

(In)Continent I-lands:
Blurring the Boundaries Between
Self and Other in
South African Women's Autobiographies

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THE TITLE OF my paper refers to the refusal by some South African autobiographers to keep the self contained within the parameters of the narrating and narrated "I." I look at three very different recent autobiographical texts. Hanlie Griesel's *Sibam-bene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* (1987), Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985), and Lyndall Gordon's *Shared Lives* (1992) trace a diversity of responses to the political problems experienced by women under apartheid and explore what Paul John Eakins refers to as the relational self. The differences among the texts, and the reasons for them, are important. Nevertheless, none of these women blur the boundaries of the narrating and narrated "I" because they, as women, conform to some essential pattern of autobiographical self-exploration which emerges out of essential truths of femaleness.¹ Nor are these autobiographical subjects depicted in the texts as selves who cannot be "distantiated" from their families, as has sometimes been claimed about women autobiographers. Rather, these autobiographical subjects smudge the boundaries of the "I-land" because, in Griesel's case, the argument for the importance of the women's testimonies is reinforced by the implication that their oppression is shared; or because, in Kuzwayo's case, indigenous black cultural models construct communally defined selves; or because, in Gordon's case, the lives of people are entwined, the self being as much—or more—a function of others' interpretations of one as of essential inherent characteristics.

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Griesel's *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* indicates in its title the collective nature of the project. "Sibambene" means in Zulu "we pull together"; the text comprises editorial commentary as well as very brief quotations from women at Mboza, an impoverished area in Northern KwaZulu/Natal.² In this slim text (only 49 pages, liberally illustrated with photographs and children's drawings), the 43 participants are divided into three generation groups of older women (*amakhosikazi*), young women (*omakoti*), and young girls (*amatombizane*). These women, who live and work together, assemble daily for literacy classes in which they speak about their disappointments, difficulties, and hopes. Although the editor states that "[t]he essence and mood of [the women's] discussions about individual experiences . . . are retained in the narrative" (n. pag.), the text in fact partially obscures individual participants because none of the speakers is identified by name.

The sense that individuals are subsumed into the group is reinforced by the arrangement of the women's responses into chapters specific to each age group, and also by the frequent generalizations and synopses which the editor interposes between the very brief comments by the women themselves. The editor often interjects longer pages of summary between the very brief responses (two or three lines is the norm) by individual (but unnamed) women. The following excerpt from the chapter on the younger women demonstrates how the text is arranged, with brief comments from the women (in bold in the original), interspersed with longer editorial generalizations:

The young women say they have to be in a position to look after themselves these days. They depend on their husbands to send money home, but this is not always enough. They are worried that their husbands will get tired of hearing about their hardships and may then choose not to come back.

The problem is that when a man finds a job in the city, he also finds a girl and falls in love with her. Then that girl and he are working, and he will forget about his woman in the homestead because she is not working. . . .

The young women want to learn to read and write so that they can stay in contact with their husbands. They need their support. If their husbands leave them, they do not know how they will be able to help their children. . . .

We have no jobs and no money. . . . Mboza must get something that will help us.

If men work here, then we will work alongside our husbands and then we can see each other. Then both of us can have jobs. (19)

As can be discerned from this quotation, the stance of objective reportage adopted by the editorial narrator, her impersonal commentary, tends to imbue the testimonies with a measure of sociological impersonality and of course sociological authority. It contributes to the creation of a document which seeks to acquire its validity from the use of metonymy: the "voices" of the women emerge from a fuller reality, a reality which they point to and "prove," and to which the editorial narrator, with her fuller command of language, can testify. The generalizations serve to anchor each individual's contributions in a shared experience of deprivation and hardship, in order that each response speaks not only *to* readers but also *for* others in the community.

But while the women are indeed aggregated in *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* (and this is by no means without its attendant problems), what is implied thereby is that although these women share unbelievable deprivation, their tenacity emanates from this sharing. This impression is reinforced because the women themselves (with only two exceptions) consistently either generalize or use plural or third-person pronouns. Here are some typical examples from the older women's testimony: "It is the times . . .," says one (5); "*Omakoti* [the younger women] are not always happy because they say we make the rules . . . they do not want to look after us anymore," says another (12); and, "[i]t is not for the older women to do the heavy work—it doesn't look right" (8). In the entire text, the pronoun "I" is used only twice (10, 26). This smudging of the individual is an editorial strategy as well as a position adopted by the speakers in almost all of their recorded responses.

