CHAPTER - VI
Micropolitics, in helping to identify and empower ‘sites’ of marginalized voices, is closely allied to another trend in critical and cultural theory: the increase in attention given to questions of geography and topography – or simply ‘space’ in some formulations – as a way of explaining key questions of power and social organization. Gordimer’s fiction displays an ongoing, and developing understanding of the importance of space, and here, as in other respects, the fiction parallels contemporaneous thinking. Thus in The Lying Days, the novel’s focus on personal politics is related to its preoccupation with space. In later novels (such as The Conservationist) space becomes an integral part of the poetic design of work, which is also principally concerned with the social and political uses, and appropriations of space. While there is not quite this tight unity of novelistic form and social content in The Lying Days, there is, nevertheless, a spatial component to the novel’s design which is crucial to how it is interpreted. The novel is written in three sections, each with a different setting which, ostensibly, acts as a kind of background to key stages of Helen’s development: part one, ‘The Mine’, establishes the industrial situation of Helen’s upbringing (and suggests a submerged political consciousness), while part two (‘The Sea’) presents the possibility of an apolitical white escapism, expressed through Helen’s adolescent sexual awakening with Ludi Koch on the coast. The final (and longest) part is ‘The City’ where Helen’s political awakening begins. The tripartite structure, looked at schematically, seems to parallel the process of Bildung, yet the structure seems also to reject such a design once having entertained it: the final section crystallizes how place is intimately bound up with individual lives; the
city contains the sites of real and complex lived relations, a fact which implicitly discredits the notion of setting as illustrative background for the development of one individual.

Specific details throughout the novel also serve to discredit the idea of setting as background. The most arresting spatial images represent Helen’s developing ‘racial consciousness’. These begin with her childhood recollection of first venturing out from the isolated white Mine community to the forbidden concession stores which the blacks use. Helen’s fascination and amazement at the jumble she sees in the shop windows, and at the bewildering array of sensory experiences that greet her, represent a significant culture shock, or encounter with this ‘other’, so close, yet usually concealed from her view. (LD, 19-24). As Helen begins to make her way home again, she observes a Mine boy urinating in the street and reports that ‘a sudden press of knowledge, hot and unwanted, came upon me’. (LD, 24) The sudden knowledge, and the question, can both be taken to indicate a young girl’s emerging consciousness of male physical difference, but beyond this naturalistic explanation of the reaction there is a resonant suggestion of an emerging political consciousness, a ‘knowledge’ that material situations differ, even the provision of facilities for essential bodily functions and a ‘question’, as yet not properly articulated, concerning why this should be so. The importance of the scene is emphasized by later considerations of the provision of toilet facilities, the most basic and necessary of public spaces. At the university Helen has one of her first talks with Mary Seswayo, the black student she tries to befriend, in a cloakroom (LD, 130-2), a setting which seems insignificant enough. Yet Helen has first encountered Mary in a cloakroom at the university, at which point the narrator pauses to remark how rare it is to find somewhere where a black girl can wash her
hands in the same place as a white girl (LD, 105), a point reinforced later when the narrator, reflecting on the restrictions which hamper Mary, observes that there are no public toilet facilities for black at all in the Johannesburg shopping centre (LD, 169). The detail that Helen is forbidden by her mother to use certain public conveniences (LD, 23), now clearly represents a luxurious disdain and adds a further poignancy to this motif, and to the implication that not only general notions of power, but basic facets of human dignity are bound up with the control of space; and all of this is incipiently present in the child Helen’s reaction to the Mine boy urinating in the street. With hindsight the original fear of the sexual other is exposed as a spectre constructed and perpetuated by apartheid and its ‘petty’ measures of enforcement.

Helen’s concern with the idea of spatial provision/deprivation as a political issue is crystallized through her concern for Mary Seswayo. The scene in which Charles and Helen drive Mary home to the Mariastad location in which she is staying involves a culture shock for the two whites which is analogous to Helen’s reaction at the concession stores. The narrator articulates the whites’ shock at the sensory experience of the township:

All above the crust of vague, close, low houses, smoke hung, quite still as if it had been there forever; and shouts rose, and it seemed that the shout had been there for ever, too, many voices lifted at different times and for different reasons that became simply a shout, that never began and never ended. (LD, 173)

The spatial compression of the township gives the illusion of permanence, despite its architectural insubstantiality. The images focused on to express this paradox are significant: the polluting smoke is a permanent feature, and the impression of the many voices of the township forming a single shout suggests the disorder and
incoherence of compression and squalor at least to the whites, with a more privileged notion of personal space and communication. Paradoxically, the single voice also suggests a coherence and unity, the unity of a common experience of repression, and there is a clear sense here of the unity required for political action, even though we see only the raw material of this mobilization: an (as yet) unarticulated, but nevertheless unified, ‘shout’. This is an embryonic version of the heterotopia which is suggested by the township description in *Burger’s Daughter*. It is significant that, in contrast to this single shout, Charles and Helen are both reduced to silence by the experience of the township: they both ‘stopped talking, as people do when they feel they may have lost their way’ (LD, 173). This is a suggestion of guilt, of a tacit awareness of white complicity in the material manifestation of repression. Perhaps these images are a little clumsy, especially the suggestion of an emerging black political voice which silences the whites; but the politics of the geography give the scene an extra dimension and importance. When Mary disappears into one of the houses, Helen is able to imagine the inside of Mary’s house (which she hasn’t seen 0 simply because the location is uniform in its squalor and compression. (LD, 175).

The theme of Mary’s domestic space is developed through Helen’s concern over Mary’s exam revision. Having discovered that the house in which Mary is staying is too cramped and chaotic for study, it occurs to Helen that Mary could stay with her and her parents: not in the house exactly, but in the ‘cooler’, a storeroom originally built for keeping food, and which would be ‘neither inside the house, nor out in the yard with Anna [the servant], but something in between’ (LD, 187). The compromise solution – the creation of a makeshift space which is neither inside the domain of the whites, nor outside where the black servants are billeted – is clearly
symbolic. Yet Helen’s compromise, designed primarily to placate the racist concerns of her mother, also indicates the literal dilemma of spatial provision for blacks.

