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By “the Flash of Fireflies”: Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer’s Late Short Story Cycles

Nadine Gordimer’s late short stories in *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* and *Loot* use a fragmentary, non-linear form to depict their contemporary society as a multi-temporal present that is haunted by its colonial past. By blending different narrative modes, including moral fable, political allegory and social realism, the stories engage with the injustices of a capitalist world-system in post-apartheid South Africa that are manifested simultaneously across different temporal and geographical scales.

The scope of social and political critique in Nadine Gordimer’s short stories as well as her reputation as a short story writer rather than a novelist are subjects of some dispute, especially because her short stories have tended to be underestimated. Early critics regarded her primarily as a short story writer; for instance in his 1974 monograph, Robert Haugh lauds the poetic intensity and technical perfection of her short stories, and considers her novels as technical failures in comparison (161). John Cooke reiterates this in his summary of the early critical reception of Gordimer’s works, noting that she was known “as an accomplished short story writer [...] in the fifties and sixties; until the publication of *A Guest of Honour* in 1970, her novels were considered at best promising but seriously flawed” (54). This changes drastically in later criticism: for example, Stephen Clingman’s defining study of Gordimer’s novels in 1986 argues that

the novel is both intensive and more extensive historically than the short story could ever be; it is a question of degree; but one that approaches “kind.” [...] [T]he novels, due to the sheer expanse of their exploration in space and time, of necessity investigate their social and historical situation in greater depth and at greater length. Their project is more substantial historically, their need to make meaning of history more decisive. (16)

It is only later that scholars like Dominic Head, in his 1994 book, respond to Clingman’s position and find value in Gordimer’s short fiction, noting that the features that are integral to her novels – “contradictions, silences and gaps” (Head 163) – are evident in her stories as well. But even Head privileges the novels, conceding that the scale of the novels makes them more expansive, involved and sustained in their engagement with social and political questions. Other scholars acknowledge the importance of Gordimer’s short stories against this wider tendency to disregard them. Judie Newman, in her short book on Gordimer, notes the value and the importance of the short stories, but excludes them from her study for pragmatic reasons having to do with space and the focus of her book, suggesting that they would merit a separate study on their own (13). Graham Huggan likewise examines the scope of social critique in Gordimer’s short fiction in a 1994 article. More recently, Graham Riach gives sustained attention to the subject of the post-apartheid short story in a forthcoming book.

This dispute resonates with a wider debate in the theory of the short story, especially in the context of postcolonial writing. Practitioners of the short story, including Gordimer herself, argue that the short story form is intrinsically suited to engaging with the politics of modernity because of its brevity and formal closure, and conversely that the intensiveness and extensiveness of the novels emphasised by Clingman are significant

weaknesses. Some critics see the short story as “particularly suited to the representation of liminal or problematised identities” (Hunter 138), not because of characteristics intrinsic to the form but because of extrinsic circumstances to do with their publication and circulation: Adrian Hunter and Paul March-Russell regard it as a “minor” form, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, hence a form which is “deterritorialized” and therefore “suitable for strange and minor uses” (Hunter 139; March-Russell 248). Deleuze and Guattari define a minor literature as that which “a minority constructs in a majority language” (16). The defining characteristics of a minor literature, they continue, are its “deterritorialization” (i.e. a displacement of language due to colonial domination), the fact that it is always politicised (as the exigencies of empire compel writers to engage directly with politics), and a conviction that literature has a collective value and revolutionary function (16-8). For March-Russell, short stories have this minor status through their publication in little magazines – being separate from the bourgeois form of the novel and the moral influence of institutions such as libraries – which enables them to be heterodox and subversive (67). It is this minor status, Hunter expands, that various writers have deployed as a medium for postcolonial dissent. He dismisses Frank O’Connor’s suggestion that the short story form inherently speaks to and about people within ruptured colonial and postcolonial societies (see Hunter 138), instead proposing the weaker claim that the short story form has been used effectively by writers in these contexts to advance a critique of empire. Subsequent accounts of the postcolonial short story, such as that by Barbara Korte, appreciate this emphasis on particularity rather than inherent characteristics of the form as it suits the heterogeneity of different colonial and postcolonial contexts (42).

