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ESSAYS

PART 1

1918-2018

A HOMAGE TO NELSON MANDELA ON THE CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH



Image Source: W.J. Vincent II, “Nelson Mandela – An Example for the World”, *Think-MoreBeMore.Com*, 12 December 2013, <https://thinkmorebemore.com/thinkmorebemoreblog/great-people/nelson-mandela-an-example-for-the-world/> (last accessed on 29 December 2018).

Abstract. This section of the journal consists of four essays aiming to commemorate Nelson Mandela on his centennial posthumous birthday. While being interconnected by a series of paradigms resonating with the ideas of the struggle for freedom and the hard-won, long walk to democracy, these papers investigate the ‘Madiba magic’ from different points of view, ranging from the socio-political dimension to the cultural sphere, from a national context to a global scenario.

Keywords. Nelson Mandela. South Africa. Gardening metaphors. Charismatic personality. Moral stature. Political leadership. TRC. André Brink.

Laura Giovannelli

“NO MAN IS AN ISLAND”:
MANDELA, FLOWERS, AND GARDENING

Tracing an outline of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (Mvezo, 18 July 1918 - Johannesburg, 5 December 2013) is a noble as well as demanding task that would require rivers of ink to flow. Much has been said on the subject, both on a national and an international level, with a surge of interest that predictably reached its height in the wake of Mandela's death at the age of 95. His passing away was followed by a long series of local and worldwide commemorations, mourning gatherings, media-covered events and, of course, the releasing of a flood of publications. Even a brief glance at these printed or audiovisual accounts shows a rich panoply of tributes and portrayals that cast the first black President of South Africa and Father of the Rainbow Nation as a global heroic icon and visionary leader, an agent of multiracial reconciliation and sage unifier, a personification of *ubuntu* and of an inspirational commitment to the democratic ideals of freedom and equality.

A feeling of profound, bewildering loss was thus accompanied by an urgency to remember his extraordinary 'life and times' and keep the South African 'miracle' alive, along with what Mporu and Chasi call "Mandelaism", that is to say, the "cultural practices and sign systems that surround and mythologise", or purposively exploit, the figure of Madiba (Mandela's clan name):

Former South African President, Nelson Mandela's death in 2013 saw an extraordinary outpouring of local and global grief. This reflected the worldwide iconisation of Mandela as a popular cultural and political symbol for human rights, political messiah-hood, sainthood, dignity, peace and forgiveness [...]. Mandelaism is intermeshed with, feeds into and draws on patriotic sentiments, often invoking notions of magical powers to reconcile racial divisions, to right wrongs of the past and to nation-build. Mandelaism, we notice, is sometimes hijacked by self-serving machinations.¹

1. S. Mporu and C. Chasi, "Mandelaism in Newspaper Advertising that 'Pays Tribute' to Mandela after his Death", *JLS/TLW*, 33 (4), December 2017, p. 1. On Mandela as a subject of representation in films, documentaries or made-for-television biopics, see R. Bromley, "'Magic Negro', Saint or Comrade: Representations of Nelson Mandela in Film", *Altre Modernità/Other Modernities: Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 12, 2014, pp. 40-58, and L. Modisane, "Mandela in Film and Television", in R. Barnard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, Cambridge, CUP, 2014, pp. 224-43. Modisane significantly opens his essay by remarking that there "are many Mandelas. A revolutionary hero, a prisoner of conscience, a social being, a media personality, and in some eyes a traitor, Nelson Mandela, aka Rolihlahla, Dalibhunga, Madiba, and at one point David Motsamai, is many things to many people [...]. He has inspired the birth of a whole industry, partly dedicated to his ideas, but mostly trained on the magnetism of his persona" (*ibidem*, p. 224).

Definitely larger than life, Mandela's nuanced persona is difficult to pigeonhole. Part and parcel of an *undying* myth, his symbolic representations might incorporate contradictions and polarities (including the seeds of biased and self-seeking fabrications, as suggested above). And yet, even when looking at him not just as a stoic champion of reconciliation, magnanimity and humane reciprocity, but through the critical lens of the anti-colonial violence in which he had been involved as an advocate (and agent) of armed struggle, his image seems to come out unscathed. Both transparent and elusive, a collective hypostasis and a dynamic subjectivity made up of different profiles – from elderly, warm-hearted “Tata Madiba” back to the underground “Black Pimpernel” outlaw of the early 1960s – Mandela continues to provide food for thought to cultural historians, biographers, sociologists, critics, and writers. When thinking of him as the galvanising vehicle of a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, we are also struck by the curious paradoxes that contributed to enhancing his *invictus* aura. Among the most prominent are, on the one hand, his being perceived as a sort of anointed, Messianic saviour in the face of his skepticism towards any cult of personality and, on the other, the subtle alchemy through which his condition as a callously silenced political prisoner eventually strengthened – rather than obliterate – the allegorical choreography gravitating around him. Moreover, factors like the marriage between an “elevated station and popular accessibility” constitute some of the strands of a “Madiba magic” that would be further “distilled during Mandela’s years in prison, when he began to craft a role for himself as principal magician”.²

As is well known, while Mandela was serving his notorious life-plus-five-year prison sentence, the South African state forbade the circulation of his speeches and writings together with any photographs of him, his last official picture dating back to 1964. Again, this censorious act paradoxically turned the government’s goal on its head. Apparently gifted with “a talent for immortality” and “uncanny powers of survival”,³ Robben Island Prisoner 466/64 was not bound to sink into oblivion. The “Mandela narrative” ineluctably gathered momentum, irrespective of the extent to which one might be tempted to link it to “a performative role orchestrated to a considerable degree by his comrades in the ANC, seeking a figure of continuity and visibility to advance their cause”.⁴

This 2018 special issue of *Anglistica Pisana* intends to pay homage to such an eminent figure of continuity on the centenary of his birth. “Mandela International Day 2018” was another climactic occasion on which the monumentalisation of Madiba was cemented around the globe by means of various tributes, ranging from the Annual Lecture delivered by Barack Obama in Johannesburg on 17 July 2018, to the emotionally-laden visits to the “Mandela Memorial”, a glass reproduction of the Robben-Island cell installed in front of the Mandela Forum’s main entrance in

2. D. POSEL, “‘Madiba Magic’: Politics as Enchantment”, in R. BARNARD (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, pp. 71, 73.

3. R. NIXON, “Mandela, Messianism, and the Media”, *Transition*, 51, 1991, p. 42.

4. R. BROMLEY, “‘Magic Negro’, Saint or Comrade: Representations of Nelson Mandela in Film”, p. 41.

Florence. There were celebrations, meetings, exhibitions, concerts, sports and film events, all concomitant with the launching of humanitarian programs and volunteering. For its part, throughout the year that would have marked the 100th birthday of its founding father, the democratic republic of South Africa honoured his invaluable inheritance via a nationwide number of cultural and charity initiatives inspired by the compelling notion of "Be the legacy". Joining ranks with the activities promoted by the Nelson Mandela Foundation were a cluster of other projects. Suffice it to mention the "100 Places and Spaces" App, created by the National Department of Tourism with a view to encouraging visitors to virtually walk through the sites of major historical significance to Mandela's life, and the release of a new range of commemorative banknotes and R5 circulation coins by the South African Reserve Bank and Mint.

It is also worth remembering that on 8 February 2018 – a week ahead of Valentine's Day and in the month linked to Madiba's liberation (11 February 1990) – a new botanical specimen was launched at the Mandela Foundation in Houghton, Johannesburg. This *Novelty floribunda* was developed by leading gardener and horticulturist Keith Kirsten and given the name of "Nelson Mandela Rose", a rose plant standing out for its disease resistance, dark green foliage, profligate blooming, and brightly-coloured flowers. As underlined by Kirsten, the plant should be seen as a symbol for its namesake's "vibrancy, stature and love", being "a tall, orange-vermilion, prolific floribunda which grows to more than a metre in good conditions and is suitable for any sunny position".⁵ With its 'stately' bearing, ruffled petals and exuberant blooming, this *floribunda* "eschews the classical, formal rose shape" and is somehow reminiscent of Mandela's "shirts, that were flowery, loose-fitting and informal".⁶

Perhaps not surprisingly, the "Nelson Mandela Rose" is just the last in a long line of plants that have been named after him throughout the decades. Elements like a thin upright stem or a sturdy stalk and the flowers' gaudy hues – a sort of composite correlative for a man who was "gracious but steely",⁷ proud and humble, strong-willed and yet capable of building multicoloured bridges across racial and ideological lines – are also quintessential traits of, say, the "Paravanda Nelson Mandela", a yellowish-green, pink-spotted orchid that was singled out to commemorate the then President Mandela's 1997 visit to the National Orchid Garden in Singapore, and of the *Strelitzia reginae* "Mandela's Gold". This rare yellow breed of crane flower or "bird of paradise", a spectacular evergreen perennial and feature plant of South Africa, was released in 1994 by John Winter at the National Botanical Institute in Kirstenbosch, Cape Town, and two years later it would be rechristened in honour of the nation's first democratic President. Again, in 1996, a fragrant, deep-lilac "Madi-

5. See "Media Statement: A Rose Named 'Nelson Mandela'", Nelson Mandela Foundation, 9 February 2018, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/media-statement-a-rose-named-nelson-mandela> (last accessed on 10 December 2018).

6. G. VAN NIEKERK, "Five Roses Named After South Africans We Love", *House and Leisure Newsletter*, 1 July 2019, <https://www.houseandleisure.co.za/content/five-roses-named-after-south-africans-we-love> (last accessed on 15 July 2019).

7. R. BARNARD, "Introduction", in EAD. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, p. 1.

ba Rose" (*Rosa Madiba*) with thornless stems was developed by Ludwig's Roses in Pretoria, while Mandela's 80th birthday in 1998 was celebrated with a crimson *Protea cynaroides* cultivar named "Protea King Red Madiba". Noticeably, the "king" or "giant" protea is South Africa's national flower, whose strength, thick underground stem and capability to survive spreading wildfires seem to figuratively enucleate the black leader's titanic resistance, royal stature, and unbreakable attachment to his land.

From the delicate scent of a thornless lilac rose to the remarkable adaptive strategies of a woody shrub like king protea, the 'Mandela effect' triggers people to work across differences and divides, open a breach in the stronghold of received ideas and move within a more encompassing spectrum of relational identities. From a complementary point of view, it might be contended that his charismatic figure has lent weight to a creolised, transnational re-assessment in the field of modern plant taxonomy and botanical classifications. That is to say, in a discursive and material sphere which, especially from the introduction of Carl Linnaeus's binomial nomenclature onwards, has been a privileged domain of Western scientists, academic institutions and, crucially, imperial travellers, collectors, and explorers. The fact that Mandela's name has entered the geopolitical mould of these onomastic practices confirms how even 'horticultural cartographies' have endorsed mobility and begun to tread multiethnic paths (although under the ennobling aegis of a universal spokesman for peace and unity of Mandela's calibre). Besides, the examples that I have quoted are scarcely exhaustive. As far as botanical naming is concerned, the 'greening of Mandela' is a much wider phenomenon that, in the past few decades, has underpinned an emblematic meeting ground, a *fil vert* through which more and more bits of the social fabric have been sewn together. This is of course true for South Africa, with a host of donated trees making up a "Nelson Mandela Forest" around the villages of Mvezo and Qunu, in the Eastern Cape, but also in other areas across the country, thanks to a non-profit tree-planting initiative which continues to this day. There is the leader's own "Family Tree", too: a *Melaleuca* under which his children's and grandchildren's umbilical cords lie buried, a gnarled old tree dominating a corner in the courtyard of what was once Mandela's home on Vilakazi Street in Soweto, now a national museum. As to the rest of the globe, there are dozens of trees, parks and green spaces that, in addition to public institutions and facilities, have been consecrated to Mandela's memory.

While referring readers to the excellent cameos on Mandela's unique personality and multifaceted traits drawn by Maria Paola Guarducci, Francesca Mussi and Linda Fiasconi in the present section of our journal, in the remainder of this paper I would like to briefly elucidate another aspect relating to Mandela and horticulture. If not new, this aspect provides insights into the relationship between the man and gardening from a perspective that sees him not just as an inspirational force, but as a conscious agent in matters of environmental care and practice, especially in connection with vegetable gardens and orchard-tending.⁸ If, among other things,

8. Elleke Boehmer dedicates a whole chapter to this aspect of Mandela's life. See Chapter 7, "Spectres in the Prison Garden", in E. BOEHMER, *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2008, pp. 149-69.

gardening is "a source of action requiring intimate and direct involvement" and carrying with itself "important social and psychological benefits [since it] relaxes, teaches, and connects",⁹ Mandela's land stewardship throughout his life, including his prison years, can be showcased as particularly significant.

A number of crucial entry points into this kind of vital and restorative relation with the land can be found in *Long Walk to Freedom*, the autobiography that Mandela started writing clandestinely in 1974, as a prisoner on Robben Island, and eventually completed after his release in 1990. In "A Country Childhood", the opening section of the book, his traditional Xhosa upbringing – including his high-ranking parentage and belonging to the Thembu royal household – comes coupled with an emphasis on his rural roots and his being a son of the African soil, enjoying life in the Transkei veld, among the green hills overlooking Mvezo and the grassy valley of Qunu. Throughout his long and intense years as a lawyer and activist in Johannesburg, a freedom fighter and a political prisoner, Mandela's affective bond with his home area in the Umtata district does not seem to have weakened. An unbreakable feeling of place attachment informs passages like the following, where the bucolic idyll takes on the empirical contours of community life, growing for subsistence and food production:

My mother cooked food in a three-legged iron pot over an open fire in the centre of the hut or outside. Everything we ate we grew and made ourselves. My mother planted and harvested her own mealies. Mealies were harvested from the field when they were hard and dry. They were stored in sacks or pits dug in the ground [...]. Unlike mealies, which were sometimes in short supply, milk from our cows and goats was always plentiful [...]. I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness [...]. From these days I date my love of the veld, of open spaces, the simple beauties of nature, the clean line of the horizon.¹⁰

Although, as he acknowledges, when he studied and worked in Johannesburg (1940s-1950s) he had "neither the time nor the space to cultivate a garden",¹¹ Mandela's horticultural apprenticeship can be said to have begun in the 1930s, while he was attending the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, and was temporarily hired to take care of the garden of one of his professors. Understandably, however, his attention would be catalysed not so much by ornamental gardening or landscape management as by the idea and practice of gardening in conjunction with husbandry, tillage and conservation. In the "Black Pimpernel" chapter of his biography, when he was forced to live underground and used to travel across South Africa in disguise, he normally went undercover as a chauffeur, a chef and a 'garden boy', i.e. one of the many black men who, in those days, were engaged to work in gardens or

9. M. FRANCIS and R.T. HESTER, JR., "The Garden as Idea, Place, and Action", in *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1990, p. 6.

10. N. MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, London, Abacus, (1994) 1995, pp. 10-11.

11. *Ibidem*, p. 582.

fields. At the “sanctuary” of Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, north of Johannesburg – the secret headquarters of the South African Communist Party and the hideout from which the ANC activists operated in the 1960s – Mandela took the *alias* “David Motsamayi” and wore the typical blue overalls of garden boys, pretending he was the “caretaker who would look after the place until my master took possession”.¹² One supposes that, during such hard times of psychological endurance, tending the soil might have been a welcome and roborant diversion, a re-energising exercise helping the fugitive to ward off the spectre of alienation. Nevertheless, working on a farm did not bring with itself that craving for a reconnection to the land that Mandela was to feel throughout the long period of his prison years.

Looking backward to that three-phase span, we ought to remember that it was only from December 1988 to February 1990, at Victor Verster (Western Cape), that he was finally granted a private location within the razor-wired boundaries of a prison compound with a striking view of the Drakenstein Mountains and of the lush vineyards in the Dwars River Valley. Formerly the deputy governor’s bungalow, that comfortable cottage had a swimming pool and a nice garden where, as a corollary to his momentous involvement in the talks about negotiation and the dismantling of apartheid, Mandela enjoyed resting, taking a walk and cultivating both vegetables and flowers. The harsher the penitentiary rules, the more this ‘idea of gardening’ seemed to permeate the black leader’s ethical imaginary and acquire an allegorical poignancy which chimed in with the notions of care and nurturing, participation and responsibility, provident planning and well-earned achievement. Hence the importance of his experience at Pollsmoor, the maximum security prison located in the suburb of Tokai, south-east of Cape Town, where he served his sentence from March 1982 to 1988. As also testified to by Christo Brand, one of his prison guards,¹³ Mandela dedicated much energy to imagining and actually creating an edible garden on the top roof of this huge building surrounded by grey concrete walls and characterised by “a modern face but a primitive heart”, a “world of concrete [where he] missed the natural splendour of Robben Island”.¹⁴ Together with other three Rivonians, he lived in the penthouse on the third floor (the rest of the incarcerated people consisting of common-law convicts), and thus asked for the possibility to grow vegetables on the rooftop: this project was carried out by using sixteen 44-gallon oil drums cut in half and filled up with soil and manure. It was a successful experiment that led to the development of some nine hundred plants, from tomatoes and lettuce to onions, spinach, carrots, cucumbers, broccoli, and strawberries. Besides its tasteful crop yield and promotion of healthy physical activity,¹⁵ this experiment allowed Mandela and his

12. *Ibidem*, p. 332.

