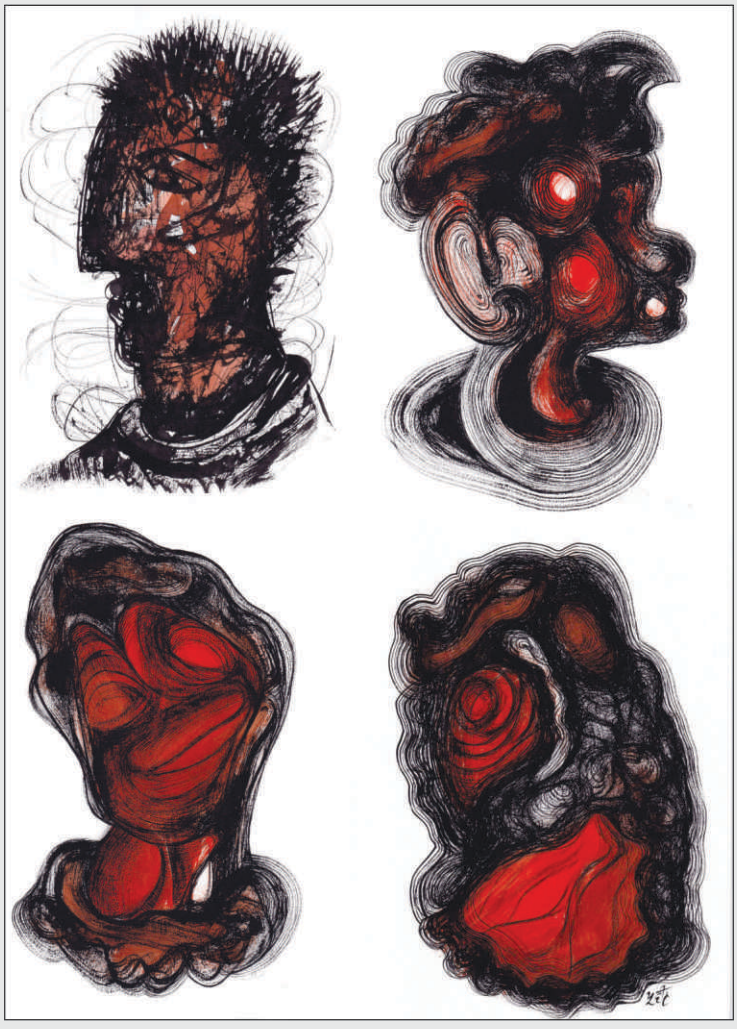
Literary Voice

A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies
U.G.C. Care Approved Group 'A' Journal
ISSN 2277-4521
Indexed with Web of Science ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I2OR, Cite Factor

Number 12 Volume 1 March 2020



Editor : T.S. Anand

www.literaryvoice.in

Literary Voice

A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies
U.G.C. Care Approved Group 'A' Journal
ISSN 2277-4521
Indexed with Web of Science ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I2OR, Cite Factor

Indexed with

THOMSON REUTERS Emerging Sources Citation Index WEB OF SCIENCE™
ESJI Eurasian Scientific Journal Index www.ESJIndex.org
I2OR
CiteFactor Academic Scientific Journals
Cosmos

Literary Voice

A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies
U.G.C. Care Approved Group 'A' Journal

ISSN 2277-4521
Indexed with Web of Science ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I2OR, Cite Factor

Number 12 **Volume 1** **March 2020**

RESEARCH ARTICLES

LITERARY VOICE
LUDHIANA

www.literaryvoice.in

An Evaluation of Liminality in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

Murat Kabak
Research Assistant
Dept. of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Science and Letters
Istanbul Kültür University
Istanbul (Turkey)
Email: m.kabak@iku.edu.tr

Abstract

Set during a civil war in the apartheid South Africa, Nadine Gordimer's July's People *is centred around the relationship between the Smales family and their former servant July. As the communal ties disintegrate in the novel, three objects play a vital role in our understanding of the characters. For the purposes of this study, these symbols not only help us to reveal the nature of spatial-temporal dislocation but also reveal Gordimer's commentary on the apartheid South Africa. This study aims to contribute the existing scholarship by focusing on the liminal/in-between experience in* July's People *through analyzing the novel's preoccupation with subject-object relationship.*
Keywords: Dislocation, July's People*, Nadine Gordimer, spatiality, temporality*

