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AFRICAN VISIONS

Literary Images, Political Change,
and Social Struggle
in Contemporary Africa

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and Joseph McLaren

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White Women, Black Revolutionaries: Sex and Politics in Four Novels by Nadine Gordimer

Nancy Topping Bazin

As early as 1959, the white South African novelist, essayist, and short story writer Nadine Gordimer wrote an essay, "Where Do Whites Fit In?" As the black struggle for power intensified and finally achieved its primary goal of black majority rule in 1994, Gordimer continued to reflect upon this question. Her eighth novel, *July's People* (1981), is a psychological and political fable. It celebrates a white woman's readiness to reject the relationships and privileges that bind her to the white world and her readiness to embrace the new South Africa of an emancipated black majority. The novels written before *July's People* focus primarily on a movement away from the remnants of colonial mentality harbored within the white world; the three novels following *July's People* emphasize a radical commitment to the black-dominated social order of the future. *July's People* and nine screenplay versions of the novel (1982–1987) are central to understanding the philosophy that underlies her three later novels—*A Sport of Nature* (1987), *My Son's Story* (1990), and *None to Accompany Me* (1994). Along with the novel and screenplays of *July's People*, these three novels envision possible answers to the question, "Where do whites fit in, in the New Africa?" (Gordimer, "Where Do Whites" 31).

Gordimer pointed out that "belonging to a society implies two factors which are outside reason: The desire to belong . . . and acceptance" ("Where Do Whites" 32). What must white South Africans do to prove themselves worthy of black acceptance? What can possibly persuade blacks to accept whites when "they have had so much of us . . . that all they crave is to have no part of us"? (32). In Gordimer's fictional world, black male leaders are more likely to accept a white woman than a white man. As the power begins to shift among whites and blacks, white females and black males move closer to becoming equals. On the hierarchical ladder, they are the middle levels between white men at the top and black women at the bottom. Furthermore, between white females

and black males, sexual attraction, intellectual companionship, and the male's tendency to protect the female can create a bridge. Certainly, in the four novels published between 1981 and 1994, Gordimer's female protagonists look to black males, initially, to gain a sense of belonging and, later, to make possible a sense of independence, rooted in that assurance of belonging. The persistence of this concern with fitting in suggests an increasing preoccupation with personal and political survival as black liberation becomes a reality. Having fought for decades for equality and against apartheid and censorship Gordimer wants blacks to allow whites like her a role in the building of post revolutionary South Africa. She experiments in her fiction with ways that a white female, in particular, might gain this right to participate.

Just after publishing *July's People*, Gordimer wrote an essay, "Living in the Interregnum." In it, she compared the current situation in South Africa to living on a slag heap that, still burning inside, threatens to maim or kill (280). In an earlier essay, she recalls the childhood "thrill of running quickly across a pile of black dust that may at any moment cave in and plunge the adventurer into a bed of incandescent coals" ("South African" 123). The image becomes more powerful when she describes a little girl she knew who had "sunk thigh-deep in living coals and hot ashes" and had been "horribly burned." Despite having seen "the tight-puckered skin of her calves, and the still tighter skin of her hands, which drew up her fingers like claws" (123), Gordimer continued to play on the slag heaps. Moreover, she admired her cousin Roy, who one day "rode a bicycle right to the top of the dump and down the other side, triumphant and unharmed" (123).

So when she describes the period during which she wrote *July's People* as "a place of shifting ground" ("Living" 280) and when she speaks of heroes who take risks, those potent images of the slag heap and her cousin's life-threatening ride come to mind. Her intense admiration for revolutionary heroes is implicit in her later fiction and explicit in her interviews (Bazin and Seymour 121; Gerrard). Although Gordimer says she is not brave enough to be a hero herself, she does take risks (Bazin and Seymour 206). Not surprising, Roland Joffe from Warner Brothers encouraged her to put into her movie of *July's People* "the streak of wildness and adventure I sensed in you as we careered about Africa" (GM B2 November 8, 1984). Her rebellious spirit is even evident in her description of herself as a child: "I was a bolter, from kindergarten age, but unlike most small children rapidly accustoming their soft, round selves to the sharp angles of desks and discipline, I went on running away from school, year after year" ("Bolter" 19). Her admiration for male heroes and her bolting spirit help explain Gordimer's enthusiasm for Maureen's flight from her middle-class responsibilities of husband and children at the end of *July's People*. Maureen is driven to flee by her instinct to survive. Given an untenable position in the white world, the white woman's best option is to bolt across the "color bar" to help blacks create an egalitarian, utopian future. Only there will a white woman who supports

black liberation fit in.

