cause deprivation and therefore requires no intervention on his part to alleviate what he sees as the natural wastage of human life. The narrative's focalisation through Mehring therefore serves to illuminate readers' perception of the dehumanising ethos that sustained racial capitalism through a period of intense social conflict within South Africa. The novel exposes a connection between the symbolic violence of Mehring's language and the structural violence instituted by his unequal power and unbridled greed. By examining the novel's complex use of form and language, I have therefore attempted to reconsider how the novel represents the violence and suffering embedded within the structure of society. The symbolic violence of Mehring's narrative allows us to better understand how social injustice is a structural problem within the specific context of 1970s racial-capitalist society.

My reading of *The Conservationist* as a textual response to the structural violence of racial capitalism in 1970s South Africa also helps expand the work being done to broaden generally accepted notions of what constitutes 'violence'. The case of 1970s South Africa highlights the political function of a definition of violence that does not simply refer to physical forms of assault but takes into account how the structure of society and its dominant ideology are central to the systematic suffering of human beings. This systemic and structural violence was established in South Africa from the very introduction of capitalist social relations in the country and the division of its population by race and class. Moreover, the novel's characterisation of Mehring as a proponent and 'conservationist' of racial capitalism, in spite of his repeated encounters and interactions with social injustice, explains how other people's suffering is tolerated, as capitalist society's specific configuration of a subject-object relation removes guilt, blame, association, and the onus of responsibility. What is ultimately suggested by the novel is that such widespread suffering will only be alleviated more durably if changes take place at the level of a society's structure, in the same way that Mehring's world-view is

thwarted only by the supersession of his narrative.

## Chapter 4. Allegories of Capitalism in Gordimer's Short Stories

### Introduction

In Gordimer's essay, 'The Short Story in South Africa', she asserts that "the short story has always been more flexible and *open to experiment* than the novel".<sup>1</sup> Crucially, she argues, the short story provides writers with "a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one. *For the sake of form*".<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, this chapter explores how Gordimer's use of the short story form offers a distinct textual response to racial capitalism in South Africa and the country's historical place within the world-system. My analysis of Gordimer's short stories therefore underlines not only how consistent this theme is in Gordimer's oeuvre but also the manifold forms of response undertaken by her work. My readings try to show that the short stories can be read productively as a series of allegories that explore the lateness of South Africa's racial-capitalist society through her focus on personal relationships. Specifically, I explore a selection of Gordimer's short stories written in the 1950s, published in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1952) and *Six Feet of the Country* (1956), to consider how the collections offer a multitude of voices and narratives that set personal preoccupations against the much larger political and cultural changes taking place in South Africa and, indeed, across the world.

Gordimer's insistence that it is the flexible and multiplicitous nature of the short story that makes the form so compelling is what is most interesting to me here. Gordimer returned to the short story form throughout her career, partly because the brevity of a short story can offer a much sharper view of society. The limited space of a short story, in comparison to the novel, can make the form challenging for the writer but also for the reader, as it precludes back story and forces a more acute and immediate mode of expression. As Gordimer says:

short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally, they have learnt to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. How the characters will appear, think, behave, comprehend, tomorrow or at any other time

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Short Story in South Africa', in *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 168-173 (p. 169) [my emphasis]. Reprinted as 'The Flash of Fireflies', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 263-267.

<sup>2</sup> Gordimer, p. 169 [original emphasis].

in their lives, is irrelevant. A discrete moment of truth is aimed at.<sup>3</sup>

Short stories require a more active form of readerly participation because of the form's emphasis on brevity and an inconclusive mode of storytelling that cannot afford exposition. Gordimer's social commitment, her political ideas and moral values, therefore remain abstract in the short story, in her emphasis on the personal and "discrete moment". The politics can only be conveyed, if at all, in the discrete moments of truth between the characters and events of her short stories. However, what may seem like a limited scene between a small number of characters and a singular event can actually have a powerful significance because the precision of detail communicates multiple levels of meaning and extended symbolism. This is where the importance of allegory comes in, because, as I see it, Gordimer's focus on discrete personal moments allows her short story collections to be read together for the wider social and political themes that informed her writing. Specifically, her focus on scenes of individual personal conflict can be read onto the wider conflict taking place at the level of society as a result of South Africa's racial-capitalist social relations. Allegory allows us as readers to consider the ways in which the short story takes on multiple levels of meaning in the details it offers about its characters, objects, and events, standing in for wider political themes and inferences when considered against the backdrop of South Africa and the world-system. In this way, the short story form also allows readers to consider in what way allegory enabled Gordimer to respond to political matters of concern without direct attack on the apartheid state and therefore without running the risk of censorship. As Anton Chekhov said, 'in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much'.<sup>4</sup> Reading the short story collection itself as an extended form of allegory, each discrete experience of social conflict informs South Africa's political reality as a whole.

Gordimer's emphasis on the short story as a form that is particularly "open to experiment" is also instructive to my overall appreciation of the nuanced and subtle changes that take place across her work as she continually sought to find new modes of expression that could respond appropriately as a reproach to apartheid and adequately raise the consciousness of her readership. It is unsurprising, then, that Gordimer started her career as a short story writer and only later began working on novels.<sup>5</sup> As I have

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<sup>3</sup> Gordimer, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> Anton Chekhov, 'The Short Story', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 195-198 (p. 198).

<sup>5</sup> Gordimer had her first short story published at the age of 15, in 1939, and her first collection of short stories was published in 1949, in the small volume *Face to Face*. Many of the stories in this volume were reworked and republished in 1952, as part of the larger collection, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*.

repeatedly demonstrated, Gordimer's formal experimentation can be traced from her very earliest works, from her attempts at cognitive mapping in *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, to *The Late Bourgeois World*, which I have read as a novella with a decentred narrative, and to her use of competing voices and points of view in *The Conservationist*. However, analysis of Gordimer's short stories pales in comparison to that of her novels. While Judie Newman has previously stated the need for Gordimer's short stories to be given a dedicated 'study of their own', they have continually been overlooked.<sup>6</sup> As Graham Huggan has asserted, 'Gordimer's novels have done much toward "articulating the consciousness" of contemporary South Africa [but] what is not often realized, or not realized often enough, is that her short stories also contribute to this articulation, and that the short story is just as well-equipped as the novel'.<sup>7</sup> However, for Stephen Clingman, the short stories 'are not *politically* conscious' and offer only 'moments of psychological illumination [or] exploration of the human condition'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the view of Gordimer's short stories as less significant is common amongst her critics, with Michael Wade seeing value in them only 'where they possess specific relevance to [...] the novels' and Barbara Eckstein problematizing the 'ambiguities' of the short stories as unhelpful.<sup>9</sup> Yet it is precisely their 'ambiguities' and their 'psychological illumination' of individual experiences and social relationships that makes the short stories so instructively, though often indirectly or only suggestively, 'politically conscious'. Gordimer's definition of the short story as having "a thousand lives" has been touched on previously by Dominic Head, in his view that this is a 'particular strength of [Gordimer's] short story – far from making a single point [...] it is able to yoke together different possibilities in a challenging, yet rewarding conjunction'.<sup>10</sup> It is exactly these 'different possibilities', and the flexibility of meaning, available in Gordimer's short stories that leads this chapter in its exploration of their allegorical capacity. It is through the different possibilities, and the layers of conflict, that Gordimer's short stories offer multiple, continuous, and open-

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<sup>6</sup> Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Echoes From Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Fiction as Social Critique', *Research in African Literatures*, 25:1 (1994), 61-73 (p. 61).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History From The Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 22. While Clingman singles out Gordimer's 'Is there nowhere else we can meet?' for its 'remarkable [...] allegory on numerous levels at once, sexual, political and historical' (p. 24), as can be gleaned from the title of Clingman's study, *The 'Novels' of Nadine Gordimer*, the task of questioning and understanding the short stories, and their allegorical significance, was not expanded upon or explored.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 4. Barbara Eckstein, 'Pleasure and Joy: Political Activism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories', *World Literature Today*, 59: 3 (1985), 343-6 (p. 343).