This paper intervenes in the wider tendency to regard Gordimer’s short stories as lesser works than her novels, and intends to refocus attention on how the non-linear and fragmented form of Gordimer’s short story cycles responds to specific political urgencies of post-apartheid South Africa. In response to Hunter’s critique of O’Connor, I defend the stronger claim that the form is intrinsically suited to engaging with the vicissitudes of imperialism, particularly the combined and unequal development of late-capitalist modernity. However, I am not suggesting an absolute division between the novel and the short story. Practitioners of the short story have made absolute claims about novels and short stories, and Gordimer herself describes in one of her lectures what she feels are the novel’s weaknesses compared to the short story (see *Telling Times* 169). However, more recent formal innovation in the novel suggests that novels can approximate some of these formal structures that have traditionally been characteristic of the short story. For example, a novel like Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) employs a multi-focal, fragmented form to engage with intersections of gender, class, caste and capital through complex and dispersed temporalities.

Gordimer’s metaphor for the short story is that it is like seeing by the “flash of fireflies” (*Telling Times* 170), suggesting that the form is characterised by multiple, simultaneous, transient, and instantaneous glimpses of a political reality. I will examine the ways in which such a non-linear and multi-temporal negotiation of a historic moment illuminates various intersecting social and political contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa in ways that the linear, historic sweep of her novels do not. My motivation for emphasising form is a two-fold dissatisfaction with the framework of minor literature that Hunter and March-Russell employ: the reading of the short story as minor liter-

ature is dependent upon circumstances of literary production and consumption which have a significant impact in determining the politics of the form. These are nevertheless contingent circumstances that are subject to change with the evolving landscapes of literary production. This leads to what March-Russell calls the "legitimation crisis": if the short story becomes more widely accepted in the academy or what is considered the mainstream of literary production, it will lose this subversive edge (see March-Russell 68). This would not provide a stable or reliable critical framework for understanding the politics of the short story form. Moreover, in the context of Gordimer's short fiction, the complex language politics of South Africa means that there is no clear-cut distinction between majority and minority languages: while the key political figures spoke Afrikaans, they also enjoyed the widespread support of English-speaking whites. Moreover, Afrikaans was not just the language of the ruling elite, but also of the people designated "coloured."

Rather than use the framework of minor literature, I will consider, firstly, how the style and texture of Gordimer's post-apartheid short stories are non-linear and multi-temporal, as they are haunted by the colonial past. Subsequently, I will examine her blending of different narrative modes across different stories in a short story cycle, including realism, fable, and postmodern metafiction, and how the multiple, telescoping perspectives offered by the blending of these modes register the simultaneity and multiplicity of inequalities of a late-capitalist modernity manifested across different spatial and temporal scales.

Multiplicity of the Present in the Short Story

In an illuminating account of its form, Mary Rohrberger characterises the short story as "an analogical mode [that] defied linearity and arrested time and moment in an eternal and continuous present" (8). Her account of time in the short story derives from Henri Bergson's distinction between time as it is measured on a clock and the psychic experience of duration (Bergson 75-7). Clock time is a homogeneous magnitude that can be measured as when one counts the individual oscillations of a pendulum. However, duration is simultaneously both a succession of individual oscillations, and a series in which each oscillation is not identical but instead contains all oscillations preceding it. This is created through the mental synthesis of these successive states through their accretion within consciousness. Duration, then, is what Bergson describes as a qualitative multiplicity, or a multiplicity in which heterogeneous temporal states coexist and permeate each other in consciousness. Bergson's analogy is to think of this as notes in a tune: while the individual notes succeed each other, they are perceived in their totality and therefore melt into each other (72, 75).