Spatial images and references are rife in the novel. There is one further important aspect of this motif, involving the character Joel Aaron, who acts in the novel as a kind of moral conscience for Helen, helping, in key scenes, to nourish Helen’s developing political consciousness. In one symbolic scene Helen and Joel take a drive to a beauty spot known as Macdonald’s Kloff, and here Helen reflects on questions of racial difference, making the crucial ‘discovery’ that Mary Seswayo ‘is a girl ... like me’ (LD, 142). Joel traces, on a rock, a ‘map’ which represents a version of the world, based specifically on an awareness of political geography:

> Here’s a whole group of islands, with a warm current wrapped round them, so they’re the coconut-palm kind. The people sing (you would find out that they’ve got hookworm) and they sail about – all over here – in the hollowed-out barks of trees, with figureheads like ugly sea monsters. Over this side is a huge, rich country, an Africa and America rolled into one, with a bit of Italy thrown in for charm. (LD, 145).

This symbolic scene, which crystallizes a key moment in Helen’s awakening, contains also this resonant image of global spatial politics, presented ironically by Joel’s observation of the ‘cocktail’ of privilege, embracing resources (Africa), capitalist clout (America) and cultural and aesthetic credibility (Italy). The resonance of this scene, and the centrality of the idea of mapping to it, is elements, which indicate the importance of questions of space even at the beginning of Gordimer’s novelistic career. The scene resurfaces in a dream of Helen’s immediately following a moment in which the headlamps of cars shine into the bedroom of Paul and Helen, reminding them of the police with flashlights enforcing
the Mixed marriage ban (LD, 261). Here the Kloof episode, with its broader implications about geopolitics is explicitly linked with localized measures of racial and spatial control.

In *Occasion for Loving*, Gordimer’s preoccupation with landscape becomes directly linked to a sense of an African history. Cooke, in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes*, has shown how the archaeological discovery, in the early 1960s, of ancient African Kraals marked a significant change in Gordimer’s thinking: these ancient ruined cities on the Witwatersrand disapproved the colonial assumptions that whites had been the first settlers there, and had a rightful claim to the gold it contained. (65). This proof of an African past — which provided an historical challenge to the white colonial arrogation of wealth and power — gives a new edge to Gordimer’s consideration of environment and social space. It also suggests the source of a black African living history, which challenges the present. The significance of the musical studies of Boaz is brought into sharper focus by this strand: the duality of his studies — to preserve a past heritage and also to forge links with something living (OL, 151) — is a correlative to this sense of space, in which the history of a landscape offers a present political challenge.

The ambivalence of the novel towards the sources of political advancement extends also, to the issue of African history. This is indicated in brief references to the Zulu king Shaka (or Chaka) in part three of the novel, in the scene at the beach. A printed humorous notice in the beach-house lavatory, listing items not to be flushed away, is signed ‘Big Chief Shaka’ (OL, 187). The irony of invoking the great Zulu king is double-edged: it is an implicit apologia for the dogma of the notice, but the self-rebuke for pomposity is implicitly leveled at Shaka also. This is
confirmed a couple of pages later when we are told, fro one point in the region, Jessie and the children can see far inland: ‘as far as you could see, and further, it was Shaka’s country; less than a hundred and forty years ago the black king had trained his prancing armies and spread his great herds of cattle here’. (OL, 189) This reference to the kingdom of Shaka, which he created and presided over from 1816-28, invites reflection on the historical precedents for the control and ownership of land by black Africans. The name of Shaka, as Leonard Thompson points out in A History of South Africa, ‘has passed into African literature and the consciousness of modern Africans as a symbol of African heroism and power’, following his immortalization in such works as Thomas Mofolo’s Chaka. (87). Gordimer has elsewhere written (English –Language Literature and Politics in South Africa) of the importance of this novel in the development of an African literary consciousness (131-50), but her reference here has a critical irony, which squares with historical accounts of Shaka. The language used of this king acknowledges the warlike nature of Shaka’s actual rule. The Mfecane wars of Shaka’s reign wrecked havoc on southeastern Africa, destroying the basis of the farming society: thousands were killed and thousands more became refugees as communities were destroyed and society collapsed. The long-term consequences for the various African peoples were also disastrous: many Africans impoverished by war were forced to go to the Cape Colony and work for white colonists, while whites were presented with new opportunities for expansion into the eastern part of Southern Africa. (Thompson, 80-7) This seems to be the subtext of the narrator’s ambivalence towards Shaka and his prancing armies: as evidence of African power, but also of a vainglory which facilitated the process of white colonization. This recalls and reinforces the
presentation of the mine-dancing in which the participants are seen to ‘prance’ in a scene in which an ambivalence about African cultural potential emerges. (OL.36-7)

Other important scenes in the novel, and the tensions they uncover, are predicated on the struggle for space. It is significant, in this connection, that the squalor Gideon sees in Alexandra is associated in his mind with the wife he has abandoned: the distortion of personal relationships, and the perspective of an individual, can be directly related to the physical manifestations of social inequality. Perhaps the greatest tensions which the novel generates occurs in those scenes in which Gideon and Ann are driving, aimlessly, in the African landscape, unsure of where to take their affair. In chapter seventeen Ann is disturbed, sleeping by the road, by a local white farmer. He leaves before Gideon comes into sight, but the fear of discovery provokes a series of nervous spasms in Ann when the man has gone. The fear of discovery is here linked to the political question of the control of space. The farmer has adopted with Ann ‘that indiscriminate comradeship that white people feel when they are outnumbered’ (OL, 233), and here different tensions collide: Ann’s shock of fear, at being almost discovered even in this open country where blacks predominate, suggests an inner realization that there is nowhere to hide, that there is no space beyond the control of racial legislation. The farmer’s implicit fear, however, suggests that white control of this space is tenuous, that the logic of numbers creates an ever-present challenge to the monopoly of power and ownership. The tensions are linked, of course: the fear involved in the maintenance of this insecure power is an implicit violence offered to those – such as Ann – who would challenge its codes. Ann’s spasms of fear may also suggest a consciousness of a potential imminent disruption to these codes, a fear of being swept helplessly along in a wave of revolutionary change.
The same tension between the tenuous white control of space, and the power of a repressed challenge is suggested over the issue of bathing rights at Isendhla. Jessie overhears a woman in the store discussing the residents' plans to protest against 'natives' using 'our beautiful beach', and to set up a segregated area for blacks. The fears, and the mobilization to assert ownership, have been inspired, apparently, by occasional glimpses of Gideon on the beach. The woman leaves a poster in the store calling a meeting to discuss the matter, and as she leaves she backs into Jessie, 'grasping a smiling apology, as she went. Jessie caught full on for a moment, like a head on a pike, the fine grey eyes, the cheerful bright skin, the full cheeks and unlined mouth of a tranquil, kind woman'. (OL, 258). The image is arresting: Jessie, for a moment, imagines the woman as the unwitting victim of violent revolution, a force implicitly called into being by an insistence on spatial control and repression.