<sup>10</sup> Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 165.

ended 'allegories' rather than one singular 'allegory'.<sup>11</sup> Gordimer's short stories are particularly suited to an allegorical reading because her collections, in their continual focus on the personal, offer a multiplicity of voices and points of view at a much faster pace. Indeed, this emphasis on different possibilities is what makes it clear that there is room for more work in general to be done on Gordimer's short stories. As such, this chapter renews criticism of Gordimer's early short stories, which are an important part of her oeuvre, most particularly in relation to what her writing is able to say about racial capitalism.

### Understanding Allegory

The multiplicity of meanings available in Gordimer's short stories corresponds directly to the derivation of 'allegory' from the Greek word *allegoreo*, a compound of *allos*, meaning 'other', and *agoreuo*, meaning 'to speak publicly'.<sup>12</sup> In a literary sense, this notion of allegory as 'other speak' offers the possibility of multi-layered meaning within narratives or, rather, a destabilisation of fixed meanings and assumptions that require what Jeremy Tambling describes as a 'method of reading' that 'involves choices, deciding, perhaps unconsciously, what should be taken literally, at face value, and what should be taken *allegorically*'.<sup>13</sup> Writing fiction that can be read allegorically, therefore, allows Gordimer (and her readers) to interrogate and resist the inequalities present in South African society, without a direct political confrontation with the authorities that would so repeatedly ban and censor her work throughout her career. The potential of the short story form to allow for ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning also allows Gordimer as a writer to produce stories that avoid addressing readers in a didactic tone, requiring a more active form of readerly engagement that may encourage a more critical and self-critical readership. Thus the stories help to "raise the consciousness" of South Africa's white minority of the abuses of apartheid.<sup>14</sup>

For Walter Benjamin, it is the silences, ambiguities, and multiplicities manifest

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<sup>11</sup> This, it is perhaps worth pointing out, is the distinction between allegory and symbolism, as Jeremy Tambling alludes to: the 'freedom of interpretation within allegory has been claimed to be the marker of what distinguishes it from symbolism', which signifies more fixed and fitting resemblances (i.e., the symbolism of a star in the sky for a meaning of hope). See Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Tambling, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Tambling, p. 15 [my emphasis].

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Rita Copeland and Peter Struck address, the allegorical 'sense of "otherspeaking" [...] refers to two related procedures, a manner of composing *and a method of interpreting* [...] what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points.' [my emphasis], 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. by Copeland and Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-12 (p. 2).



in allegorical writing that are able to confront and alienate the reader from the absolute meanings and fixed values created by the material world of labour and property, by extinguishing the 'false appearance of totality' created by symbolism and, he goes on to argue, by commodity culture.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin's initial ideas regarding the use of allegory were developed in his doctoral dissertation, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (published in 1928), where he asserts that 'allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things'.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the initial opacity of this phrasing, I believe, lies an allegorical meaning in Benjamin's connection between 'ruins' and 'things'; if we take the 'realm of things' to mean that of commodity culture, where every 'thing' is assigned a fixed value or identity so that true values and meanings are obscured, and the allegorical 'ruins' therefore suggests the negation of this effect. Herein lies the power of allegory from a Marxist point of view. Tambling uses Marx's analogy of a carpenter's table to express this in real terms:

An object such as a table represents a series of dynamic, social and economic relations. At one level, the table is a made object, but its meaning resides in the relations of production involved in its making as a commodity, which are obscured in the object's reified existence.<sup>17</sup>

So, at one level, commodity culture obscures the social relations of an object's production and reduces its social meaning. Specifically, in the example above, the social and economic relations of the table's creation are obscured because of the, often singular and even arbitrary, value that a commodity is given in order to sell it on to a consumer. By contrast, the notion of allegory works against this homogenisation and reification by offering multiple meanings that evade the reduction of an object to a singular value that can easily and readily be consumed. However, as Benjamin attests, 'the devaluation of the world of objects in allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity' and, therefore, 'the refunctioning of allegory in the commodity economy must be presented'.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, because of the all-encompassing nature of the capitalism that operates at the level of the world-system all the way down to the level of a personal relationship, allegorical readings become politically important by resisting the consumerist logic that perpetuates a dehumanised 'world of objects' that conceals the true

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted by Esther Leslie, in *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), p. 199.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> Tambling, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', *New German Critique*, 34 (1985), 32-58 (p. 34 and p. 42).

nature of capitalist social relations. It is to this wider political concern that this chapter responds, by reading Gordimer's short stories for their open-ended and allegorical disruptions to the veneer of capitalist social relations, both within the context of South Africa and the wider world-system.<sup>19</sup>

At this juncture, it is worth addressing Fredric Jameson's famous (or infamous) assertion concerning allegory in his essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (1986), in which he argues that 'all third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as *national allegories*', where even a story of 'private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society'.<sup>20</sup> While Jameson's argument has already been criticised for a perceived Eurocentrism, reductive overgeneralisations about 'third-world' (and, indeed, 'first-world') literature, and an unhelpful air of totality, his assertion regarding the inseparable nature of the private and public realms does offer insight to a more Marxist-inflected allegorical understanding of Gordimer's work.<sup>21</sup> It is the banal, insipid, and all-encompassing nature of the capitalist world-system that demands readings that examine all of its various forms, as Crystal Bartolovich argues:

What distinguishes a specifically Marxist [postcolonial] critique, however, from a more general anticolonialism, is the insistence that cultural analysis *of the everyday* (and the extraordinary alike) is inseparable from questions of political economy, in and outside the metropole, and that the critique of colonialism, and of the social order that has followed formal decolonization, is inextricable from the critique of capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Gordimer's short stories, in their focus on personal relationships and the interplay

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<sup>19</sup> Such disruption is what Benjamin describes as the 'majesty of the allegorical intention: destruction of the organic and living – the extinguishing of appearance', in 'Central Park', p. 41. It is perhaps also worth acknowledging that using Benjamin's discussion of allegory to analyse Gordimer's short stories in this way may be seen as using Benjamin against himself, as his expressed view of the short story in his essay 'The Storyteller' was that it cannot match the narrative multi-layering capabilities of the novel. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83-109 (p. 92).

<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88 (p. 67 and p. 65).

<sup>21</sup> For criticism of Jameson's essay please see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures* (New York: 1992), pp. 95-122; Gayatri Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 312-37.

<sup>22</sup> Crystal Bartolovich, 'Introduction', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-17 (p. 6) [my emphasis].

between public/personal politics, provide an important vehicle for readers to make a cultural analysis of the everyday. As previously discussed, Gordimer herself has asserted the inability to separate public politics from private life in apartheid South Africa. This inevitable connection between the personal and the political informs Jameson's argument that 'third world' literature is an unavoidably political category. As Imre Szeman recognises, allegory thus becomes Jameson's way of developing 'a system by which it might be possible to consider these texts *within* the global economic and political system that produces the third world *as* the third world'.<sup>23</sup> The potential here is that allegorical analysis of texts need not only focus on a strictly national element of allegory but on the world-system itself and in particular on the relationship between periphery and core.

Jameson's emphasis on the agency of 'third-world' literature in offering allegorical critique of the systems in which it is produced is considered particularly appropriate to the short story form by Thomas Palakeel, in his assertion that allegorical readings are more available 'in the short story than in the novel, for the short story is the most energetic literary activity in the Third World which is still alive in the wake of the multinational television culture'.<sup>24</sup> From this point of view, the assertions Jameson and Palakeel make regarding allegory can be associated with Gordimer's own view of the short story as "a fragmented and restless form [...] It is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness".<sup>25</sup> Gordimer's description of the short story as a 'fragmented and restless form' is particularly significant, as it echoes Benjamin's description of 'the destructive tendency of allegory, its emphasis on the fragmentary in the work of art'.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the temporary and transient nature of the short story increases a fragmentary and frame-like tension that speaks allegorically of the "loneliness and isolation of the individual in a competitive society".<sup>27</sup> The connection Gordimer makes between the form of the short story, a focus on personal relationships shaped by competitiveness, and an ability to speak to society as a whole is the context in which I approach the specific allegory of her short stories. In effect, Gordimer's short stories do respond to the social system in which they are produced. Gordimer's emphasis on the personal relationship as a way of speaking to society as a whole, as it manifests in her oeuvre generally, has been observed before. As Head has previously argued, Gordimer's fiction is able to 'investigate

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<sup>23</sup> Imre Szeman, 'Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization', *The South Atlantic Quarterly Review*, 100:3 (2001), 803-827 (p. 806).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Palakeel, 'Third World Short Story as National Allegory?', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 20:1 (1996), 97-102 (p. 98).