For Rohrberger, Bergson's notion of clock time "seems to define the novel's temporal base" while duration (Rohrberger uses Bergson's term *durée*) "seems perfectly fitted to the short story" as "synchronicity defines the short story's base" (8). However, the way in which she applies Bergson's notion of time to the short story is unclear: she introduces within the discussion terminology that has the potential to be misleading, particularly the distinction between "synchronicity" and "diachronicity" which Bergson himself did not use. While Rohrberger's characterisation of clock time as diachronic is straightforward, there is a tension in her emphasis on the synchronicity of duration/*durée*. Bergson himself would resist the characterisation of duration as synchronic, as

different temporal states do not, in his view, exist simultaneously. They are only synchronous insofar as they form part of a larger unity. Rather, duration is diachronic, but a diachronic series in which all states influence each other. Moreover, what Rohrberger describes as the “arrested time” and “eternal and continuous present” of the short story seems to be the very kind of presentism that Bergson resists through the concept of a qualitative multiplicity. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the short story form do reflect this sense of duration in a Bergsonian sense, such as the moment of epiphany which contains within it the totality of duration of the entire story, “parenthetically enclosed by the story’s beginning and end, both of which are implicit in the epiphany and coterminous with past and future” (Rohrberger 9). Rather than thinking of duration and the form of the short story as synchronic, it is more useful to approach them in terms of qualitative multiplicity.

This qualitative multiplicity manifests itself in the stories in Gordimer’s late collections, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* and *Loot and Other Stories*. This is evident not just in the narrative conventions of the short story form – the epiphany or the compressed aesthetic intensity of the story – but it is even more prominent in the specific characteristics of Gordimer’s late style in her short stories that depict time as something that oscillates irresolutely between past, present and future. The post-apartheid present that the stories describe is overlaid with the legacies of the past as well as the uncertain and conflicted future. The titular story of “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black” foregrounds the persistence of the legacies of the colonial past in the present moment. The protagonist, a white academic and former activist named Frederick Morris, searches for black relatives possibly in order to claim privilege through kinship with the new dominant class in post-apartheid South Africa. To this end, he speculates that his great-grandfather would have had affairs with black women when he was in Africa mining for diamonds, and he goes to Kimberley to explore the possibility that he would find his great-grandfather’s mixed-race descendants from these illicit affairs. But his search for supposed family in the present is overlaid with the tumultuous history of apartheid racial politics and colonialism, even when he performs the most mundane of tasks like looking up “Morris” in a Kimberley telephone directory:

The telephone directory didn’t give much clue to where the cousins, collaterals, might be found living on the territory of diamonds; assuming the addresses given with the numbers are white suburban rather than indicating areas designated under the old segregation which everywhere still bear the kind of euphemistic flowery names that disguised them and where most black and colour-mixed people, around the cities, still live. (*Beethoven* 11-2)

What is ostensibly a statement about the present – that “the telephone directory didn’t give much clue” to where these cousins might be found – is encroached upon by signifiers of the colonial past: the diamond mines and apartheid racial segregation. The tense of this sentence further complicates the way in which time operates. While the main verb of the sentence is, like the rest of the narrative, in the present tense, the relative clauses subsequently change tenses. The neighbourhoods that Morris is searching are described by the phrase “*designated* under the old segregation” (italics mine), with the past-tense verb and the modifier “old” alluding to a past of colonial racial segregation. At the same time, these neighbourhoods “*still* bear the kind of euphemistic flowery names” and are places where black and mixed “*still* live” (italics mine): the adverb “still”

in both cases suggests continuity, both in the sense that the present-tense verbs are continuous, even if they are not grammatically given in the present continuous tense, and that there is a continuity in these forms of injustice and segregation alluded to in the previous clause. By alluding simultaneously to the past and to the continuous present, this run-on sentence has the effect of invoking the entire sequence of historical events in a single moment, but rather than flattening it into a single, present moment, it preserves its diachronic sense of motion. The present tense narrative here, far from being uniform, is rendered uneven by the haunting presence of the past. Not only does this sentence show the way in which the present moment is striated by the racial and economic divisions resulting from the colonial past, this constant shifting between tenses creates within the present a sense of multiplicity of the subjective experience of historical movement.

