

*"What the name will make happen":
Strategies of Naming
in Nadine Gordimer's Novels*

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NADINE GORDIMER has defined her stance, both as a writer and as a South African, solely in terms of opposition to apartheid; she resists political labels of all sorts, ranging from Marxist to feminist, although strong elements of these, and of other political/theoretical constructs, can be detected in both her fiction and her cultural criticism. Her position, articulated in interview after interview, has been that as long as apartheid exists—under any name, in any form, to any degree—the struggle to end it must overshadow all other considerations, as apartheid has overshadowed all aspects of life in South Africa. Accordingly, her fiction directly addresses the effects of apartheid: her characters, both black and white, suffer its pernicious intrusions, and her plots consist of emblematic episodes that plot the trajectory of apartheid as it relentlessly separates, both literally and figuratively, all who live under it.

I will argue here, however, that it is on the level of rhetoric rather than of plot and character that Gordimer offers her most radical challenge to the apartheid system, for, in such strategies as those that inform her use of names and naming, she attacks the core of that system—the belief that any name or label can express the essence of an individual or group, or, more basically, that any individual or group has such an immutable essence. Just as in the course of her career she moves steadily away from traditional unitary presentations of character, she also increasingly emphasizes the social construction of the meanings of names as well as the ambiguity/ambivalence that inevitably pervades such meanings.

Judie Newman describes Gordimer's project as "[r]eading . . . the signs of South Africa" ("Gordimer's *The Conservationist*" 31). In so doing, Gordimer undermines the ideologies that create, and are created by, those signs. She thus enacts a form of the "affirmative deconstruction" (205) that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak associates with the work of the Subaltern Studies collective. This group, according to Spivak, "offers a theory of change" in colonial states (specifically India), a theory that has its basis in two propositions: "first, that the moment(s) of change be pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition . . . and, secondly, that such changes are signalled or marked by a functional change in sign-systems" (197). Moreover, Spivak emphasizes the violence that precipitates such changes—which happen at times of crisis—and notes that unless the sign system already encompasses "the space for a change" the crisis cannot force the change (197). It is such a functional change in language, or "discursive displacement" (197), that Gordimer aims to plot in her texts, as she increasingly acknowledges the limits of her position as privileged observer/inscriber and deliberately seeks to open in her own language the "space for a change."

Yet Gordimer's practice diverges from the Subaltern Studies theory as discussed by Spivak, for Gordimer's theory of revolution—both political and literary—has a more dialectical quality. Critics such as Stephen Clingman have noted the dialectical movement of her plots both within and between novels, and, in her essays, Gordimer herself has revealed a reliance on Hegelian thought as well on the critical theory of Lukács and Ernst Fischer. Thus, while her fiction demonstrates the centrality of the linguistic to social revolution as well as a rejection of the benign work of "transition," her sense of the violent confrontation of sign systems (or of political ones) does not preclude the action of supplementarity, which, as we shall see, pervades her theory of naming. Increasingly, as she rejects liberal humanism, she adopts a historicity that emphasizes constraints on change. In *A Guest of Honour* and *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer envisions post-revolutionary black-led African states; yet each retains (large) traces of the colonial order. For example, in *A Guest of Honour*, President Mweta falls more and more into the control of post-

colonial white capitalists who, like Hillela's entrepreneurial and distinctly racist cousins in *A Sport of Nature*, will be staying on in the newly independent African state. Much as Gordimer might want to depict a world in which violent confrontation can lead to the immediate dispersion of the old order, she cannot do so, and the constraints that she regards as historicizing discursive space are likewise plotted in her strategies of naming. Even today, as we see what the media now call "post-apartheid South Africa," it is clear that names and naming will continue to be critical issues.

Thus, the space that Gordimer seeks to open is one that has room for both the "necessary learning process" by which whites and blacks can move through and beyond the "interregnum . . . [which] is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined," and also for whites "to begin entering history" ("Living in the Interregnum," 278, 269-70, 278). She quotes Susan Sontag's assertion that "Being an 'author' has been unmasked as a role that, whether conformist or not, remains inescapably responsible to a given social order" (278), and, in "The Essential Gesture," links this responsibility to linguistic activism, quoting Octavio Paz: "It is a responsibility that goes back to source: the corpus of language from which the writer arises. 'Social criticism begins with grammar and the re-establishing of meanings'" (295). Here, too, is the starting point for Gordimer's practice of naming.