In the aggregation of individuals lies much of the significance of the text. Through the blurring of the boundaries of the "I," we are reminded that the experiences are not unique, and the emotional appeal and political efficacy of the text are thereby multiplied manifold. The work concludes with the following:

And the voices of the women must be heard . . .

the men do not listen to
 what the women have to say
 it is the strength of women
 that will bring about change. (45)

Autobiographical testimony often has been recognized as a political act in that the person testifying asserts the right to speak rather than to be spoken for. Of course, one cannot ignore the obvious complications of this politically significant act of self-assertion—caused by the presence of the “arranger” or researcher. Griesel herself attempts to explore these problems in a later article that reflects on failings of the *Sibamabene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* project (“Text and Expressions” 52-54). It is important to take cognizance of the researcher’s role in the structuring of the responses, because of the formulation of questions or, more informally, because of the dynamics of the relationship between informants and researcher, the latter having access to the print media and occupying a position of authority. Neither should one disregard the implications of the use of English in this edition of the text.³ That there is a marked power imbalance is undeniable; but one should also bear in mind the researcher’s position as facilitator. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out that interviewers of Holocaust survivors enable those testifying

for the first time to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and *be heard*, to in fact *address* the significance of their biography—to *address*, that is, the suffering, the truth, and the necessity of this impossible narration—to a hearing “you,” and to a listening community. (41)

In the case of these Zulu women, their testimony has particular resonance because they are suppressed as black women under apartheid, as members of the poorest class of South African society, and as members of a culture which traditionally demands that good women remain silent and submissive. Their testimony may thus be situated as trebly resistant. Griesel states that *Sibamabene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* was an attempt both to publicize the devastations of apartheid on the daily lives of disenfranchised women such as these and to empower the women of Mboza, to enable them to perceive of themselves as educated

("Text and Expressions" 51). In this latter aim the overwhelming sense of the density of experience, of shared testimony, of countless "I's" packed into "we's" and "they's," becomes most effective. From this sense of the testimonies representing communal knowledge (as Felman and Laub argue) "the authority of the witness, that is, the truth claim of the narrative, proceeds" (111; see also 204). This record carries authority because its relevance extends beyond the responses of the women who participated in the project. Moreover, the record of struggle, of a surviving humanity in the face of brutal deprivation, symbolically registers the need to overcome such circumstances; by implying statistical generality the text lends credence to its plea to the reader to hear and recognize the women's plight. One could argue that the text's narrative form, the sense of collective experience, offers a structural or symbolic solution to problems it cannot solve in the material world. While the women may indeed derive a measure of comfort from each other, their poverty and functional illiteracy remain unchanged subsequent to the publication of *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza*, as Griesel acknowledged four years later ("Text and Expressions," 53-54).

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Most autobiographies produced in English by South Africans during the apartheid era conform to the general trend of Western narrative life-writing and present the autobiographer/narrator as authority of self and text, the latter (the textual "I") as transparent reflection of the former, which is knowable and unique. The "I" is usually deployed as a kind of hold-all, containing the essentials of and keys to the extra-textual self. The subgenre which I have identified elsewhere as worker autobiography⁴ rarely subscribes to this practice, nor does Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*. Such writing differs from the normative Western tradition of autobiographical writing in that both the unifying narrative and the narrator are fractured by, and subordinated to, the recurrent attention to other black South African women. *Call Me Woman* gestures towards Western individualism in the narrativization of self in a prose text, but it does not wholly subscribe to this ideology, for the self is portrayed as neither unique nor as

an independent individual. Nadine Gordimer comments in the Preface to *Call Me Woman* that

[Kuzwayo] is history in the person of one woman. . . . [She] is not Westernized; she is one of those who have Africanised the Western concept of woman and in herself achieved a synthesis with meaning for all who experience cultural conflict. (xi)