As in The Lying Days, space is a site for political struggle, but is also now, a potential source of living history, of political coherence, a point most explicitly made in a view of the landscape, and its African inhabitants, seen by Jessie from her car towards the end of the book:

*The women slapped at washing and men squatted talking and gesticulating in an endless and unimaginable conversation that, as she passed, even at intervals of several miles, from one kraal to another, linked up in her mind as one. In this continuity she had no part, in this hold that lay so lightly, not with the weight of cement and tarmac and steel, but sinew of the earth's sinew, authority of a legendary past, she had no share. Gideon had it; what an extraordinary quality it imparted to people like him, so that others were drawn to them as if by some magic . . . a new kind of magic . . . the dignity of*
the poor about to inherit their earth and the worldliness of those who had been the masters. (OL, 269)

This passage brings together several strands in the novel, and resolves some of the confusions. The history which Jessie reads in the landscape is a living history in that the conversations of the inhabitants merge to suggest a unified voice of the present. This is similar to the township 'shout' heard by Charles and Helen in The Lying Days; the difference here is that the unified voice is based on the authority of the past. Jessie’s acceptance that this is a movement that she has no part in is crucial: it marks a full transition away from liberal policies of multi-racialism, and it also suggests that the failure of cross-racialism, and it also suggests that the failure of cross-racial personal relationships in the novel is actually a positive thing, a necessary break, which clears the ground for this mobilization to emerge with clarity. It is also significant that Gideon, surrounded at times by ambiguity in the novel, is presented, in the final analysis, as someone who does possess the quality which this living history can bestow: in Jessie’s estimation, here, the potential of history can be trapped into, even by those whose attitudes and activities bear the scars and distortions of the ‘prestructuring’ of apartheid. The repressive ideology, it is implied, is not, finally, all imprisoning, and the signs of collective hope can be discerned in particular individuals.

Gordimer’s treatment of space can, indeed, be approached by a consideration of the respective landscapes upon which her novels are centred, and which reveal her changing perception of her environment, from the Witwatersrand mining community in the opening of The Lying Days, through an increasing preoccupation with Johannesburg, upto her preoccupation with the veld, the South African landscape in general, from A Guest of Honour onwards. This third stage is the most
significant, for this emphasis on landscape allows Gordimer to focus on the resurgence of African culture, and it is this which facilitates her attainment of a historical sense and, at the same time, a Lukacsian critical realism for her own time and context. The fates of the protagonists in the novels from A Guest of Honour through to July’s People are, argues Cooke, ‘fundamentally tied to the landscape they inhabit’, landscapes which embody the cultural situation of these characters. (Cooke, 11,29)

Thus in A Guest of Honour, the fate of Colonel James Bray is tied to the landscape he inhabits. He leaves the stability of his home in Witshire to return to a newly independent African state. He had been deported from this (imaginary) country ten years before – by the colonial regime – for supporting the growth and rise of the People’s Independence Party which is now in government: while ostensibly a colonial administrator, he had worked in the Party alongside Adamson Mweta, now president, and Edward Shinza, a Trade Unionist. Bray returns to the country for the independence celebrations, and accepts a post as Educational Adviser, a post which takes him, initially, to the Gala district where he had previously resided. The plot revolves around the conflicting ideologies of Mweta and Shinza, and Bray’s movement to align himself with the revolutionary aims of the banished Shinza, as he becomes aware of the neo-colonialist nature of Mweta’s rule, which appears as a betrayal of the ideals of independence. Back in gala, Bray witnesses violent clashes between the workers and government forces, and finally resolves to fly out of the country in order to try and raise money for Shinza’s cause. On the way to the capital, however, he is ambushed and killed by workers who take him for a key member of a riot squad whose violence they seek to avenge.
The Conservationist extends the theme of nation building through commitment, explored in A Guest of Honour, beyond consideration of the structure and ideology of systematic organization to a deeper, more profound level of a people’s psychospiritual connection with and responsibility to a particular place as home. Mehring represents the dominant features of white society in the period from which the novel emerges and in his relationship to the land – the farm – Gordimer measures some of the deeper aspects of the ideology, culture and historical condition he represents. In symbolic terms the farm is an enormously important site for measuring the ethic, in the largest sense, of an individual or collective relationship with the environment of nature, man and beast. Northrop Frye, in Anatomy of Criticism for instance, sees the farm as one of the major archetypal symbols whereby civilization measures its progress. (113) But in the South African context the farm has additional layers of importance. For one thing, it is a significant site of origin, since farms formed the very definition of the ‘settled’ aspect of an original white colonial expansion; and it was round and about agriculture and farming as a mode of production that the original struggles of land possession and dispossession took place. Also, in that the farm is an indigenous site, it represents a way of measuring a cultural relationship to the environment. In this respect ‘cultural’ signifies in two senses: as a productive site or site of cultivation (of which the farm is symbolically the essence), and as an intense point of focus for socio-cultural attitudes to the environment in general (how one sees the role of the farm, both ecologically and socially).

The historical fertility of the culture that Mehring represents and the ethic of its relationship to the indigenous world in which it has settled is a sham. For Mehring is not even an authentic ‘farmer’; he is by no means dependent on the farm;
nor is the farm fully productive. On the contrary, Mehring is an industrialist who runs the farm as a sideline. Originally bought as a place where he could enjoy sexual assignations with his mistress and entertain his friends, now it is kept for him to indulge his romantic feelings for nature and the imperious demands of his ego – and, in a bad year, recoup his losses as a tax rebate from the government. Here Mehring represents the ideological inversion of his culture and his class. To him, his central concern is ‘conservation’; he cannot bear to see his farm trammeled by the imprint of society. Yet, in this guise we see that he cares for nature at the expense of people – the people who actually work on his farm, or provide the labour for the industry he owns.