In *July's People*, this flight for survival starts as violence erupts with black revolutionaries attacking Johannesburg. For whites, *July's People* represents a nightmare come true. Maureen and Bam Smales support the revolution but, because of their white skins, they are in danger of being killed. Therefore, they and their three children must flee, delivered by their servant July who offers to harbor them in his village. Unexpectedly, their black servant turns out to be, in Gordimer's words, the "frog prince, saviour" (*July's People* 9).

Gordimer's reference to Grimm's fairy tale of the frog prince parallels the transformation of July from servant in the white society to respected male in his African village—from frog to prince. It suggests, too, the symbolic demand of blacks to eat from the whites' golden plates and sleep in their clean beds in exchange for the service blacks have given, in saving the "golden ball"—signifying their lives in the case of Maureen and Bam. All too often whites, like the princess, have not listened to the frog, forgotten the frog, and broken their promises. They have refused the frog's demand to "love" him and be his "companion and playfellow" (Grimm 33). In the fairy tale the princess made these promises to the frog if only he would get her ball out of the well. Yet, afterwards, she assured herself he had only been talking "nonsense," because how could he "possibly be anyone's companion" (33). The next day the frog came to the castle door, so the princess had to tell the king, her father, of her promises. To her chagrin, the king insisted: "That which thou hast promised must thou perform" (34). Therefore, the princess reluctantly let the frog eat from her golden plate; she even took him up to her bedroom. However, when the frog reminded her of her promise to let him sleep in her pretty bed, she angrily threw the frog "with all her strength against the wall" (35). As he fell, the frog turned into "a prince with beautiful kind eyes" (35).

In 1989, Gordimer refers again to this fairy tale in an article in the *New York Review of Books*. She suggests that a prince hidden within a frog ("something monstrous") represents a "psychological loss of self" ("The Gap" 61). Although Grimm's monstrous frog had rescued the Princess's lost ball, she still despised him. Only after his recovery of "self" (and hence beauty and respect), will she marry him. Similarly, in *July's People*, the restoration of self occurs for July when he returns to his village where, treated with respect, he regains power and self-confidence; likewise, the black Freedom Fighters gain power and respect when they are able to bring the revolution to the Johannesburg area. Recognizing this and seeking protection, Maureen subtly offers herself first to July and then eventually (one may assume) to one or another of the Freedom Fighters.

In *July's People* Gordimer brilliantly imagines what it would be like to be wrenched away from middle-class comfort and forced to live on a subsistence level. Falling to the bottom of the economic scale had an immediate impact on the Smales's care for and attitudes toward their bodies. They became

acutely aware of body odors and bodily functions. Maureen had to use rags for her menstrual periods (67). Their son Royce quickly learned to use a stone in place of toilet paper (35). Deprivation and a lack of privacy greatly diminished Bam and Maureen's sexual desire. In fact, what they learn about the reality of subsistence living reveals that, despite their liberalism, they had understood neither July nor what daily life was like for his "people" (37-38).

Ironically, a nonviolent revolution occurs in July's village while a violent one is occurring in Johannesburg. The black servant, July, assumes power formerly held by the white master, Bam Smales. Since the Smales must hide, July learns to drive and keeps the keys to their bakkie. The lives of Bam and Maureen are totally in his hands. Powerless, Bam can no longer continue his roles as financial supporter, protector, or even lover of his wife. When he fails to fulfill his masculine roles, Maureen feels she owes him nothing. The communal way in which July's people raise children (including her three) undermines her maternal role. Thus, the white couple's interdependency has ended, and Maureen abruptly—and many would say meanly—withdraws her commitment and loyalty to her husband. The outbreak of violence has destroyed both the master-servant relationship and the patriarchal and colonialist male-female relationship. What has happened, as Maureen points out, is "an explosion of roles" (*July's People* 117).

As had happened before in history, the black revolt in the imagined future of *July's People* opens the way for the female revolt. The Smales no longer assume they "know" their servant, July, for *he* is no longer powerless and dependent; *they* are. Maureen and Bam Smales no longer know each other, for they are so powerless in the African village that neither has anything to offer the other. The new situation has shattered their former identities. Like July, Maureen had been in a dependent role. When her love for Bam does not survive his descent from power, she experiences a sense of liberation. At the end of the novel, as she crosses the river—and the "color bar"—she is "born again" (160).