13. See J. CARLIN, “Interview: Christo Brand”, *Frontline*, The Long Walk of Nelson Mandela Interviews, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mandela/interviews/brand.html> (last accessed on 15 December 2018).

14. N. MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, pp. 611, 613.

15. See Mandela’s following remarks: “The Bible tells us that gardens preceded gardeners, but that was not the case at Pollsmoor, where I cultivated a garden that became one of my happiest diversions. It was my way of escaping from the monolithic concrete world that surrounded us [...]. Each morning, I put

fellow inmates to start reaping a less palpable kind of harvest conveying a morally restorative effect. In other words, gardening enhanced cooperation and a participatory mode, with the warders and commanding officers occasionally supplying seeds and lending a helping hand when the prisoners had to employ potting soil and erect hessian barriers against the wind.

Lastly, taking one further step back in time, the eighteen years Mandela was jailed on Robben Island (June 1964-March 1982) were pivotal in myriad ways, the discussion of which would obviously exceed the bounds of space available here. Still, it will not be difficult to realise how, among other initiatives, the concept of a 'community garden' as an allegory for cooperative action and power-sharing within a bleak convict station – the very locus of banishment and enforced silence – was likely to become instrumental in encouraging resilience, self-confidence, and trust. Paving the way for what we would now call a horticultural therapy program, Mandela and Lalloo Chiba (a Rivonian comrade) succeeded in obtaining permission to garden a small plot of open ground (1 metre wide and 25 metres long) in a corner of the institution's courtyard. In a foreshadowing of the Pollsmoor experiment, growing this vegetable patch – rich in tomatoes, chillies, and onions – was tantamount to formulating a rehabilitative counter-reply and posing a dialogic challenge to prison authorities in matters of iron-fisted regimentation and human rights abuses. Gardening offered a healthy safety valve and a temporary escape from conflict while leading to a constructive mode of interaction (in addition to, say, gaining access to the courtyard during the weekend and campaigning for study and skill-learning). Indeed, inside the stifling perimeter of Robben Island, the black political prisoners' gesture belonged to a moral domain that might be fittingly summed up through the famous phrasing by John Donne, in "Meditation XVII", about no man being an island "entire of itself", but rather a "piece of the continent" and "part of the main". Being involved in mankind actually lay at the heart of the counterdiscourse to which the so-called 'High Organ', or Robben-Island 'University', gave voice within an all too real, grim island environment.

Again, Mandela's considerations in *Long Walk to Freedom* throw light on psycho-social dynamics of this kind. At the same time, these statements acquire political overtones that enable us to trace back some of Madiba's personality traits – tolerance, self-control and patience intermingled with determination and a stubborn resistance – to those of a caring, orchestrating and exacting gardener:

A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. The sense of being the custodian of this small patch of earth offered a small taste of freedom.

In some ways, I saw the garden as a metaphor for certain aspects of my life. A leader must also tend his garden; he, too, sows seeds, and then watches, cultivates and harvests the

on a straw hat and rough gloves and worked in the garden for two hours. Every Sunday I would supply vegetables to the kitchen so that they could cook a special meal for the common-law prisoners. I also gave quite a lot of my harvest to the warders, who used to bring satchels to take away their fresh vegetables" (*ibidem*, pp. 614-15).

result. Like the gardener, a leader must take responsibility for what he cultivates; he must mind his work, try to repel enemies, preserve what can be preserved and eliminate what cannot succeed.¹⁶

The relevance of these reflections becomes all the more evident if juxtaposed with an episode dating back to 25 April 1977, when the apartheid government invited a selected group of journalists to visit Robben Island in a propagandistic attempt to dispel rumours of brutal conditions in the correctional institution. On this occasion, several photographs were taken without the prisoners' permission. Rather than casting them in their everyday merciless context – crushing stones into gravel, performing hard labour in the lime quarry or pulling out weed from the seashore (manual labour remaining in force on the island until 1977) – those pictures showed black inmates composedly working in a makeshift garden, in which they were even allowed to wear such 'safety devices' as hats, dark glasses, and long trousers. One of those covered-up photographs immortalised a 59-year-old proud Mandela, standing "in defiance of arbitrary authority, his body language making a mockery of the spade on which he is leaning".¹⁷ The impersonal caption, originally written in Afrikaans, read simply: "A prisoner working in the garden".

Needless to say, an antidote to this sham posing in a barren strip of land is to be found in the above-mentioned cultivated patch near the B-section cells, which represented a forward-looking social experiment and, quoting again from the commentary on Mandela's prison archive, would turn into

a fitting metaphor for the alternative system of morality, discipline and education that the prisoners nurtured, and that in turn sustained them. It was a harvest that they shared with the rest of South Africa when they walked out to freedom – a harvest that demonstrated, in a profound sense, that they had always been walking in freedom.¹⁸

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16. *Ibidem*, pp. 582-83.

17. N. MANDELA, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, edited by V. HARRIS, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg, Penguin, 2005, p. 35.

18. *Ibidem*, p. 206.

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MARIA PAOLA GUARDUCCI

ENKOSI KAKHULU, MADIBA /
THANK YOU VERY MUCH, MADIBA

“Admirable Mandela. Point, with no exclamation”:¹ so did Jacques Derrida open his 1986 essay originally titled “Admiration de Nelson Mandela, ou Les lois de la réflexion”.² At that time Mandela had already served twenty-two years of his life sentence and was in the maximum-security prison of Pollsmoor (Cape Town), after having been in many of apartheid’s most notorious penitential institutions: in Johannesburg, in Pretoria, but most of all in the jail located on Robben Island, where he was imprisoned from 1964 to 1982. Robben Island prison is today a National Monument and a Museum, one of the most visited sites in South Africa; a sort of sanctuary where not only ordinary tourists stop by, but also political leaders from all over the world go and have a photograph taken in Mandela’s old cell. Everyone visiting the country pays homage to a ‘memory’ that this museum seems to have successfully canonised for good. Before being turned into a jail, Robben Island had been the site, in sequence, of three hospitals (for leprosy, chronic diseases and mental illness), its geographical location a few miles offshore from Cape Town providing an ideal answer to the need to isolate its inmates, whatever the reason, from the mainland. This tiny, flat, rocky island was to become primarily associated with its most famous guest and was informally re-named “University of Robben Island”. As a matter of fact, during his stay, Mandela managed to become the catalyst of an intensive intellectual activity based upon study, debates, readings, reflections, and discussions among the prisoners, in spite of the many restrictions that, in theory, should have prevented such activities from taking place. Jailers as well turned a blind eye to all this, as they too were somehow seduced by the man’s charisma.

From Pollsmoor, where he was at the time Derrida wrote his essay, Mandela was finally transferred to Victor Verster Prison (Paarl) in 1988. After a very complex process of negotiations which had lasted several years, on February 11th, 1990, it was through Victor Verster’s gate that he walked out as a free man amongst a crowd of reporters and ordinary people alike who came to witness that spectacular event. He was smiling at the cameras broadcasting all over the world, his right fist up in

1. J. DERRIDA, “Admiration of Nelson Mandela, or The Laws of Reflection”, *Law & Literature*, 26 (1), 2014, p. 9.

2. The original version of the essay features in the collection *Pour Nelson Mandela*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986. It was translated by the Cardozo School of Law of Yeshiva University in 2014 and it is now also available online at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1535685X.2014.896149> (last accessed on 30 December 2018).

the air in sign of victory and the other hand holding that of his controversial wife, Winnie, whom he was to divorce six years later.

“Admirable”, wrote Derrida to define him, thus introducing one of his speculative *tours de force* around some key issues relating to Mandela’s ‘character’ in order to explain the source of his aura. At the time, the essay was proposing an unusual perspective on the man; one that today, a hundred years since Mandela’s birth, can be useful to reevaluate a giant of the last century about whom everything seems to have already been said and written. The French-Algerian deconstructionist, as many others, wonders about the roots of Mandela’s power, a prisoner the apartheid establishment tried to condemn to silence and oblivion when in fact he gathered an unmatched public attention and devotion which translated into a never-ending germination of speeches, declarations, and addresses, that is, of words. Mandela’s charisma worked as a natural antidote against his physical removal from the public arena and made him a living myth, related to holiness. Indeed, when Derrida was writing about him, the South African leader was simultaneously famous and invisible: the circulation of any photograph portraying him was banned in South Africa, as well as any of his verbal messages. He, in turn, was allowed to send or receive only three letters and one visit with no possibility of physical contact per year: his relationships with the external world were thus reduced to almost zero. In spite of the regime’s vicious efforts to make people forget about this inspiring leader and to cancel his symbolic power from both the global and the national scene, he managed to become the very centre of an astonishing cultural and political forum stirring activism in the many places around the world where there were signs of oppression. An international community of politicians and ordinary people alike mobilised in many ways – from informal boycotts of South African products to formalized sanctions – to support both Mandela and the anti-apartheid struggle he represented. His ‘forbidden’ words managed to come to the fore via friends and relatives and were quoted everywhere. This is the case, to give just one well-known example, of the speech his daughter Zindzi read on February 10th, 1985, where he rejected the plea bargain proposed by the then president Pieter W. Botha. He stated through the voice of his young daughter:

What freedom am I being offered when the organisation of the people remains banned? What freedom am I being offered when I may be arrested on a pass offence? What freedom am I being offered to live my life as a family with my dear wife who remains in banishment in Brandfort? What freedom am I being offered when I must ask for permission to live in an urban area? What freedom am I being offered when I need a stamp in my pass to seek work? What freedom am I being offered when my very South African citizenship is not respected? Only free men can negotiate. Prisoners cannot enter into contracts.³

Most of all, in that speech Mandela was making people (his supporters as well as his opponents and persecutors) reflect upon the fact that one’s freedom is worthless if his/her people have no agency.

3. The speech is available online at: http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/before/850210_udf.htm (last accessed on 30 December 2018).

In the 1980s Mandela began to be 'consecrated' in poems, songs, paintings, drawings, films, sculptures, books, flags, posters, and other disparate objects: he progressively became, so to say, not just a political symbol but a pop icon as well. In his long essay, Derrida establishes a relationship between the admiration sparked *by* Mandela and the admiration that Mandela himself expresses *for* the unexpected, given that he was a man sentenced to life. Admirable because he knows how to admire, fascinating because he is, in his turn, capable of being fascinated, Mandela – surprisingly – venerates the law. Somehow affected by this veneration, he becomes 'venerable' in turn.

Derrida reads Mandela across the words of his public speeches, including the already quoted one made public by his daughter, when he rejected the freedom offered by the president. The speech that most 'reflects' him, though, is the three-hour self-defence during the Rivonia Trial (1963-64). It was there, in that sharp rhetoric and its contents, that he managed to enucleate the agents of his ethical strength.

Everyone knows Mandela was a lawyer, and a good one, although he had to earn his degree by correspondence. In the 1950s, together with budding anti-apartheid leader Oliver Tambo, he had opened, not without difficulties and ironically having to elude some local laws, the first law firm for black people, that is people who historically had little or no access to defence in a country where they were discriminated by the institutions themselves. The office was in Fox Street, Johannesburg, and it immediately became prominent together with its two promoters. Shortly afterwards, the two were arrested together for the first time. Both leading figures inside the African National Congress, Mandela and Tambo had also founded the belligerent ANC Youth League. Their destinies, which in many respects ran parallel for a long time, would at last lead them to separation in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre (March 21st, 1960), when the government army killed sixty-nine civilians (and injured about a hundred and eighty) who were peacefully marching against the imposition of the "pass laws", a regulation that severely limited mobility of non-white people even within the same city.

Sharpeville notoriously marked the point of no return of the repressive Nationalists' policy and, more drastically, of the ascent towards the unprecedented brutality which plunged the country into international isolation. The apartheid legislation intensified its use of violence in such a way that it was not possible to answer peacefully any longer. The state of emergency declared after the Sharpeville event forced most of the resistance leaders to go underground or leave the country: Oliver Tambo left South Africa and went into exile; Mandela chose to stay but hid himself behind the fake identity of David Motsamay, soon to be known as "the Black Pimpernel". From his clandestine hiding place he declared the end of the pacific negotiations that up to then had animated black resistance throughout the country; those negotiations were based on a kind of conciliatory dialogue – a monologue, in actual fact, as the institutions never bothered to interact – or, at most, on a form of passive resistance inspired by another prominent lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, who had cut his teeth in South Africa at the dawn of the racial discriminations of British imprint. Mandela publicly reversed the ANC strategy and openly advocated armed

struggle. *uMkhonto we Sizwe*, the armed, although partially independent, branch of the ANC he founded together with Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Joe Slovo, Chris Hani and many others, is the tangible proof of a reversal that, even though targeted at different forms of sabotage and boycott which did not include the killing of civilians, was interpreted by the government as ‘terrorism’ *tout court*. Accused of being the driving force behind what was perceived as a threatening ‘communist’ radicalism, Mandela would be finally sentenced to “life imprisonment plus five years”. The sentence itself reads as a paradox indicating how the institutions felt the need to defend themselves from a man whom they perceived as ‘perpetual’. They tried to hit what he stood for, so that the reference to the five years he had been sentenced to before he was condemned to life imprisonment was a grotesque sign which actually suggested the man’s immortality and power, rather than his defeat.

Mandela’s self-defence, constituting the *corpus* on which Derrida speculates, made history. Wearing a gorgeous Xhosa dress and reaching a happy medium between a calm pace and a passionate address, the South African leader set out to trace the history of Western law in an impeccable, watertight reflection. From the *Magna Carta*, the Petition of Rights and the Bill of Rights, to the celebration of the American Declaration of Independence, and also acknowledging the inspiration coming from Bertrand Russell’s rigorous example when he was opposing his conscience to the current law – the same conflict every African was facing at the time in the country –, Mandela expressed his belief in and support for the doctrine of the separation of powers, the impartiality and unquestionable independence of the Western judiciary, and the history of its democratic foundations and theoretical development. Derrida wonders whether Mandela might be the legitimate heir to the tradition he praises:

One may recognize an authentic heir in the one who conserves and reproduces the legacy, but also in the one who respects its *logic* to the point of turning it, on occasions, against those who pretend to be its depositaries, to the point of giving to see, against the usurpers, the very thing that, in the heritage, has never before being seen – to the point of giving birth [*jusqu’à donner le jour*], by the unheard *act* of a reflection, to that which has never seen the light of day [*n’avait jamais vu le jour*].⁴

This is what happened in the courtroom of the Rivonia Trial in Pretoria during the speech held by Mandela: the *mise-en-scène* of a cast-iron logic being displayed to the people who were supposed to represent the law. It proved to be a challenge to the law in the name of a superior law.

Derrida analyses the healthy logic of Mandela’s argumentation, which glorified the law and the state while unmasking the official institutions, with their body of contradictions and bad faith, lack of coherence, criminal short-sightedness, and cruelty. That was a *corpus* of wrongdoings doomed to historical failure. He was facing an all-white jury made up of bureaucrats who did not know how to rule because they had no idea of what the law is and what it is there for. They had never

4. J. DERRIDA, “Admiration of Nelson Mandela, or The Laws of Reflection”, p. 12.

conceived the idea of the state and of the people it represents with the respect, admiration and esteem it deserves, as they could only think in terms of privileges and differences and all the laws, acts and amendments they promulgated were targeted at the defence of those privileges and at increasingly enforcing differences. They ignored the African society's treasures because they were only interested in controlling it and in taking advantage, wherever they could, of its many resources. They disregarded the society they nonetheless wanted to rule, ignoring that in its pre-colonial foundations – which Mandela describes with the same admiration he nourishes for the British idea of justice – that society knew neither slavery nor private property. Democracy existed in South Africa long before the arrival of the whites and Mandela is fascinated by the structure and organization of early African societies, where individuals were free and equal. Together with his Marxist readings, the observation of the society he remembers from when he was a child will constitute, as emphasised by Derrida, the core of his reflection on democracy: a factual possibility still unrealised in South Africa, but definitely not utopian.

Mandela harangued and lost his court case, but that historical loss reflects of course a moral victory achieved in the name of the law. After his release, not forgetting his vocation as a lawyer, Mandela established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was thought of as the only possible beginning of the path leading to a democratic South Africa. According to him, the new country should allow room for everyone without acrimony: first of all for the people who suffered violations, but also for those who inflicted violence. The main purpose of the Commission, in its very structural principles, was to allow the chance to everyone to tell his/her own story, on the simple assumption that we can only move forward if we are ready to listen to each other, if we can empathise with the other's sufferings. The form was that of a court case: a tribunal, a jury, a special setting where talking and listening were granted for all. It was amazing to see how, after twenty-seven years in prison, Mandela could still believe in the law and how, according to the law he believed in, he managed to 'institutionalise' the process of reconciliation which, in that historical moment, represented the only chance to build up a democratic future for a country torn apart and soaked with resentment such as South Africa.

For this, for the admiration that inspired him and that through his figure keeps on inspiring all efforts towards justice and democracy everywhere, we should still be thankful.