Mehring’s relationship with the land is, indeed, plagued by contradictions. His sensitivity to the beauty and moods of the countryside is palpable:

Oh my god. The field dips away before it rises again towards the river. It has drifted into flower since the sun rose two hours ago – yesterday afternoon it was still green, with only a hint of sage to show the bloom was coming. Just touching, floating over its contours, is a nap of blue that brushes across the grain to mauve. There is no wind but air itself is a constant welling. It is the element of this lush summer. He has plunged down past the pump-house where a big pipe makes a hidden foot-bridge buried in bowed grasses and bulrushes over an irrigation furrow. His shoes and the pale gray pants are wiped by wet muzzles of grasses, his hands, that he lets hang by his sides, are trailed over by the tips of a million delicate tongues. Look at the willows. The height of the grass. Look at the reeds. Everything is continually swaying, floating rippling waving surging streaming fingering. He is standing there with his damn shoes all wet with the dew and he feels he himself is swaying,
the pulsation of his blood is moving him on his own axis (that's the sensation) as it seems to do to accommodate the human body to the movement of a ship. A high earth running beneath his feet. All this softness of grasses is the susurration of a slight dizziness, hissing in the head.

(Cons. 183)

Mehring's sensitivity is corrupted, as observed earlier, by a central paradox. It is his exploitation of the land—extraction of pig iron—and the people with indisputable claim to it, that affords him the luxury of conserving his four hundred acres; unconsciously his sense of oneness with the land slips into the inescapable shadow side of his guilt and conjures the presence of the black body. Still admiring the land, his mind wanders: “No wound to be seen; and simply shoveled under. He looks out over this domain almost with fascination, to think that, somewhere, that particular spot exists, overgrown. No one'll remember where you are buried”. (Cons. 184)

Mehring's determination to conserve his land means that his workers are viewed primarily as a method to further his conservation policy, and, except for a few moments of delusory sentimental bonding or fear, he is largely indifferent to them. They are—like most things in his life—a means to an end. Watching his farm manager, Jacobus, at work, Mehring assesses his worth:

He certainly has a sense of attachment to the place; one could do a lot worse, although it's business-lunch exaggeration to say (he sometimes hears himself) his old boy does better than any white manager. What this really means is that they're more honest than any white you're likely to get on a menial yet responsible position. He may filch a bag of mealie-meal for perks but why the hell not, who wouldn't—but he hasn't the craft to crook you. There is laughter when—frankly confidential—there comes the observation
that you can always trust a man who can’t write not to keep a double set of books. (Cons. 145)

Jacobus’s attachment to the farmland is real, and the novel depicts the relationship of the black farmworkers and their families with the land as natural and unselfconscious. During Mehring’s absences they run the farm effectively, from maintaining the machinery to gathering wild spinach from the veld. Even Mehring acknowledges their sense of belonging: “they were squatting God knows how long before he bought the place and they’ll expect to have their grandchildren squatting long after he’s gone”. (Cons. 202) Their organic connection to the land is reinforced by events on the farm like the worker Phineas’s wife’s induction as a diviner. After Mehring and his son Terry have visited and then left, the Africans – to whom the white men mean nothing except employment – participate in the ceremony:

All the farm was dark except for where they gathered the life of the place together for themselves. He and his son with woman’s hair came and went away, leaving nothing, taking nothing: the farmhouse was empty. Stamping slowly, swaying from one foot to another, dancing conferred a balance of its own that drunkenness could not fell . . . The sleeping cattle, the barn, the sheds, the fanged and clawed machines the colour of football jerseys and smelling of oil, the pick-up and the caterpillar tractor, the water obediently flowing forever down there in the reeds – all – all might have been theirs.

(Cons. 172)

On a symbolic level, Mehring is guilty of the greatest bad faith. Preserving his false paradise, he refuses to make it fully productive in order to provide for all its inhabitants. The degree to which he embodies the virtue of conservation is the same degree to which he conserves the political and economic injustice that makes his
devotion to nature possible. Mehring’s privileged relationship with nature and his social and economic privilege are part of the same political reality.