Gordimer's depiction in *July's People* of what it would feel like to crash from middle-class comfort to subsistence living reveals her superb ability to observe detail and imagine the psychological consequences of change. However, like many nightmares and fairy tales, Gordimer's narration of the story raises questions that it leaves unanswered. We accept a tale like "The Frog Prince" as we might a dream that lacks connections, contains contradictions, and asks us to believe the impossible. However, many readers of *July's People* were not so willing to tolerate the unlikely. They felt, in particular, that they were being asked to accept an ending that was hard to believe. Maureen's flight toward the unmarked helicopter seemed both foolhardy and puzzling. When Gordimer rewrote the story as a screenplay, film producer Roland Joffe and other readers of the script asked her to make the story more convincing. She was to clarify Maureen's seemingly cold-hearted abandonment of her husband and especially her children; her evolution from

housewife to freedom fighter, and the reasons the men in the helicopter might save Maureen (GM B2 1983-1986C January 14, 1985; December 22, 1986; March 3, 1987). Gordimer's letters to Joffe and her revisions of the screenplay provide answers. Such information about her intentions serves to explain peculiarities in the characters and the plot that mar an otherwise brilliant novel.

The focus in the story on the master, the servant, and, most important, the colonial woman illuminates how colonialism, racism, and sexism intertwine. According to Gordimer, in revolting against the white male, Maureen is rebelling against the colonialist attitudes toward her, which continued in South Africa throughout the years of apartheid. In discussing the screenplay of *July's People* in an October 24, 1986 letter, Gordimer explained the situation of the "colonial white woman":

She is in the doubly powerful position of wielding authority over blacks while at the same time being herself protected, cosseted. Much racist legislation, indeed, is done in her name, for her sake as bearer of future generations of the white race. She is the sacred womb from which only the ruling race must come. Her sexuality must thus be protected from any approach by defiling blacks. (GM B2 1983-1986C)

According to Gordimer, a woman like Maureen is "conditioned to believe she needs protection. A protection which by implication and in practice makes her, her male protector's possession rather than herself" (GM B2 October 24, 1986). When Bam becomes powerless, she is freed from his protection and therefore is no longer his possession. Maureen's first response had been to turn for help to July, who served as her "boy" for fifteen years. She ignores the fact that he has a wife and children and behaves seductively with him (153). But July is too bitter to accept her sexual advances. Therefore, she turns to the other men who have gained power—those carrying guns, the Freedom Fighters.

In becoming involved with the black male, the white woman defies the taboo against black male/white female sexuality that was still illegal when Gordimer wrote the novel. Even lesser forms of intimacy with a black man had once been unthinkable. However, when Maureen tries to offer July equality through intimacy (145-53), equality is not part of his conception of male-female relationships; nor can he forget how working for her, a woman, undermined his manhood psychologically and socially. Furthermore, when he worked closely with Maureen in her house, his sexuality was strictly controlled. As Gordimer stated in an October 24, 1986 letter to Joffe, the black servant is "a eunuch in relation to White Madam." He protects her "at master's bidding," but to be her protector, the black man must be "emasculated" (GM B2). Any sexual response to her or from her is strictly forbidden. Therefore, Maureen and July revolt against Bam's colonial mentality that denied each of them dignity. As Gordimer says in a March 11,

1987 letter to Joffe, "They destroy Bam, between them; it's their doing. So Bam falls out of the triangle of the power-struggle" (GM B2, 3).

The ending of the novel *July's People* has evoked considerable controversy. Maureen hears a helicopter landing. The narrator describes it in sexual terms: A high ringing is produced in her ears, her body in its ribcage is thudded with deafening vibration, invaded by a force pumping, jiggling in its monstrous orgasm—the helicopter has sprung through the hot brilliant cloud just above them all, its landing gear like spread legs, battling the air with whirling scythes (158).