The narrative consistently shifts attention away from the autobiographical subject and towards other black South African women. Passages which laud individuals and groups of women are characteristic of the text. Even in the more conventionally autobiographical central section of the narrative, the subject does not retain a pivotal position. The concluding sentence of the chapter entitled "Minors are Heroines" serves as a neat statement of theme of the text as a whole: "Long live the spirit of those unsung heroines!" The publishers characterize the text thus, in the back-cover blurb:

This remarkable autobiography refuses to focus only on the author, for it draws on the unrecorded history of a whole people. In telling her own personal and political story over 70 years, Ellen Kuzwayo speaks for, and with, the women among whom she lives and works. Their courage and dignity remain a source of wonder.

The autobiographical self thus is not consistently central, and, even when it is given centre stage, it is defined as a self among a host of others. Kuzwayo reminds us more than once that her achievements are important because she is a black South African woman, not because they are personal victories. The text consistently refuses to privilege the "I." Of her suffering when her son is banned, she comments:

Let it be known that the trauma I went through in the three years my son was banned to Mafikeng is nothing unique. It is the torture and suffering of hundreds of black parents. Mothers in particular have endured such torments. (193)

This shift of focus towards other women occurs not only in terms of the focalized component of the narrative (that is, the object of narrative focus, the "I" to whom things happen) but also with regard to the focalizer (the one whose viewpoint is represented, the narrating "I"). In *Call Me Woman*, the narrator always presents herself as empathetic to other black women, be they illegal liquor

brewers or medical doctors, and at times this empathy spills over into the narration of an experience or event from the point of view of a generalized black mother (Kuzwayo 44) or specifically from another woman's viewpoint (47-48). There is, on these occasions, a sort of effacement of the narratorial focalizer as the crucial source of perception and information.

But it is not only the text's narrative techniques which blur the focus on the narrator/protagonist; its narrative structure further reinforces this effect. Kuzwayo's autobiography is divided into three parts: Parts 1 and 3 are largely biographical or documentary, while the middle section tells Kuzwayo's own story. Part 1, entitled "Soweto," serves to provide background information regarding the impoverishment of black South Africans and how legislated oppression has resulted in the breakdown of the social fabric of indigenous communities. The narrator is concerned particularly with the impact of this on women. Part 2, entitled "My Road to Soweto," is the longest section of the text; this tells Kuzwayo's own story. Part 3, entitled "Patterns Behind the Struggle," focuses on black South African women: their attempts to ameliorate appalling conditions, and the amazing achievements of many who have succeeded in attaining professional status in spite of the odds posed by sexism and institutionalized racism. The recognizably autobiographical part of the text, then, is framed by parts 1 and 3, which serve to contextualize, to situate, the experiences recounted therein. In addition to sandwiching the autobiographical narrative between two documentary accounts which routinely highlight black women's achievements, *Call Me Woman* further de-emphasizes the autobiographical subject by juxtaposing, in the front of the book, a chronological list of significant events in Kuzwayo's life with a list of major political events which occurred in that time. Kuzwayo is thus presented as merely one victim of the national nightmare. The text concludes also with two lists: these are of the names of all black women medical doctors and lawyers. Again, these detract from the reader's sense of the narrator's achievements and importance.

The effect of the structure and narratorial strategies is to depersonalize the narrative. For readers familiar with current Western autobiographical practices, this might cause some un-

ease.⁵ But reading this text in terms of a generalized notion of indigenous cultural practices makes these features of *Call Me Woman* very interesting. In traditional South African cultures, the individual can never be “self-made.” Selfhood is communally defined. One proverb which encapsulates this philosophy may be translated as, “A person is a person because of other people.”⁶ Kuzwayo refers to the importance of proverbs in traditional South African cultures,⁷ and the proverbs that she discusses all indicate, to a greater or lesser degree, the importance of community (16-17).