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FRANCESCA MUSSI

NELSON MANDELA AS A SYMBOL
OF NATIONAL UNITY AND RECONCILIATION

In tribute to former South African President Nelson Mandela, and on the occasion of his birth centenary in July 2018, this essay focuses on Mandela's contribution to South Africa's reconciliation process, on his role in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 1995-2001), and on his status as an iconic figure. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, a memoir about his experience serving as the Chairman of the Commission, former Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu underlines Mandela's extraordinary character and fundamental role in the reconciliation process by depicting him as "a potent agent for the reconciliation he urged his compatriots to work for and which was central to the purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission he appointed to deal with our country's past".¹ Despite his prison years and the constant harassment he had to endure during the apartheid regime, Mandela, Tutu points out, "did not emerge from prison spewing words of hatred and revenge" (*NFWF* 39), but dedicated himself "to the reconciliation of those whom apartheid and injustice and pain of racism had alienated from one another" (*ibidem*).

As he cast his vote at Ohlange in the 1994 first democratic elections, which would pave the way for his presidential nomination, Nelson Mandela carried a message of forgiveness and reconciliation and spoke of his dreams of "one nation": "This is for all South Africans an unforgettable occasion. It is the realisation of their hopes and dreams that we have cherished for decades. We are starting a new era of hope, of reconciliation, of nation-building".² With this optimism and willingness to forgive, Mandela set both an example for his countrymen and the underpinning tone for the work of the TRC. In his 100-Day Speech to Parliament on 18 August 1994, Mandela continued to emphasise the need for reconciliation by acknowledging that the new government of National Unity had two primary goals: reconciliation and reconstruction, and nation-building and development, which were South Africa's main challenges at that time.³ He went on to observe that "the issue of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has generated much public debate and some apprehension ... [but] what this issue raises is how we

1. D.M. TUTU, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London, Rider Books, (1999) 2000, p. 7. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *NFWF*.

2. See "Watch: Milestones in Mandela's Long Walk", 5 December 2014, <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/people-culture/mandela/milestones-in-mandela-s-long-walk> (last accessed on 8 October 2018).

3. In this regard, see Nelson Mandela's 100-Day Speech to Parliament, 18 August 1994, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Govern_Political/Mandel_100.html (last accessed on 8 October 2018).

deal with a past that contained gross violations of human rights – a past which threatens to live with us like a festering sore”.⁴

Authorised by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995, the TRC was set up “to provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed”⁵ during a 34-year period of South African history (1960 to 1994). Becoming an integral and restorative component in South Africa’s process of reinvention as a liberal democracy, the TRC had the primary tasks of assisting the whole nation in dealing with its painful past and promoting reconciliation among all South Africans. Availing itself of three committees – Amnesty, Reparation and Rehabilitation, and Human Rights Violations – the Commission specified the following goals: to investigate past gross human rights violations, afford victims an opportunity to relate the violations they had suffered, grant amnesty to persons who committed abuse during apartheid (as long as crimes were politically motivated and there was full disclosure by those who pleaded for amnesty), take measures toward restoring human dignity, report to the nation about its findings, and make recommendations aimed at preventing gross violations of human rights in the future. The Human Rights Violations and Reparation and Rehabilitation committees completed their mandate in 1998 and the related five-volume report was handed over to President Mandela on 28 October 1998. The Amnesty Committee completed its mandate at the end of May 2001 and published its final report early in 2003, as part of the TRC’s final report.

Within this process of redressing the imbalances and injustices of the past, both in terms of memories and symbols, the renaming of the Day of the Vow and the launch of Freedom Park are significant examples that further show Nelson Mandela’s commitment to national unity and reconciliation. On 16 December 1995, he declared that the Day of the Vow (or Day of the Covenant), so far a powerful instrument of Afrikaner nationalism,⁶ was to be renamed “National Reconciliation Day”. In his address, Mandela stressed the fact that 16 December was chosen precisely because “the past had made [it] a living symbol of bitter division”, while in the new times of national unity it would stand as a symbol of South Africans’ “inter-dependence as free and equal citizens of our Motherland” and as “a compact to live together on the basis of equality and mutual respect”.⁷ It is certainly not coincidental that the TRC officially started its work through a ceremony held on

4. *Ibidem*.

5. “Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995]”, http://www.fas.org/irp/world/rsa/act95_034.htm (last accessed on 8 October 2018).

6. The origin of the Day of the Vow as an annual religious holiday dates back to the Battle of Blood River, which took place on 16 December 1838. First celebrated as “Dingane’s Day”, a homage to the day the Voortrekkers triumphed against the Zulu army led by Dingane, it became powerfully instrumental in strengthening Afrikaner nationalism, culture, and identity: in 1952, it began to be known as the “Day of the Vow” and, from 1982 onwards, as the “Day of the Covenant”. Briefly put, the victory over the Zulu army was perceived as a sign of God’s ratification of Afrikaner supremacy.

7. Mandela’s speech is cited in Y. HUTCHISON, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*, Manchester and New York, Manchester U.P., 2013, p. 120.

16 December 1995. Having a similar purpose, the Freedom Park was conceived as a national and international icon of humanity and freedom aiming at assisting the diverse people of South Africa and the whole world in understanding and appreciating the country's struggle for liberation. During the Freedom Day celebrations in Umtata, on 27 April 1999, Mandela stated that "the day should not be far off, when we shall have a people's shrine, a freedom park, where we shall honour with all the dignity they deserve, those who endured pain so we should experience the joy of freedom".⁸ In line with this statement and as a response to the need identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for symbolic forms of reparation of past conflicts (besides the financial reparations for the victims and their families), the project for Freedom Park was officially launched on 1 June 2000, and the place opened in December 2007.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however, remains the reconciliation initiative most widely discussed and analysed within the context of the transition period. Since the TRC published the first part of its final report in 1998, there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship and journalistic accounts that relate to and comment on the Commission, offering assessments of both its success and failure as a human rights and/or historical project. There are also analyses of the TRC's use of concepts such as truth, justice, amnesty, and reconciliation. In addition to inspiring many research studies, the TRC also constituted and, partly, still constitutes an intriguing and stimulating new source of literary writing. Many works published in South Africa from the 1990s onwards present stories focusing on themes such as memory and truth, guilt and confession, atonement and forgiveness. John Kani's 2002 play *Nothing But the Truth* is a powerful example of how literature has continued to engage with questions of memory, truth, healing and reconciliation, even after the submission of the TRC's final report (the five-volume first part, in 1998, and the section related to the amnesty hearings, in 2003).

The play was Kani's debut as sole playwright⁹ and was first performed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 2002. By foregrounding the tensions and conflicts within the microcosm of one family, the play exposes both the complexities and ambiguities of establishing the truth – here, about defining a liberation hero – and challenges the validity of the TRC's amnesty deal. The protagonists are Siphso Makhaya, Assistant Chief Librarian at the Port Elizabeth Public Library, and his daughter Thando, who is a teacher and also works as an interpreter at the Amnesty hearings of the TRC. The play is set in motion by the news of the death of Siphso's brother, Themba, a famous liberation hero who went to London in exile and did not go back home, even after the political situation had changed. Themba's daughter (and Siphso's niece) Mandisa is expected to arrive and carry her

8. The full speech can be downloaded at http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1999/990427_freedomday.htm (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

9. John Kani has been involved in writing plays since he joined The Serpent Players in 1965, and has collaborated with Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona and other theatre practitioners such as Nomhle Nkonyeni and Fats Bookholane, who later distinguished themselves on both the South African and international stage.

father's body for burial on ancestral soil. Thando and Siphso offer counterpoints to Mandisa's outside perspective on the work of the Commission. For example, Thando strongly counters Mandisa's attack on the TRC's amnesty process by emphasising her cousin's foreign background and, more remarkably, citing Nelson Mandela:

No, your anger is selective. We, who stayed here. We who witnessed first hand the police brutality. We who every Saturday buried hundreds of our young brothers and sisters shot by the police, dying in detention, dying because of orchestrated black on black violence, accept the TRC process. You have no right to question that. Mandela spent 27 years in prison. Is he asking for someone to be sent to Robben Island to spend years there as pay-back? If all those who suffered can forgive, then so can you [Mandisa]. If our President can ask us to work for a better life for all of our people, so can you.¹⁰

The passage shows Thando's, and by extension the author's, perception of Mandela's magnanimity and willingness to forgive and, most significantly, it confirms the iconic dimension Mandela reached through the years, becoming a national and international symbol of national unity and reconciliation.

On the other hand, later in the play, Siphso voices all the doubts and ambiguities concerning the TRC's amnesty procedure, which was established to grant amnesty to those applicants who had disclosed the whole truth in relation to their politically-motivated crimes. Siphso questions the validity of the amnesty process in relation to his son Luvuyo's death, insisting that "it's not about me being happy or not, forgiving him or not. It's about justice" (*NBT* 54). In his view, Luvuyo's case must be re-opened, with the culprit being identified, charged, found guilty of murder and put in jail. Only after serving his due time in prison may the culprit apply for amnesty for killing Luvuyo, "the son of Mr Siphso Makhaya" (*ibidem*). The provision of amnesty, in fact, still remains a source of controversy and heated debate. Many critics have raised questions and objections about the endeavours of truth commissions and their achievements in comparison with the criminal justice system: can justice in its different forms be served equally well by truth commissions? Should standard forms of prosecution, such as trials, be preferred? Does the amnesty process satisfy various criteria for justice, or does it distort the trial system? Even though the Amnesty Committee recommended prosecution for those people whose amnesty requests had been denied because they did not meet all the compulsory requirements, and although those who never applied for amnesty were liable to legal prosecutions and civil suits, much criticism was related to the fact that if perpetrators were granted amnesty, victims were no longer able to sue them.¹¹

10. J. KANI, *Nothing But the Truth*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand U.P., 2002, pp. 29-30. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *NBT*.

11. On this aspect see, for example, A. GUTMANN and D. THOMPSON, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 2004 and R.I. ROTBERG and D. THOMPSON (eds), *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton U.P., 2000.

Another notable example of a 'literary response' to the work of the Commission and to the amnesty process is to be found in Achmat Dangor's 2001 novel *Bitter Fruit*. The text is meaningfully set in 1998, between the publishing of the TRC's final report and the end of Nelson Mandela's term as president, and it concentrates on the entanglements of a coloured family composed of Silas Ali, a former revolutionary, currently a lawyer working for the Ministry of Justice and deeply involved in the work of the TRC; Lydia, a nurse, who was raped by François Du Boise, now a retired lieutenant in the security police; and Mikey, the unacknowledged fruit of Lydia's rape, raised by her and Silas as their own son. The narrative thus develops around the consequences of Lydia's rapist's application for amnesty in the lives of the three main characters and, in particular, it focuses on the aftermath of Mikey's self-discovery as a child born of rape.

Through the character of Mikey, Dangor openly criticises the TRC's amnesty process and casts light on the different perspectives associated with the Commission's widely promoted concept of reconciliation: unwilling to forgive his mother's perpetrator and to embrace a reconciling approach, Mikey chooses to pursue the path of violence and kills Du Boise. Yet, before fulfilling his revenge, while he is randomly wandering through the city, Mikey suddenly feels at a critical juncture as he catches sight of Nelson Mandela:

[Mikey] wanted to extend his hand, offer a greeting; then, incongruously, he remembered the gun in his pocket, and stepped back. [...] Through the rest of the night, he remained aware of the gun in his pocket, pressing its presence on him. He had practised pulling it out rapidly, because that might be the only way he would get close enough to Du Boise. Would he really have shot that grand old man, he wonders now, as something in his mind was subliminally suggesting when he stood before Nelson Mandela's open window?¹²

This scene seems to suggest that the random encounter with Mandela, a symbol of national unity and reconciliation in the new South Africa and a strong supporter of the work of the TRC, is no sufficient incentive to deter Mikey from accomplishing his vengeful plan. Even more surprisingly, Mikey appears to toy with the thought of killing Mandela himself, "that grand old man". In an interview quoted by Shane Graham, Dangor, commenting on the TRC, asserted that "in wanting to forgive and forget so quickly, we swept a lot of things under the carpet".¹³

Dangor's critique resonates with Verne Harris's Alan Paton lecture entitled "Maddiba, Memory and the Work of Justice", in which it is argued that the post-apartheid reconciliation project and the memory work done through the 1990s and beyond have been overly reliant on "two interlinked figures, or symbols: 'the new South Africa' and 'Nelson Mandela'".¹⁴ This has allegedly given rise to a dominant trend of

12. A. DANGOR, *Bitter Fruit*, London, Atlantic Books, 2003, pp. 269-70 (first published in 2001 by Kwela Books, South Africa).

13. S. GRAHAM, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 97.

14. In his role as Head of the Memory Programme at the Nelson Mandela Foundation's Centre of Memory and Dialogue, Verne Harris has been the archivist for the Mandela papers since 2004. He had

narratives largely influenced by the ‘Madiba magic’ mythology – narratives of a noble struggle against oppression, of truth and reconciliation, of nation-building, reconstruction and development, and of the ‘New South Africa’ and the ‘rainbow nation’. This phenomenon, Harris observes, has resulted in “a totalising agenda” where “too many sub-narratives have been squeezed out, too many counter-narratives ignored” (*APL*). He goes on to question the tenets of the TRC process:

But what if remembering is just as likely to reopen old wounds? What if the majority of the thousands of South Africans who came to the TRC to testify to abuse and damage have not found healing from their “TRC experience”? (Have we gone back to those thousands in the years since the TRC to test what has now become a dominant mythology, namely, that the TRC’s rituals of testimony were effective as instruments of healing?) What if forgiveness is impossible, because it requires precisely an embrace of the unforgiveable? [...] Is it possible that we rushed into the rituals of “dealing with” the past? (*ibidem*).

Harris does not provide answers to these problematic questions, but he is adamant that they be asked and engaged with. He even suggests that Mandela, had he been younger on the advent of democracy, would have vigorously contested his elevation to the status of an icon and would have acted resolutely “to ensure that the TRC Final Report was not buried and the huge, rich TRC archive with it” (*ibidem*).

However, despite its evident limitations and flaws, it is undeniable that the TRC has made a contribution to the process of healing and reconciliation in South Africa by uncovering stories of apartheid oppression, encouraging perpetrators to come forward and take responsibility for their crimes, and fostering mutual forgiveness as an essential basis for building a better future. It is equally indisputable that Nelson Mandela played a paramount role both in the demise of the apartheid regime and throughout South Africa’s reconciliation process. I would like to conclude by citing Mandela’s statement when he received the first part of the TRC’s final report on 29 October 1998, an occasion on which he placed emphasis on the necessity to develop the reconciliation project far beyond the completion of the TRC’s mandate itself:

I therefore take this opportunity to say that I accept the report as it is, with all its imperfections, as an aid that the TRC has given to us to help reconcile and build our nation. The Commission [...] was [not] expected to conjure up instant reconciliation. And it does not claim to have delivered [this] either. Its success in any case depended on how far all of us co-operated with it. Yet we are confident that it has contributed to the work in progress of laying the foundation of the edifice of reconciliation. The further construction of that house of peace needs my hand. It needs your hand.¹⁵

previously collaborated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and directed the South African History Archive (SAHA). The 18th Alan Paton Lecture “Madiba, Memory and the Work of Justice” was organised by the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, on 5 May 2011; the full text is available at <http://paton.ukzn.ac.za/Files/ALAN%20PATON%20LECTURE%202011.pdf> (last accessed on 8 October 2018). All subsequent references to this lecture will be indicated with the abbreviation *APL* within brackets.

15. “Statement by Nelson Mandela on Receiving Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report”, 29 October 1998, http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1998/981029_trcreport.htm (last accessed on 10 October 2018).

Reconciliation is a very long process and, as Mandela advocated, one that needs the hand of all South Africans, irrespective of class, gender, religion, and race.

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LINDA FIASCONI

REMEMBERING MADIBA:
A PORTRAIT BY ANDRÉ BRINK

When Nelson Mandela passed away in 2013, André Brink lamented his death as a personal, irreparable loss: “When my own father died”, he wrote in *The New Yorker*, “I felt diminished, but given his painful effort of getting it over with, it brought both relief and release. This time, everything feels more final; the agony is more acute and more unavoidable”.¹ A white Afrikaner writer polemically opposed to the apartheid regime and the moral myopia of his own ‘tribe’, Brink nurtured a sort of veneration for Madiba and was highly inspired, throughout the liberation struggle, by the non-racial, democratic values of the African National Congress. He came to know many of the ANC’s leaders during their years of exile, and their ideals reverberated in his non-fictional writings as well as in his fiction. His special relationship with Nelson Mandela, whom he met for the first time in 1994 and later felt privileged to call a ‘friend’, stemmed from a sense of mutual respect and admiration, and was certainly made possible by a charismatic black leader who placed a high premium on the idea of reconciliation, especially with Afrikaners, and whose primary legacy would be a multiracial South Africa.