<sup>25</sup> Gordimer, *Telling Times*, p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, 'Central Park', p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Gordimer, p. 171.

the public through the private [and] the political ramifications of personal actions'.<sup>28</sup> Clingman also recognised how this relationship between the private and the political responded to South Africa and its historical place within the world: 'Gordimer has, over the period in which she has been writing, also explored a much larger, and changing, world'.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, though, I refer to Gordimer's own words when she emphasises how personal relationships form a root for her project as a writer: "after the war, after the gas-chambers and the appearance of the first mushroom cloud, where was there to turn, in the ruins of institutions and political beliefs, but back to individual personal relationships, to learn again the human A B C?"<sup>30</sup> In this post-war context that Gordimer describes, the short story form offered a mode of expression that was able to respond to the ruins of institutions and political beliefs: "totally contained in the brief time you give to it, [the short story] depends less than the novel upon the classic conditions of middle-class life, and perhaps corresponds to the breakup of middle-class life which is taking place".<sup>31</sup> The short story, as Gordimer wrote in 1968, takes aim at the general crisis of late capitalism and its social relations: "our age is thrashing about desperately for a way out of individual human isolation [and] our present forms are not adequate to it".<sup>32</sup> The faster pace of the short story and the multi-voicedness of a collection therefore offered Gordimer a form more adequate to capturing and finding a way out of these encounters with individual human isolation. The characters and objects stand in for wider political themes and respond to the deeper level of conflict in South Africa and the world-system, over and above the particular event dramatised in a given story. The fragmentation of reality into a collection of short stories responds to the difficulty in conceiving of society in its totality. Gordimer's collections instead offer a social reality that is chaotic and disorderly but, yet, remain specifically and continually defined by the unevenness of apartheid and the commodification of social relations as perpetuated more generally by the capitalist mode of production.

### **'Which New Era Would That Be?'**

Gordimer's description of the 'breakup of middle-class life' in a South Africa defined as a 'sad, confusing part of the world' is treated in much more ambiguous and complicated terms in her short story, 'Which New Era Would That Be?' The story describes a brief

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<sup>28</sup> Head, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Clingman, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Gordimer, 'Notes of an Expropriator', in *Telling Times*, pp. 137-142 (p. 140).

<sup>31</sup> Gordimer, *Telling Times*, p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

encounter in a printing shop owned by the "half Scottish, half African" Jake Alexander, who is drinking with some friends and preparing bacon in a frying pan when a former acquaintance, "young Englishman" Alister Halford, appears for an unannounced visit, bringing with him a young white woman who has not previously been introduced to Jake or his friends.<sup>33</sup> The story therefore offers a scene where black and 'Coloured' friends are awkwardly interrupted by unanticipated white visitors. The awkwardness of the interruption is heightened as the black male characters are referred to only by their first name, while the white woman is continually referred to by her full name, and sometimes by title. The woman fails to recognise the privilege and authority attributed to her in South Africa by virtue of her class and race, in her casual but oblivious declaration that she is the "assistant-director" of a "social rehabilitation scheme". While the remarks are said presumably as an expression of her good deeds, perhaps to ingratiate herself with the black male characters, her passing reference to South Africa's deep-rooted problems with social inequality appears either calculated or careless, and certainly adds a palpable sense of tension to the scene. Her emphasis on social action contrasts starkly with the "huge gold seal ring" that Jake cannot help but notice on her arrival.<sup>34</sup> The "hugeness" of the gold ring conveys, in a word, not only the physical size of the jewellery but the significance of the object as political explanation for the void between the characters in this scene. The characterisation of 'Miss Jennifer Tetzl' offers a more political representation of what Gordimer describes above as "whites in all the stages of [their] understanding and misunderstanding". References to gold in the story begin to operate at the level of allegory for the way in which commodities stand between characters and define the uneven social relations within apartheid South Africa.

The gold ring becomes an extended political metaphor for the systemic and historical capitalist organisation of society that will continue to prevent South Africa from reaching the 'new era' posed as a question in the story's title. While the white woman is keen to stress her commitment to equality, from the philanthropic nature of her work to her accommodation in "Cape Flats [...] a desolate coloured slum in the bush outside Cape Town", her dialogue is as capricious and ostentatious as the gold ring she wears.<sup>35</sup> Her desire to appear knowledgeable actually conveys the limitations of her consciousness and her insensitivity to the history of exploitation in South Africa:

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<sup>33</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Which New Era Would That Be?', in *Life Times: Stories, 1952-2007* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 50-64 (pp. 51-52). [Originally published in *Six Feet of the Country*].

<sup>34</sup> Gordimer, p. 56 and p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Gordimer, p. 55.

The two had entered the building from the street through an archway lettered NEW ERA BUILDING. 'Which new era would that be?' the young woman had wondered aloud, brightly, while they were waiting in the dim hallway for the door to be opened, and Alister Halford had not known whether the reference was to the discovery of deep-level gold mining that had saved Johannesburg from the ephemeral fate of a mining camp in the nineties [...] or to the recovery after the world went off the gold standard in the thirties – really, one had no idea of the age of these buildings in this run-down end of town.<sup>36</sup>

The characters are unable to decipher which 'new era' is being referred to in the name of the building. The question is therefore posed instead to the story's readers through its title. While the white woman's gold ring may imply that the discovery of gold in South Africa by the British signified a prosperous 'new era', the personal relationships in the story implicate the racial-capitalist structure of apartheid that have prevented any fair distribution of South Africa's gold-mining wealth. Indeed, the reference to a "recovery after the world went off the gold standard in the thirties" smoothes over what should be a much more nuanced view of South Africa's place in the world-economy. The country was originally tied to the 1925 British Gold Standard Act but the Wall Street Crash in 1929 led to a decade of severe worldwide economic depression, which eventually precipitated the Second World War, hardly a straightforward 'recovery'. The name of this building in 'the run-down end of town' is therefore an ironic indictment of the failures of both South Africa and the world-system, in which the historical cycles of accumulation may appear to offer 'new eras' but in reality offer working people little material change at all. This contradiction is marked in the underdevelopment of the neighbourhood despite its proximity to the country's largest reserve of gold mines. As an object laden with extended political symbolism, the gold ring can therefore be conceived in the wider systemic and historical formulations available across Gordimer's oeuvre that allow readers to consider the disparities and injustice perpetuated as part of white accumulation in South Africa, while also registering the way in which social relations are obscured in the capitalist reification of objects.

However, rather than making Jennifer Tetzl a simplistic symbol of unequal racial relations, Gordimer complicates the narrative by revealing further on in the story that Jake also owns gold in the form of "one gold-filled tooth".<sup>37</sup> As this gold has been transformed into a body part, Jake's filling emphasises his own complicity and

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<sup>36</sup> Gordimer, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Gordimer, 'Which New Era Would That Be?', p. 58.

capitulation to the structure of society in South Africa, where his possession of gold conflicts with his "deserted" shop in a run-down building that "smelled of dust and rotting wood". Gold becomes not only the symbol of South Africa's great wealth and gross unevenness but, in *Jake*, the story also registers the way that these relations of production are obscured and reified. The extraction of Jake's tooth for an artificial gold filling can be conceived within the historical extraction of gold from South Africa and the harsh, exploitative conditions of South Africa's mining industry. The extent to which social relations in South Africa have become reified is exemplified in the palpable sense of alienation and estrangement at the end of the story, when Alister and Jennifer Tetzl leave, and Jake returns to the backroom of the printing shop: "no one spoke" as he returned to his pan of bacon that had malformed into "curls of meat, now jellied in cold white fat".<sup>38</sup> As "his eye encountered the chair that he had cleared for Jennifer Tetzl to sit on", the story ends abruptly: "suddenly he kicked it, hard, so that it went flying on to its side".<sup>39</sup> His eyes return to the frying pan. The kicked chair becomes a representation of the white woman herself but also displaces the antagonism of South Africa's racial-capitalist social relations. The image of the "jellied fat", as Jake returns to the frying pan, ends the story inconclusively and hints that the characters are trapped in a sort of stasis by their social conditions. The sharp tone of the story and its inconclusive ending convey the connection between allegory and the readerly participation that Gordimer wanted to achieve in her writing. As Gordimer previously discussed in an interview with Diana Loercher:

Had I written say, 'Which New Era Would That Be?' earlier on, I would not have let Jake's turning up the gas and kicking the chair in the end of the story, after Jennifer Tetzl and the journalist have left, speak for itself, but would have explained, emotively, Jake's feelings, something like this: 'He was furious, who on earth did she think she was...' and the story would have lost its impact, which comes from the fact that the reader *himself* makes the judgement.<sup>40</sup>

However, while Gordimer asserts that it is the reader who 'makes the judgement' about what the story is able to say about the unevenness of social relations within the construct of apartheid, it is also the allegorical character of her short stories that makes this process

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<sup>38</sup> Gordimer, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Johannes Riis: Interview with Nadine Gordimer', in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 101-107 (pp. 103-104) [original emphasis].

of judgement much more open-ended. The story's true 'impact' comes from the reader's unrestricted response to the ambiguities Gordimer identifies above and the political meaning that is carried in the precise details associated to the characters and objects. On a literal level, putting the three successive events of this specific short story together, a reader may think Jake kicks the chair because of the inedible bacon that he now has to replace, but reading allegorically allows for a more developed consideration of the story's wider political significance that cannot necessarily be directly exposed at length, which in any case may detract from the story's power in engendering a more critical response from the reader. On a more allegorical level, the way that objects interact as commodities between the characters becomes an instructive part of what the short story can say about racial capitalism: from the economic contradictions represented in the characterisation of Jennifer Tetzl to the uneven exploitation of South Africa's gold. Both characters are recognised through their specific connection to gold, but one is associated openly and ostentatiously in the form of Jennifer's huge gold seal ring while the other is obscured and dehumanised as the gold has been used to replace Jake's teeth. The gold is registered as a form of body malformation, occupying a permanent but liminal state of consumption. In this way, Gordimer is actually able to expand on what Herbert Marcuse says about the primacy of consumerism in capitalist society leading people to 'recognise themselves in their commodities'.<sup>41</sup> It is only through these commodities that the characters are being recognised and have a meaningful relation, in a society where everything has been configured through a racialised, capitalist accumulation. As Jake relights the stove for more bacon at the denouement of the story, the reader is able to consider the role of consumerism and consumption in the obscuration of social relations: he will extinguish a negative social experience by providing more bacon for consumption, despite the crude, disgusting imagery of the 'curls of meat jellied in cold white fat' that connects consumerism with both economic waste and ill health. The physical violence of Jake kicking down the chair is actually matched, symbolically, in the lasting image of him frying bacon, which in its essential form represents the flesh, and death, of another animal. What connects the short story's persistent references to gold with the fried bacon is the apparently indiscriminate but also highly discriminate nature of commodity production under capitalism, most marked in apartheid South Africa by the social conflict that manifests here in relation to gender, race, and class. Every advantage comes at the expense of someone else, from the gold that could symbolically be ripped out of Jake's jaw to craft the jewellery sold to white women, to Jake's own consumption of pigs bred and slaughtered for their flesh. If the short story functions as an allegory of

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<sup>41</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 9.



the unevenness that defines capitalist social relations, then the 'new era' of the story's title can be understood to be rhetorical, as the story instead marks the lateness defining the continued racial and class-based exploitation in post-war South Africa. Thinking about the story more allegorically underlines the extent to which a singular event and handful of characters can in fact be highly political.

### **'The Catch'**

Reading across the swathe of singular events dramatised in Gordimer's short stories, such as the one above, allows for a much wider social commentary on the unevenness of racial capitalism. 'The Catch' presents a young white couple on holiday near Durban who befriend a local Indian fisherman on their daily visit to the beach, but they reify their relation to him as "their Indian". When they encounter the Indian man in a position in which they could help him, without even going out of their own way, his status as an object is unravelled and he becomes humanised in a way that they did not wish to experience. The narrative contrasts their seemingly pleasant interactions on the beach with the story's final scene, in which the couple offer to drive the man home in their car, much to the disgust of their friends. Referred to in the text only by the function of his job, the personal name of the "Indian fisherman" never becomes important to the couple, who objectify his role on the beach. His identity is recognised only through his labour, contrasted with the couple's privileged vacation.<sup>42</sup> For the couple, the shallowness of their interaction with the fisherman allows them to retain their sense of authority in their relation to him: "their you's and he's and I's took on the positiveness of names, and yet seemed to deepen their sense of communication by the fact that they introduced none of the objectivity that names must always bring".<sup>43</sup> The supposed informality of their pronoun usage actually leads the couple to claim ownership of the man, as he quickly becomes appropriated demeaningly as "their Indian".<sup>44</sup> Yet their possessive relation with him remains shallow as he functions in their story as little more than a prop in his status as an object to be associated with their holiday rather than a fully-rounded human being with a life, family and social needs of his own: "they almost forgot he *was* Indian".<sup>45</sup> In this case, the man's "Indianness" is a reminder of a (socially-constructed) difference and inferiority that is always politically present even if it goes unspoken. To be as effective as

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<sup>42</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Catch', in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 13-27 (p. 13).

<sup>43</sup> Gordimer, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Gordimer, p. 14 [original emphasis].

possible as an object in this couple's holiday, the fisherman must lose all sense of his class and racial identity. The fisherman is depersonalised, reduced to nothing but a memento or symbol for the couple's holiday to Durban:

When they went home they might remember the holiday by him as you might remember a particular holiday as the one when you used to play with a spaniel on the beach every day. It would be, *of course*, a nameless spaniel, an ownerless spaniel, an entertaining creature existing nowhere in your life outside that holiday.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the fisherman's presence on the beach represents nothing more than a reified 'thing', of whom they have no understanding as a human being, and to whom their 'deep communication' rather conveys the skewed social relations prevailing under apartheid.

Gordimer unravels the true nature of the couple's "deep communication" with the fisherman in the story's final scene, when the couple are driving with three friends in to Durban city and notice the fisherman at the side of the road struggling to walk home carrying his catch of fish. Although they stop the car to help "their Indian", the wife is immediately embarrassed by his presence in front of their friends and thoughtlessly tells the fisherman that "his big catch is more trouble than it's worth".<sup>47</sup> More trouble than it is worth *for them*, perhaps, but not for him considering that fishing is his livelihood. The viewpoint changes momentarily as the words "fall hard upon" the fisherman, suggesting that he perceived himself to be more than just an object to the couple, when in reality his labour and livelihood are regarded as having no value at all. As Barbara Eckstein notes, the story's 'metaphors of fish' convey 'part of a cycle of eating and being eaten, being washed up or caught'.<sup>48</sup> This extended metaphor takes a Marxist undertone when read allegorically, in connection to my reading above, in relation to issues of consumption and exploitation. As the wife carries on talking to him in an obvious state of anxiousness at the supposed social impropriety of their association, the fisherman repeats her words back to her:

'The catch was more trouble than it was worth,' he said once, shaking his head, and she did not know whether he had just happened to say what she herself had said, or whether he was consciously repeating her words to himself. She felt a

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<sup>46</sup> Gordimer, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Gordimer, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Eckstein, *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 122.

stab of cold uncertainty, as if she herself did not know what she had said, did not know what she had meant, or might have meant. Nobody else talked to the Indian [and] she was furious with them for leaving it all to her.<sup>49</sup>

As the words of the white woman are one of the few pieces of dialogue given to the fisherman, this final scene conveys what Gordimer described above as the layers of miscommunication and misrepresentation that shaped personal relationships under apartheid. The wife appears to have seen the holiday encounter with the man as a one-way transaction, and the symbol of their holiday was now more trouble than it was worth to her. The use of the word 'worth' here is critical, in that she has placed an arbitrary and artificial sense of value on *him* as an object rather than as a human being, what Marx refers to as the confusion of 'material relations between persons and social relations between things'.<sup>50</sup> The woman is uncertain, therefore, because there has been a confusion in their relationship between the apparently innocuous encounters on the beach and their subsequent encounter at night, which becomes immensely troubling for the woman because the material relation she wanted with this object has transformed into a social relation with an actual human being. This subtle shift offers a meaningful reflection on social relationships in apartheid South Africa in this period. The scene is allegorical, therefore, because it is able to raise questions about the way racial-capitalist society is organised in an immensely suggestive but brief encounter between the privileged white holidaymaker in her car and the labouring 'Indian' fisherman walking with his catch. What may appear to be a trivial and inconsequential encounter actually reverberates for the way society is structured as a whole — that, in fact, is 'the catch' of the story. Or, from the fisherman's unspoken perspective, all that glisters is not gold: despite and perhaps because of the woman's privilege she is unable to understand the fisherman and see him as anything more than an object. The fisherman's remark suddenly makes her uncertain, therefore, because it may be an innocent act of repetition but it might also be a challenge loaded with meanings of resentment and hostility. Who has been caught? Who is causing trouble? What kinds of trouble are being announced? What kinds of worth or value are being pointed to and contested in a society where even seemingly innocent and pleasurable holiday interactions are mediated by the exploitative relations of production demanded by a racist system of accumulation? The woman certainly does not have the answer but these are questions asked of the story's readers.