In "Beyond the Interregnum: A Note on the Ending of *July's People*," Nicholas Visser has pointed out that this image and certain words and phrases at the end of *July's People* echo Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan," in which Zeus takes the form of the swan and rapes Leda. Leda simultaneously engenders Helen and Clytemnestra, both of whom grow up to be faithless wives. Helen's infidelity in abandoning Menelaus for Paris causes the Trojan War. Agamemnon returns from the war only to discover Clytemnestra's infidelity. Perhaps, then, the emphasis here should be not only, as Visser's was, on "a moment of insemination, from which new possibilities will emerge" (66) but also on the woman's infidelity, made possible by the descending helicopter. The shift in a woman's allegiance alters history in each story. In Gordimer's story, the black revolution and the woman's implied sexual revolt against the colonial husband are interwoven. The echoing of Yeats's use of the myth enhances Gordimer's personal fable about how a white woman can gain acceptance in South Africa. One wonders what Gordimer said to Roland Joffe that made him write to her: "I was very struck by what you said about the white women and black leaders. What you had to say about survival was both optimistic and shocking. I hope the film [*July's People*] will be too. If Maureen's transmutations guide the narrative, I think we'd achieve something remarkable" (GM B2 November 8, 1984, 3).

Nadine Gordimer does not perceive the feminist perspective in her own analysis of the colonial woman. The importance of gender is evident, however, in what she wrote in an October 24, 1986 letter to Joffe: "Of course the feminists will claim Maureen as *the* survivor. But I don't want to make a feminist film, do you?! I could have made my solution-finder, my character capable of *remaking the self*, a man. But I suppose I clearly, if subconsciously, chose a woman because in the situation of the colonial white woman the whole ethos of colonialism, as it distorts the white personality, is epitomized" (GM B2, 2). While emphasizing Maureen's streak of independence, Gordimer also stresses Maureen's dependence on men. She wrote to Joffe on January 24, 1985, "In case the feminists want to claim Maureen, it is to a helicopter *manned*, that she makes her bolt" (GM B2). She specifies that identification with the black women in July's family is not an answer for Maureen. Instead, Gordimer says, Maureen "needs to take the risk of a whole new social order, not take the contemporary version of the 18th century

retreat into a convent" (GM B2 October, 24, 1986, 2 #3C). Gordimer's opposition to feminism may have its roots in her girlhood experience of attending a convent school for girls. No more all-female environments for her; having no boys around was not to her liking!

Her outline of the structure for her screenplay is "Stage one, allegiance to Bam. Stage two, shift of allegiance to July. Stage three, rejection of both [Bam and July], and emergence of allegiance to a late and painfully-emerged selfhood" (GM B2 January 24, 1985, *Under the Danger*). If this allegiance to self were persuasive, the feminists might well claim Maureen, but the textual evidence suggests a different story. She flees to a symbol of masculine technological power—the helicopter. In the novel Maureen could not make out the markings on the helicopter and therefore does not know "whether it holds saviours or murderers" (158). However, were she expecting whites to be in the helicopter, she could have taken her husband and children with her. Furthermore, going off with conservative whites would not fit with Maureen's or Gordimer's political ideology or the liberation of the colonial woman Maureen represents.

The story only makes sense if we assume those in the helicopter are black. In an October 1994 interview, Gordimer acknowledged this and said Maureen would "rather take a chance on blacks" (Bazin, "An Interview" 582). In an earlier draft of the novel and in the screenplays of *July's People*, Maureen does identify the helicopter as belonging to the black Freedom Fighters. Yet, in four of the nine versions of the screenplay, the reaction of the Freedom Fighters to Maureen's sudden arrival is still not clarified. In the seventh version, however, Gordimer revises in response to Roland Joffe's desire to know why these Freedom Fighters in the helicopter would be willing to save Maureen. Many readers have not been convinced that black Freedom Fighters would be "saviours" rather than "murderers" for an unknown white woman seeking their help. Thus, the ideological demands on the narrative were in conflict with the behavior one might expect of Freedom Fighters in the midst of a violent conflict with whites. Even if they do not murder her, they are preoccupied with a civil war and can hardly be expected to save her.

Furthermore, as Joffe states in a March 3, 1987 letter, Maureen comes across as "an opportunist" (GM B2, 2). Neither her husband Bam nor July can meet her needs; therefore, she runs toward those who are likely to be the next occupiers of the "Master Bedroom" (Gordimer's symbol for what Bam has lost). Indeed, as she runs, "the smell of boiled potatoes (from a vine indistinguishable to her from others) promises a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree" (160). These images, however illusory, suggest a longing to reenter the middle-class lifestyle with the new men in power more than they suggest a willingness to withstand the hardships of the life of a revolutionary. Gordimer may be implying that time spent as a revolutionary would ensure the white woman a place in the postrevolutionary, black-

dominated society by the side of a black leader. Maureen's dream is obviously not to live in the new South Africa in a village like July's.