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For almost a quarter of a century, Mandela managed to move André Brink from a distance. During the twenty-seven years of his captivity, he represented – for the writer, as for many South Africans – a symbol of freedom, a living myth, a powerful name celebrated in underground songs, although, by force of circumstances, he was a faceless man, since it was forbidden to circulate his picture in South Africa. Through his famous three-hour speech given at the Rivonia Trial in 1964 he had passionately asserted his readiness to sacrifice himself for the cause of freedom, and his inspirational words would resonate in every corner of the world up to the moment he finally walked out of Victor Verster Prison in 1990. In “Nelson Mandela: Myth, Man, Magician” (2010), Brink also looks back at the feelings of doubt and anxiety associated with Mandela’s ‘mythification’, observing that, “emerging from prison, there was a real danger that the man could no longer match the myth”.² Mandela’s physical absence but symbolic presence throughout the years had kindled unattainable high expectations, which, nevertheless, Brink feels he managed to live up to – even surpass – without ever sacrificing his humanity. In fact, it was

1. A. BRINK, “A Letter to Madiba”, *The New Yorker*, 15 December 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-letter-to-madiba> (last accessed on 19 December 2018).

2. A. BRINK, “Nelson Mandela: Myth, Man, Magician”, in H. RUSSELL (ed.), *Let Freedom Reign: The Words of Nelson Mandela*, Northampton, MA, Interlink Books, 2010, p. 8.

when the myth changed into a man (or the ‘god’ into a ‘mortal’) that Mandela’s very ordinariness came to define the greatness of his stature:

It is because of the very humanness of his humanity – for better or for worse – that the way in which Mandela assumed the burden of being a man among people transformed the very ordinariness of his being into something magical [...]. At the time of our first free elections, Mandela made me believe: We have achieved the extraordinary. Now we can tackle the ordinary. Because in this country we have a human being in charge. No more. And certainly no less.³

Far from inhabiting a space of sainthood, Brink suggests, Mandela had a quality that was fully and absolutely *human*,⁴ immersed in a tumultuous historical context where the very notion of the ‘human’ had to be reformulated, and the ‘ordinary’ – to put it in Njabulo Ndebele’s words – rediscovered.⁵ Even though he ended up praising his humanity as exemplary, thus casting a luminous halo on his figure, Brink always located Mandela’s significance in the realm of history and politics. He was never blind to his (minor) political mistakes – elsewhere he cites, for instance, the renegeing on promises made to the Inkatha Freedom Party before the elections, his rash invasion of Lesotho in 1998 or his suspected interference during the trial of anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak⁶ – but ultimately recognised his vital contribution to transforming South Africa’s identity from pariah autocracy to a humane, respected democracy.

Even before Madiba came to power, Brink held a strong faith in his potentially pivotal role in the country’s future. In “Mandela Free” (1990), an article written in anticipation of the announcement that the world’s best-known prisoner was to be released, Brink presented Nelson Mandela as a man uniquely positioned to champion the cause of freedom and democracy in South Africa, arguing that the experience of incarceration had fully prepared him to meet the challenges of the outside world. He singled out three aspects through which he believed Mandela could reassure people about his own integrity and natural leadership: firstly, his relations with prison warders, whose assaults and humiliations throughout the years were always met with restraint and dignity, and whose respect – even friendship – he ultimately succeeded in winning; secondly, his sympathy towards Afrikaners and the special interest he nurtured for their language and literature; finally, his attitude towards

3. *Ibidem*.

4. Mandela himself insisted again and again that “[he] was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances” (N. MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Boston, Little Brown, 1995, p. 556). Similarly, Anthony Sampson observes that “it is not realistic to portray Mandela as a saint, and he himself has never pretended to be one: ‘I’m no angel’. No saint could have survived in the political jungle for fifty years, and achieved such a worldly transformation. Mandela has his share of human weaknesses, of stubbornness, pride, naïveté, impetuosity. And behind his moral authority and leadership, he has always been a consummate politician” (A. SAMPSON, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*, London, HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p. xxiv).

5. See N. NDEBELE, *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Manchester and New York, Manchester U.P., 1994.

6. A. BRINK, “Mandela a Tiger for our Time”, *The Guardian*, 22 May 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/may/22/southafrica.nelsonmandela> (last accessed on 19 December 2018).

black organisations outside the ANC, whose young and more rebellious members were always involved in discussions and treated with understanding and respect.⁷ If Mandela could transfer these attitudes and this wisdom to ‘the larger prison’ of South Africa, Brink contends, there were no doubts that he would peacefully lead the country to a new dispensation, marking his epoch as few others might have. The prison, in this perspective, was perceived as a microcosm of South Africa, where reconciliation between blacks and whites – particularly between Africans and Afrikaners – would be paramount for survival.

The recognition that Afrikaner support was a prerequisite for reconstruction was certainly one of the most significant intellectual breakthroughs Mandela experienced on Robben Island. In *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*, Anthony Sampson reminds us that, in the early 1970s, “Mandela was developing a special interest in the Afrikaner mindset. He urged the other prisoners to talk with the warders in Afrikaans, however much they disliked it, to understand more about their psychology and culture [...]. Mandela himself studied Afrikaans systematically, reading many Afrikaans books, and spoke it quite well”.⁸ While in prison, he came to believe that it was important to acquire an understanding of the Afrikaners to be able to negotiate with them, and that the best way to do so was through their literature. When cracks began to appear in the Afrikaner monolith and the voices of white liberals grew more insistent, he seemed to find hope and inspiration in the world of letters, being “particularly encouraged by Afrikaner writers like André Brink and Jan Rabie, who were attacking oppression”.⁹ Brink himself, in a 1993 interview, claimed that a prisoner from Robben Island once told him that Mandela recommended his books to the other detainees.¹⁰

The esteem and admiration the writer seemed to have earned during the prison years were confirmed when, in the new dispensation, the then-President Nelson Mandela accepted to write a preface to his collection of essays, *Reinventing a Continent* (1996). In the three pages introducing Brink’s reflections on South Africa’s transition towards democracy, Madiba emphasises the key role played by writers and intellectuals in countering the tyranny of silence and denouncing an iniquitous system; he also praises the creative and critical input provided by dissident Afrikaners like André Brink:

A particular feature of our situation [...] has been the significant number of Afrikaner intellectuals who through their writings added their voices to those denouncing injustice

7. A. BRINK, “Mandela Free”, in ID., *Reinventing a Continent*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1996, pp. 132-33.

8. A. SAMPSON, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*, p. 229.

9. *Ibidem*, p. 318. In 1973, Brink published *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*, 1974), the first Afrikaans novel to be banned by the apartheid government because it dared represent love across the colour bar – between a coloured man and a white woman – while exposing inter-ethnic violence and the gruesome methods of torture employed by the police. It was followed by *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), another ‘novel of miscegenation’.

10. B. ELNADI and A. RIFAAT, “André Brink Talks to Bahgat Elnadi and Adeel Rifaat”, *The Unesco Courier*, September 1993, p. 7.

and crying out for a society all of whose people would be equal citizens. That long road we have walked to where we are today carries indelibly the tracks and the footmarks of these courageous men and women who dared to challenge the powerful structures of their own ethnic group to proclaim allegiance to the ideal of a greater South Africa. This collection of essays is one example of such beacons along that road.¹¹

In the last chapter of his remarkable memoir, *A Fork in the Road* (2009), Brink recalls the day he was invited to tea at the President's Cape Town residence, Genadendal, to present him with a copy of the volume. He had already met Madiba on other occasions before – and he would meet him again with his fifth wife, Karina Szczurek, in 2007 – but in Genadendal there were only the two of them. Mandela started reminiscing about his solitary, contentious decision to initiate talks with apartheid government officials in the mid-1980s, and explained how his personal faith in the future of his country had been fed by years not only of interaction with others, but also of reading. “This was when the crucial moment came”, writes the author,

the moment when he finally became, for me, not just the leader and statesman, but a human being. I remember him leaning over – he was sitting on a sofa, I on an easy chair right next to him – and placing his left hand on my wrist. And then he said: “When I was in prison, you changed the way I saw the world”. Each one of these words has been branded into my memory for ever. I certainly do not believe that he was, at that moment, speaking to me as a specific and individual writer: he was thinking of ‘you’ as a collective, as the writers of the books he had read in prison. And so he may have spoken those very words to others – other writers, other individuals – on other occasions. He was paying homage to literature. To the written word. To the experience of reading. But that did not alter the fact that, *at that moment*, he was addressing himself to *me*.¹²

As well as describing a profoundly emotional moment which marked the apogee of Brink's career as a writer, this anecdote emblematically foregrounds Mandela's respect and passion for literature, which, together with music and the visual arts, represented one of the torches that shed light on his course, his “long walk to freedom”.

It was again literature – and, most strikingly, *Afrikaans* literature – that Mandela turned to when he decided to open Parliament in May 1994 with a poem by Ingrid Jonker, “The Child”. By choosing an Afrikaner writer, renowned for her anti-apartheid stance, the newly elected President marked the first of a series of steps to reach out to his former adversaries. A year later, seizing the opportunity offered by the 1995 Rugby World Cup, he skillfully drew on the deep attachment of Afrikaners to their favourite sport to extend hands across the racial divide and bring South Africans together. In his memoir, Brink joyfully recalls

the most unforgettable moment [...] when Nelson Mandela, wearing the number 6 jersey of captain Francois Pienaar, held aloft the Webb Ellis Cup. “You have done this”, he

11. N. MANDELA, “Preface”, in A. BRINK, *Reinventing a Continent*, p. ix.

12. A. BRINK, *A Fork in the Road*, London, Vintage, (2009) 2010, p. 418.

said, waving his arms towards the dancing, cheering crowd in the stands, “not just for your team but for more than 50,000 around us”. And Francois responded in a line that immortalised the moment: “No, Mr President”, he said. “We have done this for forty million people”.¹³

While he strenuously condemned apartheid as a crime against humanity, Madiba always remained sensitive to the heritage of the Afrikaners, who, he perceived, shared with black Africans a history of resistance against colonialism and imperial exploitation. His innate sense of the collective enabled him to cultivate a vision of inter-racial harmony and human fellowship which included the former oppressors in its articulation.

It was precisely this unshakeable faith in human dignity transcending racial difference that Brink found most impressive about Mandela’s outlook. Like many others, he regarded him as the very embodiment of what is known in South African culture as *Ubuntu* (a xhosa word which means, essentially, humanness, humanity towards others), a philosophy that enhances the notion of interdependence, complementarity and community and recognises that all humans are bound together. In his 1999 evaluation of Madiba’s political and ethical significance, Brink clearly states: “I know of no other person in a position of power, with the possible exception of Mandela’s compatriot, Desmond Tutu, who so amply demonstrates the Xhosa dictum, ‘I am human through other humans’”.¹⁴ What made Nelson Mandela such a remarkable public leader, Brink seems to suggest, was the fact that his political acumen was embedded in a decolonised and interconnected worldview, and that he valued white South Africans as part of this interconnectedness. In the struggle for human freedom in South Africa, Mandela recognised that it was necessary to free both the prisoner and the jailer, as he clearly states in his autobiography:

It was during those long and lonely years [in prison] that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.¹⁵

This conception of freedom heavily draws on and extends the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, in that the genuine human being is cast as one who lives “in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others”.¹⁶ In line with this view, Mandela not

13. *Ibidem*, p. 67.

14. A. BRINK, “Mandela a Tiger for our Time”. Desmond Tutu (1931—) is a South African Anglican cleric and Nobel Peace Prize laureate renowned for his commitment as an anti-apartheid and human rights activist. Nelson Mandela appointed him Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a court-like restorative justice board set up in 1995 in order to uncover the truths about gross human rights violations committed during apartheid and encourage reconciliation.

15. N. MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 624.

16. *Ibidem*.

only fought for and finally attained the liberation of his own people, but also generously invited white South Africans, especially Afrikaners, to transcend the prison of prejudice and become part of something larger.

For a reader familiar with André Brink's novels, Mandela's words are resonant of the impassioned testimony of Bernard Franken, the Afrikaner rebel in *Rumours of Rain* (1978) influenced by an elderly member of the ANC and then convicted for political activities under the Terrorism Act. Modelled on the historical figure of Mandela's long-time friend and communist lawyer Bram Fischer, Franken perfectly embodies the principles of *Ubuntu*, devoting his life to the pursuit of a self-forgetful ideal:

*As a White, as an Afrikaner linked through the colour of my skin and through my culture and my language, to that group which is in power in this country [...] I am free to reap the fruit of my White superiority while it lasts. Or I may choose to do nothing at all. But a third cause is open to me. And as a thinking and feeling man my only freedom today lies in renouncing, for the freedom of others, everything I might otherwise lay claims to, not through any merit on my part, but through the condition of my birth – which is the epitome of bondage. No man is so completely oppressed by the oppressor as himself.*¹⁷

Brink's contention is that, by dehumanising blacks, Afrikaners ended up excluding themselves from the human realm, too. In keeping with Mandela's mission "to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both",¹⁸ his struggle aimed simultaneously at the liberation of blacks from white oppression, and at the liberation of Afrikaners from the ideology and mindset which had been stifling their potential and isolating them. As Diala observes, "Brink clearly had reservations about the compartmentalisation of people into racial laagers, white or black, and saw as his basic mission the building of bridges across racial boundaries. In Nelson Mandela and the ANC, Brink found his ideals affirmed".¹⁹

Although it more or less explicitly permeates Brink's entire *oeuvre*, the all-embracing concept of *Ubuntu* is not identified through its proper xhosa name until *An Act of Terror* (1991), when the Afrikaner protagonist, Thomas Landmann, comes to recognise and understand it: "Ubuntu: sharing, generosity, hospitality, humanity. All of that, and more. Oh much more".²⁰ It is a belief amply echoed in Brink's post-apartheid novel *Imaginations of Sand* (1996), which gravitates around the election day that brought Nelson Mandela – here explicitly mentioned – to the presidency. Even though Madiba is not converted into a character, his democratic spirit and heartfelt belief in a shared humanity find a certain resonance in the figure of a formerly exiled black leader, the elder ANC politician Thando Kumalo. In the

17. A. BRINK, *Rumours of Rain*, Naperville, IL, Sourcebooks Landmark, (1978) 2008, p. 142.

18. N. MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 624.

19. I. DIALA, "The Political Limits of (Western) Humanism in André Brink's Early Fiction", *Studies in the Novel*, 34 (4), 2002, p. 431.

20. A. BRINK, *An Act of Terror*, London, Minerva, (1991) 1993, p. 179. Similarly, in *Reinventing a Continent* Brink defines the African concept of *Ubuntu* as a "unique amalgam of generosity, compassion and understanding" ("Towards a Syncretic Future", in ID., *Reinventing a Continent*, p. 213).

context of an emerging democracy, his words stress the need for all South Africans to confront a painful past and dismantle binary oppositions – us/them, black/white, African/European – “to discover the simple truth that we’re in this together [...] that from now on, even if there is struggling and suffering ahead, we’ll be struggling and suffering together”.²¹ Joyfully catching the spirit of a nation on the brink of a long-awaited change, *Imaginings of Sand* emblematically reveals the author’s whole-life commitment to moving from the constraints of colonialism and white solipsism towards an all-inclusive African humanism which would recognise “[t]his fatal, miraculous involvement with others; all of them, the good and the bad and the indifferent, the living and the dead”.²²

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More than two decades have passed since that glorious moment of South Africa’s first democratic elections, and the national mood is no longer one of elation. The country has gradually sunk to the depths of corruption, violent crime, and a resurgence of racism (both white and black), leaving many promises unfulfilled and casting doubts on foreign policy manoeuvres presided over by Mandela’s successors. After trying hard to give it the benefit of the doubt, Brink unleashed a ferocious attack on the ANC in the last pages of his memoir, where he sadly brands the group as “the enemy of the people”²³ and “a disgrace to the party’s history”.²⁴ Anger and disillusionment notwithstanding, the writer never considered leaving the African continent – unlike many whites who chose to emigrate – and remained committed to the future of his beloved country till the end of his life, always feeling encouraged and inspired by the inclusive vision endorsed by one of the greatest freedom fighters in history, a Nobel Peace laureate, and a friend: “I know now”, he writes in the epilogue of his memoir, “what Nelson Mandela meant when he told me, on that last morning I spent with him, *You are an African*”.²⁵

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21. A. BRINK, *Imaginings of Sand*, London, Vintage, (1996) 2000, p. 256.

22. *Ibidem*, p. 338.

23. A. BRINK, *A Fork in the Road*, p. 428.

24. *Ibidem*, p. 424.

25. *Ibidem*, p. 439.

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PART 2

MARTINA COPPOLA

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S LIFE-WRITING:
A (CON)TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Abstract. This article explores some aspects of the historical and socio-cultural context in which Australian Indigenous women's life-writing has developed over the past thirty years, after it burst into cross-cultural notoriety through the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place* in 1987. Given the role that questions of genre play in the examination of texts, my paper attempts to show how this fluid, hybrid, and postnational kind of life-writing transcends the boundaries of the European autobiographical canon. Through a brief historical *excursus* and a discussion of Morgan's *My Place* and Rosalie Fraser's *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen Generation* (1998), attention will be paid to the destructive effects of a complex and often discriminatory political system on native peoples' lives, with the heavy responsibility relating to the 'Stolen Generations'. Room will also be granted to the steps that the Australian government has recently taken towards a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Keywords. Contemporary Aboriginal women's life-writings. Sally Morgan. Rosalie Fraser. Stolen Generations.