This qualitative multiplicity is evident not just in the texture of the prose, but also in the ways in which the settings of Gordimer's late stories relate to the history of the colonial past. In "Mission Statement" and "The Diamond Mine" in *Loot and Other Stories*, signifiers of the colonial past decorate the spaces that the characters traverse. In "Mission Statement," Roberta Blayne, Assistant to the Administrator of an international aid agency, embarks upon an affair with Gladwell Shadrack Chabruma, Deputy-Director in the Department of Land Affairs. Blayne's grandfather, it is revealed later in the story, was the manager of a mine in South Africa. There are instances where the politicians and aid workers are critical of the depredations of the colonial past, as when they blame colonial game hunting for the decline in wildlife in the country or in the shame that Blayne feels for the fact that her grandfather ran his mine like a slave plantation and addressed his black housemen in terms that were racist and dehumanising. Both Blayne's act of confessing her ancestry to Chabruma and the financial aid that Britain provides through the Agency are characterised as expiation for historical wrongs, and Blayne reads Chabruma's reticence about voicing overt criticism of colonialism as his "strength of character," as a sign that he does not dwell in the past but instead merely pursues "the way forward" out of his "largesse of forgiveness" (*Loot* 24). However, the relationship with the colonial past is far from a uniform sense of atonement, as the administrators and officials reiterate previous regimes of segregation and control. The institutions of power and governance that are central to the plot, like the various Government ministries or the aid agency, occupy colonial buildings: Blayne lives in a suburban bungalow dating from colonial times, and likewise the official residences of Chabruma and other cabinet ministers and diplomats are in suburban houses. The features of these houses, such as patrolled guard-houses, swimming pools and tennis courts, are reminiscent of spaces of racial segregation where black people were historically denied entry. They are now repurposed into signs of wealth and status for the new political elite. It is likewise especially revealing that following a long meeting, Chabruma and Blayne retreated to a bar where

from his [Chabruma's] side, the conversation in the beer-reeking dingy nook built during colonial rule in nostalgia for an English pub was being conducted as a continuation of the afternoon meeting where the Agency's agenda [...] and the Government's counterpart were trawling for accommodation. (*Loot* 16)

The way in which these signifiers of a colonial past are reiterated in the echelons of power and administration does not suggest a straightforward moral or political equiva-

lence between colonial rule and the new government. Rather, the implication here is that the new political class has moved into the spaces previously held by white colonial administrators and has begun employing the various inequalities of class and status – represented here through the architecture of houses and the value of property – in ways that serve both the political interest of the independent state and the private wealth and power of the new ruling elite.

A further point worth emphasising is that the characteristic narrative features of the short story, such as its concentration on a single moment and its independent, self-contained structure, allow for the story to create this qualitative multiplicity within the experience of the present. This is particularly prominent in “Mission Statement,” whose opening paragraph recounts the anecdote shared by Blayne’s grandfather about the black servants whom he treated like slaves on a plantation when he used to manage the Buffalo Mine. The story shifts immediately and seamlessly into the present day, and it becomes unclear what relevance that opening passage has to the plot, as none of the characters or events are mentioned again, until the passage is repeated again later on, this time rendered in italics as the narrative focalises through Blayne’s perspective, when she drives past the mine (*Loot* 41–4). Just as in “Beethoven,” the narrative seems to be contained within a loop, only here it is the past memory and its reiteration that frames the experience of the present, rather than a hypodiegetic narrative in the present conjuring up the past. It is at this reiteration of the anecdote about the mine that the relevance of the opening passage to Roberta’s life is first implied, before she confesses the same explicitly to Chabruma later on. She thus creates a dramatic revelation for the reader that draws into coherence subtle details that were introduced earlier on, such as her relinquishing her maiden name or her shame at being British motivating her aid work. The story presents this epiphany on two levels: for Blayne as she confesses and repents for the guilt and shame of her ancestry, and for the reader for whom this sudden revelation creates the effect of a single moment that brings together all of Blayne’s past and gives meaning to the entire arc of the narrative, both past and future. This epiphanic moment constitutes the unity through synthesis in psychic experience that, for Bergson, is central to the notion of the qualitative multiplicity of the present.