This inversion of the social and the natural is of great significance for the South African context as a whole. In *The Lying Days* we saw how Helen Shaw had to break out of a ‘naturalized’ mythology that placed blacks in the realm of nature itself; in Mehring’s case we see how cynically advanced that mythology could become. One need only consider how central the concept of a ‘labour reservoir’ is for denoting a fundamental reality of the South African economic structure: notwithstanding whatever tendencies there may be for the system to break down, that human labour is stored up in designated collection zones, just as natural water might be, for controlled release, under the pressure of regulated employment and unemployment, into the white-owned economy. In the location next to his land, Mehring’s farm borders on just such a ‘reservoir’. Evidently Gordimer is puncturing some of the major myths of South African ideology, and not the least of these is Mehring’s romanticization of his relation to the land, a romanticization that has historically been a central component within the self-representations of white South African culture. Gordimer has shown it to be based on an emptiness. In Mehring’s case, moreover, she demonstrates the degree to which his feeling is a sentimentalization of a more fundamental passion, which for him is one of possession. Mehring ‘buys’ the farm; it is frequently referred to as his ‘property’. Yet as Antonio informs him, he has tried to buy what is not for sale, and his desperate attempt to obtain some form of natural communion through the very means of his social oppression is perhaps the final index of his cultural alienation, both from Africa and from its people.
In one episode in the novel Gordimer precisely demonstrates this. Alone in the third pasture on New Year’s Eve at midnight with only a bottle of whisky to keep him company Mehring imagines that Jacobus is with him. On this particular night he feels closer than ever to the land, and his projected relationship with Jacobus, though retaining the hierarchy of master and servant, is enveloped in an aura of forgiveness, male camaraderie and mutual, universal understanding: ‘We’re going to finish the bottle, Jacobus, you and I, just this once’. (Cons.207). Many things are revealed in this episode, not least the melancholy that is perhaps the reverse side of Mehring’s ‘frontier’ type of bravado, the banality of Mehring’s cultural quotations and the need for absolution subconsciously concealed beneath the colonizing mind. But the most important fact about this scene is that it is just a fantasy; the encounter with Jacobus never takes place outside the internal world of Mehring’s half-drunk reverie. Indeed there is more than a little comedy to the incident, and as a symbolic moment in which Mehring feels most ‘at home’ on his farm in both social and environmental terms, the episode is intimately revealing. Mehring’s whole sense of cultural satisfaction is no more than a self-deceptive dream, a myth of belonging without substance. His culture in its supremacist form is as alien from the African environment as are the Spanish chestnut trees he tries to plant on his land. Gordimer has brought up for inspection what lay buried, unconsciously beneath the surface of Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. And in this way too she represents the reverse side of the ‘European-in-Africa’ theme presented in *A Guest of Honour*. There Bray won his ‘natural’ affiliation with Africa through his social affiliation; here it is shown that without the latter there can also be no former. Social oppression is the underlying basis of an irredeemable cultural alienation, from land and people alike.
This sense of alienation is highlighted through the formal structure of the novel – the insertion of Zulu quotations. Through these quotations, the novel achieves the broader vision of white power shifting to the blacks. The disruption of the narrative with quotations from Zulu mythology evokes – like the black body in the pasture – the sense of a deeper but pressing African presence. While the story is ostensibly that of Mehring and his white world, Newman, in her book Nadine Gordimer, holds that the quotations – each introducing or reinforcing an event in the novel – steadily uncovers the real story as that of the blacks. The quotations are “the organizing points for a subtext which slowly comes into the foreground”. (Newman, 39). Each quotation more overtly than the last asserts the African connection to and possession of the land, collectively suggesting what Newman calls “a buried logic of fictional events, which may be expressed in the rhetoric of myth”. (56) The early quotations are predictable expressions of concern during the terrible drought described in this section of the novel: prayers for corn, (Cons.39) and for children and the continuation of life (Cons.61); an African presence at this point of the novel is unremarkable. Newman notes, however, a strengthening connection with Zulu mythology in the rest of the quotations where there is a reference to Henry Callaway’s The Religious System of the Amazulu, which is the transcript of first-hand accounts of Zulu codes, customs and beliefs made by this British missionary in the nineteenth century:

A further series of quotations (83,93,113) is taken from a dream by one of Calloway’s informants, in which he dreams he is awoken and ordered to go down to the river with his brother, there to grapple with a spirit ancestor. This precedes the episode in the novel in which Solomon is awakened in the night, by mysterious figures, supposedly at the behest of his brother, and
attacked. The later quotations introduce the image of the “Amatongo”. The ancestors who are beneath the earth (163,193) (linked to the dead man buried in the third pasture), the question of material possession of Africa (213), and the bringing of rain and floods by the rainmaker (231) which precedes torrential rain and floods in modern South Africa.

The sense of African belonging to the land is consolidated for Newman in the last quotation (247) which she believes “widens the historical perspective to suggest the enduring occupation of the land by the blacks”. (Newman, 56)

The novel brilliantly integrates Zulu myth with the real events experienced by the blacks in the novel. The dead body found “on a nest of reeds it has flattened” relates specifically to the Zulu myths of origins relayed in Calloway’s book. Newman explains that reeds are metaphors for the ancestors; a father – the ancestor, or uthlanga, of his children – is like a reed because they broke off from him. When the farmworkers disown the dead body they therefore deny the ancestors; this denial triggers a response. Solomon, who found the body, is chosen to awaken them to their cultural duty. He is beaten up (apparently for debts owed) near the place where the body lies buried, an experience that approximates the dream myth of a fellow being called to the river to wrestle with an ancestor spirit. Solomon, reports say, was “attacked in the night by a spirit” (Cons.92). The veld fire, which ravaged the third pasture and burned through the compound where the workers and their families live, also has mythological significance. Newman explains that in Zulu mythology rainmakers burn the earth around their homes so the gods will know from the blackened area that the rainmaker is seeking rain. The sacrifice of colourful birds to bring about rain (taking colour from the earth, as does drought) is invoked in the novel through the description of the storm as a “monstrous cosmic peacock” that
shed “gross paillettes of hail” (Cons.232). Newman asserts that “drought, he dead black fire and images of the rainbird are carefully organized into a coherent pattern of Zulu mythology”. (Newman, 58). Also significant is the feast celebrating the initiation of Phineas’s wife as a diviner. Possessed by the spirit of the ancestor, she conjures up images of destruction and mayhem: “In her sleep there were also elephants and hyenas and lions and full rivers, all coming near to kill her”. (Cons.166) She is tormented by the ancestors, and only after the storm and the proper burial of the body at the end of the novel is there resolution for her. At the burial “Phineas’ wife’s face was at peace, there was no burden of spirits on her shoulders”(Cons.267). Gordimer’s use of myth solves the central dilemma of the novel. Confident that a shift to black history is imminent, but unable to see how this new reality will come about, her use of Zulu mythology to appropriate the surface narrative, and the symbolic use of the dead body to claim the land, evades the need for a specific answer, yet nevertheless gathers an irresistible force of change. The novel affects a shift to African culture whose reality has survived (or has been conserved) beneath the surface reality of the dominant white culture.

A crucial index of the nature of the revolutionary transition is the loss of geographical control, and in July’s People this is marked for the Smales by their forced retreat to their black servant July’s village, a place Maureen had imagined visiting one day, of her own volition, on a combined shooting, camping and educational jaunt in the bakkie. (July’s People, 37-8). But the issue of the control of space is not exposed simply as a matter of loss, but rather as a transition naturally resulting from the exposure of false credentials. Bam, as the representative white bourgeois unable to adopt to a new social space, is ironically exposed when we discover that he had once presented a paper on ‘Needs and Means in Rural African
Architecture’. (JP, 108). Bam, though able to theorise about the pragmatic use of African social space, is himself quite unable to operate in that environment. There is an important geopolitical point here about a prescriptive paternalism establishing a blueprint for spatial organization which does not originate organically from within a community and a lived understanding of its needs.