In Australia, approximately between 1910 and 1970, many Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their home and families in consequence of several government measures introduced through the Assimilation Policies, whose guidelines had been set at the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities (21-23 April 1937, Canberra). These children, torn away from their parents, were obliged to renounce their heritage by adopting the white culture; their names were changed and they were prevented from communicating in their traditional languages. Some of them were adopted by white families while many others were placed in institutions where abuse, loss, and neglect were unfortunately daily occurrences. With hindsight, it can be claimed that the notion of assimilation, together with the child removal policies, did anything but achieve its aim to 'improve' the lives of the Indigenous people, mainly because white society, despite its utopian integration projects, refused to deal with them as equals. In this essay, attention will be focused on two Aboriginal women life-writers, Sally Morgan (1951—) and Rosalie Fraser (1958—?), who found the strength and courage to delve into such a controversial and painful topic, with its connections with the Stolen-Generation policies and their disastrous effects on their lives and an entire people's existence.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch were the first Europeans to come into direct contact with the Aborigines inhabiting the Australian continent. However, the first explorer who described an encounter with them, if in racially biased

terms, was English William Dampier in 1688. On 22 August 1770, British Royal Navy Captain James Cook declared Australia a British possession and Admiral Arthur Phillip, the first Governor of New South Wales, turned a portion of that territory into a penal colony. The attempt to 'civilise' the natives began by setting up mission stations, which were institutions ruled either by the Church or the State (sometimes by both). Here the authorities promoted an education imprint based on the rudiments of European culture alongside the principles of Christian belief: as confirmed by colonial history, from their arrival onwards, Europeans ended up imposing their traditions and customs upon the Aboriginal population at the expense of the local people's cultural heritage. On the other hand, Australian natives were not officially recognised as British citizens and, for this reason, they were not granted citizenship rights.

In the 1830s, the British started to draw up a series of laws formally aimed at the protection of the Indigenous, although in the name of those very Protection Policies many natives would lose their cultural roots, family, land, and independence. In 1836, the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee on Aborigines in order to safeguard the local tribes, and, no later than the following year, a Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes would make explicit reference to the repressive, unfair, and cruel actions perpetrated against the natives. For this reason, in 1837, the Select Committee began to systematically monitor the way the Indigenous were treated by appointing a Protector of Aborigines, whose task was to remain in close contact with the aboriginal tribes so as to protect, help, and educate them through the teaching of the rudiments of Christian belief together with an acquaintance with Western culture's roots. Yet, being forced to adopt a lifestyle markedly different from their habits, these communities were overwhelmed by melancholy and a sense of impotence which often culminated in alcohol abuse and violence.

On 11 November 1869, British authorities passed an Aboriginal Protection Act that licensed the exertion of a total control over them, including the responsibility for child-raising, education, marriage, work, and residency. In the wake of this ordinance, in 1886 Western Australia also promulgated the Half-Caste Acts, which granted local authorities the power to remove half-caste children from their families, even by the use of force, in order to start their assimilation process into white society. The Aborigines Act, which was brought into force on 23 December 1905, was at the basis of the policy that had the most significant effects on Western Australian aboriginal tribes; in particular, it envisaged a stronger control over natives through the appointment of a Chief Protector of Aborigines who was tasked with the role of legal guardian of both full-blood and half-caste children.

During the first half of the 20th century, the Australian Government sought to strengthen the dissemination of a Western socio-cultural canon via assimilation policies which were again detrimental to Aboriginal tribes. From 21 to 23 April 1937, those assimilation guidelines were laid down at the Parliament House in Canberra: such measures concerned all natives with the exception of full-bloods, who were expected to 'die out' through a process of natural extinction.

The 1950s and 1960s were dramatically pivotal in relation to the Stolen Generations because, in those years, the policy of child removal was consistently applied in order to 'australianise' and educate the natives in line with the principles of white culture. The definition of 'assimilation' was inspired by the idea that all the half-castes had to start living like white Australians; yet, beyond such democratic and liberal premises, the government provided for the building of reservations and settlements aiming at accommodating and civilising those very natives. While discrimination insidiously started spreading, there were as yet no real improvements in general conditions.

By the end of the 1970s, a rosier scenario had come to the fore thanks to a transitional period in the Australian Aboriginal people's history which saw the dismantling of the reserves and segregated facilities (even though that 'spectre' would continue to haunt the memories of natives and whites alike for a very long time). In 1975 the Federal Government approved the Racial Discrimination Act, which banned any form of racial discrimination: for example, the widespread practice of denying access to public space to those who were black or belonged to a non-white ethnic group was definitively made illegal. A new dawn seemed then to have been announced.

After the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers, which took place in February 1983 at Murdoch University (Perth), the year 1987 represented another landmark in light of the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, which had national as well as international reverberations and also gave a large audience the chance to virtually experience a more direct contact with Aboriginal authors and the vexed question of their people's rights.

In 2007 the then Prime Minister John Howard and the Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough launched "The Intervention", a series of policies which, though criticised by some groups, meant to pay heed to the recommendations concerning healthcare and human rights contained in the "Little Children are Sacred" Report. This report, released on 15 June 2007 by a Board of Inquiry chaired by Rex Wild and Patricia Anderson, had provided evidence of the extremely high levels of the state of neglect, abandon, and sexual abuse suffered by children within the aboriginal communities. In the same year, when John Howard lost the federal election, Kevin Rudd, his successor in line, announced his wish to deliver an apology to all the members of the Stolen Generations so as to create the conditions for a fairer and more equal dialogue between the Government and the Aborigines. 13 February 2008 was the memorable day in which the Australian Parliament, through the Prime Minister as its spokesman, opened a new chapter in national history by declaring "We say sorry".

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The two Aboriginal women writers discussed in this article, Sally Morgan and Rosalie Fraser, resort to a fluid, hybrid form of memoir or testimony – a form that is now commonly referred to as 'life-writing' – in order to trace their stories and disclose what happened to their families. The relatively recent publication dates of their two works – *My Place*, 1987 and *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen*

Generation, 1998 – are a tangible sign of how painful it must have been for them to gather strength and begin to publicly share their life experience and all they had been through, including what the whites had done to them by invading their land and driving them away from their own ‘place’. Quite understandably, their act of remembrance cannot be confined to the private sphere, since the journey through such distressing memories relies on a polyphonic legacy made up of public documents, testimonies, and rituals. In this way, past experiences have been ‘relived’ and assessed not only for themselves, but also for those who are close to them.

As is well-known, the recovery of the past on the part of the narrator-(auto)biographer can involve the return of the repressed and/or the stirring up of exogenous shocks that have seriously affected one’s existence. Memory, in this case, has both a cognitive and healing function, together with experience, which, as a kind of ‘corroborant’ feeding personality and identity, remains of course a crucial factor when trying to assess the meaning of events. Experience helps individuals and communities to grow by refining their relational, linguistic and social skills in myriad ways and to different degrees. When approaching an autobiographical work, then, we should be wary of aprioristically casting its author as an absolutely independent agent and totally free orchestrator of his/her own life.

Throughout the 20th century, autobiographical writing and life narratives became a much studied subject within various academic *milieux* and diverse theoretical perspectives, including structuralist and post-structuralist approaches as well as the historically engaged analyses in the fields of Cultural, Gender, Ethnic, Trauma, and Postcolonial Studies.¹ Along with the number of theoretical contributions, new sub-genres of personal narratives and styles of self-writing have also been developing. Among these subgenres, the so-called ‘autoethnography’ has acquired an increasingly important role; this word, which is composed of ‘auto’ and ‘ethnography’, already suggests that we are dealing with “a genre of writing that involves personalised accounts in which authors draw on their own lived experiences, connects the personal to the culture and places the self and others within a social context”.²

The origins of autoethnographical texts characterised by a racially-connoted, postcolonial imprint can be traced to the first half of the 20th century. Through these writings, mostly non-European and eyewitness subjects who carried the heavy burden of a colonial past decided to start telling their silenced stories, not only as individuals but as members of a community. This kind of literature has thus stemmed

1. For an updated survey on this complex topic, see among others L. GILMORE, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, London and New York, Cornell U.P., 2001; S. SMITH and J. WATSON, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2001; L. ANDERSON, *Autobiography*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011; P. CECCONI, *Seeing through Places and Spaces: Geografie contemporanee della scrittura del sé*, Bologna, I libri di Emil, 2015. As far as Aboriginal life-narratives are concerned, the most relevant critical instruments are the ones provided by Ethnic, Trauma, and Postcolonial Studies.

2. D. REED-DANAHAY, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1977, p. 9. See also M.L. PRATT, “Autoethnography and the Recording of Citizenship”, in A. CAREY-WEBB and S. BENZ (eds), *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 57-72.

from the moral need to articulate a non-metropolitan counterdiscourse and expose hidden, painful truths about the past (i.e. victimhood, discrimination, and violations of human rights), while addressing a possibly worldwide audience that had always been kept in the dark about such shameful circumstances and events.

It should also be remembered that, as is often the case with autochthonous communities, orality and storytelling constitute the roots of Indigenous culture in Australia, where the natives tried hard to keep this tradition alive, despite the powerful and numerous Western influences over centuries. Stories were passed down from generation to generation in the form of songs, movement in dancing, and paintings. Since the community plays a crucial role in Aboriginal culture, stories are to be seen as the expression of a collective view rather than an individualistic and personal one. As a consequence, when facing texts written by Aboriginal authors, one should refrain from applying a Westernised term like 'autobiography', which does not seem to properly convey the plural and polyphonic profile connoting these communities and their strong collective conscience.

The rising number of publications in the autoethnographical field testify to a national and international interest in this new subgenre and have paved the way for an Aboriginal life-writing where issues of identity, belonging, and nationality are at the forefront. As anticipated, Australian Indigenous peoples have long been faced with a sense of harassing displacement intensified by government policies which have taken steps to legitimise their subjection and their concentration in reserves and mission stations. These people, who have always been closely related to their land, to their *place*, experienced an excruciating unravelling of their sense of being, which they would endeavour to recover through acts of remembering and oral as well as written types of testimony.

Aboriginal life narratives aim then at recovering a sense of personal and collective experience so as to bridge the gap between a (pre-)colonial past and a postcolonial present, while also highlighting how their communities' habits and customs have been altered in accordance with the colonisers' objectives and projects. This kind of 're-membrance' must be considered as a fundamental stage in a reclaiming-of-identity process which also sees Aboriginal women writers as actively engaged along a 'therapeutic trajectory' where reconstructing the self and healing wounds go at the same pace. Although these women intend to show the world the suffering that was inflicted on the natives, they refuse to portray themselves as passive victims and prefer to take on the ethical and political role of a witness.

In 1987, the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place* marked a turning point in the history of Australian Aboriginal literature and helped bring Indigenous writers from the periphery to the mainstream. The book had an enormous international success, but it left a more tangible footprint in its own country, as suggested by a *Weekend Australian*³ article where Barbara Jefferis depicted it as an illustration of "the sort of Aus-

3. It is the Saturday edition of *The Australian*, a broadsheet newspaper and the most important national daily in the country. Long-experienced journalists are engaged in this project and the topics discussed concern aspects of the economic, political, and social life. Sections devoted to national and international news are accompanied by others dealing with economics, health, sports, films, books, and art reviews.

tralian history which hasn't been written before, and which we desperately need".⁴ A new and unknown side of history saw the light, as announced in the text itself by Morgan's great-uncle, Arthur Corunna, who, during a conversation with the author's grandmother, commented: "[W]e're talkin' history. You could be talkin' it too".⁵

Morgan's life-writing directs our gaze to a 'new' Australia, or, to put it in another way, a different, complementary version of an old monocultural Australia, and it is exactly by virtue of the narration of her personal and family history that the realities and deep wounds of non-white minority subjects can start being healed. Indeed, Morgan was one of the first writers to confront the burning issue of the Stolen Generations, the Aboriginal children who had been systematically torn away from their families with the governmental authorities' approval.

Rosalie Fraser's *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen Generation* (1998) is certainly worth mentioning as another telling contribution. Differently from Morgan, whose memoir has an overtly polyphonic structure involving relatives as speaking witnesses, Fraser seems to transpose her own painful experience as a Stolen Child to a symbolic level. She thus sets out to 'clinically' anatomise the cruelties suffered by her sister and herself in the foster home that took them in and that nobody would believe might be guilty of such moral baseness. Writing this memoir was for Fraser a kind of redeeming experience, consisting in the search for an opportunity to be listened to and believed: not by psychiatrists, guidance counsellors or Child Welfare, but by a common audience finally ready to receive and share her story.

Sally Morgan was born in 1951, the same year the mastermind behind the Assimilation project, Paul Hasluck,⁶ became Minister for Territories with Responsibility for the Northern Territory, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Nauru, and Norfolk Island. The Policy of Assimilation – a cornerstone of Aboriginal policies until the mid-1970s – was definitively approved in January 1961 by the group of Commonwealth and State Ministers at the Native Welfare Conference in Canberra. On a theoretical level, it provided all full-/half-blood Aboriginal people with the possibility to enjoy the same standards of health and resources as white Australians. However, as underlined above, these allegedly liberal and democratic premises clashed with the construction of reserves and institutions aimed at hosting, educating, and civilising the 'undisciplined' Aborigines.

My Place recounts all these vicissitudes from the so far silenced point of view of the native, namely from the perspective of Aboriginal women who were brought up to believe that their bloodline carried the blame for what was happening to their people. To understand their feelings, behaviours and attitudes towards white institutions, it is therefore necessary to consider the social conditions in which the indigenous population lived in the years covered by the three stories making up Morgan's book, that is to say, the stories of Arthur Corunna (her great-uncle), Gla-

4. Quoted in L. FINN, "Postnational Hybridity in Sally Morgan's *My Place*", *Moveable Type*, 4, 2008, p. 11.

5. S. MORGAN, *My Place*, London, Virago Press, (1987) 1988, p. 163.

6. Paul Hasluck was Minister for Territories from 1951 to 1963.

dys Milroy (her mother), and Daisy Corunna (her grandmother). Taking account of the fact that Daisy reconstructs a series of episodes dating back to 1900-83, that Arthur focuses on the years 1893-1950 and Gladys refers to the time span 1931-83, it follows that *My Place* examines almost one hundred years of Australian history concerning, in particular, the southwestern part of the country.

The events over which this book goes back call into question some of the government policies that had a major impact on the natives' social, political, and private lives. One of the most consequential of them was the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, which was passed in 1900 and came into effect in January 1901. However, the measures that would most affect the Aboriginal tribes of southwestern Australia (the communities strictly related to the setting of *My Place*) were outlined on 23 December 1905 under the apparently philanthropic heading "An Act to Make Provision for the Better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia", also known as the Aborigines Act 1905. These laws guaranteed greater control over natives through the presence of a Chief Protector of Aborigines, to be appointed by the Governor and acting as a legal tutor of Aboriginal children up to their sixteenth year of age. As a matter of fact, instead of protecting them, this measure caused enormous suffering and restricted their movements; in other words, it deprived children of their liberty and ethnic background.

Moreover, in accordance with the articles of the 1905 Act, the Governor had the power to declare any given area a 'forbidden place' for the natives, with prohibitions applying not only to provincial towns but to cities as well. On 18 March 1927, the Governor of Western Australia thus made Perth a prohibited area for Aboriginal people. In one of the accounts collected in *My Place*, Daisy recalls how she was consequently banned from visiting her daughter Gladys at Parkerville Children's Home, an institution run by the Church, and how this situation profoundly marked their lives for the worse, leaving unforgettable scars. In the section "Gladys Corunna's story (1931-1983)", Gladys provides further emotional testimony on this:

I was very sick after the operation. I had no one to talk to, I cried and cried. I couldn't understand why my mother hadn't been to visit me, I thought perhaps they hadn't told her I was sick. She told me later that she couldn't get time off work and she couldn't come at night because of the curfew, which prevented Aboriginal people travelling after dark. It was hard for her, then, and hard for me, too. Even when I was sick, I belonged to the Native Welfare Department. [...] On Sunday afternoons, visitors were allowed to come. We used to wait and wait, we knew it was a long, uphill walk from the station, and we never knew whether someone was coming for us or not. That was the worst part. You hoped right up to the very last minute. I used to think, well, Mum will be here soon, I'll just wait a little bit longer. She'll be cross if she doesn't see me standing here, waiting for her. I remember some years when I only saw her twice at the Home [...]. A lot of kids at Parkerville had parents. Some had mothers, some had fathers. [...] It was hardest for the Aboriginal kids. We didn't have anyone. Some of the kids there had been taken from families that lived hundreds of miles away [...] and anyway, Aboriginal people had to get permits to travel. Sometimes they wouldn't give them a permit. They didn't care that they wanted to see their kids. Each time Mum came and saw me, she always had a bit of paper with her that said she was allowed to

travel. A policeman could stop her any time and ask to look at that paper, if she didn't have it on her, she was in big trouble.⁷

An interlacement of *stories* rooted in Australian *history* and seen through the eyes of the natives, *My Place* is not just a documentary account, but also enucleates the intimate recollections, emotions, and controversial feelings that the protagonists experienced when dealing with the grim situations they found themselves in. This personal involvement transpires in Morgan's text thanks to the oral tradition's modes ingrained in Aboriginal culture: her grandmother, her mother and her great-uncle do tell her what they experienced firsthand and the text appears to present this firsthand testimony. Oral transmission ensures that the person who is telling and the one who is listening get gradually involved in a dialogic exchange and closeness, with the addressee acquiring more and more familiarity with the codes and meanings of his/her addresser.