In *A Sport of Nature*, the central character, Hillela, talks with her black lover Rueul about their names, a rather complicated undertaking, as they each have several, acquired from various sources. Rueul's European name, which he uses in private, was given to him by his missionary teachers. His public, African, name, which the reader never learns, was chosen by his mother, and is the one that he feels expresses—even determines—what has happened and will happen to him; it means "God has done very well." In contrast to the naming practices of whites, he says, "we Africans always give names that mean something, not your Marys and Johns" (274), and "the name has to do with many things, the circumstances when it is given. Whether there's been a drought, or a war." Hillela logically deduces that the name

reveals “what has already happened,” but Rueul corrects her: “No, more important, what is going to happen. What the name will make happen” (275). Rueul’s is the optimistic view: he assumes that if one is given “a name to live up to” (274), one will proceed to do so. Implicit in his formulation, however, is the darker side of naming, which is seen quite clearly in South Africa, where an essentialist philosophy of naming underlies the apartheid system. As the historian Leonard Thompson points out in *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*, the idea that “races are the fundamental divisions of humanity” is the core assumption in “the political mythology that legitimizes the South African social order” (69; see also Ettin 48-49). In this system, the racial name or label, like the given name in Rueul’s system, does indeed determine one’s fate, for it is used to signify the limits of what one can be and do. The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin are also pertinent to an understanding of how the linguistic practices of the South African government both embody and enact the monolithic and monologic nature of apartheid.

Yet, as Bakhtin would also argue, the forces of social/linguistic diversity (or heteroglossia) can and do resist the monologic impulse; according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “cacophony, though muted, will persist” (36). It is this concept that separates Gordimer’s practice from Spivak’s model. Hillela’s identification of the flaw in Rueul’s argument points to the inevitable lacunae in his system: “it doesn’t always work out the way the parents intended. I’m named for a Zionist great-grandfather” (275). Indeed, neither Zionism nor Judaism have any relevance for Hillela; her goal is to give up “being white” (193), to be “an African wife” (196). Moreover, her own daughter Nomzamo, named for Winnie Mandela, does not grow up to be “an African liberationist . . . a heroine” (275); she becomes “top model Nomo,”

an international model [who] does not hamper her image with national politics; to the rich people who buy the clothes she displays or the luxuries her face and body promote, she is a symbol of Africa, anyway; one preferable to those children in advertisements of aid organizations begging money to keep them from starving. (202)

Just as Nomo changes her name to suit her new image, Rueul will change Hillela’s name to Chiemeka, an Igbo name having the

same meaning as his does. And as Nomo cuts her ties not only to Nomzamo Mandela but also to Whaila Kgomani, her martyred rebel father, Hillela cuts her own ties, for "Hillela" is "withdrawn from the currency of general use . . . thereby confusing her identity and whereabouts, for others, further than these already had been" (315). Yet, as it is possible to "trace" Hillela through her name changes (as we shall see), Nomo's connection to Winnie Mandela and the African resistance movement re-emerges—as a function of her new identity, exploitable by her promoters.

Likewise, political/social names can be manipulated to create or reinforce realignments. As Thompson notes, the names of human groups in South Africa constitute "a terminological minefield" (viii), for as groups form and reform, define and redefine themselves, they adopt new names, usually with acronyms, often not only to reflect their own positions but also to suggest their differences from other groups. Such a strategy can be seen in the naming practices of the various black consciousness movement groups as described by Gail Gerhard in *Black Power in South Africa*.

Disguise can also prompt name shifts. Like many other revolutionaries in Gordimer's fiction, Whaila Kgomani, in *A Sport of Nature*, uses an alias to escape detection as he moves in and out of South Africa, while Rosa Burger of *Burger's Daughter* uses in London "a surname not her own—but that was for private rather than political reasons" (311); she wants to avoid contact with those who might know her from South Africa. On a larger scale, groups can change names for such purposes as temporary avoidance of banning.

Names need not be literally changed, however, to resist ossification; meanings adhere to names through social usage. A straightforward example can be found in "Letters, Words, Worlds," G. H. Pirie's fascinating account of the naming of Soweto. "Soweto"—SOuth WEst TOWnships—was chosen for its very neutrality; yet, as Pirie points out, it is now a name charged with both positive and negative meanings generated by the people and events associated with it. Soweto provides a dramatic example of the process that shapes all name usage, for, as post-modern theory reiterates in all of its manifestations, signs are inevitably diffuse and socially charged.