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<sup>49</sup> Gordimer, 'The Catch', pp. 26-27.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Vol. 1)*, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1909), p. 84.

In this allegorical sense, the story dramatises how an unequal relationship between individuals divided by class and race bestows symbolic meanings that become completely reified, giving only the appearance of genuine relations. By the end of the short story, the couple cannot wait to be rid of the Indian man after having given him a lift in their car:

'I must thank you very much,' he kept saying seriously. 'I must thank you.'  
'That's all right,' the husband smiled, starting the car with a roar. The Indian was saying something else, but the revving of the engine drowned it. [...] And as if her words had touched some chord of hysteria in them all, they began to laugh, and she laughed with them, laughed till she cried.<sup>51</sup>

The Indian man's dialogue is unheard, just as his identity and livelihood were completely negated. Is it the voice or the man himself that is being referred to when the narrator describes how "the revving of the engine drowned it"? The man has, quite possibly, become so dehumanised that he is no longer thought of as a person at all – drowned indeed by the racial politics of the encounter. The Indian man's repetition of the word "must" when he says thank you is a subtle reminder of a system that brutally divides people by arbitrary racial and class status; instructing you to know your betters and make way for them. The final image of whites laughing at an Indian man offers a brutal indictment of this system. However, this indictment is twisted with poignancy in the image of the woman's laughter giving way to tears, suggesting that while she knows that she does not have answers to the questions posed by the encounter, there is an internal sense of longing for a less shameful story.

### **'The Train from Rhodesia'**

The reification of individual relationships presented in 'The Catch' is further extended and dramatised in 'The Train from Rhodesia', which presents a white couple returning from a holiday in South Africa to their home in the former British colony of Rhodesia (now known as Zimbabwe). As the train makes a stop at an isolated, disused train platform, the couple haggle with an old man who is selling wooden animals but is wearing nothing but a "piece of old rug".<sup>52</sup> The woman initially plans to buy a carved wooden lion from the old man but decides that his price is too expensive, "retreating to her compartment"

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<sup>51</sup> Gordimer, p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> Gordimer, 'The Train From Rhodesia', in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, pp. 47-53 (p. 48).

disturbed that he had become "part of the holiday".<sup>53</sup> As she dwells on this encounter, her partner returns to the compartment laughing and announces that: "I was arguing with the [old man] for fun, bargaining – when the train pulled out already, he came tearing after...One-and-six Baas! So there's your lion".<sup>54</sup> The dialogue is fast-paced, which creates a sense of uncertainty as to what transpired, particularly as the woman's initial response is to say "how could you?"<sup>55</sup> While her subsequent criticism of her husband may explain her annoyance at the plot, this does not answer the broader political sense of the initial question: "why didn't you take it decently [...] why did you have to wait for him to run after the train".<sup>56</sup> *How* and why the husband would behave in such a callous and exploitative way is the more important question raised in the story but which remains unanswered for the reader. Rereading the story allegorically, in order to find a possible answer to this question, one might point to the destructive disassociation of commodities from the relations of their production, even when coming face to face with an ostensibly poor and decrepit old man. As the old man is much more desperate to make the transaction, his poverty reinforces not only the vacuous nature of a 'holiday' to South Africa's "strange places" but also the vacuousness of white commodity culture more generally. As Michael Wade observed in his analysis of the story, there is 'no real communication, and the ground is not really neutral, for the artist must submit his work to the necessity imposed on him by the alien values by which he has to live – or starve'.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, the 'necessity imposed on' the old man can be read as an allegorical representation of a much larger core-periphery set of relationships determined elsewhere and historically. No such necessity exists but it is the way that society has been historically organised and divided in South Africa that has led to this particular encounter and this man's particular position. His age and destitution is emblematic of the much longer history of colonialism and racial exploitation in South Africa that has precipitated the institutionalisation of racial capitalism. From this point of view, the train itself becomes representative of the unequal flow of capital; the train, and its passengers, act as an allegorical dramatisation of capitalist technology and wealth leaving behind the inertia and isolation of a provincial platform and indigenous population.<sup>58</sup>

That the wooden lion is left discarded "on its side in the corner" of the couple's compartment only reinforces the sense of petty materialism really at stake in the story.

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<sup>53</sup> Gordimer, p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Gordimer, p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Gordimer, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> Wade, p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

The ornate features sculpted into the wooden lion to give it life contrast with the man's deprivation: "heraldic, black and white, with impressionistic detail burnt in" with a piece of fur around the neck to give the illusion of "a real mane, majestic, telling you somehow that the artist had delight" in making it. There is a contradiction between the man's artistry and his poverty, particularly as the sales he appears to rely on will be entirely dependent on passing trains. The lion may also be read as a representation of the old man's pride, as the woman imagines the carved lions grappling "with strange, thin, elongated warriors who clutched spears". The woman is able to recognise that this man, perhaps because of his artistry, has a sense of dignity, despite his obvious poverty and the cruel bartering of the train's passengers who can effectively hold his life and livelihood to ransom. Just as the lion is left discarded in the corner, so too is the old man left behind by the forward motion of the train. The woman's sense of "shame" in the South African "heat" is counterposed against the ominous conclusion to the story, as the train leaves the platform having "cast the station like a skin [...] The train called out, along the sky; but there was no answer".<sup>59</sup> The people on the platform are defined by their poverty. They are dependent on people for whom they are nothing more than a last bit "of fun" on a half-way pit-stop home at the end of a holiday. The train will go back to Rhodesia but those on the platform remain trapped as static objects within the ongoing interregnum of apartheid.

The train is another example in Gordimer's work of an image that alludes allegorically to the flow of capital out of South Africa the core of the world-system. The specific forms of movement that the passengers use on their journeys (whether by train in 'The Train from Rhodesia', or by car in 'The Catch') also speak to a certain kind of exclusive faster pace of progress only available to those who can afford it. The distinctions between the journeys being made in the narratives speak to the unfulfilling nature of 'growth' and 'progress' in capitalist society, for those with privilege able to use the train and car for personal gain, and those left either on the platform or at the side of the road, witnessing the growth and progress of an economic system supported by their labour. The short stories therefore capture Gordimer's concern with uneven development, in the wider allegorical meanings available in the personal and physical journeys taking place in her short stories.

### **'The Defeated'**

The allegorical function of movement within Gordimer's oeuvre can also be explored in

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<sup>59</sup> Gordimer, 'The Train From Rhodesia', p. 53.

the narrative of the unnamed narrator in 'The Defeated', which involves both a physical journey around the narrator's home in a mining town and a personal journey as she finishes her schooling and leaves for university only to return at the behest of her parents to work as a shopkeeper in their family-run store. The narrative, therefore, offers multiple meanings of impeded development in her narrative's sensitivity to the commercial role of her parents' shop in the mining town, to which she returns despite an implicit desire to use her university education to find a job that enables her to work for social good.