***

"The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci 276). Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* opens with an alternate translation of the quotation above from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Written in 1981, the novel presents a dystopic vision of the post-apartheid South Africa, where a liberal white family is caught up in a civil war between the African rebels and the white ruling class. The interregnum in Gramsci's lines refers to the in-between state in the novel, where the power vacuum created by the disappearance of the apartheid regime is yet to be fulfilled by a new regime. The epigraph from Gramsci is related to two main concerns of the novel. The death of the old reign is a painful process since it does not allow the new reign to be born. The impossibility of the birth of the new reign ("cannot be born") is tied to the old with a coordinative conjunction. The "and" that is connecting the old to the new emphasizes both the result (as in 'since the old cannot be completed, the new cannot be initiated') and simultaneity (as in 'the death and birth processes coincide'). In that sense, birth and death are connected in terms of both causality and contemporaneity. This reflects the novel's concern with the temporal and spatial dislocation, which are "the morbid symptoms" of the suspension of the political and social structure. In Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* we observe two morbid symptoms: temporal and spatial dislocation, which do not allow the characters to position themselves in the social structure. This inability of adapting oneself to the society is reflected through three symbols revolving around three objects in the novel: a pickup truck, a radio and a shotgun. As the white liberal family is dislocated, they hold onto these objects that are valuable symbolically but functionless in

their living conditions. Before talking about how the novel problematizes the character relationships in a social structure, it is vital to look at the context that *July's People* was written and its place in the dystopian tradition.

Set during a civil war in South Africa, *July's People* is centered on the interaction between the Smales family and their servant July. The novel opens immediately after the breakout of the civil war between the black South African rebels and the white ruling class. July helps the family to escape from the war-torn Johannesburg and they take shelter in July's native village in rural Africa. Although the novel imagines a dystopian future, as Gordimer stated in an interview in 1987, the harsh living conditions and the tension felt in the interracial interactions were evident in the apartheid South Africa: "In the few years since it was written … many of the things which seemed like science fiction *then*, have begun to happen, and it's not because I'm a seer or prophet, but because it was there. We've been doing things that would bring this about" (qtd. in Bazin 119). In 1993, Rajen Harshe writes an article just months before the abolition of racial discrimination in South Africa, reflecting the anxieties of the interregnum. The final years of the apartheid regime, for Harshe, were "a difficult phase of transition that involves rearranging the mechanisms of sharing power among its citizens" (1981). Meanwhile, this in-between political climate found its expression in the "sporadic outbursts of violence between the ANC [African National Congress] and the IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party] supporters in the streets (Harshe 1980). However, these violent outbursts created by the racial tension are only in the background of the novel. The Smaleses only learn the course of the civil war from the news on the radio. Even though Maureen and Bam Smales are the supporters of the black emancipation movement in Africa, their liberal attitude proves to be grounded in hypocrisy as the novel progresses. The couple, first confronted by the material lack in July's village, and then is confronted by the new power relations and their bond to the old society that they were living in. Their adaptation in July's village is interrupted by their unwillingness to share their resources, and their perception of the interregnum as a dystopia.

Wanting of a definitive answer to the question of what a dystopia has led the critics to evaluate utopian strain in the West. One of the most inclusive definitions offered by those critics is Roemer's narrative description: a utopia is a work of fiction that:

> invites readers to experience vicariously an alternative reality that critiques theirs by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentials of their own culture in new ways. If the [perceived alternate reality is] … significantly better than the "present," then the work is a eutopia … if significantly worse, it is a dystopia (20)

Yet, not all the works in utopian tradition conform to this definition. Apart from *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or "the classical dystopias" (Moylan 176), there is no clear classification of dystopias written in the post-war period since these works resist neat classification schemes that have been offered by various critics. However, it must be noted that the emphasis is on the reader/writer's perception of the fictional worlds in Roemer's definition. As it will be mentioned later in the article, the reader's perception of the narrative

is limited to the perspective of the Smales family. The supposed end of the apartheid regime is neither desirable or undesirable because a simple reversal of the power dynamics (black population dominating over white, instead of white dominating black) is not necessarily emancipatory for both parties. Because the power vacuum after the end of apartheid is filled with civil war and social unrest, instead of equal rights or representation, and this phase is repeatedly called "interregnum" in the novel.