With the titles of the novels, Gordimer begins her enterprise. The titles of her first four novels—*The Lying Days*, *A World of Strangers*, *Occasion for Loving*, and *The Late Bourgeois World*—all apply abstract names to place or time, while the last five apply similar labels to people: *A Guest of Honour*, *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, *July's People*, and *A Sport of Nature*. Her latest novel, *My Son's Story*, signals a departure in that its title retains the labelling of a person—my son—but also extends the pattern to include object or action—narrative. In each case, the titles seem straightforwardly descriptive, even when the description, as in the first two, includes the idea of deceit or unfamiliarity. But Gordimer quickly problematizes the names that she has just provided. Her shift from titles indicating place/time to titles referring to character(s) suggests her changing concept of character; the epigraph to *Burger's Daughter*—"I am the place in which something has occurred" (Lévi-Strauss)—indicates the extent to which place and time (both historical context and specific places and times) become determinants of who one is or, more accurately, whom one can be perceived to be. Character, place, and time are no longer separable in her world, for there, as she has said, "politics is character" ("A Writer" 23), and both shift with place and the inevitable passage of time.

Within each individual novel (though less so in the first three), Gordimer calls into question the labels given in the titles. In *Burger's Daughter*, for example, the title remains an accurate label for Rosa Burger only in that her paternity is not called into question. Even so, as Lorraine Liscio notes, Rosa is also her mother's daughter (249). Moreover, "Burger's daughter" is seen differently from various perspectives. In the first four pages, for example, she is seen as "a schoolgirl" (9) by passersby; as a girl of particular appearance by those who look more closely; as a girl of "remarkable maturity" (11) by her teachers; as not one of the "Bloody Boers, dumb Dutchmen, thick Afrikaners" (11) by her school friends who fail to notice her Afrikaner surname; and as "an example to us all of the way a detainee's family ought to behave" (12; italics omitted) by her parents' political associates. Later, she also will undergo political "naming" as a communist because she is Burger's daughter. Rosa's struggle, which she

finally realizes to be futile, is to isolate a private self from the public views of her, to create a private life apart from the political arena. She cannot, for she is indeed the site of events, all of which involve people seeing and thus "naming" her. At the end of the novel, she is again described by a political associate in terms that strongly echo those used to describe her at fourteen, but, emblematically, our only direct access now to Rosa herself is through one sentence of a letter describing her prison cell. As Rosa accepts the necessity to situate herself in politics and ideology and in social terms, we lose the voice with which she has attempted to assert the possibility of doing otherwise.

The multivalence that characterizes Gordimer's titles reflects dialogic theorizing of language, too, as a place in which something not only has occurred but is continually occurring. As V. N. Vološinov says in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, "[e]ach word . . . is a little arena for the clash of and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual is a product of the living interaction of social forces" (41). The career of Gordimer's titles thus illustrates in microcosm Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the idea that, in Katerina Clark's and Michael Holquist's words, "meaning is context bound but that context is boundless" (218-19). As the names recur in characters' discourse—as well as in the discourse that is the reader's act of reading—they take on new meanings that supplement rather than supplant those that have come before. Yet, especially in South Africa, with its essentialist philosophy, supplementarity is itself confrontational.

Likewise, all of the categories that Gordimer introduces in her texts are similarly revised as they are reintroduced in new contexts. Kaleidoscopically, they reflect and refract themselves, forming transitory patterns of meaning that cannot outlast the moment of their perception. "Brotherhood," for example, is a contested concept both in South African politics and in Gordimer's fiction. Implicit in the white imperialist mythology of South Africa, it manifests itself most obviously in the *Broederbond*, a semi-secret society of prominent Afrikaners who are acknowledged as shapers of government policy. Among the opponents of apartheid, it refers to unity in the struggle for black nationhood

as well as to unity within race or political group. Thus, it functions simultaneously as a sign of inclusion and exclusion, and as an index of biological and social affiliation.