But before Maureen can prove her loyalty during the revolutionary battles, the Freedom Fighters must trust her to be a loyal political ally—one they can rely upon during warfare. They must be able to trust her not to betray the blacks to members of her own race should events turn against the revolutionaries. Thus, acceptance by the black revolutionaries begins with allowing her to depart with them in the helicopter. Upon reading a version of the screenplay that still matched the ending of the novel, Joffe argued that the text was not convincing. Because Maureen had had no previous contact with the Freedom Fighters, they were not likely to trust her or care to save her (GM B2 March 3, 1987, 2 #3). Furthermore, because she had had no prior contact, her solitary run for the helicopter at the end seemed to Joffe "an act of alienation not communion" (GM B2 March 3, 1987, 2 #3).

Joffe suggested that Gordimer prepare the audience for the ending and make it more realistic by building up Maureen's relationship with Daniel, an injured Freedom Fighter staying in July's village until he is healed. Therefore, in the next version of the screenplay, Gordimer has Maureen ride off one day with Daniel and July in Bam's yellow bakkie. Maureen's stated goal is to buy medicine for her son from the Indian store. However, she departs secretly, intentionally not telling Bam, and she knowingly risks her life and the safety of the vehicle. July, Daniel, and Maureen do meet a guerrilla roadblock, and the revolutionaries would have seized the bakkie had July not known one of them since childhood.

Bam is so angry with Maureen when she returns that he slaps her face. He senses her shift of allegiance. When she tells him she can no longer talk to him because the things they used to talk about no longer exist, he says: "Ah, and the children don't exist, I don't exist. You don't exist. We've always trusted each other, and now, here, in this mess—suddenly I can't trust you, either." When she says that at least she has finally seen the Freedom Fighters, he exclaims: "Oh yes, so you know *they* exist, eh" (GM B9 F12, 74).

In this version Maureen becomes more certain that Daniel is a Freedom Fighter when he steals Bam's gun and disappears. Later Daniel comes to Maureen, out of hiding, and she provides him with food and painkillers for another revolutionary. Her actions help confirm her loyalty to the black cause. Thus, at the end when she approaches the helicopter, Daniel vouches for her, offering her safety.

The dialogue in this draft of the screenplay is awkward. However, it clarifies the evolution of thought underlying Gordimer's psychological and political fable about white women and black revolutionaries. One Freedom Fighter from the helicopter asks if she is lost and she replies: "No, found." When he asks, "Where are your people?" she replies: "You are my people. I trust you. I want to be with you. Fight with you. Your women fight with you." When the Freedom Fighter replies "That's impossible, for you," she answers,

"No. Everything else is" (GM B9 F15 insert p. 164 alternate ending). For Maureen, a leap that places her permanently on the other side of the "colour bar" is her only acceptable option. She cannot endure staying in July's village; nor does she want to go back to the white community, where she would have to see blacks as the enemy and blacks would see her as the enemy. She must take the risk of joining the black Freedom Fighters. On March 11, 1987, Gordimer explained to Joffe that Maureen's run is to be "a wild act, a breaking free, a taking of a huge chance." The audience should "fear for her, half-envy her" (GM B2, 3). In one of the later versions of the screenplay, Maureen tells Daniel: "I wish I were black. My children were black. You can fight if you're black." When Daniel asks her what she wants to fight for, she replies, "Same things as you" (GM B9 F12, 3). When one of the Freedom Fighters calls Maureen "a mad woman," another defends her by saying, "There were others who worked with us—whites, women—went to jail with us, don't forget. Maybe she's sane, like they were" (GM B9 F15 insert p. 1). In yet a later version when one puzzled comrade asks, "Is she mad?" Daniel replies, "She's with us" (GM B9 F12 rewrite 161-63 scene 250). In that version Maureen helps Daniel move a wounded man into the helicopter and then flies off with these men.

The white woman "fits in" in South Africa by joining the black struggle. That seems the only viable choice she has. These screenplays clarify the fable Gordimer had in mind about how the politically conscious white woman "learns about survival. Not just physical survival, but in the sense of finding a way to go on living, belonging in South Africa" (GM Box 2 October 24, 1986 #3).