By contrast, the narrator's story is dominated by a preoccupation with the presumed success of her friend, Miriam Saiyetovitz, whose parents are also shopkeepers. Miriam relied on parental support to fund her university education in Johannesburg, which is described as a "hard struggle for the Saiyetovitzes", but Miriam does not return to the mining town, using the "profit" of "independence" instead to settle in the city and marry a doctor.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the narrator prioritises her family and home, Miriam disregards her studies and her family and friends are left "forgotten".<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the narrator also loses contact with Miriam and so the "profit" of "independence" can be read as part of what Gordimer refers to above as the "break-up of middle class life", as South Africa becomes shaped by the primacy of consumerism and white accumulation. As Miriam drops contact with her parents after marrying a doctor, the suggestion is that her secured access to wealth and privilege negates the role of her parents, who only prioritised their relationship to their daughter in relation to money. The contrast between the narrator's story and Miriam's story emphasises a reification of personal relationships that Gordimer was firmly opposed to: "During the 1950s, we believed very strongly in the personal relationship [...] acknowledging all of us as individuals: the Forsterian 'only connect' lay behind what we did and believed in".<sup>62</sup> The narrative therefore allows readers to consider how personal relationships have been diminished by consumer capitalism and social relations that are centred on individual accumulation. In this way, the narrator's reflection on her education allows readers to make a critique of society's ordering around economic roles: "fitting" young people, almost factory-like, only with what was required to fulfil certain positions: "good school-teachers, secretaries, organizers; we did everything well, nothing badly, and nothing remarkably".<sup>63</sup> The narrator's comment that "to the Saiyetovitzes, Miriam's brain blazed like the sun" allows the reader to understand why her parents struggled for the sake of their daughter, even

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<sup>60</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Defeated', in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, pp. 174-190 (p. 185 and p. 187).

<sup>61</sup> Gordimer, p. 189.

<sup>62</sup> Johannes Riis, 'Nadine Gordimer', *Kunapipi*, 2:1 (1980), 20-26 (p. 21).

<sup>63</sup> Gordimer, p. 184.

though Miriam herself "didn't worry about it" and took for granted that they would "find the money".<sup>64</sup> The disconnect here is that Miriam had been "fined down into a lady" by her parents to the extent that their concession store becomes nothing more than "the backwater of the small town".<sup>65</sup> By abandoning the mining town, the narrator becomes more introspective in her return home without her closest childhood friend: "it was the same as ever, only dirtier, smaller, more chipped and smeared".<sup>66</sup> The image created here is of something hollowed out, drawing a link between the social break-up taking place and the degradation referred to by the narrator. Rather than educating successive generations to be social and moral citizens of a community, the suggestion here may be that an education tied purely to economic purpose, in a world of shop-keepers, has self-defeated the construct of the family. The narrator may therefore be realising that meaningful social relations are being destroyed by the very pursuit of wealth encouraged by their parents and the education system.

Miriam's characterisation therefore allows readers to consider a more systemic view of South Africa, in her choice to reside in Johannesburg rather than return to live near her parents in a town with ostensibly little prospects on the periphery of the country's economic centre. Miriam's permanent relocation to Johannesburg marks the extraction and flow of capital in South Africa to the cities as places of "luxury" for white people living in "ten-thousand-pound houses".<sup>67</sup> The social break-up registered by the personal relationships dramatised in 'The Defeated' is emphasised in the final appearance of Miriam at the end of the narrative, in the form of a photograph sent in the post. The framed studio portrait of "Miri's little boy and his mother" becomes a fetishised object for the parents who have nothing else of their daughter and have not yet met their grandson. There is a bitter irony in the detail provided by the narrator that, in the photograph, Miriam had one hand visibly laying "on the child's shoulder, a smooth hand, wearing large plain, expensive diamond rings".<sup>68</sup> The rings therefore become the only connection back to her home in its role as a mining town. Miriam's hand is "smooth" and adorned with diamonds, in stark contrast to the "dirty, small, chipped, and smeared" reality of life in the Witwatersrand. As Miriam has multiple "diamond rings" despite only having one hand visible in the photograph only serves to exacerbate the bizarre nature of commodity culture in such an unnecessarily lavish display of wealth in a photograph meant for

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<sup>64</sup> Gordimer, p. 184 and p. 185.

<sup>65</sup> Gordimer, p. 186 and p. 187.

<sup>66</sup> Gordimer, p. 188.

<sup>67</sup> Gordimer, p. 187.

<sup>68</sup> Gordimer, p. 189.



family. Clingman has reflected on this image as a direct sense of familial betrayal.<sup>69</sup> The staged nature of the portrait also makes the presentation seem ostentatious and insincere: an additional layer of fiction within the fiction of the story.

Taking the story's multi-layered capacity one step further, Miriam's adornment with jewellery offers a subtle reminder of her home in the mining town that she has abandoned in favour of the city. Bernard Magubane described this social breakdown as symptomatic of the 'tyranny of the gold industry' and its model of development, which has 'determined not only the political economy [but] the social structure as well'.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the 'defeated' of the title may not only signify the family left behind but all those exploited, dehumanised, and discarded as part of South Africa's core-periphery relations. The allegorical nature of the personal and physical journeys made in 'The Defeated' therefore offer a parallel to the analysis I have already made of Gordimer's first novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, in which both narrators move between 'Mine' and 'City', mapping more expansively the themes that Gordimer continued to explore in her short stories.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to conceptualise the focus on personal relationships in Gordimer's short stories as an extended form of allegory that registers the wider conflict taking place at the level of society, as a result of South Africa's racial-capitalist social relations. I have endeavoured to explore not only Gordimer's versatility as a writer but also the capacity of her short stories to dramatise the relation between South Africa's social problems and the country's historic and systemic position within global capitalism. Gordimer's short stories provide a means of exploring the alienated and fragmented social relations inherent to South African capitalism in the period. The fragmented nature of short story writing offered Gordimer a form that allowed her to capture many voices, dislocated across multiple narratives. As I explored further in my examination of her novella, *The Late Bourgeois World*, Gordimer's combination of theme and literary techniques in this way allow readers to consider the fragmentary existence, impeded progress, and unavailable futures tied to the uneven development of capitalism in South Africa and the world-system. Gordimer's short stories therefore offer an important counterpoint to her longer works of fiction. Indeed, Gordimer's prodigious oeuvre

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<sup>69</sup> Clingman, p. 23.

<sup>70</sup> Bernard Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 116.

testifies to the significance of this connection, as her fifteen novels were each published at an average separation of three years, interspersed with the writing and publication of twenty one distinct short story collections. Gordimer alternated between these two forms fairly consistently, with one or two short story collections appearing in between the publication of each of her novels, with the only exception being the back-to-back publication of novels *The House Gun* in 1998 and *The Pickup* in 2001. It is the specific form of the short stories, particularly the way in which they treat the racial and class divisions of apartheid South Africa in discrete and intimate contexts, which makes them so effective at presenting the country's social problems as issues of personal conscience rather than as some abstract and immovable socio-economic boundary.

Gordimer's alternation between writing novels and short stories was previously noted by Wade, who commented that her 'novels are published after intervals during which she usually rehearses themes and preoccupations in a volume or two of the less extended form'.<sup>71</sup> However, I would disagree with Wade in his view that the short story is a 'rehearsal' of themes, because the short stories are significant in their own right, as an important aspect of Gordimer's literary technique and her experimentation with different forms to engage her readership. This is why it is such a shame that so many critics have bypassed Gordimer's short stories, perhaps following Wade's example of considering the short stories only if they contain 'specific relevance to an issue arising out of our discussion of the novels'.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, I would agree with Head that:

The extension of narrative possibilities in Gordimer's work, in fact, is a crucial aspect of her quest for a literary form appropriate to her situation, because the cultivation of narrative relativity, of a plurality of voices, is a way of conveying the complexity of the historical situation [...] It is also a way of deconstructing the authoritative monologic perspective sometimes associated with colonial literature.<sup>73</sup>

What we see from a consideration of Gordimer's short stories is that her engagement with this form, as in her engagement with many other forms, offers an attempt to conceive and convey the complexity of South Africa's historical situation in relation to racial capitalism and the world-system. Allegory therefore captures this particular theme that preoccupies so much of Gordimer's output, which she herself articulated in her interview

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<sup>71</sup> Wade, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Wade, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Head, pp. 16-17

with Andrew Salkey, where she reflected on her project as a writer:

This is a theory I have about most writers, not only about myself. I think that in effect we all write one book, but we write it piecemeal and often from very different points of view throughout our lives. You move on, you change, and your writing changes with this advancement.<sup>74</sup>

Rethinking Gordimer's short stories as a series of allegories that are, in their wider political frame of reference, in communication with and expand on the world that is dramatised in the narratives of her longer works allows us to better understand Gordimer's definition of her oeuvre as 'one book' with many fragmented and 'different points of view'. As such, my reading here returns me to the key claim I made in relation to Gordimer's specific sense of social responsibility as a writer who wishes to raise the consciousness of white people who had not woken up to the country's social injustice.