Burger's Daughter portrays Lionel Burger, the Afrikaner Communist, in the context of Afrikaner society: "All were people whose allegiance made . . . [him] their enemy. All were Afrikaners, whose history, blood and language made him their brother" (173). Burger has chosen brotherhood with blacks, which is a denial of his Afrikaner brotherhood, yet Brandt Vermeulen, who exemplifies what Burger has denied, is seen in his swimming pool with a small black boy in a clear reflection of Rosa's memory of her father swimming with Baasie, the black boy who briefly lived with the Burgers and whom Rosa has always thought of as her brother. That Burger's Afrikaner brotherhood, however much he may have wanted to deny it, has tainted his African brotherhood becomes apparent as Baasie later rejects Rosa's sisterhood, telling her that "I'm not your Baasie, just don't go on thinking about that little kid who lived with you, don't think of that black 'brother,' that's all" (321). What the Burgers have perceived as an act of familial acceptance is to Baasie "a take-over" (321). Not only have they assumed the right to define and name his relationship to them, but, as he has just pointed out to Rosa, they have assumed the right to name *him*: "Baasie" (little boss), to them a strategy of opposition, giving him the "respect" that blacks are forced to give to whites, but to him a denial of his real name, Zwelinzima (suffering land), a name Rosa can neither pronounce nor translate, a sign she cannot read without his help (Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* 83).

A powerful and common sign of white imperialism on all levels is this very suppression of the African names. Just as the Johannesburg City Council repeatedly passed over appropriate (and easily pronounced) African names for Soweto to give it an English-based acronym, South African blacks (like those in the United States) have historically been given English or Afrikaner ("Christian") names, which, as far as whites are concerned, *are* their names. The Burgers' choice of "Baasie" in fact is not as radical as they believe, as such names as "Witbooie" (white boy—from *The Conservationist*) indicate. Their anti-apartheid joke de-

pend on knowledge of their politics for its context; in the mouth of an Afrikaner nationalist it would indicate only contempt for the individual so named.

In Gordimer's fiction, the discovery of the African name by a white person exposes a denied gap in understanding and compels a recognition of the suppression of the black voice as a whole. In *Burger's Daughter*, both Rosa and the reader reach these perceptions. Baasie's belief that she does not know him and that he does not "know who you are" is proven for him by the fact that "you didn't even know my name" (322). His bitter conversation with her is an attempt not to point out or correct her misreading of him, but to insist that she has no right to any interpretation of him at all: "I don't have to live in your head" (323). But, of course, he does; she revises him as Zwelinzima/Baasie, just as she must live in his head in his revised version of his partner in "their infant intimacy" (319). Moreover, their confrontation forces her to revise herself; in planning to live what she believed could be a purely apolitical life in Paris, she has refused to recognize the political nature of such a choice. As the epigraph to this section of the novel says, "To know and not to act is not to know" (213). She is becoming, she realizes, one of "the kind of people for whom there is going to be no future" (329). Thus, although she says that Zwelinzima/Baasie did not cause her to decide to return to South Africa, her explanation of why she goes back echoes the meaning of his African name:

No one can defect.
 I don't know the ideology:
 It's about suffering.
 How to end suffering.
 And it ends in suffering. (332)

Now he lives in her ideology, which she understands that she cannot "know," for it, like him, like herself, creates itself anew as she does "what I can" (332)—what she is able to do, what, in any given situation, she should do, what she will be allowed, by white or black, to do.

The name of July in *July's People* is a similarly multivalent sign. In this novel, set in a future South Africa in the midst of a black revolution, July, the long-time servant of the Smales family, has

brought Bam, Maureen, and their three children to his village. Like Zwelinzima's "Baasie," "July" is a white-assigned name, one that overtly demonstrates white desire to trivialize and demean. Signifying a vague, Western time designation that cannot have any real significance in July's sense of himself, his past, or his people's history, the name stands in stark contrast to Rueul's sense of African names as reflecting their possessors' complex relationship to the past, present, and future. "July" is not "a name to live up to." Yet Maureen Smales, who has prided herself on her consideration for July's dignity, is startled to realize that she has never wondered what his real name might be. Hearing the chief call him "Mwawate," she does not at first realize that this is July. As time passes, "July" begins to merge into "Mwawate," a person who no longer depends on the Smaleses to "protect" him and, though he will continue to protect them, will do so only on his own terms. His change in situation and self-concept is marked by his changing name.