In Sally Morgan's autoethnographical book, clues are disseminated in such a way that we are allowed to see the whole picture of the author's origins only after a process of reading and fitting the 'puzzle pieces' together has taken place. To comprehend the meaning of this life-writing and identity-reconstruction, one must carry on reading.

Our curiosity is soon stimulated through the opening sentences, since, first of all, it is difficult for us to locate the protagonist within a typical Western community. We are thus induced to concentrate our attention on the very details of the lives of Sally and her siblings and, above all, of her relatives and ancestors. When reading the conversation between Morgan and her grandmother, we realise that the latter belonged to a different world from that of the white colonisers; for example, Daisy always insists on eating all the food that is set on the table without leaving even a single crumb, because, as she used to repeat to her grandchildren, "I know what it's like to be hungry, it's a terrible thing!"⁸ Daisy is profoundly suspicious of the Government and of all those who work for the institutions linked to it. If this apparently odd behaviour leads Western readers to dig more deeply into Sally's real origins, the author herself opts for a dramatic effect by presenting her discovery of Nan's aboriginality – her being a *Boong*⁹ – as a true revelation and shocking surprise, a circumstance that speaks volumes about subaltern and alienated identities.

For half-caste children, being torn away from their Aboriginal mothers also meant losing their language and culture, because they were forced to live in a condition of displacement from both white society and native communities. The half-caste status prevented them from being accepted in the white world because of their 'black blood', while their familiarity with the English language excluded them from the initiation rites and ceremonies of their own Aboriginal culture. In her account, Daisy says that her half-caste condition made her "too black for the whites and too white for the blacks".¹⁰

7. S. MORGAN, *My Place*, p. 250.

8. *Ibidem*, p. 74.

9. This is a derogatory term and a synonym for 'aborigine'.

10. S. MORGAN, *My Place*, p. 336.

As a descendant of a stolen-children family, Sally herself can be considered as a child who suffered loss. Although she was not physically separated from her family, she was partly deprived of her identity and past because all her relatives always refrained from telling her the truth, adding to a sense of ambiguity that increased over the years. It is only when Arthur, Daisy, and Gladys agree to tell their own stories that Sally is actually able to recognise and affirm her true genealogy and selfhood. The interweaving and comparing of these accounts allow both narrators and narratee to psychologically overcome their condition of *pariah* and feel proud of a recovered inheritance, despite the white man's attempts to delete it forever. Sally's regained pride is at the basis of the composition of *My Place*, through which she intends to free her mother, grandmother and great-uncle from the secrets, fears, and sufferings they had to endure for many years, as confirmed by Arthur's remarks in the following excerpt:

I look back on my life and think how lucky I am. I'm an old fella now and I got one of my granddaughters lookin' after me. That's something, these days. And I got Daisy's granddaughter writin' my story. I been tryin' to get someone to write it for years, now I'm glad I didn't. It should be someone in the family, like. It's fittin'. I got no desires for myself any more. I want to get my land fixed up so my children can get it and I want my story finished. I want everyone to read it. Arthur's Corunna's story! I might be famous. You see, it's important, because then maybe they'll understand how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants. I'm part of history, that's how I look on it. Some people read history, don't they?¹¹

Through its polyphonic structure, this life-writing succeeds in conveying the sense of a community that was once torn apart and is now made whole again. In a symbolic gesture, Sally charges her mother with the task of reflecting on the conclusion of this long path of research dealing with memories, suffering, deprivation, and redemption. Quite significantly, Gladys now affirms she feels embarrassed when thinking that she had wanted to be white, although she is not sure yet about her 'nationality'.

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Rosalie Fraser was born in December 1958 at Mullewa Reserve, a town in the northern part of Perth (southwestern Australia). In the "Postscript" to her book published in 1998, *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen Generation*, she tells of the moment she decided to put her story down on paper and how the act and process of writing became instrumental in confronting pain and lightening the burden of gnawing memories:

One night I was so down, even alcohol could not help, so with the kids in bed, I just sat down and started writing. The pen took on a life of its own. I started feeling better. Trouble was no one but me could read it, as I could hardly read or write.¹²

11. *Ibidem*, p. 213.

12. R. FRASER, "Postscript", in EAD., *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen Generation*, Alexandria, NSW, Hale and Iremonger, 1998.

In the “Dedication” section, she similarly documents her “need to write” – “Love and thanks to Stan, my husband and best friend, who has been patient and understanding with me in my need to write my book”¹³ – while in the final chapter she casts the act of writing as an essential gesture capable of exorcising trauma: “For myself, it has been an experience writing this book. I would recommend writing to anyone who has problems to come to terms with: it must be the best therapy one can have”.¹⁴

Fraser’s memoir, tellingly entitled *Shadow Child*, focuses on her shattering experience while living as Ward of the State in a foster home she and one of her siblings were placed in from 1961 to 1980, after being taken from their parents by the Child Welfare Department. In particular, the writer lays bare the abuses she suffered at the hands of her foster mother, Irene Kelly, and connects this kind of physical and emotional violence to the larger picture of the oppression that had similarly hit her sisters and brothers in the wake of the assimilation policies enacted by Welfare Institutions.

Although the term ‘welfare’ formally refers to institutions targeted at shielding and taking care of people, these social organisations did not seem to actually watch over Indigenous children’s health and well-being and certainly were not able to offer them any real protection. Rosalie thus learnt to mistrust authorities and became convinced that governmental institutions would rather disguise the truth than take any revolutionary action and acknowledge white man’s cruelty. She also inferred that, if she wanted to survive, she was to tell lies, or rather, concoct a version of the truth that the establishment would accept as plausible.

By addressing both white and indigenous readers, this piece of life-writing participates in a process of official reconstruction of a dark side of history, a sort of ‘shadow chapter’ that has been obliterated by the official one. In the same breath, Fraser’s memoir testifies to the sufferings caused by foster families and institutions to native children during this particular period of Australian history. In order to give a factual basis to her account, she mentions the names of the social bodies that were responsible for the removal from her family and cultural roots. *Shadow Child* acts then as a ‘silence breaker’: Fraser decided to write the story of her life (and her people) with a view to countering the authoritative versions and leaving room for the dissenting point of view of a minority subject.

A striking feature of this book is a dry and concise style which resists any melodramatic or sentimental slackening. The shocking abuses and maltreatments at the hand of the foster mother (Mrs Kelly) are described in a crystal-clear and incisive way by the author-protagonist, who refrains from providing any logical reason for those actions; this creates a compelling displacement effect that drives us to reflect on the inhuman cruelty hidden behind the ‘ordinary’ and the idea of ‘guardianship’. Yet, the conflicting feelings experienced by Rosalie towards Mrs Kelly – whom, in spite of everything, she still calls ‘Mum’ – suggest how important it was for her

13. “Dedication”, *ibidem*.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 270.

to cling to a mother figure. For example, she writes how cooking meals together filled her with pleasant memories: "strange as it may seem", the moments of preparing meals together "have left me with some lifelong, loving memories of my foster mother".¹⁵ The importance of relying on a mother figure is confirmed by the fact that Fraser never explicitly blames Mrs Kelly for her shameful behaviour, while instead pointing the finger at the Child Welfare's connivance.

Shadow Child covers a time period which goes beyond Fraser's childhood, and this choice lets the writer underline how childhood mistreatments heavily conditioned her adult life. She explains how the lack of love and the years spent in the constant fear of being punished with no justifying reason have, among other things, raised doubts in her mind about ever being able to become a good mother. At the same time, the virtual re-enactment of the psychophysical oppression and discrimination she suffered allows Fraser to heal wounds and transform her life-writing into a forum capable of gaining public attention for all the 'ghost children' of the Stolen Generations.

If personal memories are a primary source to draw upon, Fraser also appeals to Aboriginal culture and a collective memory which embraces both her siblings' reminiscences and the Welfare Acts she managed to have access to (some excerpts of these documents are included in the book). It should be noted that *Shadow Child* came out in 1998, ten years after the first Aboriginal mobilisation in Sydney (with the protesters marching through the city and chanting the slogan "We have survived"), in the aftermath of which authorities decided to open an inquiry to investigate the damage caused to native communities. In 1991, the Australian Government had passed the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (also known as "CAR Act"), whose aim was to find a way towards reconciliation between Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and non-natives by the end of the 20th century, in an effort to achieve equality in matters of land, housing, justice, education, employment, health and so forth. If, on the one hand, the majority of the Australian white population pleaded guilty, others still carried on claiming that the Aborigines should have been more tolerant and forbearing in relation to the grievances they had to endure in the past. Needless to say, the natives paid no heed to such a patronising position.

Going back to Fraser's text, one notes that, among natives, discrepancies do arise especially as far as the sensitive issue of forgiveness is concerned. As can be gathered from a conversation between Rosalie and her sister Karen, who after many years try to make sense out of Mrs Kelly's behaviour, the overcoming of trauma cannot be simply 'collective', but needs to be part of a personal and internal processing. While Fraser had "[to] struggle with my emotions so much [...] sometimes I thought I hated her and other times I knew I did not",¹⁶ Karen and her other sisters were adamant that what they had suffered was too devastating to be forgiven. In general terms, it can be contended that some people are naturally more disposed to forgive than others, often because they are more resilient, or be-

15. *Ibidem*, p. 51.

16. *Ibidem*, p. 183.

cause they are able to cope with traumatic events and organise their lives in spite of all the difficulties. In *Shadow Child*, Fraser seems to show more of this disposition than her sisters do, affirming that “when you are an abused child you learn to take the good with the bad”.¹⁷ Moreover, the level of intimacy that is reached in the relationship between those who cause harm and their victims plays an important part in the trajectory towards forgiveness. Quite significantly, Fraser is the only one who does recognise Mrs Kelly as her mother, at least as the only kind of mother she has ‘by her side’. Rosalie does not forget but, despite this, she is always ready to forgive Mrs Kelly and go back to her. When the foster mother tells her that she is dying of cancer, Rosalie does not hesitate to leave the Miller family – for whose generous help she would always be grateful – in order to rejoin the Kellys. Forgiveness also requires an act of self-forgiveness: in other words, the victim must not yield to self-denigration and must realise that the blame for the cruelties suffered should be put on the perpetrators in the first place. It has taken time for Rosalie Fraser to acquire this awareness and, as she says, she was helped all along by the fact that her accounts were collected and shared by one of her step-sisters, who supported and encouraged her.

If able to forgive her foster mother, Rosalie cannot bring herself to ‘absolve’ the institutions, which she still perceives as a hostile enemy, especially when it comes to neglect and acts of omission in the context of a prolonged, unjustified violence. By the same token, this is also the reason why Rosalie’s foster siblings and foster father, even after Mrs Kelly’s death, could not find the strength to build an affective relationship with her, just because she continued to embody the wounds inflicted by whites on a harmless victim. Forgetting one’s mistakes is not possible when one comes face to face with a person who always triggers memories of guilt and regret; it is therefore necessary to ‘obliterate’ this person forever, in a vicious circle that adds violence to violence. And yet, in the last, touching chapter of *Shadow Child*, the author is ultimately at peace with herself: she positively comes full circle when claiming that, as an adult, “I now hold my own life in my own hands”.¹⁸ Reflecting on her past life, she comes to the wise and reassuring conclusion that Mrs Kelly

did a lot of wrong, but then I would be a liar if I never said she did a lot of good [...] I do have a soft spot for her. I do not know why, but I cannot feel hatred for my foster mother. I guess there is a bond which will always allow me to love her: you cannot live with someone for so long, especially as a child, and not have some bond and love between you. I feel good because one Mother’s Day I took a pot of flowers to my foster mother’s grave and let her know that I forgive her.¹⁹

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Through this overview of two contemporary Aboriginal writers’ memoirs it has been possible to see how their autoethnographical accounts, each of them characterised by specific contents and narrative techniques, share a common purpose and

17. *Ibidem*, p. 35.

18. *Ibidem*, p. 267.

19. *Ibidem*, p. 268.

engagement which gravitate around the question of Indigenous people's identity, rights, and close link to their 'stolen' native land and culture.

For both Sally Morgan and Rosalie Fraser, recovering their 'aboriginality' has represented a decisive step towards identity-reconstruction. The relationship individual/community/land, which is pivotal in Morgan's work and implicitly at the basis of Fraser's, has been emphasised through the foregrounding of the cultural differences and diverse worldviews between white settlers and natives. To the Aborigines, in fact, the land is not to be seen as a passive and impersonal entity to be conquered, but rather as a sacred and vital space to be honoured. The topic of the land is strictly related to the traumatic experience of the forced removals, which were felt not only as a painful separation from the family circle, but as an upsetting deprivation of a constitutive, quintessential element of the self.

Memories and historical evidence are so compelling as to drive native storytellers and witnesses to resort to writing and to address a wide audience in order to break the silence and proudly reclaim their aboriginality. In memoirs like *My Place* and *Shadow Child*, a crucial message is conveyed through a relatively unadorned style, curt syntax, and bare lexicon, which are however hybridised via native dialectal borrowings. Rather than just echoing back to the 'authenticity' of the spoken language, such contaminations set out to draw a necessary distinction between British (or European) and native ways of expression. Even if only from a purely symbolic point of view, the inclusion of an Aboriginal vocabulary is conducive to acquainting a Western audience with that feeling of displacement and alienation with which natives always had to cope. The two writers analysed here, in particular, have been said to express themselves with "an immediate and straightforward style, which with its sincerity and indulgence spares nothing and no-one and which finds its ultimate point of convergence in human experience".²⁰

My Place and *Shadow Child* have contributed to providing a 'new' version of the history of Aboriginals, completely different from the ones long endorsed by non-Indigenous Australians' official reports. It is also thanks to this kind of autoethnographical testimony that a dialogic process of truth-telling and reconciliation has been set in motion. Indeed, starting in 2008, the Government has adopted a series of strategies significantly called 'Closing the Gap', which aim to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population's disadvantage through financial investments, training and rehabilitation programmes, with particular reference to some indicators such as education, health, lifespan, and employment rate. On a yearly basis, the results of these political and economic measures are officially illustrated and monitored in the "Closing the Gap Report". As Morgan and Fraser have led us to realise, issues such as child care, children's rights and childhood education cannot but be granted a prominent place in the reconciliation process's agenda.

20. My translation. Thus runs the original passage: "scrittura immediata, schietta, che con sincerità e indulgenza non risparmia niente e nessuno, il cui punto di coesione è rappresentato dall'esperienza umana" (M. BARTOCCI, "Postfazione" a S. MORGAN, *La mia Australia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2011).

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Laura Giovannelli

GLIMPSES IN THE DARK:
A CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW OF
NADINE GORDIMER'S *JUMP AND OTHER STORIES*

Abstract. This paper should be read as a homage to another remarkable figure within the South African panorama and in a transnational scenario: Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), one of the most significant voices and acute observers of her country's turbulent and dramatic history and its people(s). In particular, attention is drawn to Gordimer's aesthetic tenets, to her poetics regarding the short-story genre and to *Jump and Other Stories*. This 1991 collection remains a crucial and somewhat unique work which, if coming out after Mandela's liberation (11 February 1990) and in the happier interregnum of South Africa's transition to democracy, actually puts together texts that were mostly written when the demise of apartheid was approaching but the downfall of the regime was not yet a fact.

Keywords. Nadine Gordimer's poetics and commitment. South African socio-political transitions. The racial issue. Storytelling. Truth.

I would like to open this presentation¹ by quoting a comment by Andries Walter Oliphant, a South African writer and committed literary scholar and editor who also chaired the Arts and Culture Trust in South Africa (1995-2007), and who was a friend and admirer of Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014). In the 1990s, Oliphant edited a rich and diversified collection of essays, literary pieces, and interviews meant as a tribute to the life and works of the then 75-year-old Gordimer. In his Foreword to the volume, he drew on a figurative language where compelling metaphors and hyperbolic statements intermingled so as to provide a striking, quintessential portrait of the writer's temperament alongside her physical traits:

Nadine Gordimer is the colossus of South African literature. Her figure as a writer majestically straddles the literary landscape. Although petite, her formidable image looms so large, it seems to fall over every feature of the South African aesthetic topography. This characterisation is not, as one might think, a mere paradox. Neither is it a metaphor of domination. Both these tropes, anyway, do not belong to Gordimer's affirming vocabulary. In her aesthetics, the concept of domination features only as something to be challenged and opposed. Rather, her prominence is the consequence of her genius.²

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the International Colloquium "Story into History: Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories", 10 May 2019, organised by Héliane Ventura and Mathilde Rogez at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France.

2. A.W. OLIPHANT, Foreword to ID. (ed.), *A Writing Life: Celebrating Nadine Gordimer*, Photographs by D. GOLDBLATT, London, Viking, 1998, p. XI.