It is through their combined use of epiphany and allusion to the vestiges of the colonial past that individual stories from Gordimer’s late collections reflect the ways in which the temporality of the present is uneven and complex. The narrative of the short story, by virtue of its formal density, completeness and complexity, creates a subjective experience of time that is a qualitative multiplicity, unifying the past and the present. In Gordimer’s stories, this qualitative multiplicity characterises the way in which the present is striated by the combined and uneven development of capitalism and colonial history. There is, moreover, a further level at which Gordimer’s stories present a qualitative multiplicity, and that is through their arrangement as a short story cycle. This anthology allows for a composite and multi-focal perspective on the unevenness of time in the present by juxtaposing different stories that depict heterogeneous and oppositional scales of time and place.

Telescoping Perspectives

Having considered how individual stories depict the persisting injustices in the present, I will examine how the short story cycle as a macroscopic form is particularly adapted

to engaging with the vicissitudes of imperialism and inequality in a late-capitalist world-system. In their analysis of literature in the global capitalist world-system, the Warwick Research Collective advance a framework of "combined and uneven development" which they trace from the works of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky to Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti. Within this framework, the global capitalist economy is striated into regions of cores, peripheries and semi-peripheries whose development is "combined" in that they are dependent upon each other and mutually implicated within a larger macroeconomic structure, and "uneven" in that these relationships are asymmetrical and hierarchical, with core regions benefiting from the exploitation of peripheries and semi-peripheries (Deckard *et al.* 10-2). The various forms that this capitalist world-system takes, manifested in different macroeconomic structures and institutions such as multinational corporations, international aid or global finance, operate simultaneously in the present across different scales. For Sharae Deckard, an aesthetic that is critical of this world-system must

mediate sensoriums of the contemporary as profoundly uneven and heterogeneous, structured by the asymmetries of uneven and combined capitalist development that striate the global North and South, in which history is represented as synchronic and multi-temporal. (2)

The critique of such complex polygonal relations poses distinct formal challenges, as Deckard observes. She notes three approaches that are inadequate as aesthetic responses to these structures: maximalist novels that try to accommodate simultaneity and multi-focality at the level of the sentence become unreadable and incomprehensible; encyclopaedic novels which attempt to reproduce totality within themselves end up being bloated; mere linear chronological approaches to history are schematic and hollow, with mechanistic plots, flat characterisation and reductive psychologisation (3-4). It is difficult to find a form that is multi-focal and simultaneous while at the same time not compromising the complex interplay of human subjectivity, desire and agency within these structures of capital. In light of this critique of the challenges faced by a globalist novel, I argue that the short story cycle is a form that accommodates the simultaneity and synchronicity of capitalist modernity through its qualitative multiplicity.

March-Russell identifies some of the key approaches to the short story cycle: firstly Forrest Ingram and Susan Garland Mann's approach according to which short story cycles have a formal unity constituted by recognisable patterns and the elaboration of consistent themes; the second of Robert Luscher and J. Gerald Kennedy, who argue that it is an accumulative process of the progressive development of themes and motifs through a particular sequence of stories; and the third by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, according to which the short story cycle is a "composite novel" that blends genres and modes (104-5). Any kind of commentary on the short story cycle is complicated by the fact that short stories are usually published as stand-alone pieces in periodicals and only later anthologised into a collection. It is therefore difficult to make formal assumptions about their composition. But all of these strands of critical opinion on the form of the short story share the intuition that the short story cycle is in some ways greater than the sum of its parts, and they only differ on the details of how this is the case. I would resist the temptation to consider the meaning of short stories as a sequence or composite novel, as this would entail the need to read

the stories in order and undermine the flexibility of the form that gives it its unique advantage. Nevertheless, especially in the case of Gordimer's works, there is a sense in which her late story collections have a sense of unity in terms of the patterns created by themes and motifs that are addressed in her works. They are also to some extent composite works, mixing different modes like fantasy (as in "Dreaming of the Dead"), allegory and parable ("Loot" and "Tapeworm"), metafiction ("Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black"), or social realism ("Mission Statement"). And even though most of these stories were originally published as stand-alone pieces, the editorial process of their anthologising and the authorial control over them would support reading them as singular works with a sense of unity of purpose. By presenting a succession of different short stories, each narrated from a different vantage point, a short story cycle is able to telescope different perspectives. This makes the short story cycle what Deckard would consider a multifocal and multi-temporal form that allows it to engage with the different temporal and geographical scales at which these forms of combined and uneven development are manifest.