The treatment of the issue of space reaches a culmination in the following passage, in which many of the novel’s themes are conjoined:

He lingered about in the small space of the hut behind her, she could hear him hitting his fist into his palm as he did back there when he was talking about some building project he was hoping to be commissioned to design. Impossible to imagine what was happening in those suburban malls now, where white families ate ice-cream together . . . bought T-shirts stamped with their names (‘Victor’ ‘Gina’ ‘Royce’), and looked, learning about foreign parts, at photographic exhibitions whose favoured subject was black township life. (JP, 125)

As Bam lingers in the ‘small space’ of the village hut, Maureen reflects on those diametrically opposed spaces – shopping malls – he had been involved in producing, as an architect; spaces in which stable bourgeois identities are possible and can be proclaimed on T-shirts, and in which the issue of racial and economic equality is reduced to the optional photographic exhibitions – aesthetic representations, apparently incidental to the capitalist routine which such malls epitomize. Of course, this is a concealment of the real causal relation: the creation of these urban shopping spaces is, in important ways, dependent upon the spaces of social deprivation. The suppression of this casual relationship is exposed alongside another reversal: the
obvious irony of Barn’s transposition – from the designer of capitalist urban space to a lingerer in someone else’s mud hut.

Barn’s transposition has its counterpoint in Sonny’s decision, in My Son’s Story, to move to the white suburb – a sponsored political challenge, which is eventually confronted with violence. It is the dislocation – in which the geographical aspect is merely one part of a broader psychological dislocation – which results in the rupture of this family; and Sonny’s decision to relocate is clearly not the cause of the problem, but rather the symptom of – in the forming an appropriate reaction to – a broader cause: that of a repressive state structure.

Considerations of social space recur in the novel and they are intimately related to the presentations of the identity of Sonny and those of his family. In the new house in the white suburb the family dynamic appears to change, as it is now possible to co-exist in the larger house with the luxury of privacy. From Will’s perspective this is a way in which his parents (especially his mother) conceal from themselves their marital estrangement:

*If she is busy in another room he’s sometimes home for half an hour or so before she knows he’s there. In her innocence she takes this as one of the benefits we’ve won for ourselves, for the cause, for freedom: this house has privacy, it’s not like the old one in the ghetto where we were together all the time. It’s a space he deserves. It’s something we have to be grateful to him for. He’s been to prison for principles like this.* (MSS, 44)

Will’s early perspective may include an element of impercipience regarding his mother’s knowledge of Sonny’s affair, but, reading against Will’s heavy irony, this passage fittingly associates the estrangement with the new, sterile social space that facilitates isolation. An important point emerges from this: the old ‘ghetto’ house
embodied social possibility, by enforcing a sense of community, whereas this new bourgeois space embodies and creates social separation. Will misunderstands the nature of the ‘freedom’ and the ‘space’, which is being fought for: the idea of a radical social restructuring is not to repopulate existing social space, but to effect its break-up and rearrangement. The infiltration of the white suburb is an interim phase, a means rather than an end in itself, and the larger objective is actually fulfilled by the eventual destruction of the house.

The connection between space, power and community are made in this resonant passage which occurs during the cleansing of the graves episode, in which white activists join with blacks in the political demonstration:

_The blacks were accustomed to closeness. In queues for transport, for work permits, for housing allocation, for all the stamped paper that authorized their lives; loaded into overcrowded trains and buses to take them back and forth across the veld, fitting a family into one room, they cannot keep the outline of space – another, invisible skin – white project around themselves, distanced from each other in everything but sexual and parental intimacy. But now in the graveyard the people from the combis were dispersed from one another and the spatial aura they instinctively kept, and pressed into single, vast, stirring being with the people of the township. The nun was close against the breast of a man. A black child with his little naked penis wagging under a shirt clung to the leg of a professor. A woman’s French perfume and the sweat of a drunk merged as if one breath came from them. And yet it as not alarming for the whites; in fact, an old fear of closeness, of the odours and heat of the other flesh, was gone. One ultimate body of bodies_
Gordimer here returns to the notion of a black heterotopia, first broached in The Lying Days. In this passage spatial repression is shown, paradoxically, to have created the possibility of a community, an integrated body politic: it is a community of proximity, a vitality which is alien to the privileged whites who are, nevertheless, soon infected by its sense of possibility. A heterotopia is a space which is connected to all other social sites, in a contradictory relationship. The sites of black urbanization in South — symbolically represented here — clearly fulfil this function since they are connected to the other sites defined in the nation’s economic hegemony, sites which they also challenge or contradict. Yet if uncontrollable black urbanization represents a challenge to the racist social organization of South Africa, it does so, perhaps, through the formation of sites which could be termed homotopias as much as Foucauldian heterotopias: the challenge is a unification of a repressed, collective identity. The image of unity in this body politic — ‘the single diastole and systole’ — is made to adumbrate the nation’s possibility, in the image of ‘freedom of the great open afternoon sky’, an unlimited space above this land, and above these people, presumably heralding the change they will bring to it; and if homotopian impulse generates the communal possibility, it opens out into something non-sectrian: significantly, whites feel themselves to be contained within this heterotopia/homotopia, for the first time in Gordimer’s work. However, the fleeting vision of an alternative future is dissipated by the chaotic break-up of the protest, in which the self-absorption of Sonny and Hannah effaces their communal impulse.

If there is a clear hint of political change in My Son’s Story, however, the novel maintains a steady gaze on the interim phase, on the personal dissolution of
Sonny and Will, examples of the human sacrifice that the period of resistance must entail. Other instances of the control of social space indicate the exclusion of Sonny from the new dawn, as when the idyll of Hannah's rented cottage garden oppresses Sonny with its artificial beauty and greenery which screens 'the smashed symmetry of shot bodies' (MSS. 143): there is a violence embodied in the symmetry of the garden, the domain of the rich white man, a violence which produces the parallel asymmetry in order that the domain may be preserved. A description of the spatial discrimination which has governed the lives of Sonny and his family ends with an account of Sonny's exclusion from the library:

*The lover of Shakespeare never had the right to enter the municipal library and so did not so much as think about it while white people came out before him with books under their arms; he did not recognize what the building represented for him, with its municipal coat of arms and motto above the pillared entrance: CARPE DIEM (MSS. 12).*