As the Smaleses fight July over control of "their" possessions, the struggle becomes also one over who possesses the right to define and hence name (Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* 89-91). July's broken English, which Maureen always has seen as a problem for her, as interpreter, to solve, is now his weapon. When he wants her to stop working with the other women, he forestalls her arguments by refusing to name his reason; it is "no good" (97), he tells her. He knows what they gradually begin to realize and what increasingly paralyzes them: the black revolution, both literally and figuratively, is "an explosion of roles, that's what the blowing up of the Union Buildings and the burning of master bedrooms is" (117). In this explosion, the Smaleses discover the precariousness of their identities. Neither can know the other any longer; to Bam, Maureen is "her. Not 'Maureen.' Not 'his wife'" (105), and to her he is "this man who had nothing, now" (145). Nor can they know July—"they could not read him" (60). The (con)text is being rewritten, and they cannot participate because they cannot rewrite themselves. They cannot find "words that were not phrases from back there, words that would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the blacks, out of themselves" because "the words would not come. They were

blocked by an old vocabulary" (127). The failure of the Smalese's language signals the failure of their attempt to situate themselves in July's world. In July's and Maureen's last confrontation, he finally refuses to speak English at all, but

she understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself—to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others. She was not his mother, his wife, his sister, his friend, his people. (152)

But knowing no word, Maureen cannot use her understanding. Even "the death's harpy image she made of herself meant nothing to him" (153). At the end of the novel, she is fleeing towards a helicopter without knowing "whether it holds saviours or murderers; and . . . for whom" (158). Stripped of context and role and without language to inscribe others, she is left only with animal instinct: "alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility" (160).

Names, as these examples indicate, are central to all of Gordimer's novels, but the issues surrounding names and naming become most crucial—and most pervasive—in *A Sport of Nature*, for there identity has become so fluid, so elusive, that all the names appear to be, as Rosa says of acronyms in *Burger's Daughter*, "hastening to claim, to catch up, the theory chasing events" (349). In fact, in the later novel, acronyms exemplify Gordimer's destabilization of identity and meaning. They appear to be "the language of love" for Hillela; they name the organizations for which she works, presumably to show her love for the African "family" that she has joined. But "a career can be built out of acronyms," and this Hillela certainly has done, whatever her motive. Acronym-making is linked to "the child [who] plays with alphabet blocks on the floor" (259; italics omitted in all passages), suggesting both the ephemerality of the acronyms and their instability before their meaning can "congeal" in social usage (Vološinov 101). At the end of this discussion of acronyms, the narrative voice (itself amorphous and varied) reflects on Hillela's vision of the rainbow family:

The real family, how they smell. The real rainbow family. The real rainbow family stinks. The dried liquid of dysentery streaks the legs of babies and old men and the women smell of their monthly blood. They smell of lack of water. They smell of lack of food. They smell of bodies blown up by the expanding gases of their corpses' innards, lying in the bush in the sun. Find the acronym for her real family. (260, italics omitted)

The repetition of "real" in this passage, in this novel of radically undermined reality, suggests that the only reality is that of suffering; only this will not be subjected to linguistic play.

Everything else, however, is called into question. Judie Newman debates whether it is Hillela herself or her cousin Sasha (who stays in South Africa to fight and be jailed for the black state that Hillela returns to celebrate in safety) who is the "sport of nature." Others question whether Hillela as a sport of nature is to be seen as the founder of a brave new species or as one whose "abnormal variation" is just utter amorality (see, respectively, Howard and Peck). In comparison to most of her family, she seems quite admirably unprejudiced, unconventional, and non-judgemental, while in comparison to Rosa Burger (who makes a brief appearance in the novel), she seems naive, apolitical, and superficial. The novel has proved unsettling precisely because it offers no basis for the political judgements that it seems to call for. At one point we are told, regarding Hillela's departure from an ANC job in Europe, that a possible motive is "a judgment that has to be considered. A harsh one." Yet all we can do is consider; as the narrator says, "who knows" (244). The novel offers the reader a sequence of shifting perspectives. The major part of the narrative is presented in a voice that resembles that of a journalist or biographer who is piecing together the meagre factual evidence and fleshing it out with the opinions of Hillela's associates. Thus, when we seem to be reading Hillela's thoughts or accounts of actions more detailed than the participants could possibly remember, we must consider the possibility that the biographer is moving into a fictional supplement to the "fact"—which, as the novel's frame, is itself "fiction." Moreover, the irony in her presentation of Hillela may reflect either her own skepticism or that of others, or both.

The centrality of naming emerges in this protean narrative's first sentence: "Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one

name and emerged under the other" (1). Hillela, the only Jewish student at an English girl's school in Rhodesia, sheds the name "Hillela" at school: "What sort of a name was that? Didn't know, couldn't tell them. What she did tell them, without a moment's hesitation, was that anyway she was always called by her second name, Kim." Then, returning to South Africa for vacation, "she threw Kim up to the rack with her school panama and took on Hillela" (1). She so successfully blends in with the English girls that no one remembers that she is Jewish; she even attends the Anglican church with them.