In keeping with this communally defined identity, autobiographical forms in traditional indigenous South African cultures, called *izibongo* or *izihasho* in Zulu and Xhosa (Turner 3) and *dithoko* in Sotho (Kunene 53; Guma 2-3) and “praise poems” in English,⁸ are less about the narrating self defining a self, claiming that the enunciating “I” is the best authority on the knowable, individualistic self, than about a narrator using lines composed by her/himself and/or others about her or his ancestors and forebears, as well as passages about the autobiographical subject.⁹ In other words, the enunciating self, indeed, the performer (for traditional praise poems are performed in social situations), is not the author/authority for the self in the way that is expected in Western-style autobiography. The self, to put this another way, is dispersed across numerous communally accepted characterizations of that self. Furthermore, lines which prove to be popular in a particular community may appear in a number of different individuals’ praises.

Just as praise poems often act as a spur to courageous action (Gunner 70), the characteristic references to other women in *Call Me Woman* provide a kind of honour roll to motivate other black women to aspire to greater endeavours. But the references serve, too, to situate Kuzwayo’s autobiographical subject as being one of that company, to define her self as almost a palimpsest of the innumerable selves of South African black women. While *Call Me Woman* does not appear to be consciously evoking features of traditional indigenous auto/biographical poetry, it does reinforce the location of Kuzwayo within a community. This dispersal of self serves to locate Kuzwayo as praise-singer as well as

to declare that Kuzwayo achieves her own self-hood, an identity which must constantly be re-created *because* of her bonds with this community of women. The text thus might more accurately be termed auto/biographical than autobiographical. In singing the praises of these mothers and daughters of Africa, Kuzwayo defines the self obliquely: I am one of them, and I am proud to be so identified. The autobiographical subject's self is shaped by her role as one who serves her community.

In constructing the narrative subject through its association with others, Kuzwayo is conforming to traditional African cultural imperatives. Both Mary Maboreke and Thandabantu Nhlapo have written on the importance of community in black South African cultures, particularly for women. Nhlapo observes, for instance, that "the overriding value in the African family is reflected in the *non-individual nature of marriage*, sometimes called the collective or communal aspect of the marriage relationship" (113). He goes on to note that "[f]amily ties serve to subordinate the interests of women to the interests of the wider group" (119); "the African value system does not perceive women as separate entities but always as adjuncts to the family. A woman's personhood is lost in the group much more than a man's is subsumed under the so-called community principle" (120). And Maboreke has this to say: "Africans in general and African women in particular identify themselves through a maze of relationships; namely, mother to so-and-so, daughter to so-and-so, wife of so-and-so, etc., in which so-and-so is always a man. . . . Almost all Africans see themselves as an integral part of a big and complex machine called 'the family.' The individual alone is seen as almost useless and certainly powerless" (228).

However, although Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject is defined relationally, the primary relationship is less pivotally that between the woman and the men in the family (as is traditionally the case) than that of the autobiographical subject and the community of black women. Kuzwayo's autobiography defines the autobiographical subject as being one link in a "chain of sisterhood" (239). The text concludes thus:

The black women in South Africa have shown outstanding tenacity against great odds. We shall never give in to defeat. Today we remain

determined, like the women of our community of previous generations, who have left us a living example of strength and integrity. . . .

The commitment of the women of my community is my commitment—to stand side by side with our menfolk and our children in this long struggle to liberate ourselves and to bring about *peace* and *justice* for all in a country we love so deeply.

The old Setswana proverb has come alive with a fresh meaning for me at this point:

Mmangoana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng

It means:

“The child’s mother grabs the sharp end of the knife.”

Nkosi Sikelel’ i Afrika

God Bless Africa.

* * *

In *Shared Lives*, Gordon explores how relationships with others, principally—but not exclusively—other women, complicate the performance and autobiographical/biographical depiction of self in life as in narrative. *Shared Lives* revisits the peculiarities of the tightly knit Jewish community of Cape Town of the 1950s and 1960s, probing “the rituals of the tribe” (145), which focused on women as the bearers of the next generation. The narrator explains how much more potent were the compulsions of gender than any sense of social engineering based on race classification:

Though Flora [Romy], Rosie and Ellie grew up amongst liberals who repudiated apartheid—a milieu that found it easy to distance itself mentally from the country in which it lived—no woman in the ’50s in this society could be impervious to the norms of gender. These women . . . belonged to the last generation to have no political awareness of their fate as women, and yet each contrived to resist, in different ways, the models which they did also absorb. (6)

The imperative to marry, as the culmination of “the prevailing cult of femininity” (44), imbued all of their lives.