Notably, the year Gordimer passed away, a number of touching obituaries – again by fellow writers – would tread a similar allegorical path. Margaret Atwood’s eulogy published in *The Guardian* in July 2014 is a memorable case in point. In her typically incisive and trenchant style, Atwood responded to Gordimer’s death by claiming that

[it] seems impossible – surely she was ageless, like one of those very old, tiny, trees in the Arctic, gnarled and tough as a nut, but nonetheless evergreen. Despite her minute size, she was a huge presence – a voice of rectitude that spoke above the political din, addressing itself to our common humanity. She was an inspiration to all writers facing seemingly insurmountable odds within their own societies or facing a choice between risky truth-telling and personal comfort.³

Briefly stated, Gordimer was an author who commanded, and still commands, our attention. Mature and evergreen, physically small and yet a huge, towering presence, she has gained a reputation as being both a universal interpreter of human behaviour and a voice inextricably bound up with South Africa and its turbulent geopolitical realities. Although she had her own detractors, what we generally come across when surveying the critical essays concerning her output and lifelong endeavour is an emphasis on her ethical rigour and unshakeable sense of justice: on her veracity, integrity, vocation, enduring commitment to the struggle against apartheid and towards social change. Never dreamy, melodramatic or tinged with self-pity, Gordimer’s writing shines for its penetrating power of observation, an anatomising quality that Lionel Abrahams once traced to a “transparency of the ego”: a special sort of “illuminating intelligence”, a “magic lantern [...] with x-ray properties”⁴ wavering between the poles of compassion and cynicism.

While relentlessly probing South African history and ethos, her literary works raise crucial issues without lapsing into facile propaganda and, most importantly, without underrating the aesthetic component and the idea and principles of artistic accomplishment. Indeed, her provocative assertion “Nothing I write in [...] factual pieces will be as true as my fiction” is one of her most quoted statements, capable of enucleating a point – the one relating to ‘honest (literary) writing’ and the creative writer’s freedom of expression – that she would never grow weary of making. The following excerpt shows how Gordimer proceeded to debunk received ideas about the reliability and authoritativeness of facts as opposed to the subjective inventiveness (and therefore unreliability) of fiction; in her view, especially in a country like South Africa, the ‘lies’ of fiction may be read as more revealing ‘truths’ than, say, the censored accounts of official historiography or the ideological alliances of political commentary:

3. M. ATWOOD, “Nadine Gordimer: Evergreen, Ageless and an Inspiration to All Writers”, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/14/nadine-gordimer-margaret-atwood-tribute> (last accessed on 5 May 2019).

4. L. ABRAHAMS, “Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego”, *English Studies in Africa*, 3 (2), September 1960, repr. in R. SMITH (ed.), *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1990, pp. 27-28. On Gordimer’s ‘searchlight perceptiveness’ see also another engaging (if early) contribution: B. SACHS, “Nadine Gordimer: Writer with the Eye of a Camera”, in ID., *South African Personalities and Places*, Johannesburg, Kayor Publishers, 1959, pp. 83-89.

Fiction's morality lies in taking the freedom to explore and examine contemporary morals, including moral systems such as religions, with unafraid honesty [...]. For my *fiction* I have claimed and practised my integrity to the free transformation of reality, in whatever forms and modes of expression I need. There, my commitment has been and is to make sense of life as I know it and observe it and experience it. In my ventures into non-fiction, my occasional political essays, my political partisanship has no doubt shown bias, perhaps a selectivity of facts. But then, as I have said before, and stand by: nothing I write in such factual pieces will be as true as my fiction [...]. The transformation of the imagination must never 'belong' to any establishment, however just, fought-for, and longed-for.⁵

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Back in 1960, in his article entitled "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego", Abrahams began to lay the groundwork for an appreciation of Gordimer's short fiction. True, by that time she had only penned a couple of novels, and one can hardly deny the outstanding role she was to acquire in the field of novel-writing throughout her long career, from the autobiographical/*Bildungsroman* framework of *The Lying Days* (1953) to the more diffusively polyphonic, sparse and fluid style that comes to the fore in her last books, such as *The Pickup* (2001), *Get a Life* (2005), and *No Time Like the Present* (2012), with their efforts at recording a multi-voiced consciousness. Even so, her mastery as a short-story writer remains unquestionable. If Abrahams had underscored the poignancy of the incident in Gordimer's stories – the thrust of "getting the facts into focus", the "moments which are peculiarly this writer's *métier*"⁶ – in the 1970s Robert Haugh praised the fine artistry, satiric edge, obsidianlike cleverness and *trait de lumière* of such pieces.⁷ In the same period, Kevin Magarey further strengthened the profile of Gordimer 'the gem-polisher' by comparing her terse and lucid technique to the craftsmanship of jewelry design.⁸

In more recent times, Dominic Head drew attention to the parallels existing between a large portion of Gordimer's tales and Modernist developments within the genre in matters of structural pattern, symbolic layering, and hypersignification:

My view of the Gordimer stories is that they work *ironically* with [the] notion of 'aesthetic completeness' in the tradition of key modernist innovators such as Joyce and Mansfield [...] ambiguity, a fundamental property of the short story genre, is a property that Gordimer pointedly exploits [...] the disunifying and disruptive potential of the short story was significantly developed during the modernist period; and this is important since Gordimer's stories, in their turn, are influenced by, and develop, modernist innovations.⁹

5. N. GORDIMER, "Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics" (1988), in EAD., *Living in Hope and History: Notes from our Century*, London, Bloomsbury, (1999) 2000, pp. 7, 14-15. On Gordimer's notions of the truthfulness of fiction and the writer's place in history and freedom of expression, see also her "Living in the Interregnum" (1982), in EAD., *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, edited and introduced by S. CLINGMAN, New York and London, Penguin, (1988) 1989, pp. 261-84, and "Writing and Being", Nobel Prize Lecture (1991), in EAD., *Living in Hope and History: Notes from our Century*, pp. 195-206.

6. L. ABRAHAMS, "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego", p. 28.

7. See R.F. HAUGH, *Nadine Gordimer*, New York, Twayne, 1974, pp. 13-16.

8. See K. MAGAREY, "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories", *Southern Review*, 7, 1974, repr. in R. SMITH (ed.), *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 45-74.

9. D. HEAD, *Nadine Gordimer*, Cambridge, CUP, 1994, pp. 161-63.

The slices of life on which the crisp observations of Gordimer's narrators focus – often resisting closure, dwelling on unresolved contradictions, or opening up avenues for dazzling revelations – are not of course alien to the dynamics of the epiphanic moment that brings about 'shocks of recognition'. The pivotal relevance gained by this aspect has been stressed by the author herself in one of her spare critical reflections on the short-story genre, namely "The Flash of Fireflies", a suggestive essay interspersed with Woolfian echoes and references to the 'flashing magic' of the instantaneous illumination. In her commentary, Gordimer expatiates on the bio-luminescent effects of this special family of beetles and their intermittent glowing. Regardless of their brief lives, here fireflies embody freedom and the heuristic experience. Through their roaming in darkness and unrelenting excursions, the lightning bugs become the vehicle of a literary metaphor for a constellation of stories that, in spite of their relatively unassuming character when compared to the authoritativeness of novels, can turn into epistemological tools. Their syntax is said to be instrumental in catching the intimations of truth and

the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness. Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment [...]. A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not *the* moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives [...]. The short story is a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness – which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference.¹⁰

The marriage between technical discipline and formal innovation, the magnification of the "discrete moment of truth" (the significant detail) and rhetorical economy, is certainly a strong point in Gordimer's short narrative. At the same time, it must be added that in her case the "flashes of fearful insight" end up unveiling a texture that does not – and cannot – confine itself to the inner cocoon of the subjective conscience. 'Cocoon' is another keyword in Gordimer's allegorical idiolect, where it is basically a synonym for a narrow-minded, defensive attitude as well as a self-referential enclave one must break out of in order to establish healthy and humane relationships. In Gordimer's writing, the texture that is progressively unveiled through epiphanic moments is steeped in the South African context and its specificities, starting with such vexed questions as racism, the socio-political and moral consequences of segregation, colonialism and Western power, the 'morbid symptoms' and neuroses fuelled by ethnic strife and, needless to say, the pernicious system of apartheid.

From her earliest published stories, dating back to the late 1930s and 1940s, up to the compendium *Life Times: Stories, 1952-2007*, which appeared in 2010 and spanned more than half a century of her production in the field, Gordimer managed to draw an invaluable, updated picture of the long succession of "present moments" that have accrued throughout the dramatic phases of South African history. All the

10. N. GORDIMER, "The Flash of Fireflies" (1968), in C.E. MAY (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories*, Athens, OH, Ohio U.P., 1994, pp. 264-65.

while, she strove to interpret this history from the *inside*: from her genuine sensitivity as a ‘natural’ writer engaged in a hermeneutic quest and in a “tension between standing apart and being fully involved”, in the awareness that the

change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society – that is to say, history – and my apprehension of it; in the writing, I am acting upon my society, and in the manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me [...]. What I am also saying, then, is that in a certain sense a writer is ‘selected’ by his subject – his subject being *the consciousness* of his own era.¹¹

The act of bearing witness, the teasing out of clues that have progressively extended their compass across the colour bar in order to focus on non-white, disenfranchised realities, is such a salient feature in Gordimer’s narrative that one might well take up Jeanne Colleran’s suggestion and employ the word ‘archive’.¹² This hypothetical archive is both well-documented and interspersed with gaps – with missing files or incomplete entries, so to speak – as if developing along a parable of epistemic leaps that start from an original condition of albinocratic, circumscribed knowledge and then pursue a deeper, virtually unbiased understanding. While chronicling her country’s political ordeals, Gordimer has therefore gone to great lengths to envisage a borderland where an interracial dialogue might be established.

As regards the post-apartheid era, namely the Rainbow Nation of the 1990s and the following decade, she continued to dig into the South African way of life, so that a complementary range of issues and dilemmas would loom large again in her works (i.e. violence, poverty, illegal immigration, political rivalries and corruption, environmental health). At the same time, in volumes like *Loot and Other Stories* (2003) and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007), she broadened her horizon beyond the local by looking at the transnational scenario of globalisation and also assuming a more confident, occasionally lighthearted attitude that joined hands with playful self-referentiality.¹³

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After this introductory survey, we can now see how *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), a collection from Gordimer’s mature phase, locates itself within her macrotext. The first thing to take into consideration is that each of the sixteen stories included in this volume had previously appeared in American or British magazines,

11. N. GORDIMER, “Selecting My Stories” (1975), in EAD., *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, pp. 114-16. For a deeper understanding of the ‘history from the inside’ concept, see the seminal study by S. CLINGMAN, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, London, Boston and Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1986.

12. See J. COLLERAN, “Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer’s Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum”, in B. KING (ed.), *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave, 1993, pp. 237-45.

13. I have looked closely at these last aspects in my “‘Hieroglyph to be decoded’: Exploring Routes of Representation and Telling in Nadine Gordimer’s *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*”, *Études Littéraires Africaines*, 38, 2014, pp. 93-103.

such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Granta*.¹⁴ This is an important clue to historically assess a book that, if coming out after Nelson Mandela's liberation (11 February 1990) and in the happier interregnum of South Africa's transition to democracy, actually puts together texts that were mostly written when the demise of apartheid was approaching but the downfall of the regime was not yet a fact.

Set in the late 1980s, these stories convey "flashes of fearful insight" precisely on that difficult crossroads moment, before majority rule came into existence in April 1994. Although a number of apartheid laws had been repealed and negotiations were on the agenda, a disquieting sense of indeterminacy, an unconscious fear of the consequences of desegregation and other alarming underground phenomena still had the upper hand. In this respect, the collection seems less to take a reviving leap than linger on the threshold of the "incarcerated imagination" of the years of Emergency.¹⁵ The reader feels somehow trapped in limbo or, in Johan Jacob's words, is plunged into a "*fin-de-siècle* awareness of disorientation", into the critical juncture of a "post-apartheid but pre-democratic South Africa, of overlap between the totalitarian order and the dawning democracy".¹⁶

My choice for this paper's title – "Glimpses in the Dark" – is first of all meant as a reference to such a destabilising condition of in-betweenness, with all its ambiguities and uncertainties, hesitations and concealments. In the stories, the sombre mood that hangs over the epiphanic flickers contributes to enhancing a general effect of defamiliarisation and doubt, with the paradigm of the politically 'spectacular' still pressing on. Here the slippery ground that connotes a critical state of transit is both rendered through a semantically dense, finely calibrated language and graphically objectified via a pattern of motifs and core themes. Among the most significant recurrences are those relating to jumping, hunting and escaping, chilly silences and communication slippages, duplicity and mirrors, violent death and victimised children, betrayals and new allegiances, the twists and turns of power relations and the pulling apart of (or longing for) home.

The far-reaching and often ironic resonance acquired by the notions of home and homeland – family and nation, domesticity and belonging – is readily confirmed by the titles of three stories where the characters' dwellings turn out to be anything but safe, comforting or cohesive 'nooks'. These stories are "My Father Leaves Home", "Home", and "Safe Houses". The first one is a semi-autobiographical tale in which the narrating I is the daughter of a Jewish watchmaker and jeweller who, just like

14. These are the titles of the sixteen short stories, in their order of appearance in *Jump and Other Stories*, London, Bloomsbury, (1991) 2003: "Jump", "Once Upon a Time", "The Ultimate Safari", "A Find", "My Father Leaves Home", "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight", "Comrades", "Teraloyna", "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off", "Home", "A Journey", "Spoils", "Safe Houses", "What Were You Dreaming?", "Keeping Fit", and "Amnesty". All my quotations come from the 2003 edition and page numbers will be given directly in the text.

15. I. DIMITRIU, "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 17 (1), 2005, p. 94.

16. J.U. JACOBS, "Finding a Safe House of Fiction in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*", in J. BARDOLPH (ed.), *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, Rodopi, 2001, p. 199.

Isidore Gordimer (Nadine's father), had left his poor country in Eastern Europe when he was thirteen and moved to a small town near Johannesburg in hope of a better life. Thanks to his 'leaving home', he managed to muscle his way into the system, where he was even inducted at the Masonic Lodge, although he would pay dearly for that in human terms. Indeed, his racist attitude towards Africans implicitly awakens in his daughter ancestral memories of the marauding Cossacks once located in the areas he came from. If no longer a pogrom-fleeing Jew, he now wears the mask of the white master who disparagingly looks down upon the black miners from the compounds. At the same time, he is incapable of fully laying claim to a 'new home' in this corner of the southern hemisphere, where the ruling class is either English or Afrikaner. "In this, their own country", black miners appear to be "migrants from their homes, like him" and realising that, if poor and alien, "at least he was white" (p. 62), is regrettably little consolation.

Even more permeated by antiphrasis, "Home" centres on a moment of crisis in the life of a happily married mixed-race couple (the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Act No. 55 of 1949, having been repealed in 1985). The relatively good position that a Coloured woman and her Swedish husband have been acquiring in a South African coastal town is all of a sudden pulled to pieces by the establishment's protectionist backlash, namely its drastic implementation of security laws. By conjuring up the spectre of notorious Section 29 of the Internal Security Act, 1982 – which allowed state authorities to detain suspects of terrorist activity without trial, holding them for the purpose of interrogation with no prescribed time limits – Gordimer pours salt into the wounds of an inquisitorial system that legitimated warrantless arrests, torture and the curtailing of basic civil rights, involving the freedom of movement and association, the presumption of innocence tenet and legal advice. In the story, the shock and fear that overwhelm Teresa, when she is told that part of her family is being detained under Section 29, deal a heavy blow to the little joys of her hardly-won 'ordinary' life and to her relationship with Nils, the "special closeness of a couple who belonged to nobody else" (p. 124). This chilling metamorphosis from interracial association, sweet intimacy and blithe mundaneness to a new state of emergency is powerfully recorded by the "home" of the title. The couple's nice house on the coast, where they work together at a marine biology institute, is reduced to a "stopped clock" (p. 128) and an empty setting, a synecdoche for incompatibility and secrecy, an "apartness together" (p. 132). While bourgeois Nils suspects a *ménage à trois*, Teresa's alleged love affair, for which she temporarily forgets her home, actually consists in rescuing her own people from the threat of dying in detention. She covertly hastens to investigate, consult lawyers and fill in applications to officials and magistrates, and shall only go back to the house she lives in with a European man by the time the danger impending over her 'tribal' home has been warded off. And that is the epiphany Nils must come to terms with: "Perhaps there was no lover? He saw it was true that she had left him, but it was for them, that house, the dark family of which he was not a member, her country to which he did not belong" (p. 140).

Along the same lines, in "Safe Houses", a rich white lady's suburban villa shielded by trees and pillared entrances is to shade into an *unsafe* abode the moment she

welcomes – and has sexual encounters with – a white ex-academic who, back from exile and guerrilla training camps across Africa, goes underground in order to keep on fighting for freedom. In a jesting and half-revealing way, he tells her that he is a construction engineer, whose job also includes “pulling down. Preparing to rebuild. Destroying old structures” (p. 191). When the clandestine revolutionary is finally discovered by the police and put on trial, he wonders in the solitude of his cell if the sophisticated and apparently credulous woman had by that time recognised him, from “that house where she thought herself safe among trees, safe from the threat of him and his kind, safe from the present” (p. 209).