Gordimer's short stories and novels work together by challenging readers through a multiplicity of forms and meanings to think through apartheid South Africa and its place within the totality of the capitalist world-system. As Gordimer wrote in her introduction to her *Selected Short Stories*: "some stories I have gone writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them; because I hoped to make the revelation of new perceptions through the different techniques these demanded".<sup>75</sup> In this way, Gordimer's concern with her own kind of formal experimentation is exactly what allows her oeuvre to have any attempt at meaningful forms of social change. Revolutionary art, as Benjamin argued, is 'directly concerned with literary technique. By mentioning technique I have named the concept which makes literary products accessible to immediate social, and therefore materialist, analysis'.<sup>76</sup> Gordimer's commitment to social progress can be understood in her 'progressive development of literary technique'.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gordimer, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 85-104 (p. 87).

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, p. 88.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to resituate the importance of Nadine Gordimer's oeuvre. It was undertaken both as a response to declining critical engagement in relation to Gordimer's work and in order to take issue with an incomplete and therefore misleading critical orthodoxy. This orthodoxy, perhaps inadvertently, has appeared to set Gordimer up as a reporter on South African history. The most notable and influential study of Gordimer's work has been that of Stephen Clingman, who reads Gordimer's fiction as a series of realist reflections on the country's specific history of racial segregation. By contrast, this thesis has considered how the content *and* form of Gordimer's work allow readers to conceive of apartheid not simply as a system of racial segregation but as a form of 'racial capitalism'. I have approached Gordimer's writing from a Marxist perspective, examining how her work invites critique of apartheid as a specific manifestation of economic domination within the wider capitalist world-system. Above all, I have emphasised the formal versatility of Gordimer's writing as a novelist in order to explore the variety of ways in which her work encourages readers to consider the recent history of South Africa in its complex relation to world capitalism.

This thesis has offered an extended analysis of Gordimer's apartheid writing as a broadly Marxist exploration of South Africa, founded on Gordimer's own sense of social responsibility as a writer and her awareness that the racial divisions in South Africa were economically driven. I have therefore considered how the forms of Gordimer's fiction respond to apartheid as a specifically racialised form of capitalism. As I have stressed throughout, this task has been undertaken in order to complement as well as augment existing critical approaches to Gordimer's work. My readings have shown how Gordimer's fiction raises questions about the representability of capitalism and about the extent to which Marxist concepts of uneven development, the lateness of so-called late capitalism, structural violence, and revolution can be applied in the context of South Africa.

As the introduction to this thesis demonstrated, criticism of Gordimer's oeuvre peaked in the early 1990s. Her work no longer receives anything close to that former level of critical attention. More problematically, readings of Gordimer's work cultivated a distorting critical orthodoxy that has viewed her writing too narrowly as a source of historical consciousness of apartheid and therefore an essentially realist endeavour. Gordimer's receipt of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, so closely followed by the official end of apartheid in 1994, seems to have indicated that her project as a writer was complete. In turn, critics moved on and Gordimer appeared to have lost her place in the

postcolonial canon. By contrast, the research conducted in this thesis has sought to demonstrate that Gordimer is a writer whose work remains ripe for discussion, through a broader appreciation of both her formal versatility as a novelist and the ways in which her work illuminates Marxist theories of capitalism in relation to South Africa and the capitalist world-system. The enduring relevance of an extensive oeuvre such as Gordimer's is captured well in the call from Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly 'to tell the underside of apartheid history, and to outline its implications for the present and future'.<sup>1</sup> As Attridge and Jolly argue, the 'specifics of the South African situation' offer an important resource for the 'postcolonial world'.<sup>2</sup> As I have demonstrated, the specifics of the South African situation also offer an important resource for a post-capitalist world.

The openness of Gordimer's writing to new readings, and the applicability of apartheid history to analyses of the present and future, underline why Gordimer should remain an important figure within the postcolonial canon. Attridge also places particular stress on literature's susceptibility to, and even its active solicitation of, new readings over time. He describes 'the way in which a literary work can speak powerfully and immediately to us from across centuries or across cultures [...] not as a matter of closure but as one of openness. The literary work is singular not because it is locked in a historical safe whose combination we can never be sure of finding but because it changes every time it is read'.<sup>3</sup> As with Attridge's measure of a text's openness, the chapters in this thesis have posited new readings of Gordimer's work outside of the historical realist critical orthodoxy foregrounded in the introduction. Rather than viewing the literary work as a constative and 'static object, transcending time, permanently available for our inspection', Attridge advises us to appreciate the fact that 'a defining characteristic of literature is that it remains open to reinterpretation'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the starting point for this project was my belief that criticism of Gordimer's work had not sufficiently developed beyond the identity politics of race and gender. While Clingman, the leading critic of Gordimer's work, has contributed detailed and insightful readings of her apartheid writing, I found that his predominant focus on the racial context of apartheid did not quite capture the complexity or scale of the social, economic, and political contexts dramatised by Gordimer's works. As such, my project has explored the ways in which Gordimer's work was concerned with the simultaneity of apartheid's economic and racial origins, starting with the rise of Afrikanerdom and the post-war emergence of an American-led

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. xxii.

<sup>4</sup> Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 82 and p. 85.

world-economy in the global dispensation after 1945. My readings follow Gordimer's own work in viewing South African apartheid as a form of racial capitalism situated within the global capitalist system of which apartheid was a corollary.

Resituating the value of Gordimer's work by focusing attention on its representations of capitalism is a task that seeks to extend the way in which Gordimer's readers think critically about the development of apartheid within the context of the capitalist world-economy. Rather than treating apartheid in South Africa as an isolated and exceptional case, readers will do well to remember the world-encircling nature of capitalism and situate the abuses of apartheid within the capitalist economic paradigm of exploitation. Key to this understanding is the way that Gordimer's work finds ways of involving and inciting her readers, with the use of various techniques that engage and compel readers to consider and question the worlds of exploitation explored by her texts. Propelled by her sense of social responsibility as a writer, Gordimer's literary techniques enabled her to use the form of the novel, novella, and short story as specific modes of resistance to and dissent against apartheid. As explored in this thesis, Gordimer's form of dissent was enacted through the modes of expression in her writing. Specifically, I have considered why Gordimer's texts can be seen to dramatise apartheid as a form of racial capitalism through an engagement with how her particular modes of expression *represent* capitalism. In the course of this study, I have tried to place as much emphasis on the 'formal' features and attributes of Gordimer's fiction as I have on its 'content', precisely in order to understand why her narratives are told in varying and particular ways. I wanted to consider *what* they mean by delineating *how* they mean. Gordimer's frequent use of privileged white narrators in settings of obvious economic unevenness, for example, allows readers to consider the centrality of capitalism to the apartheid project. The class-based characterisations of Gordimer's narrators allow readers to conceive of apartheid in economic as well as racial terms. Point of view therefore functions to take readers beyond the racial guise of apartheid in order to expose how racism and racial stratification were tools of capitalist accumulation in South Africa.

My method of selecting texts was aimed at illustrating the formal versatility of Gordimer's writing as a response to the larger social, political, and economic contexts that I have sought to investigate. As such, I have covered a wide range of Gordimer's writing during apartheid, addressing works both closely at the specific levels of their formal features and styles and more expansively at the level of the larger contexts from which they emerge and that they endeavour to elucidate. The analysis of Gordimer's oeuvre was also done chronologically in order to best appreciate her development as a writer in relation to apartheid and how her writing can be understood as a broadly

Marxist exploration of South Africa. Gordimer's fiction remains so compelling because of the forms she used to dramatise life in South Africa. As Ben Okri has said, 'people think it is content which endures; but it is form which enables content to endure'.<sup>5</sup> More simply, form functions as narrative method.

Chapter 1 examined Gordimer's first two novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, in order to consider how these texts offer a response to the difficulty of representing capitalism. I argued that the structure of the texts offer a 'cognitive mapping' of South Africa's place within the world-system. The narratives map movements between Europe and Africa, across various South African cities, and in the country's rural locations and mining towns. Gordimer does not offer a report on South Africa in the 1950s through historical realist narrators but the forms of the narratives allow readers to consider South Africa's historical position as an international nexus within the world-system.