Gordon sets out to write a biography of three members of this group—Romy (earlier called Flora), Ellie, and Rose—with whom she had been friends since schooldays. All three had died before reaching middle age. But the narrator finds that the impersonality of the biographer cannot be achieved, nor is it desirable. Instead of seeking to hide the narrating self in the impersonality of the biographer’s apparently objective authority,

she allows her story to become one of the shared enterprise of growing up and becoming women, "shared lives which go on in memory" (1), and of the collaborative nature of the narrative reconstruction of those who peopled her past. Contemplating the creative act of writing about her friends, the narrator confronts the failures of generic conventions:¹⁰

There will be, I thought, no path to follow. There will be no easy truth. It will be an imaginary meeting of divided halves: the biographer and the subject, the living and the dead. There is no essential truth and no end to truth. Biographic objectivity is an illusion: that voluminous "Definitive Life" favoured by publishers is but a shell. For the only approach to a living truth is, on the basis of fact, to imagine the life—which is to take it to the border of fiction. (251)

The writing project becomes one in which the authorial "I," rather than acquiring an almost unimpeachable authority, acknowledges the partiality of memory, the blindnesses of self. The author turns to mutual friends and relatives to assist in the piecing together of a narrative:

What began in dreams and acts of memory has become . . . collaborative. What was written after breaking the silence in South Africa at the beginning of 1990 has been an attempt to fuse the words of others with my own biased hoard. We exchanged our stories of Romy, Rose, and Ellie, a continuation, a recovery, it seemed to me, of the vital part of friendship. (277)

By using a collaborative approach to authorship, Gordon finds that relationships are revived in the process: "In Cape Town and Johannesburg, Romy's old network sprang to life at a touch. This was no ordinary biographical research; it was the renewing of bonds which was, to Romy, the essential act of life" (276).

The self is performative, tentative; although Gordon seeks to uncover truths about her friends, it is the bonds of friendship, of co-operation, which seem to her to be fundamental, and these seams are constantly renegotiated, reconfigured:

"One's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown," wrote Joseph Conrad in a letter of 1896. It was back at school, through revolt, cheating, and the bond of outcasts, that we glimpsed a secret sharer, some other and perhaps authentic self who lurked half-defiant, half-craven, beneath the approved identity of Bardot or socialite, as the case might be. (80)

The text explores mutuality; it is a celebration of influence (rather than an anxiety of influence). In this passage the narrator describes Romy's gift for calling into being undiscovered potential:

The advancing leaps of "empathy" that almost knocked one over, like Tigger's unruly bounce, had their goal: to induce others to be what they were made to be. [Romy] had no rules; she simply lent herself to undefined need, called it into existence, watered it with eager concern, and nurtured it into action. In this way she exploded provincial stagnation: to know her was to realize that possibilities lay all about us. . . . When, later, I learnt Conrad's corollary to his perception that character remains hopelessly unknown—"There remains nothing but to surrender to one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life"—I recognized this fidelity as one that Flora practised long ago, without a philosophy, with only an intuitive grasp of how to be. (88)

This auto/biography traces the amoebic qualities of self and community, the attractions and repulsions which all the time push and pull the self in different directions. The narrator sees the principal influences in her self-development as Romy, "who 'opened you up' . . . [and] 'restored to you a self you hardly knew existed'" (192),¹¹ and Siamon Gordon, the author's husband.¹² As a teenager Gordon had seen herself as plain and unattractive. The narrator recalls:

Yes, I was a mess and, almost perversely, practised a studied indifference to my appearance because I thought myself more than plain. In contrast with other girls, I was irredeemable. I stamped up the mountain, pushing my unwashed hair out of my eyes. Under my palm, I felt the familiar film of acne. Those days, I could hardly bear to look in the mirror long enough to tie my hair back, as required by Miss Tyfield, on school days. (87)