To understand the interregnum, or the liminal/in-between experience felt in *July's People*, we may look at Victor Turner's account of the difference between society and *communitas*. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner defines two juxtaposed and alternating models for interpersonal relationships: society as "the structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less"" and *communitas* "emerg[ing] recognizably in the liminal period" as "an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (96). In Turner's anthropology, this liminal and structured modes of human relationships co-exist, and their complementary relationship is akin to Nietzsche's explanation of the origins of Greek tragedy as the interplay of the Apollonian (ordered, structured drive) and the Dionysian (chaotic) drives in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Yet, as cited in the introductory quote, the balance between the old and the new is disturbed in *July's People*, and the two symptoms of this imbalance are the spatial and temporal dislocation.

The novel's preoccupation with dwelling in the threshold and setting the characters in a liminal state is most apparent in the opening passage where the narrator not only gives a context to the events in the novel but also sets the tone in a brief, eight lines passage.

> July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind.
>
> The knock on the door. Seven o'clock. In governors' residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses' company bungalows, master bedrooms *en suite* – the tea-tray in black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap.
>
> The knock on the door
>
> no door, an aperture in thick mud walls … *Bam, I'm stifling; her voice raising him from the dead, he staggering up from his exhausted sleep* (Gordimer 1)

The temporal dislocation felt by the Smales family is reflected in the form. Whilst the second paragraph sets in Johannesburg, with "the knock on the door", the reader is immediately transferred to July's village. The transition between the master bedroom and the mud house is so sudden for the characters that there are no punctuation or temporal reference but only a negation of the spatial reference ("the door / no door"). Also, it is no coincidence that the novel opens in a threshold, emphasizing the liminal (literally "threshold" in Latin) experience felt in the interregnum. Hence, even Maureen and Bam's reactions are not in a stable state. Whilst Maureen is suffocating, her voice raises her husband "from the dead".

Yet, not every element in the passage is intermingled and coexistent. There are sharp turns separating then and now. The mention of the "black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap" raises a red flag. Since brands such as Lifebuoy exploited the colonizer's obsession with hygiene in the 1920s (Lock and Nguyen 161). Maureen's concerns about hygiene are also evident when Maureen is mentioned bringing toilet rolls, instead of more essential materials while running away from Johannesburg. Yet, the lifebuoy reference is not only about hygiene. With a genius pun, Gordimer also points out July's role as a metaphoric lifebuoy to the Smales family, hence, depicts him as a sympathetic character.

Moreover, the paralyzing effect of the interregnum, as illustrated above ('suffocation' and 'raising from the dead'), is so devastating and dislocating for Maureen that she wakes up thinking:

> As if the vehicle had made a journey so far beyond the norm of a present it divided its passengers from, that the master bedroom *en suite* had been lost, jolted out of chronology as the room where her returning consciousness properly belonged: the room that she had left four days ago (Gordimer 3-4)

Maureen's temporal and spatial dislocation is supported by the divided sentence structure in the novel's form. The first phrase after the comma is a nominalized clause (beginning with 'that') which turns the rest of the clause into a noun. By nominalizing the phrase, "that" also separates/divides the sentence, i.e. Maureen's thoughts can also be read as "As if the vehicle had made a journey so far beyond the norm of a present it divided its passengers from … the room that she had left four days ago". In that sense, the master bedroom's state of being 'jolted out of chronology' is itself divided from the sentence. Because of their temporal and spatial dislocation, the Smales are gradually stripped off from their connection to 'the old' social structure and these are reflected in three vital objects in the novel.

Each object has a dual role in the plot and the characterization. Whilst each of them explores a different aspect of the relationships between the characters, they also disclose what the white quasi-liberal family has lost in the interregnum. The vital role of the objects in the novel is, in fact, pointed out earlier in the novel by the narrator: "In various and different circumstances certain objects and individuals are going to turn out to be vital … and the identity of the vital individuals and objects is hidden by their humble or frivolous role in an habitual set of circumstances" (Gordimer 6). Although the narrator, at this point, refers to 1976, Soweto Riots in South Africa, these 'vital individuals and objects' also refer to the individual characters and their relations to certain objects.