Hillela's renaming of herself to adapt to different situations doesn't just begin the novel: it also functions as a microcosm of the novel's action. Along the journey of her life, Hillela repeatedly sheds one name and emerges under another, just as she sheds roles and lovers and re-emerges with others. A common theme in all observers' (and readers') interpretations of her is her adaptability. The skeptical narrative voice notes that "there hasn't been anything she hasn't profited by, at one period or another" (213), while an admirer tells her that "you are too clever for anything to happen to you" (239). She is consistent only in her mutability.

Hillela's name changes signal changes in her political and social alignments. After a sequence of attachments to various men, Hillela marries the ANC leader Whaila Kgomani and takes his last name, symbolically cutting her ties with her family: "Hillela herself, as they knew her, disappears in the version of a marriage that has a line in the *curriculum vitae* devoted to Whaila Kgomani in a *Who's Who* of black 20th-century political figures" (177); her own name is unlisted. In the novel, also, she is often referred to as "Mrs. Whaila Kgomani." That Hillela views the marriage as a rebirth, as the beginning of her real life, is seen in the fact that "the woman has generally chosen to begin her existence there, when asked about her early life" (177). As usual, she succeeds in adapting to her new life: "as she had picked up protocol in an ambassador's Residence she picked up the conventions to be observed, signs to be read, manoeuvres to be concealed in refugee politics" (187).

After Whaila's assassination, "Mrs. Hillela Kgomani" begins a new existence as a widow, as an icon of liberation, and as a fund-

raiser (the most successful) for African aid organizations. Again, she shows a "quick aptitude" for whatever she needs to learn or do, including "the invention of euphemisms" (252), which constitute the language of diplomacy. It is this proficiency that impels her into her second marriage with Rueul, when she becomes Chiemeka, the General's wife, then "the President's wife" (315), and finally "the wife of the Chairman of the OAU" (354); she is "in a place of honour" (353). Only her face could identify her as Hillela (or Kim) Capran, as Mrs. Whaila Kgomani, or as Hillela Kgomani, for she has shed all of the names that enabled others to connect her with her past selves.

In the novel, construction or invention of self is closely linked to language and writing, for to review the past is "a flipping back of the pages of self" (178). The roots of Hillela's adaptive talent are seen in part to be in her ability to imagine, as the Smaleses cannot, what cannot be named. In thinking about her and Whaila's unborn child, she envisions it as "our colour"; Whaila (more realistically, given Nomo's future as a top model) thinks: "A category that doesn't exist: she would invent it. There are Hotnots and half-castes, two-coffee-one-milk, touch-of-the-tar-brush, pure white, black is beautiful—but a creature made of love, without a label; that's a freak" (186). As Reuel's wife, she creates yet another unimaginable and unnameable identity: "But Hillela has not been taken in by this African family; she has disposed it around her. Hers is the non-matrilineal centre that no-one resents because no-one has known it could exist. She has invented it" (322). Hillela's apparent independence from labels frees her to think and act in any context; in whatever context she has, she can inscribe the text of herself. Yet her naming of Nomo indicates how such a vision can collide with the dialogic nature of self-construction, in which the inscription of self is interpenetrated by society's inscription of the self. Admirable as her imagination may be, it cannot free her (or Nomo) from the roles that are constituted by their historical and social situation. She may, for example, decide to "[give] up being white," but as long as the choice to give up one's color is, fundamentally, a white privilege, her choice in one sense reinscribes her as white.

Hillela's case foregrounds the dialogic and therefore conflictual relationship of historicity and indeterminacy in Gordimer's

thought. Attacking not only the social manifestations of apartheid but also its inscription in language, Gordimer undermines certainty of name, identity, and hence of evaluation and categorization by reinforcing the centrality of historical and social context. Thus, she shows how the word can function simultaneously to control and suppress individuals and groups and to undermine the very authority that it has seemed to establish. Standing at the intersection of historicity and indeterminacy (like a text), moreover, the act of naming signals and conspires both in social control and in resistance to it. Yet it is always an act of social construction; neither the namer, the named, nor the name can stand above or apart from the context in which they act. Richard Martin, in discussing the "realism" of *Burger's Daughter* (its intimate connection to the world outside the text), writes: "yet its narrative strategies from the outset function to resist any illusion of direct access to the 'real,' insist that the real is always mediated by language, conception, and ideology, and that these (and thus the text as well) are themselves historically determined and constituted" (11). Gordimer expresses this assumption most directly as Will, the "author" of *My Son's Story*, discusses the inevitable mutability of his father's life and thought, which he equates with the changes in the meaning(s) of his name:

Sonny had had to change his mind about so many things, as his life changed, as the very meaning of his ridiculous name changed—first a hangover from sentimental parents, then a nickname to reassure the crowds at rallies that he was one of them, then an addendum to his full names in a prison dossier: "also known as 'Sonny.'" A common criminal with aliases. (50)

For Gordimer, the name functions as an index of identity, and, in *My Son's Story*, her writer-character repeatedly stresses the mutability of individuality. Hannah Plowman, Sonny's white lover, does not, like Hillela (whom she much resembles), change her name, but, as described by Will, her life exemplifies the pattern that Hillela's and indeed all of Gordimer's characters' lives show: "An individual life, Hannah's, but one that has followed the shifts in power of the communities into which she was born. So that what she really is, is a matter of 'at that time' and 'then'; qualifications and uncertainties" (87). Will

here emphasizes, as Gordimer has increasingly done throughout her career, the simultaneous working of individuality—decision-making and agency—and context—the social relations that both shape individuality and guarantee its mutability. Later Will similarly envisions Hannah (and Sonny) as caught between the pull of their love for each other and their changing circumstances. Hannah has been offered the position of United Nations High Commission for Refugees Regional Representative for Africa, and she and Sonny are both aware that she will accept, even though it will mean, effectively, the end of their affair. According to Will, “[t]hat was exactly what Hannah was obeying: the need to change. How would change come, for her, if she stayed on in the cottage, conveniently near for visits from Sonny? How does such a love affair—come about, made inevitable by the law of life between a man and woman—obey the other law of life: moving on?” (215) Here again, the intersection of the personal and the political/social forms the everchanging site of identity.

In Gordimer’s texts, language reveals itself clearly as mediator. According to Vološinov, the

inner dialectical quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes. In the ordinary conditions of life, the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully because the ideological sign in an established, dominant ideology is always somewhat reactionary and tries, as it were, to stabilize the preceding factor in the dialectical flux of the social generative process, so accentuating yesterday’s truth as to make it appear today’s. And that is what is responsible for the refracting and distorting peculiarity of the ideological sign within the dominant ideology. (23-24)

Vološinov here addresses both the “space for a change” and the violence/crisis that Spivak sees as crucial for discursive displacement. The space is the force field generated by the “inner dialectic quality of the sign,” and the crisis is not only the social upheaval that characterizes South African society and its texts but is—or can be—also a function of the act of writing.

The interplay between the monologism of institutionalized power and the inherent mutability of life and language forms the arena of possibility, both (and perhaps simultaneously) political and literary. This is a lesson that Will knows Sonny has learned

from Shakespeare: "Once a great Shakespearean reader, reverent amateur of the power of words, Sonny must have known that if a term is coined it creates a self-fulfilling possibility and at the same time provides a formulation for dealing with it" (179). This learning from literature itself embodies the possibilities created by language. Encountering Kafka after Shakespeare, Sonny finds in both "a way out of battered classrooms, the press of Saturday people, the promiscuity of thin-walled houses, and at the same time back into them again with a deeper sense of what life in them might mean," for "Kafka named what he had no names for" (17). Moreover, Sonny's reading of Kafka (and Shakespeare) is shaped by his own experience in his vastly different context; he rejects Kafka's belief "that the power in which people are held powerless exists only in their own submission" (17) because he recognizes the social forces—in his case those of apartheid—which, through their human representatives, limit and modify individual circumstance. Yet understanding the power in possibility of language moves Sonny toward direct activism—as it moves Will to see literature as a political act.