As something of a pariah, she enjoyed some of the privileges that come with being "to some degree, an outsider" (32). Her escape into historical novels allowed her to resist becoming one of the "regulation women" who value only "physical sophistication" (44). Nevertheless, Romy (then called Flora), the "seductive beauty" (51) "took [Gordon] up in her irresistible way" (57), her boundless affection giving Gordon the confidence to abandon her self-image of wallflower (50) to become Siamon's wife:

But for you, Romy, I would not have been a candidate for the mated existence; I would have been, for a long time, a subject of family conclaves (which they would have enjoyed) about improving my appearance and manner, along the lines of Press advice, when I was 14, to be less of a prude. I should have been, according to family prediction, a Miss Prim of a nursery teacher, waiting around, after friends had married, for some second-rate husband who would have me. (264)

It was also Romy who later saved Gordon from the grips of a debilitating postnatal depression.¹³

The auto/biography is in large measure an attempt by Gordon to bring Romy back to life (242) in order to express her gratitude to her:

Could any act of reciprocity give back to Romy what she did for me? She invented her friends, made us up, endowed us with qualities that were congenial to her. This was the source of her attraction. She gave to each what each most needed. Since I was plain and freckled, she gave me, at sixteen, a charge of confidence. . . . All of us she urged to play our parts in character. But could we do this for her? Could we find her in that elusive "between" in which women of our generation lived? (250-51)

Shared Lives, seemingly contradictorily, explores the fractures, the disunities, within selves, and the unities, the bonds, between friends: "I was part of them, they of me, and I want to claim that part. I am the divided relic of these friends, and feel the footsteps of their lives in mine" (248). It celebrates the other in the interstices of self. The importance of co-operation, particularly among women, is more than a reflection on the value of friendship, however; it becomes Gordon's political and philosophical credo: "[Romy's] sharing came to me now, not as a private knack, but as a triumph of women's tradition and portent of women to be" (263). This feminist politics of collaboration shapes her career; the substitution of competition with co-operation at school becomes the model for her teaching career at St. Hilda's College, Oxford (56).¹⁴ As biography/autobiography/collaborative recollection, *Shared Lives* recounts but also enacts, performs, the search for truths through fellowship.

Rather than indicate a weakness, an inability to construct an individualist autonomous self in the tradition of male-biased humanism, Kuzwayo, Griesel, and her respondents, and Gordon,

in their own ways, refuse such conventions precisely because their strengths lie in the acknowledgement of mutuality. Autobiography in the Western tradition, with the strong authorizing "I," gives way in these texts to the more fluid forms of auto/biography—forms which more fruitfully can fathom the nuances of reciprocity.

NOTES

- 1 Jelinek, in her groundbreaking anthology of critical essays on women's autobiography, notes that women's autobiographies differ from men's in that the former emphasize the personal as opposed to the public (7-8). Mason argues—in a similarly sweeping generalization about female-authored autobiography—that "the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other.' This . . . grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems . . . to enable women to write openly about themselves" (210). What I am contesting are their essentializing moves to characterize a female autobiographical tradition, and the collapse of the distinctions between sex and gender, and between race, class, and culture, which this implies.
- 2 This province is on the eastern seaboard of South Africa. Moves are afoot to have the province declared a kingdom.
- 3 There is also a Zulu version of the text, which, Griesel notes, is "almost exactly the same length as the English one" ("Texts and Expressions" 52).
- 4 See my "Not Quite Fiction."
- 5 See Daymond, 21-22.
- 6 In Zulu, this is: *Umntu, umuntu ngabantu*. In SeSotho, it is: *Motho ke motho ka batho*. This proverb means that you are somebody because of the community of people around you. Whatever you have achieved will be because, in one way or another, the community has lent its support. You are, therefore, always to be considerate of them; your status and survival also depend on their recognition of you. So it is about mutual support, give and take. (I am indebted to my dear friend and colleague, Thandi Dlodhlo, for this information.)
- 7 "Similarity of proverbs runs through all the different communities of South Africa; Zulus, Batswana, Xhosas, Swazis, Tshongas and several others" (16).
- 8 Turner cites Opland's criticism (33) of this translated term, for it fails to allow for the element of censure which is important in much of this poetry.
- 9 Usually their praise names are recited, in order to situate the subject within kinship lineages (Gunner 62-63, 67, 182; see also Turner 5; Opland 40).
- 10 In addition to its challenge to generic conventions, the text strains at other borders, too, such as the distinctions between absence and presence, life and death. The imaginative revival of her dead friends results in the conversations with Romy, years after Romy's death. "Romy," she says, "is the collaborator in her biography. I simply relay her oral performance" (261). And she not only finds Romy in many of the texts that she later teaches but comes to know her more intimately than she had when Romy was still alive. "Yes, I was getting to know Romy better than in the course of her life. She came closer as old lines swerved from their context" (250).