This is the edifice of cultural exclusion, which equates power with opportunism, available for whosoever can enter these portals and 'seize the day'. It is the importance of this ideology which Sonny comes to recognize, rightly understanding that advancement is facilitated through the acquisition of certain cultural knowledge. Sonny's problem is that he is never able to separate his idea of 'improvement' from a complicity with the cultural hegemony – the opportunism – which the incipient black community spirit implicitly challenges. This, again, may be another instance of the interim phase, a necessary working within the modes of production, which Sonny also encourages in Will by transposing onto him his idea of improvement and importance of literature. When, at the end of the novel, Will effectively announces himself as the 'author' of the novel, we realize – as the title has indicated all along –
that he has accepted his father's legacy, despite the resentment he has continually felt towards his father's cultural elitism. This may imply that Will accepts the mantle of scribe as a compromise, as a necessary act of complicity in finding a voice that will challenge the hegemonic system in a language it can recognize. But there may be something beyond this, an advancement beyond Sonny’s confusion about the relationship between culture and power: a more explicit understanding on Will’s part, perhaps, of the nature and implications of the compromise that is being made. In one sense this has to be the case, since Will is identified as the ‘author’ of the novel which can be made to reveal just such an understanding. There are also instances in the novel which indicate the process of this advancement, as in Will’s account of his father’s reaction to the wreck of their burnt-out house, when, after his apparent sense of loss.

_The old rhetoric took up the opportunity. We can’t be burned out, he said._

_we’re that bird, you know, its called the phoenix, that always rises again from the ashes. Prison won’t keep us out. Petrol bombs won’t get rid of us. This street – this whole country is ours to live in. Fire won’t stop me. And it won’t stop you. Flocks of papery cinders were drifting, floating about us beds, clothing – his books? The smell of smoke, that was the smell of her. The smell of destruction, of what has been consumed that he first brought into that house._ (MSS, 274)

Sonny’s own distaste for rhetoric, even for the articulation of ideas with which he is in agreement (MSS, 192), a cast an ironic doubt over this stubborn outburst, which is merely automatic, gestural. The infiltration of the white suburb has here met its anticipated confrontation, and the interim phase is passed, just as the memory of Hannah, the smoker, appears to be simultaneously exorcised in this destruction.
Most importantly, perhaps, the books have also been destroyed, implying an accompanying exorcism of Sonny’s ‘idea’ of literature, the appeal with which Hannah is associated. Sonny it appears, is restricted in this conclusion, a victim of the interregnum, unable to progress beyond a gestural language of confrontation.

Here there is the first part of an extended allusion to the ending of Gordimer’s first novel, *The Lying Days*, where Helen Shaw’s ‘phoenix illusion’ of accepting disillusionment as a potential new beginning is associated with her intention of returning one day to face her country’s problems: the association establishes an ironic distance between character and (more mature) character-narrator (LD, 367). Sonny’s ‘phoenix speech’ is illusory in that it fails to register the element of salutary exorcism in the destruction before him: but his illusion concerns strategies and attitudes of practical resistance, casting an ironic shadow on the free choice of Helen in *The Lying Days* as to whether she will commit at all. For Will, at the end of the novel, there is a partial advancement, but a compromise and restriction, too. Will’s situation is indicated in the novel’s final passage: ‘What he did – my father – made me a writer. Do I have to thank him for that? Why couldn’t I have been something else? I am a writer and this is my first book – that I can never publish’. (MSS, 277). The overt metafictional conclusion to the novel raises important questions about the function of literature, questions specific to the South African context. The passage quoted represents a complex conjunction. Will’s reluctance at his ‘enforced’ vocation stems from the appropriation of his personal life for need: as for Sonny, the interregnum demands this sacrifice from him. The final line presents an important ambiguity: the avowed impossibility of publication suggests a paradoxical reluctance to make the sacrifice, which has infact already been made. It also suggests, quite apart from the spectre of censorship, an
impossibility imposed by political expediency, the need to protect the sensitive
details of the activism Will has described in his translation of his family’s ‘reality’
into fiction. Here there is a tacit acknowledgement on Gordimer’s part of the effects
of the racial discrimination on literary production: the freedom she has to create a
fictional representation of the forces operating on a family of committed activists, is
a freedom and a luxury which could not have been enjoyed by the family she has
created.

Here Gordimer alludes again to her first novel, The Lying Days, recreating
the effect used at the end of that novel when the narrator, Helen Shaw, also
announces herself as the ‘author’. The end of My Son’s Story forms an ironic
contrast with that luxurious moment of self-definition which has implied an
emerging bridge between world and text for the young white writer finding a voice.
The metafictional moment here emphasizes the impossibility of such a bridge for
Will, the kind of South African ‘author’ who has had to be invented by a privileged
white. There is a fitting sense of closure in Gordimer’s inclusion of such a self-
reflexive moment in My Son’s Story, the last of her novels to be written in the
apartheid era: her novel articulates its point about South African literary identity and
literary production by re-evaluating the metafictional ending of her first novel,
written in the early days of the Nationalist rule.

The concentration on landscape can appear overstated, but it is a reading
which fills an important gap in criticism of Gordimer, suggesting the relevance of a
politics of space to her work. In a 1982 interview to Robert Boyers later published in
Salmagundi, Gordimer shows how the issue of land and ownership crystallizes the
South African situation. A question is posed concerning the different treatment of
landscape to be found in the work of white and black South African writers.
respectively: black writers, Terence Diggory speculates, identifying with the people rather than the land, in contrast to the preoccupation with landscape in the work of white writers, a speculation which Gordimer takes up:

I think there's something very interesting there. I think that whites are always having to assert their claim to the land because it's based, as Mehring's mistress (in The Conservationist) points out, on a piece of paper — a deed of sale. And what is a deed when people have first of all taken a country by conquest? ...Blacks take the land for granted, it's simply there. It's theirs, although they've been conquered; they were always there. They don't have this necessity to say, 'Well I love this land because it's beautiful, because it's this, that, and the other. (Boyers, 6)

This is a significant idea: that colonial history has generated a racial divergence concerning spatial perception. And if South Africa's colonial origins produce this geopolitical tension, it is a tension which has been subsequently promoted in extraordinary ways by the apartheid system, which was predicated on the establishment and control of spatial zones. Underpinning this mechanism was the initial apartheid ethos of racial separation, which conceived of South Africa as comprising four 'racial groups': White, Coloured, Indian and African. Also fundamental to the apartheid system of spatial control (in addition to absolute control for whites) was the idea that whites in South Africa formed a single nation, while Africans belonged to several distinct nations. The single white nation comprised both English and Afrikaans — speaking whites; the African 'nations' or 'homelands' were eventually ten in number. This geographical designation made the white nation the largest single nation, and also set up spaces — the homelands — to which black South Africans would (so the government intended) be largely
confined. Blacks were accepted as workers in other areas while their labour was required, but were otherwise expected to return to their designated homeland. This, in effect, was an attempt to restrict urbanization, and the pass laws were set up to enforce this, allowing the arrest of blacks resident in towns for longer than seventy-two hours without a permit. In rural areas outside the homelands efforts were made to remove Africans from land they occupied or owned.