Gordimer had begun *July's People* in 1979 and published it in 1981. She worked on the screenplays at least through 1987 and did not abandon the project until 1989 when she received a scriptwriter's revision of her film script and rejected it outright. During these years she published *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and was working on *My Son's Story* (1990). Revising the screenplays, explaining her intentions to Roland Joffe, and envisioning how she would fit into post revolutionary South Africa—all kept the fable she began in the novel *July's People* evolving in her imagination. Thus, in *A Sport of Nature*, *My Son's Story*, and *None to Accompany Me* she creates additional scenarios—attempts to imagine still other ways for the white woman to fit in. The female protagonists in the next three books, Hillela, Hannah, and Vera, are new versions of Maureen. Like Maureen whose instinct to survive turns her into a rebel, they are actively pursuing ways to fit into the process of rapid change in South Africa.

In each of the four novels, the female protagonists are the ones sufficiently dissatisfied with the *status quo* to break away from their families and go off on their own. Each chooses a radical alternative. Like Maureen, the revolt of Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* and Vera in *None to Accompany Me* involves a shift in allegiance from the white world to a black one. Both

adopt a new way of life. Hannah in *My Son's Story* has likewise left her family to assist the black liberation movement, but ultimately she goes one step beyond that: she shifts her allegiance from the black male revolutionary to the more radical black female revolutionary. Hannah cuts off her affair with Sonny when she learns that his wife Aila has been charged with terrorism, concealing arms, and acting "as a courier between Umkhonto we Sizwe in neighboring countries and a cell in the Johannesburg area" (233).

In *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer utilizes sex to facilitate Hillela's rejection of the white world and her acceptance by the black. The absence of Hillela's parents enables her to sever all connections with her own race. Both of her parents had chosen allegiance to a sexual relationship over allegiance to their daughter. Her mother had abandoned her to be with a lover in Mozambique. Her father had chosen to live with his new wife, Billie, rather than Hillela, when he was forced to choose between the two. Then Hillela found herself rejected because of her own sexuality—first, by her Aunt Olga, for associating with a "colored" boy and then, by her Aunt Pauline, for making love with Sasha, who was Pauline's son and Hillela's cousin. However, another sexual relationship enabled Hillela to leave the country, and after she was abandoned by that white man, sexuality became her key to entering the black world.

Like Maureen, Hillela follows her instinct to survive which leads her eventually to the black African male. Hillela becomes the wife of a black revolutionary, Whaila. When she becomes his, his politics become hers. Her political activity is motivated primarily by sex, not politics. She is spurred by her devotion to him, not by her political convictions. Yet, because she is his wife, the black radicals fully trust and accept her, and she plays an active role in the international community of revolutionaries. Her sexuality has served as her key to fitting in.

Later, after Whaila's assassination, Hillela marries Reuel, a black revolutionary leader in another African country, a head of state who is also the chair of the Organization of African Unity. With him she attends the ceremony for the proclamation of the new African state that used to be South Africa. This newly liberated nation is "Whaila's country," the one for which he had given his life. By then Hillela has succeeded so well in "fitting in" that she is one of those toward whom the celebratory fists are lifted "like spores" (354). She is "the wife of the Chairman of the OAU [who] has slowly risen alongside her husband, beside the first black President and Prime Minister, his wife and the other leaders of a new nation and the Presidents, Prime Ministers, party, and union leaders of many others" (354). She fits in with the elite of Africa.

Devoting herself to her black revolutionary lovers, Whaila and Reuel, and their causes, Hillela successfully annihilated her white identity. Even in her first marriage, she had detached herself so totally from her past that she had

puzzled Whaila. He had been "dismayed" by "her lack of any identification with her own people" (215). He lived so totally for his people that, for him, when she expressed her indifference, "there was something missing in her . . . like a limb or an organ" (215). Hillela had even been willing to annihilate her body—her whiteness. When she had a baby with Whaila, she was delighted "not to have reproduced herself" (202). She was pleased that her daughter Nomzamo (named for Nomzamo Winnie Mandela) was black like the father. This rejection of her white identity continued with her second black husband, Reuel. She adopted a black African name (Chiemeka) and wore traditional African clothing.