- ¹¹ The influence went in the other direction, too, from Gordon to Flora. The narrator is deeply troubled over the advice which she had offered to Romy not to marry unless she is more than certain that it is what she wants:

I have often wondered, in after years, at my complicity during that obsessive summer when we huddled over this question until we shredded further the conventional marriage to the negation to which it pointed. Winston thought Romy the sole author of her dilemmas. He waved away the confession that I have put down here: our lives shaped together. What I said on Fourth Beach did play a part, a not altogether innocent part, in Romy's future. Ostensibly I was saying the right thing: she must be free to decide. Yet, embedded in that concern, there lurked another motive: I rejoiced in Romy's hesitance. I needed her to continue to be a free woman. So we use others to shore up the ramparts of dreams or faiths—just as elders of the tribe used generations of unready girls to shore the ties and rituals of a closed community which gave religious sanction to male predominance. These girls were born to lose themselves before they found a future—or realized, even, that there might be a future to find. (189-90)

- ¹² For example:

... For most of us [the destitution prevalent in the black ghettos] was invisible, so we often said the approved liberal things without feeling them. The effect of the [Group Areas] Act was to turn each group upon itself, cut off from other groups, each locked in its own narrow cares.

This was a state of mind that was particularly warping for white women, who were left with nothing at all to do but lie in the sun, arrange flowers, and offer each other dainty gifts at morning parties. These small rituals—which defined womanhood in those days—assumed an inordinate importance in the triviality of workless days. The doves cooing through the pines and the foghorn blaring on winter nights spoke of protracted vacancy. . . .

As a girl, I never conceived of work in the sense of a profession. Emigration [to Israel] was to be the great adventure, not economic, mental, or political struggle. Though emigration was expected of all Habonim Movement members, Siamon was the one leader to challenge the vagueness of this future as it would affect women. I was surprised by his notion that I should plan a career.

"Why don't you write?" he suggested as we sat around after a meeting. "You should try biography. It would combine your interests in literature and history. You should think more seriously of what you could do."

"No," I said, "no, impossible." I thought of my mother who wrote poems, but who kept them, like Emily Dickenson, tied up in a drawer. If she were diffident, I who was not poetic should be all the more so.

"I wouldn't want to live with an idle woman," he said. (84; see also 124).

- ¹³ Romy arrives suddenly soon after Gordon is beginning to take the first tentative steps to recovery, made possible through her studies of Virgil:

My inability to adjust to New York became increasingly hopeless and propelled me into a depth of depression from which there seemed no return: I lay inert through all the hours and minutes of the day, hardly able to speak. . . .

Then, late one night at the end of January, Romy came: a saviour in high tan boots, with streaming red hair framed in a white bonnet, alighting at Kennedy Airport, tired from her flight, but bent on transformation. She had feared, she said, "the worst," and her "shock at seeing the person I knew" came out in a burst of tears. So she gave me back that person. (152-53)

And when Romy leaves, Gordon finds that she has been renewed:

Romy's departure marked a new beginning for me: a resolve to build up the good deliberately, as she did instinctively, and affirm it with all one's strength. . . . I saw, now, the possibilities of that double existence: to hold firm to truth and, at the same time, to make terms with the world in order to act within it. (165)

¹⁴ The form of power that she wishes to communicate to her students is that of *becoming*: "Subversiveness conjoined with scholarship: . . . the means to discover truths which cannot exist, frozen, in ideology or doctrine, only through perpetual search" (175).

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