The first vital object in the novel, reflecting the Smaleses' inability to adapt themselves in their new environment, is the pickup truck, which not only represents mobility and freedom but also creates the tension between Maureen and July. As the white liberal family cannot drive the truck, July keeps the keys as did he in Johannesburg (Gordimer 69) and the entire relationship between July and the Smales is supposed to be built on equality both before and during the interregnum. Yet, when July drives the truck to buy the necessary items from the local shop without asking the Smaleses' permission,

Maureen assumes a hostile discourse. As if to command her slave, Maureen says: "Go and say I want to see him" (Gordimer 68). To understand the complex web of social relations, we may refer to Turner's distinction of the liminal experience which would fit the in-between state in the novel. For Turner, there are two types of liminality:

> [F]irst, the liminality characterizes *rituals of status elevation*, in which the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position … [and] second, the liminality frequently found in cyclical and calendrical ritual, usually of a collective kind, in which … groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors; and they, in their turn, must accept with good will their ritual degradation. (167)

Even though there is not a ritual of "status reversal", as Turner would call, in *July's People*, Maureen feels the degradation and the status change after July takes the keys of the car and as seen from the quote above, she tries to assert her superiority by commanding July to come see her. Because, even though she seems to perceive July as her equal, the truck as the symbol of mobility and freedom turns into a manifestation of resentment. She is so resentful of seeing July leaning his back against the car that she thinks that: "[p]ride, comfort of possession was making him forget by whose losses possession had come about" (Gordimer 94). Dramatic irony, on the other hand, is that, it is the loss of the black African whose exploitation generated Maureen's possessions. As Harshe points out, in the context of apartheid South Africa:

> 87 per cent of the land was grabbed by the minority white population while the blacks have had to contain themselves within the remaining 13 per cent of the land. Most of the fertile and minerally rich patches of land were controlled by whites … [S]everal decades of geographical segregation, educational discrimination and impoverishment continued to obstruct the blacks from capturing high paying or skilled jobs. (1981)

Maureen's father was also a mine owner who mistreated his workers. She recalls their shift boss who "spoke the bastard black *lingua franca* of the mines, whose vocabulary was limited to orders given by whites and responses made by blacks", and the narrator emphasizes that this is "an old story that [Maureen] had been ashamed of" (Gordimer 45). In that sense, Maureen is unable to conceive her complicity with the exploitation and injustice in the apartheid period, as she is unable to confront the leveled relationship between her and July in the interregnum. Despite Maureen's twisted perception of the hierarchy between them, the situation is exactly the opposite for July. Even though their status has been levelled in a bare survival, July acts as if the Smaleses are his masters. If we go back to the opening passage of the novel, July's very first act is "ben[ding] at the doorway". Therefore, for July, the transition between the master bedroom doorway to the mud hut door is not so radical as it was for the Smaleses whose understanding of their hierarchical position has collapsed.

On the other hand, the radio, as the second object, illustrates the extent of the

Smaleses' temporal dislocation from the outside world, as well as their growing sense of alienation from one another. During their refuge in July's village, a small radio becomes their sole connection to the outside world. Trying to fix the radio or to find a frequency is a means for Bam to occupy his mind and still feel useful. Therefore, he is always seen while "fiddling with the radio" (Gordimer 138). Yet, the news that Maureen and Bam are eager to hear becomes less and less intelligible. "There were other radios in the community, bellowing, chattering, twanging pop music, the sprightly patter of commercials in a black language; the news reader's gardening-talk voice spoke English only to the white pair, only for them" (Gordimer 25). What strikes the reader as odd is the broadcasting of lively pop music during a civil war. It is as if the black community in the village has no bond with the events that are happening outside their village, as does the nonchalant broadcasters. Yet, the Smales is the only the audience of the news in the village. Even in their eagerness to learn about the events outside the village, their position as the audience reduces them to passive receivers. And they become more passive through the middle of the novel, where the couple listen to the news for the last time in English: "The reception was bad, the reader was bad, the reader a stumbling speaker – who was left, at the state broadcasting service's splendid towers of granite, to do such a job? Possibly the transmission no longer came from there" (Gordimer 88). The suspension that the news is no longer transmitted from the state broadcasting center removes them once again from the events since they receive their information from a state agency that is already removed from the heart of the civil war. From this point on, the language of the radio shifts from English to Afrikaans and Portuguese (Gordimer 110) that would make impossible for them to understand what is happening 'back there'.