Whaila had seen their black/white "closeness as a sign; the human cause, the human identity that should be possible, once the race and class struggle were won" (215). Her willingness to shed her past identities made this gesture toward a utopian vision possible. Cut off from family, she had been free to strive for this utopian oneness. Until Whaila was assassinated, her dream had been to raise a "rainbow family"; the truest unity would come through the mixing of the races. The ideal of the rainbow family suggests that once everyone is multiracial, racism will disappear. Miscegenation, therefore, seems to be an integral part of Gordimer's utopian vision, along with economic, racial, and sexual equality.

An interracial marriage is an important way for a white woman to make her children fit into the new Africa. Gordimer's two white children chose to leave South Africa. Ironically, Hillela's dark-skinned daughter also deserted her mother's beloved Africa. Nomzamo was an exotic success in the Western, capitalist world as an internationally-known model. Sexual attraction opened Nomzamo's way into the white world just as it had opened her mother's way into the black. The response to racial and sexual difference can be repulsion; sensuality, however, can change that response to love.

In a 1988 interview, Gordimer claimed that "the two greatest drives in people's lives, the two most important things, are sex and politics." She added,

I think there may be a particular connection between sexuality, sensuality, and politics inside South Africa. Because, after all, what is apartheid all about? It's about the body. It's about physical differences. It's about black skin, and it's about woolly hair instead of straight, long blond hair, and black skin instead of white skin. The whole legal structure is based on the physical, so that the body becomes something supremely important. And I think maybe subconsciously that comes into my work too. (Bazin and Seymour 304)

Gordimer's fascination with black-white sexual relationships, which dominates *A Sport of Nature* continues to dominate her next novel *My Son's Story*. In this tenth novel, her white protagonist, Hannah, has an affair with Sonny, a black political activist. Their relationship is both intellectual and sexual. From Sonny, Hannah gains insight into a black revolutionary organization in South Africa; from Hannah, Sonny gains a friend who can listen to and

respond to his political concerns.

Whereas Hillela left South Africa to carry on her love affairs and political activities, Hannah comes to Johannesburg from Lesotho. Both women are considerably further along than Maureen in their evolution toward personal independence. In *July's People* Maureen had been a dutiful South African housewife. Not until she was placed in an impossible situation did she become capable of what Gordimer describes in *A Sport of Nature* (279) and *My Son's Story* (215) as "moving on." To survive and to serve a higher cause than oneself, one must retain the freedom to move on, to abandon the known for the unknown. Thus, Maureen had abandoned her family and ran to the helicopter. In response to a series of rejections, Hillela had, in turn, forsaken her country, her family, and her race to move into the future in the company of the black African majority. Hannah has a freer spirit yet, for she is not preoccupied with a need to belong. Her career comes first; she leaves Sonny and Johannesburg because, in Sonny's words, "the common good outside self required this" (224). She left for Addis Ababa (202) to become the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Regional Representative for Africa (201). Hannah is involved in helping Africans not because of Sonny but because of her own political convictions. She was herself first and Sonny's mistress second.

Although Maureen's only thought was for her "lone survival," she had to be saved and was at the mercy of those in the "manned" helicopter (GM B2 January, 24, 1985). Hillela relied on men for her survival too; if one man did not help her, another would. She never had only one source of help and undoubtedly could, and often did, survive on her own. Economically independent, Hannah is free to love or not love where and when she chooses. She has what Othello so feared that he became insanely jealous—the power of the female to withdraw her love. Unlike Desdemona, Hannah does, in fact, withdraw her love; Hannah, not Sonny, ends their relationship.

Finally, in Gordimer's eleventh novel, *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Vera Stark, like Maureen, sheds her family and aims to place herself within the new society. Just as Maureen escaped while her husband, suspecting nothing, took the children to the river to fish, Vera waits until her husband, Ben, goes to London to visit their son. Ben admits in London that "she belonged to the reality back there as he himself never had, never could try to, except through her" (322). She owns their house from a prior marriage and so, without consulting him, she sells the house in his absence. Vera goes to live in an "annexe" with separate entrance belonging to Zeph Rapulana (311), a former activist who is now one of the black elite (258). Thus, she is under the protection of a black male; however, this time their relationship is not sexual even though "her whiteness would not be taboo for him, or his blackness for her" (122–23). Vera does consider the possibility of his being interested in her sexually (120–21), but she quickly decides that their relationship is on "a level that was neither sexually intuitive nor that of

friendship" (122). Yet, he was very special: "Vera had never before felt—it was more than drawn to—involved in the being of a man to whom she knew no sexual pull. And it was not that she did not find him physically attractive" (123). In his presence, she feels a "reassurance she had not known she no longer found elsewhere with anyone" (123). They have a perfect relationship without sex: "They belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman" (122). Perhaps more relevant to this than Gordimer recognizes is the fact that Zeph is years younger than Vera.