The stories in *Loot* converge on different meanings of the title: "loot" as wealth that is acquired through plunder, the very act of looting and the greed that motivates these acquisitive desires, and a word of Hindi origin whose etymology encodes the colonial encounter. In an interview with Hermione Lee, Gordimer describes the title story as a "political fable," containing a little bit of both a "moral fable" and "political allegory" (316). Graham Riach elaborates upon the fact that this story was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1999, around the time when Thabo Mbeki assumed the office of the President (1086). According to Gerard Steen, a parable is an anecdote with a specific moral teaching. While a fable has a pithy explication of the story's moral in the end, a parable does not, and it leaves its meaning more open-ended. Whether "Loot" is a fable, as Gordimer suggests, or a parable depends on how one interprets the closing line: "Full fathom five" (*Loot* 6). Far from rounding off the moral teaching of the story through this explication, this invocation of *The Tempest* as an intertext seems to open up further questions – to do with Prospero's hubris, his vow in the end to bury his staff and books, the significance of Caliban's transgression – and render its moral conclusions ambiguous. This suggests that Gordimer's story is more of a parable than a fable. What defines a parable, according to Gila Safran Naveh, are its didacticism, allegoricity and its enigmatic and oblique representation of reality (6). Inherent in this are two kinds of doubleness; the first is a doubleness of its didactic purpose: a parable is intended to instruct while at the same time obscuring the truth that it needs to convey; the second is a doubleness of its treatment of reality: the parable must refer to the reality of the real world but only indirectly through allusion. A similar doubleness between the reality of South African politics and the fictional fantasy of the parable is signalled by the opening line of the story, "Once upon *our* time" (*Loot* 3, italics mine): although uncannily reminiscent of folklore, fantasy and fairy tales, this phrase, through the pronoun "our," resists the convention of these modes to set the story in a non-specific time with the indefinite article "a," and instead grounds the story within its immediate political context of critiquing Mbeki's presidency and a shared collectivity between the narrator and reader.

Central to Naveh's account is the parable's reliance on the appeal to a truth that transcends the real world, like that of an all-powerful "Other" authority like a god in

order to obtain a moral lesson (7). An act of god is manifested in the story through the tidal wave that drowns the looters as punishment for their greed. The story seems to be reaching towards an objective and transcendent moral authority. However, the modern parable, as opposed to classically Biblical ones which most definitions take as their starting point, is nevertheless circumspect about its affirmation of an objective truth. Naveh notes this is particularly significant in the works of Franz Kafka, whose parable-like stories, through their doubleness of surface and implied meaning, articulate a "covert attack on metaphysics" because of the human subject's inability to grasp reality (149). It is worth noting that Kafka's works are likewise central to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a minor literature, as discussed earlier. One could perhaps argue that the deterritorialization and linguistic indeterminacy of minor literatures make them especially suited to articulate such metaphysical crises. However, as I had outlined previously, my approach is concerned with an analysis of the formal characteristics of the short story rather than the contexts of publication that render it a minor literature. A similar metaphysical crisis is evident in "Loot": while the story is an objective, moral condemnation of greed and corruption during Mbeki's assumption of the presidency, it nevertheless foregrounds its own fictionality. This epistemic disjunction characterises a sense of political stagnation: there is a search for a new form of sustained political commitment in the story, manifested in a didactic purpose, while the story nevertheless harbours a nascent and subdued disavowal of these political ideals as truths through a narrative mode that emphasises its own fictionality. Moreover, the distant and abstract terms through which the story engages with the politics of Mbeki's presidency allegorically, allows it to operate on a scale that is universal and non-specific, addressing greed abstractly rather than talking about a specific party or government.