In urban areas the government was equally systematic in its attempt at spatial control. There were many ‘petty apartheid’ measures, which affected the daily lives of people through the provision of separate amenities. On a larger scale there were thorough ‘re-zoning’ strategies: in the cities non-whites were frequently moved from land they occupied and were resituated in newly-established, segregated townships. The Group Areas Act of 1950 (with its many amendments) was a vital piece of legislation for spatial control: it designated urban areas as the sole province of specific racial groups. In practice this invariably meant the eviction of blacks from desirable areas now designated as for whites only. Despite all of these measures, however, non-white (especially African) population of the towns continued apace.

The policies of the apartheid regime illustrate the inter-dependence of rural and urban control in spatial politics, a point which is seminal to theorist: for Henri Lefebure, as evident in Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies*, the notion of urbanization assumes a centrality; as Soja points out, Lefebure’s idea of urbanization stretches beyond the confines of cities: it becomes a metaphor for the spatialization of modernity, the way in which capitalism reproduces its relations to production. (Soja, 50). Commentators on the human geography of South Africa, as in *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa*, edited by David M. Smith, have stressed the certainty of urban development to
major social and political developments, though the experience of South Africa incorporates 'unique' urban phenomena: new forms of urbanization have arisen, denying a rigid division between city and country; this is especially evident in the expansion of informal 'fringe' urban settlements, the urban phenomena which challenge conventional definitions. (Smith, 11). The specificity of South African urbanization suggests not only a challenge to conventional descriptions, but also the existence of sites from which energies for social change might emerge. Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias', in Diacritics, helps to explain how such a possibility can be conceived: Foucault's heterotopias are sites which stand in a pointed relationship to other social spaces. They have 'the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect. These spaces ... which are linked with all the other, ... However contradict all the other sites.'(Foucault, 22-27)

The concept of heterotopias can identify the sites of social experience and hence of social struggle. The black urban experience in South Africa — especially township life — is a manifestation of dispossession and repression. Yet it also contains a seed of something more positive, as (in its later manifestations) an implicit challenge to government control of urbanization. In this sense one might talk of black urbanization as a heterotopia, a socially created spatiality (albeit within strict confines) which maintains a contradictory link to all the other sites of South Africa, to which it is the required source of exploitation as well as the banished site of repression. For Soja the heterotopia is 'concrete and abstract at the same time', and this articulates very accurately the nature of black urbanization, the concrete embodiment of a counter-culture, and, by virtue of this, also the means of
articulating and harnessing abstract ideas of racial identity and solidarity. (Soja, 17-18). Gordimer has been consistently sensitive to this ambivalence and potential of black urbanization. In the introduction to the collection of essays on the apartheid city, David Smith quotes a description of a township from Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* in which she identifies several issues, which are explored in Smith’s collection. Gordimer, at one point raises the question of how the ‘urban’ can be defined in this context: ‘is this conglomerate urban or rural?’ She goes on to broach the subject of inequality hinging on the conjunction of power and space: ‘is this a suburb or a strange kind of junkyard? The enormous backyard of the whole white city.’ She also can see how this special kind of urbanization contains within it, for all its deprivation, the seed of a social possibility beyond that which has been imposed on its inhabitants: a “place”; a position whose contradictions those who impose them don’t see, and from which will come a resolution they haven’t provided for. (BG, 149-51)

Smith finds Gordimer’s description significantly perspective in its presentation of these geographical issues, a description which ‘captures something of both the life and the landscape of apartheid.’ Smith also indicates, in effect, how Gordimer has located the ‘heterotopic’ quality of the township life: her account

*Hints at the central significance of urbanization under apartheid: that those places imposed by the white government on the black majority have taken on a life of their own, rebounding on the system to its discomfort and ultimate demise. Very simply, urbanization under apartheid, no matter how carefully the state contrived to control it, has undermined apartheid itself, bringing South African society and its cities to the brink of significant if still uncertain change.* (Smith, Introduction)
Urbanization in South Africa, despite the deprivation and squalor that invariably accompanies it, does identify a challenge to, and a contradiction emerging from, the policies of the apartheid regime. On the one hand the expanding settlements indicate the failure of the strategies of strict spatial control; on the other, the presence of blacks in townships adjoining cities is tacitly required since these people comprise much of a city's required workforce. There is a self-defeating element in this connection.

Indeed, this contradiction has come to undermine the functioning of apartheid, even though the government has made attempts to embrace the trend to urbanization within its own practices; through, for example, a new policy of 'orderly urbanization', as set out in the 1986 White Paper on Urbanization. The intention, evidently, was to harness and control the marginalized masses into an authorized workforce, although the government resisted bearing the burden of new housing costs. (Smith, Introduction) In short, government policies colluded with resistance to the spatial rigidities of the apartheid state, resulting in urban phenomena which challenged the foundations of apartheid society, even while they graphically embodied its contradictions. Gordimer's continuing preoccupation with the significance of human geography, consequently, has an enormous historical significance, as a fictional investigation of a determining feature in the dissolution of apartheid.

Clearly, the heterotopias of urban South Africa return us to the micropolitics of the body: heterotopias are places created for individual bodies to resist the organized spaces of incarceration or surveillance and to establish their own spaces of consciousness and freedom. Urbanization, like sexuality, is thus a form of transgression for Gordimer, of social development beyond the limits of apartheid. In
this sense urbanization and sexuality, through their transgressive potential, are two key routes for the fashioning of the cultural hybridization that Gordimer has identified as the necessary future of South African literature.
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