Vera Stark has reached an age at which she is forced to confront the fact that ultimately each of us is alone. No one else will suffer our particular pains, our illnesses, or our death. Ageing has seemingly led Gordimer to focus in this novel not just on the social condition of her white female protagonist (which can be changed) but also on the human condition (which cannot be changed). Existentially, Vera is alone. Therefore, she chooses to live alone: "To find out about my life. The truth. In the end" (313). In a September 1994 interview, Nicci Gerrard reports that the idea for *None to Accompany Me* came to Gordimer while reading this haiku by the seventeenth-century poet Basho: "None to accompany me on this path: / Nightfall in Autumn." Having used this haiku as an epigraph for her novel, Gordimer told Gerrard: "All the different relationships that people have in life that seem so much to take away the burden of self, in the end it's an illusion and you're alone." In Gordimer's words in her eleventh novel: "The bliss of placing the burden of self on the beloved turns out to be undeliverable. The beloved is unknown at any address, a self, unlike a bed, cannot be shared, and cannot be shed" (121).

Vera is not lonely but she is alone. Her aloneness is made even clearer by a startling surprise near the end of the novel; this encounter makes her seem even more alone precisely because she is sexually irrelevant. This shocking incident begins when a pipe bursts, and Vera hurries into Zeph's house, not to seek help but to borrow his pliers "to turn off the main water control in the yard" (322). Walking quietly in the dark so as not to awaken him, she took the pliers from "the cupboard in the passage between his bedroom and the bathroom" (323). Suddenly, "without any awareness of a shape darker than the darkness she came into contact with a warm soft body" (323).

Through her open jacket this one against her, breasts against breasts, belly against belly. . . . For a few seconds, maybe, she and the girl were tenderly fused in the sap-scent of semen that came from her. Then Vera backed away, and the girl turned and ran on bare feet to his bedroom where the unlatched door let her return without a sound.

Vera came out into the biting ebony-blue of winter air as if she dived into the delicious shock of it. She turned off the tap with the satisfaction of a woman performing a workman-like task. (323)

Oddly enough, no emotional reaction on Vera's part is recorded, but the next generation has obviously replaced her. What goes on in the bedroom belongs to the young. And why not? Vera has her work to do at the Legal Foundation and on a committee writing the new constitution for South Africa (320). She has entered a new stage in life. At times lately she had experienced "an exaltation of solitude. It was connected with something else: A freedom; an attraction between her and a man that had no desire for the usual consummation" (306). Therefore, after walking out of Zeph's house into the garden and looking up at the stars, Vera "took up her way, breath scrolling out, a signature before her" (324).

In short, Maureen has evolved through Hillela and Hannah to become the starkly self-sufficient Vera of *None to Accompany Me*. Vera still needs male protection, but she has chosen a more impersonal source than Ben, her too adoring husband. She has abandoned Ben, "because I cannot live with someone who can't live without me" (310). Yet she has Zeph's house keys as "a precaution Zeph insisted on for her safety; if anything or anyone threatened her, a woman alone, she could come to him" (323). Vera is "working through . . . dependencies" (313). She and Zeph have "loyalties but no dependencies" (321). That is why Zeph's nearness, rather than Ben's, better serves her purpose. She now views the personal life as "transitory, it is the political life that is transcendent, like art" (305). The constitution she helps to write will affect many, many lives beyond her own. An atheist, she sees her immortality in what she creates for future generations.

Living not in the main house but, symbolically, in the annexe, Gordimer's protagonist in *None to Accompany Me* has realized Maureen's illusive dream of a politically useful life among the revolutionary elite. However, even Vera is not totally independent, for she remains under the protection of an empowered black male. Although Nadine Gordimer explored black/white sexual relationships in *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1990), her protagonist, at this later stage in life, rejects not only family, as Maureen did in *July's People*, but also (at least with Zeph) physical intimacy. Still, the bonding between the white woman and the black revolutionary remains a constant in Gordimer's scenarios about the ways a white South African woman might fit into post revolutionary South Africa.

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