The military and masculine power are reflected through the shotgun symbol that acts as the manifestation of Bam's temporal dislocation. "All the old games, the titillation with killing-and-not-killing, the honour of shooting only the wing, the pretense of hide-and-seek invented to make killing a pleasure, were in another kind of childhood he had been living in to the age of forty, back there" (Gordimer 77). It is evident in the passage that for Bam, the presence of the shotgun in the village is the reminiscent of a lost past and the remnant of his 'old games' with his immediate surrounding. Yet, as the narrator emphasizes, his hunting activities 'back there' were childish (noting the word choices 'titillation', 'hide-and-seek'), compared to his current situation of hunting wart-hogs to feed the village. In that sense, his hunting activity is a way of asserting his masculinity. Whilst Bam's position as the meat-provider in the community can be read as a rite of passage, in the sense that the individual in *communitas* earns his position in another group, Bam's self-perception problematizes this view. Bam is forced to face the revolting aspect of hunting when he shoots his first piglet on its head:

> It was horrible, the bloodied pig-face weeping blood and trailing blood-snot … Game birds (his usual prey) had no faces, really … a guinea-fowl head doesn't look much different, dead, from alive … He understood, for the first time, that he was a killer. A butcher like any other in rubber boots among the slush of guys, urine and blood at the abattoir. (Gordimer 77-78)

These horrid images of his hunt draw a stark black-white contrast with the faceless games he hunted 'back there'. Facing the consequences of his actions, Bam cannot integrate into the community. Even with a symbol of military and masculine power, Bam is unable to respond the expectations of the village, at least in a psychic level.

Moreover, Bam's already precarious masculinity is further challenged by the tribal chief where he is asked to teach the soldiers in the tribe how to shoot in two consecutive scenes. Summoning the Smaleses to his court, the chief expresses his intention of protecting his land: "Those people from Soweto. They come here with Russias [*sic*], the other ones from Moçambique, they all want take this country of my nation. Eh? They not our nation" (Gordimer 119). Even though the aggression of the tribes the chief mentions may fall into the category of tribalism and chauvinism, the sole purpose of the chief in *July's People* is to defend his tribe against "those Soweto and Russias". Taking the period of Gordimer's writing of the novel into consideration, the USSR was the other hegemonic power, which would wage proxy wars against its ideological enemy, the United States, through invading countries and/or aiding the local rebel groups. In that sense, the chief's enemy is not "AmaZulu, amaXhosa [or] baSotho" (Gordimer 119) but a local tribe and "the Russias", i.e. it is a war against an imperial power. Bam's inability to understand the legitimate resistance is mirrored in the following scene where he is asked the kind of gun that he used in Johannesburg. The Chief says that the "white men are known to keep in their bedrooms, to protect their radios and TV sets" (Gordimer 120). When Bam replies "I don't shoot people", his reply is followed by a "backwash of laughter" (Gordimer 120). This scene is crucial in understanding Bam's self-conception, since he assesses his predicament. It is insinuated that instead of staying in Johannesburg and "defending [his] own wife and children" (Gordimer 121), he ran away. Bam's impotence is emphasized through these successive scenes in the sense that as Bam could not defend his family "back there" in Johannesburg with his gun, he is unable to grasp the rightful war that the tribe is waging. Yet, the final blow is delivered with the robbery of the shotgun, depriving him of his sense of masculine identity. When his son tells that he should call the police to inform them about the robbery, Bam experiences a nervous breakdown in front of his sons:

> If he couldn't pick up the phone and call the police whom he and she had despised for their brutality and thuggery in the life lived back there, he did not know what else to do.
> …
> He lay down on his back, on that bed, the way he habitually did; and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done before his sons. (Gordimer 145)

This is the last appearance of a patriarch who would never reclaim his masculine power through a vital object and is left alone by his apartheid government that would intervene so-called 'brutality and thuggery.'