However, "Mission Statement," which follows immediately after "Loot," is the opposite kind of story: it is not abstract or allegorical, but is a realist interrogation of the nexus through which foreign aid and tenders for government projects are brokered. The characters are agents within the various institutions, such as government ministries, aid agencies, private companies, *et cetera*. The story is grounded in the specific conditions of macroeconomic structures of capitalist expansion. While "Loot" appeals tentatively to an external morality, "Mission Statement" foregrounds the contingency of its meaning through the metafictional undermining of its own perspective. A greater part of the story is bookended by the anecdote about black workers' necks that Blayne's grandfather would share to entertain his guests at parties. The opening anecdote frames the story within the legacy of mining and the guilt associated with this colonial inheritance. But the way in which the anecdote is reiterated in Blayne's mind (41-2), and the way in which she rejects her grandfather's story and criticises it for its colonialist language later on signals a metafictional gesture that critiques the politics of the story's own narrative. But in contrast to the parable form, there is no greater moral force like an act of god that gives the story an external moral appeal.

If one were to read these two stories in succession, the sudden and drastic change in scale and perspective would have a disorientating effect. While these stories vary in their perspective and mode, and are all independent of each other, there is a sense that, when taken together, their meaning is more than the sum of their parts. These varied yet congruous perspectives allow the form of the short story cycle to be a qualitative multiplicity that depicts simultaneously the different scales of space and time at which

these conflicts and injustices persist in the newly-independent state: abstract parables, personal lives, family histories, government institutions, university campuses, *et cetera*. Each story correspondingly operates on a different scale at which it registers the underlying racial and social contradictions of this society: for example “The Generation Gap” follows a group of siblings in a middle-class, white family who deal with their shared outrage at the news that their father has left their mother and begun a relationship with a woman who is the same age as the youngest sibling. The four of them are confronted with their own racial prejudices when they are appalled at the thought that this woman already has a child from a mixed-race father, and their father would now be looking after him. “Look-Alikes” is set in a university campus that has homeless black squatters, and the story represents the state of anxiety and disorder surrounding the dissolution of boundaries of race and class within ideological state apparatuses like university campuses and academia. This qualitative multiplicity enables the stories to register and critique the complex polygonal and multi-temporal material conditions of combined and uneven development of the capitalist world-system in post-apartheid South Africa. The disorientation caused by the frequent changes in scale and perspective has the further advantage of depicting the sense of ethical and epistemic flux that characterises literature of the periphery.

The Polygonal Form of the Short Story

Gordimer’s novels are complex interrogations of social and political injustices in South Africa during and after apartheid. I do not dispute Clingman’s and Head’s claims that the expansive treatment of space and time in Gordimer’s novels allows them to consider fraught ethical and political questions with a depth that short stories do not offer. Such a deep focus was especially powerful when engaging with a widespread, state-sponsored form of structural violence like apartheid. Instead, what I argue is that there is a specific context in which the fragmentary and multi-temporal structure of Gordimer’s late short stories is better adapted to critique aspects of imperialism and injustice that the expansive, linear structure of the novel cannot adequately apprehend. The nature of a late-capitalist world-system, particularly as manifested in post-apartheid South Africa, is one of polygonal and multi-temporal contradictions, where injustices and corruption occur simultaneously on different scales and intersect with each other. The narrative sensorium of Gordimer’s short stories is a qualitative multiplicity that allows one to register and critique the simultaneous and multiple articulations of power and imperialism across different scales.

My argument has implications not just for how Gordimer’s works are valued, but also for a more general debate on the postcolonial short story. While my method has been a formal analysis of the short story and the short story cycle, and their treatment of space and time, a question that remains open, following March-Russell’s reading of the short story as a minor form, is what impact the contexts of production and publication of the short story have on its meaning. There is perhaps a further argument to be made that the publication of Gordimer’s stories in contexts separate from the bourgeois form of the novel enables her fiction to focus on perspectives and voices that are different from the middle-class, liberal elite who are the protagonists of her novels. It is for both the formal advantages and the social plurality offered by this non-linear form that Gordimer’s use of the short story remains, as with her long fiction, a radical

political gesture, and one that becomes especially relevant during her late career when critiquing the post-apartheid dispensation.

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