As Gordimer confronts the permeable boundaries between fiction and fact, she extends her concern with the intersections of personal and political, practice and theory, as well as those of art and life. In fact, much of her Nobel Prize acceptance speech deals with these issues, as its title, "Writing and Being," suggests. In that speech, she early asserts a gap between the sphere of art, or fiction, and that of life, or fact: "nothing factual that I write or say will be as truthful as my fiction." But she rapidly reconnects art and life in the stance of the artist (in this case, herself): "for it is in the tension between standing apart and being involved that the imagination transforms both" (8). As the discussion above suggests, a similar tension informs Gordimer's fictional treatment of language and fiction—and, in particular, of their relation to the larger world. While she repeatedly has referred in her essays and interviews to literature as "transcendent" (for example, "Living in the Interregnum" 276), she is equally insistent on the importance of social and historical situation, saying in "Writing and Being" that "the writer's themes and characters are inevitably formed by the pressures and distortions of that society

as the life of the fisherman is determined by the power of the sea" (12). The tension that Gordimer depicts arises from her questioning of the power of language to represent or convey truth—preceded, of course, by the question of whether or not there is "truth" to be conveyed.

From another angle, discussing contemporary literary studies, Gordimer provides a more direct comment on this tension: as the critic attempts "to make definitive through methodology the writer's grasp at the forces of being," she or he is stymied, for "life is aleatory in itself; being is constantly pulled and shaped this way and that by circumstances and different levels of consciousness. There is no pure state of being, and it follows that there is no pure text, 'real' text, totally incorporating the aleatory." Thus, she concludes, "the literary scholars end up becoming some kind of storyteller, too" (8). In essence, it is the acceptance of the "aleatory" quality of both life and art that sets them in contrast to those forces—whether of overt coercion, like apartheid, or of covert coercion, like prescriptive literary theory—that seek to label, define, and fix.

The aleatory, moreover, forms the basis of her often-repeated claim that literature can transform (her own favorite term) the world. Graham Huggan has demonstrated that Gordimer's views on the writer's responsibility are deeply influenced by Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art* (35 and passim; see also Rich and Newman). Fischer's ideas clearly foreshadow Gordimer's: he says, for example, that "art is necessary in order that man should be able to recognize and change the world" (14); it follows that "art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it" (48). Thus art and life are mutually reflective, for Fischer sees the guarantee of art's continuing necessity in the aleatory nature of human life: "all art has to do with this . . . infinite capacity of man for metamorphosis, so that, like Proteus, he can assume any form and lead a thousand lives without being crushed by the multiplicity of his experience" (223). Huggan quotes Marcuse's dictum that "art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world" (35).

It is in the Marcusean sense that Gordimer "names" the act of writing as an act of revolution, setting the writer's imagination

and language, and by implication aleatory life, against the ideal of stasis that characterizes the state. She concludes that

the writer . . . knows that the only revolution is the permanent one— not in the Trotskyite sense, but in the sense of the imagination, in which no understanding is ever completed, but must keep breaking up and reforming in different combinations if it is to spread and meet the terrible questions of human existence. What alienates the Writer from the State is that the State—any State—is always certain, it is always certain it is right. (Mailer and Gordimer 25)

The “terrible questions of human existence” take concrete shape in her own fiction in the dilemmas that her characters face: Rosa Burger’s struggle to separate her private from her public self, for example, or Liz Van Den Sandt’s realization that life requires risk, or the ultimate recognition of all of the main characters in *My Son’s Story* that the fundamental “law of life [is] moving on” (215). They are also seen in the fates of those characters, such as Meyring in *The Conservationist* or Bam and Maureen Smales in *July’s People*, who reject the need to accept the forces that impel life and change: the disintegration of self and individuality even as it is most desperately asserted.

At the end of *My Son’s Story*, when Will reveals that he is the author of the book we have yet to finish reading, he reasserts one of the most fundamental of the claims writing makes: the recording of a witness. He will, he says, move on from the story of his own family, “my first book—that I can never publish” (277), to his mature work as a writer, work he identifies directly with politics; he says that it is

my time that’s coming with politics. . . . I’m going to be the one to record, someday, what he and my mother/Aila and Baby and the others did, what it really was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free, as desert dwellers’ days are determined by the struggle against thirst and those of dwellers amid snow and ice by the struggle against numbing of cold. That’s what struggle really is, not a platform slogan repeated like a TV jingle. (276)

Echoing Gordimer’s metaphor for the writer’s context as a sea that determines her existence as fisher/writer, Will’s goal opens out into that of Gordimer, the writer who is nearing the end of her career and who can see, as Will perforce cannot, how endless is the writer’s struggle to create. Yet out of her struggle, in her

admittedly provisional answers to the "terrible questions of human existence"—as Yeats said during another revolution—"a terrible beauty is born" ("Easter, 1916").

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