The novel concludes with the arrival of the fourth vital object. With the emasculation of her husband, Maureen falls into a despair that leads her to run for the slightest chance of

survival. As a helicopter, whose origin is unknown, arrives July's village, Maureen runs towards it without knowing "whether it [held] saviours or murderers" (Gordimer 158). And as Maureen leaves her family behind for her own survival, the narrator says:

> The real fantasies of the bush delude more inventively than the romantic forests of Grimm and Disney. The smell of boiled potatoes … promises a kitchen, a house just the other side of next tree. There are patches where airy knob-thorn trees stand free of undergrowth and the grass and orderly clumps of Barberton daisies and drifts of nemesia belong to the artful nature of a public park. (Gordimer 160)

What is significant in the narrator's description of Maureen's delusion is that both flower species, Barberton daisies and nemesia, are indigenous to Africa. Yet, these flowers are juxtaposed with another horticultural element that belongs to the world outside July's village, a public park. The very appearance of the helicopter induces Maureen to act in state of confusion of fantasy and reality. This is why the narrator distinguishes 'the real life fantasy' from 'the romantic' fantasies. Whilst both are a form of escapism, the former's influence comes from its power to juxtapose more inventively. The helicopter is the big unknown at the end of the novel. Its ambiguity does not allow the reader to decide whether it is a hope for survival or a possible threat. It is neither one nor the other. Yet, it carries the hope of reconnecting the past to the future and the old to the new. As each vital object in the previous examples is tied to the society 'back there', the helicopter image also creates a sense of hope and connection to the future with the juxtaposition of reality/fantasy, the belief in 'the survival of the fittest'/a delusional mind, and so on.

Even though they consider themselves as a liberal family, the Smales "had tried to train [July] to drop the 'master' for the ubiquitously respectful 'sir'" (Gordimer 52). Even in this small instance, the verb 'train' carries the Smaleses' presupposition that July needs to be educated and the family's hypocrisy. This quasi-liberal attitude is exposed with the emergence of various morbid symptoms, finding their expression in the vital objects in *July's People*. These objects not only reflect the spatial and temporal dislocation experienced by Maureen and Bam but also represent what is at stake for them in this interregnum. As the analysis of the interregnum in the novel shows, *July's People* differentiates itself from the other books in the dystopian tradition. As can be seen from the above quotes related to radio, the narrator makes brief references to the turmoil out there, yet the characters in July's village are isolated from the dystopic terrain where everything crumbles into uncertainty. In that sense, the novel is not a typical dystopia depicting a complex web of relations in a social setting with a special emphasis on the politics of that fictional world, as it is in Huxley's *Brave New World*, for instance. *July's People* is rather an inner dystopia where the characters confront both their inner conflicts and conflicts with other characters in the novel. Another conclusion that can be drawn from our analysis is that the novel's problematizing of the human relationships in the interregnum through giving each symbol a context of ownership and locality. In the case of the car keys, for instance, July was the keeper of all keys in Johannesburg. Yet, as the spatial dimension changes, the owner/holder paradigm shifts. Radio, on the other hand, reflects the characters' isolation from the civil war at a surface level. But at the same time, it reflects how Gordimer chooses to comment on the

apartheid South Africa by both engaging in a political commentary whilst distancing her novel's setting and its characters from the immediate politics of her time by positing the characters in a different spatial and temporal context.

Works cited

Bazin, Nancy Topping. "Women and Revolution in Dystopian Fiction: Nadine Gordimer's July's People and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." Bazin, Nancy Topping. *Selected Essays: International Conference on Representing Revolution*. Ed. John Michael Crafton. West Georgia UP, 1989. 115-127.

Gordimer, Nadine. *July's People*. Penguin Books, 1981.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. International Publishers Co., 1971.

Harshe, Rajen. "Understanding Transition towards Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28.38 (1993): 1980-1983.

Lock, Margaret and Vinh-Kim Nguyen. "Colonial Diseases and Biological Commensurability." *An Anthropology of Medicine*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 146-174.

Moylan, Thomas. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Westview Press, 2000.

Roemer, Kenneth M. *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Cornell UP, 1969.