Chapter 2 examined how *The Late Bourgeois World* allows readers to understand that the supposedly 'seperate development' of apartheid was really a matter of grossly 'uneven development' within an exploitative system of accumulation. By focusing on the text's dramatisation of a bourgeois white woman who becomes increasingly alienated from South Africa's bourgeois class, I considered the increasingly fragmented form of the text as a response to the 'lateness' of capitalism, as a morally objectionable and obsolete system.

Chapter 3 explored the association between capitalism and 'structural violence' in *The Conservationist* in order to conceptualise violence not only as a form of physical assault but as a form of social injustice perpetuated by the systems, processes, and practices of an entire social and economic order. The novel's form articulates and makes visible the systematic suffering produced by capitalism as an economic system through the characterisation of a wealthy white capitalist as a narrator, who has repeated but entirely unsympathetic interactions with other subjects and who appears unable to grasp the apparent social injustice of apartheid. The novel's representations of social injustice are treated in the language, tone, and voice of the narrator as a matter of course and therefore of little consequence. Form therefore functions to communicate a blindness and self-centredness that allow for the continued justification of the gross structural unevenness of apartheid. At the same time, the novel also offers points of view of black workers on the narrator's estate, including another textual source that acts as the voice of a dead black man who was found and then unceremoniously buried there. The complicated structure of the text therefore functions to underline the entrenched patterns

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Okri, *A Time for New Dreams* (London: Rider, 2011), p. 125.

of violence structured into South Africa's racial-capitalist order and the wider world-system in which apartheid functioned.

Chapter 4 examined a selection of Gordimer's short stories in order to consider how they operate collectively as an allegory to convey the destructive capacity of racial capitalism, particularly on personal relationships, within the confines of the capitalist world-system. Reading the narratives of her short stories as an ongoing process of disruptive fragmentation, I refocused critical attention on the formal capacity of Gordimer's shorter fiction to communicate her defining political concern with social consciousness.

Gordimer's formal experimentation is what allowed her to respond as a writer to the political, social, and economic inequalities of life in South Africa. Gordimer's project as a writer was informed by her steadfast belief in the power of fiction to raise consciousness. For Gordimer, reading was not a simple act but a revolutionary act of participation, what Shameem Black refers to as 'the potential for novels to spark reflection on social norms and ethical values' by imagining and understanding the lives of others.<sup>6</sup> Critics of Gordimer have also recognised this potential in Gordimer's oeuvre: Clingman on the specific characterisations of race in her writing and South Africa's history of racial division under apartheid; Newman on the feminist positions available in Gordimer's writing as part of a challenge to European social norms that limited the place of women in South African society; Head on the increasing 'literariness' of Gordimer's work and the politics of her textuality. The revolutionary act of Gordimer's writing is its capacity to help readers question dominant modes of thinking, in relation to race, gender, and politics, but also in relation to the divisive, uneven, violent, and exploitative conditions of capitalism both in the context of South Africa and the wider world-system.

As I see it, Gordimer's works do not simply make social observations but socialist observations, guided by her own vision for a more egalitarian future, which she herself has called the world's "socialist horizon". Gordimer's sense of social responsibility as a writer determines her concern with raising the consciousness of her readership and with encouraging a more socialist consciousness. This thesis has shown that an extended Marxist reading of Gordimer's work offers the opportunity to consider how her fiction engages in and works to encourage a form of praxis aimed at social progress. I have not merely sought to reconsider the formal versatility of Gordimer as a writer but to understand how the very forms of her fiction illuminate Marxist concepts of uneven development, lateness, structural violence, and revolution both in the context of South

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<sup>6</sup> Shameem Black, *Fiction Across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in late Twentieth-Century Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 250.



Africa and the wider capitalist world-system. It will therefore be interesting and productive for future research to consider the ways in which Gordimer's post-apartheid writing continues to think about South Africa in the larger context of the capitalist world-system, particularly in relation to ongoing concerns about economic reforms following the national revolution heralded by the official end of apartheid in 1994. As demonstrated most forcefully in Gordimer's eighth novel, *July's People*, 'post-apartheid' freedoms do not necessarily imply a freedom from capitalism.

The complexity of Gordimer's writing during apartheid also speaks to the complicated formations of apartheid as a political and social construct in South Africa. Apartheid, over the course of 46 years, was by no means a static construct. Gordimer's writing allows us to view apartheid as a socially unstable and politically unsettled period of transitions, constantly changing in response to internal and external pressures. By selecting works from each era of apartheid, I have found in writing this thesis that Gordimer is a highly effective writer of such transitions, both in relation to the historical specificity of apartheid and the wider ideological totality of the world-system. The variability of meanings available in her writings, the contradictions and the competing voices, communicate her works' sensitivity to the uncertainty, instability and impermanence of the capitalist model. Capitalism as a world-system has always been in a state of transition, as it continually expands in search of accumulation and revolutionises its modes of production. Transitions within South Africa and the world-system, both actual and imagined, emphasise the nature of Gordimer's 'interregnum' and the world's 'socialist horizon' as a continually postponed/deferred revolution. The frustrated ambition of this socialist horizon is crucially important in defining Gordimer's political voice. Gordimer's writings demonstrate the radicalism of her voice, in communicating this ongoing concern with the socio-economic inequality that defined apartheid and continues to define the post-apartheid. In this way, the act of writing itself was Gordimer's form of activism, and her message remains active in the writings she has left to readers. Likewise, Gordimer made her view clear that acts of writing are only as powerful as concomitant acts of literary reading. Criticism and engagement are forms of activism. Beyond resituating Gordimer's formal complexity as a writer, this thesis remembers Gordimer for her insistence on the power of storytelling and her inexhaustible hope and vision that humanity will achieve a greater potential based on the common good.

## South Africa Then and Now

Gordimer was writing for a South African future that did not look exactly like the country's past. Yet the concerns dramatised in Gordimer's fiction are concerns that are still commonly faced by people today in South Africa and, indeed, across the world. South African politics remain fraught with the ongoing splits in the African National Congress (ANC), from the recent crisis of confidence in Jacob Zuma to the acrimonious departure of Julius Malema and the flagrant incitements of violence by his new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters. Violence against the Other is now perpetuated both against whites and blacks in post-apartheid South Africa, most notably in the xenophobic attacks in 2008 against Zimbabwean refugees fleeing from the persecution and poverty of Robert Mugabe's regime, and the Marikana massacre in 2012. The depth of social and economic crises facing South Africa have resurfaced as this thesis was being written, with open criticism of the ANC seemingly more acceptable following the death of Nelson Mandela in 2013. Public mourning for the great leader's passing was combined with the quite public criticism of Zuma, who was booed while giving a reception at the Mandela Memorial in Johannesburg. It is therefore worth remembering that a post-apartheid transformation must overcome both 300 years of colonial legacy and an ongoing indebtedness to a grossly uneven world-system. The arguments put forward in this thesis show why it is imperative to take a much wider historical and systemic view of South Africa's development. Gordimer's writing allows readers to consider the ongoing problems associated with wanton capitalist accumulation. In this way, Gordimer's writing allows us to better position the history of South Africa in relation to what Neil Lazarus has recently called the "long and as yet unbroken history [...] of a specifically capitalist imperialism and the counter-history of resistance to it".<sup>7</sup>

The vision, shared by Mandela and Gordimer, of an egalitarian South Africa, looks ever more precarious with the ANC's embattled position in government and mass allegations of state capture and corruption. Yet, in the words of Gordimer herself, "there is no forgetting how we could live, if only we could find the way".<sup>8</sup> The official end of apartheid is marked annually on 27 April by a public holiday known as Freedom Day, which commemorates the date of South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 and the promise of a more egalitarian future. Through the connections made in this research, this thesis hopes to contribute in some small capacity to realising and achieving the

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<sup>7</sup> Neil Lazarus, "'Third Worldism' and the Political Imaginary of Postcolonial Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 324-339 (p. 337).

<sup>8</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times*, p. 396.

aspirations that informed Gordimer's politics and writing. To those who would consider such motivations for the common good as naive or lofty, I would only refer them back to Nadine Gordimer, with words from her ninth novel, *A Sport of Nature*, reminding us that while "Utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it [...] you can never hope even to fall far short!"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 217.

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