To put it briefly, feeling at home, in a familiar and beloved land, is dolefully replaced by a sensation of strangeness, surreptitiousness and unreality. In other cases, houses – whether urban mansions or farms – even seem to implode as an appalling background for self-annihilation, like fake Edens concealing Satanic temptations within their walls.

The impact on readers proves all the more staggering when Gordimer resorts to fairy-tale codes and singsong formulae only to turn them on their head and transform a reassuring set piece – such as a bedtime story – into a nightmarish hallucination, an allegory of evil. Behind its harmless and comforting title, “Once Upon a Time” encapsulates a half-conscious attempt of a South African writer (Gordimer’s imaginary double) to (re)invent a children’s story by setting it in her national context. The result is a mournful tale that proceeds to dismantle the “Sleeping Beauty” *topos* and its celebration of the victory of life over the curse of envy and death. Being forced into an enchanted slumber nourished by the myth of racial superiority is here a white, middle-class South African family living in their walled house with their trusted black servants and pets. While the husband and wife obsessively devote their energies to expanding and upgrading the anti-intrusion security system so as to keep aggressors away, their little boy gets fascinated by the Sleeping Beauty story that his mother recites to lull him to sleep. A Christmas present from the “wise old witch” (p. 30) – the boy’s paternal grandmother, a sort of good/evil fairy, since she is instrumental in casting the spell – the book of traditional European tales adds the icing on the cake of white alienation and actually opens a portal to Hell:

Next day he [the little boy] pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible ticket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life: he dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his little body to creep in, and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle [...] the alarm set up wailing against the screams while the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers, and they carried it [...] into the house (p. 30).

Through this *nightmarish*-time story, Gordimer aims to awaken readers from the centenarian sleep of a self-devouring *laager* mentality that is doomed to destruction by reason of its own exclusive principles. Quite shockingly, it is in the very domestic fortress and its “concentration-camp style” (p. 29) that the white ‘little prince’ gets fatally enmeshed in the razor-bladed coils. As long as the apartheid interregnum is

in force, one is led to conclude, no symbolic forest of trees, brambles and thorns is ready to relinquish and allow harbingers of reconciliation to pass through.

A similar rhetorical strategy informs "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight", whose antiphrastic title echoes a line from William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (1803), a poem which in turn expands on the oxymoronic coexistence of innocence and degeneration, joy and woe, infants' faith and damnation. In this story, which is not set in South Africa but probably in England, Vera – a personification of authenticity and lack of malice, as intimated by her name – is pulled into the abyss of a Blakean endless night after falling in love with a lodger of Arab origins who stays at her parents' house. The lodger is actually an undercover terrorist and, when Vera gets pregnant, he promises to marry her after she is officially introduced to his family. While arranging the trip to his country, the scheming foreigner has no qualms about placing a bomb in Vera's baggage, so that she, her unborn baby and the other passengers are cynically 'chosen' and quickly sent to their death the moment the airplane blows up over the sea. Any hope for "sweet delight" is thus cruelly stifled.

A mixture of cynicism and violence comes coupled with guilt, ignorance and the lacerating psychosis of racial division in "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" and "Teraloyna". The first story opens with a curt reference to an introverted Afrikaner farmer who has accidentally shot dead one of his labourers during a hunting jaunt in the surroundings of his estate. This cold, hard fact, adds the narrator, will probably cause a stir amid the local and international press, which is likely to embroider and overinterpret it as a political crime, thus adding fuel to the fire of the inhumanity inherent in segregation:

The papers at home will quote the story as it has appeared in the overseas press, and in the back-and-forth he and the black man will become those crudely-drawn figures on anti-apartheid banners, units in statistics of white brutality against the blacks quoted at the United Nations (pp. 111-12).

Yet, no matter how grounded, mainstream ideology should not be taken at face value, as suggested by the ending of this story, which draws to a close in the same startling and abrupt way it had begun. The unadorned truth, this time, identifies the victim with the illegitimate black son of Marais Van der Vyver himself, who finally emerges as a traumatised, grief-stricken father rather than a flag-waving murder plotter: "How could they know that *they do not know*. Anything. The young black callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer's boy; he was his son" (p. 117).

In "Teraloyna", the eighth of the sixteen texts and a symbolic centerpiece in the collection, the spectre of pigmentation proves again a haunting presence, now expressed in allegorical terms. The imaginary island of Teraloyna is a *loin terre*, a mythic navel of the world which has been gradually depopulated of its multiracial native inhabitants, assimilated within the ethnic hierarchies of different mainland countries. Upon reaching Southern Africa, some islanders (especially the blue-eyed ones) merged with the whites, whereas the darker-skinned people were more rigidly classified and occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder. When even-

tually used as a meteorological station, Teraloyna is overrun by so many cats that South African authorities, under the pretext of defending the local-wildlife ecosystem, decide to employ a task force of ‘healthy white fighters’ to exterminate the animals. There seems therefore to be no way out of imperialistic domination and the vicious spiral of mass killing. Significantly enough, among those who feel the strongest urge to kill is a blue-eyed boy with Teraloyna blood in his veins, who looks forward to setting foot on his ancestral island and “the *jol* he and his mates will have, singing and stamping their army boots in the aircraft [...] and the prey they will pursue [...] all colours, abundant targets, doesn’t matter which, kill, kill them all” (p. 107).

Going back to the title of this paper, “Glimpses in the Dark”, I think it is also important to approach Gordimer’s collection by way of the other end of the spectrum, through the “glimpse” that is capable of temporarily relieving one of the burden of “darkness”. In other words, the times of upheaval and anxious waiting for a new dispensation evoked in these tales should not be seen as necessarily of a piece with the grievous symptoms of paralysis or chaos. As a matter of fact, they can simultaneously be read as signs of the epoch-making, hazardous leap that must be taken in order to break away from hegemonic centres, rethink peripheries and uncover avenues of contact around and into the edges.

In this sense, it is useful to compare the Forsterian epilogue of “Jump” – the first, powerful story that gives the volume its title and that ends with a defeatist “Not now; not yet” (p. 20)¹⁷ – with the more cautious dynamism embodied by the protagonist of “Keeping Fit”, the penultimate story. Set in an imaginary Southern African country, “Jump” pivots on the discomfiting vicissitudes of a white ex-parachutist and counter-revolutionary who finally becomes a supporter of the black Armed Forces’ new government. After being interviewed and showcased by the media as an apostate and a ‘penitent colonial’, he is waiting for his official rehabilitation in the room of a ramshackle hotel, similar to a drab, surreal stage where he is doomed to take stock of his life and watch his pale face being reflected on an empty TV screen. His somewhat snatched ‘walk to freedom’ has seen him jump too hastily into the fields of opposite allegiances and lose his purpose along the way. Temporarily holed up as an awkward lodger, both culpable and acquitted, he epitomises a “rare species, kept captured for study” and feels he “can’t go out because they are all around him, the people” (pp. 17, 20).

17. These words remind us of the lingering interracial clash described in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, with its memorable passage involving Cyril Fielding and Dr Aziz, an emissary of the British Raj and a Muslim Indian ‘subaltern’: “Fielding mocked again. And Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not knowing what to do, and cried: ‘Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say [...] we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then’ – he rode against him furiously – ‘and then,’ he concluded, half kissing him, ‘you and I shall be friends.’ ‘Why can’t we be friends now?’ said the other, holding him affectionately. ‘It’s what I want. It’s what you want.’ But the horses didn’t want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it [...] they said in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there.’” (E.M. FORSTER, *A Passage to India*, edited by O. STALLYBRASS, Harmondsworth, Penguin, [1924] 1979, p. 289).

If more ordinary, the complacent white jogger of “Keeping Fit” is to learn first-hand that generous assistance may also come from those stigmatised (black) “people”. During one of his Sunday-morning walks, he unintentionally crosses over the barrier between the suburb and a squatter camp in the township, thus risking his life, until he is providentially rescued from an angry mob by a wise, almost awe-inspiring black matriarch who hides him in her small, overcrowded shack. Although the jogger is at a loss for words when trying to tell his wife about this stunning experience, his epiphany is a more promising one than the repentant parachutist’s, at least as far as individual awakening is concerned. Indeed, his crossing to the ‘wrong side’ of the road has taught him a positive lesson regarding *ubuntu*, unconditioned hospitality, and caring:

The woman brought him the cup of tea, carrying a small tin of sugar. – No, no, sit, sit. You see what this place is like, the rain pours in, you see how we have to try and stuff around the tin with plastic, but we can still greet with a chair. –

While he drank the paraffin-tasting tea she stood above him admonishingly. – You must keep away from here. – [...] he had shamefully wanted to fling himself upon her, safe, safe, reassured, hidden from the sound and sight of blows and blood as he could be only by one who belonged to the people who produced the murderers and was not a murderer (pp. 236, 240).

Back in his large and comfortable house, he does obliquely break the silence by attempting to persuade his family to set free a little bird trapped in the drain-pipe outside their bedroom. But the wailing bird, like him, cannot as yet rely on the white world’s sympathy, so that interracial/interspecies crossing dramatically comes to a standstill:

He jumped from the bed and burst through the house, going after her, bellowing, his hands palsied with rage. – Get the bloody thing out, can’t you! Push up a pole, take the ladder, pull down the drain-pipe, for Christ’s sake! –

She stared at him, distancing herself from this exhibition.

– What do you expect of little boys? I won’t have them break their necks. Do it then! *You* do it. Do it if you can. You’re so athletic (pp. 242-43).

The jogger’s wife, whose emotional detachment leaves little room for dialogue and whose joke about being “athletic” pitilessly casts him as *unfit*, is not more at fault than the white people who, in “What Were You Dreaming?”, feel so sympathetic towards the black situation as to unconsciously “blend voyeurism with concern” and “jokey superficiality”.¹⁸ For his part, the half-elusive, half-roguish Coloured man to

18. D. HEAD, *Nadine Gordimer*, p. 175. A longer passage from Head’s lucid commentary is worth quoting: “The story begins with the black man’s monologue, revealing how his conversation with whites in cars is necessarily pragmatic and scheming: he must create the impression of himself he imagines his interlocutors hope for, in order to reach his destination. On this occasion he begins to cotton on to the fact that the white woman is using him as an illustration of oppression for her companion, and he readily supplies information (not all true) about enforced relocation, effective slave labour, disease, and so on. The crucial point is that the fact of oppression must be reproduced as a kind of circus act in repayment for the patronage of these ‘concerned’ whites. This effect is reinforced by the contrast between the mono-

whom they have given a lift sets out to purposely confirm their standard assumptions until a climax is reached when he is even ready to tailor a shining example of 'a subaltern's dream', so as to meet their do-gooding expectations:

"What were you dreaming?"

[...] "Ag, nothing, master, nothing, all *non-sunce* –"

The sense is that if pressed, he will produce for them a dream he didn't dream, a dream put together from bloated images on billboards, discarded calendars picked up, scraps of newspapers blown about – but they interrupt, they're asking where he'd like to get off" (p. 224).

A decisively different, more sanguine kind of resilience informs instead "The Ultimate Safari" and "Amnesty", the third and final story in the volume, where the psychology of some African characters is marked by a sense of stoical self-possession, pride, and clear-sightedness. Moreover, they cultivate a dream that aims at undermining, rather than adapting to, white expectations. In particular, for the two female protagonists, this dream is triggered by an unbending faith in the future and the consequential tenet of 'coming back home', that is to say, by the idea of nation-building and claiming for racial and ethnic equality in an African-Renaissance framework.

If the title of "The Ultimate Safari" is still enveloped in irony, its main characters emanate an iconic aura. This is a hunting story in which the agonising escape of a brave black girl and part of her family from bandit attacks in war-torn Mozambique is placed in stark contrast to the "luxuriousness of game lodge lifestyles and of subtle sexual courtships" suggested by the word "safari".¹⁹ During their unsanctioned trek through the Kruger Park, they must move stealthily like hunted animals, now and then taking a peek at the white people happily cooking in their camps, or at the blacks living in the compounds nearby, who would lose their work if they assisted these fugitives. Thanks to the man who has taken charge of them, they manage to survive a lion attack, but the tiny, enervated grandfather eventually passes away. Together with their tough and strong grandmother, the I-narrator and her two brothers move on with the Mozambican group towards the *ultimate* stage of this weird safari, in which they have been allotted the role of preys intent on eluding predators. This stage sees them join a refugee tent camp in South Africa, where they

logue, and the sensationalist, sometimes prurient conversation the whites indulge in about the black situation, while their passenger sleeps in the back of the car: there is an integrity about the hitcher's monologue – even in acknowledging the lies he is telling [...]. The irony is that the forms of the story represent the dispossessed hitcher as having a more coherent view of the situation than do the confused whites" (*ibidem*, pp. 174-75).

19. K. LAZAR, "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18 (4), December 1992, p. 794. Lazar's observations also seem to hint at a political vision that joins ranks with an African Renaissance ideal: "The fact that 'The Ultimate Safari' ends within a South African setting points to the radical contiguity, the interconnectedness of South Africa's politics with that of its neighbours. The 'borders' that the refugees cross seem porous and arbitrary in the extreme, suggesting that the idea of a sovereign nation-state with inviolable borders is farcical in the light of South African incursions into and support for rogue fighters in Mozambique" (*ibidem*).

are staying for a virtually unlimited period. When a white TV crew arrives to interview them for a documentary, the old woman and the self-assured girl refuse to wave the white flag and appear to be making the best of a bad situation. Notwithstanding their polarised attitudes, a strand of uncomplaining, genuine good will transpires from them both:

A white woman squeezed into our space and asked our grandmother questions which were told to us in our language by someone who understands the white woman's.

[...] And what do you hope for the future?

Nothing. I'm here.

But for your children?

I want them to learn so that they can get good jobs and money.

Do you hope to go back to Mozambique – to your own country?

I will not go back.

[...] Why does our grandmother say that? Why? I'll go back. I'll go back through that Kruger Park. After the war, if there are no bandits any more, our mother may be waiting for us [...]. They'll be home, and I'll remember them (pp. 45-46).

Lastly, through the South African woman's candid utterances in "Amnesty", the theme of hopeful waiting gathers momentum, with the concept of amnesty itself being transpersonalised and projected into the prophetic dimension of *Mayibuye iAfrika*, the rallying-cry of the African National Congress. After being granted an amnesty and being released from a five-year period of detention on Robben Island, the anonymous woman's militant partner becomes even more engaged in the struggle. The goal of his commitment as a revolutionary leader in the Movement (the ANC itself) is to refurbish *Mama Africa's* home, the nation's collective home, and that is why he is hardly ever physically with her on the farm. In the face of her ostensible naivety, she perfectly understands the implications of this as well as of a differently conceived form of dispensation, as shown by her concluding remarks: "Waiting for him to come back. Waiting. I'm waiting to come back home" (p. 257).

Importantly, the collection closes with a story that extols the notion of a new birth: the imminent birth of the couple's second child and that of a democratic South Africa which is now going through the watershed of the 'political miracle' announced by the release of Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders: "When they talk about the Big Man, the Old Men, I know who these are: our leaders are also back from prison. I told him about the child coming; he said, And this one belongs to a new country, he'll build the freedom we've fought for!" (pp. 255-56).

The motif of jumping loses here many of its dysphoric overtones thanks to a polyphonic perspective that moves away from a self-defeating white ethnocentrism and begins to gravitate around black narrators. In a metaliterary and moral sense, Gordimer herself appears to take an epistemic leap and set the stage for the Other's agency. While this remains a challenging and possibly double-edged task, since the Other's word risks being too easily translated and incorporated, she appeals to imaginative empathy in the attempt to envision a different kind of glimpse in the dark, bent on building a bridge across racial walls. If stories like "The Ultimate Safari"

and “Amnesty” are told in a naturalistic and demotic register that a few critics have read as unwittingly patronising and affected by stereotypical constructions,²⁰ there is little doubt that these vernacular voices do breathe life into the narrative. Among those who have favourably evaluated Gordimer’s ethnological and linguistic ‘jump’, Jeanne Colleran argues that

the brevity of the stories allows for an unsustained representation of the Other of Gordimer’s South Africa. The voice of the white bourgeoisie does not fill the space of this collection in the same way that it reverberates throughout Gordimer’s novels, and while the clearings opened for other voices are necessarily narrow ones, the concision actually authenticates these voices, making them at once more credible and less usurped [...] the reader is asked to read *diacritically*, across the silences between stories, around the tacit significances of their placements or alignments, and through the implied priorities of tales told first or last or middle.²¹

With what effects does then *Jump and Other Stories* locate itself within Gordimer’s macrotext? We are probably right when claiming that in this collection she has been able to show not only that “whites must jump out of their skin’s protection”,²² but also that taking a leap in the dark does not necessarily melt away into a desperate, inconclusive action. This leap might indeed consist in a visionary striving, in a transracial act of conscience, sympathy, and trust.

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20. A brief detour into these positions is offered by D. HEAD, *Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 173-74.

21. J. COLLERAN, “Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer’s Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum”, p. 240.

22. M. KAYE/KANTROWITZ, “Leaps of Faith”, Review of *Jump and Other Stories* by Nadine Gordimer, *The Women’s Review of Books*, 9 (3), December 1991, p. 4.

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REVIEWS

Rec.: ELIZABETH GASKELL, *Le confessioni di Mr Harrison*, Roma, Edizioni Croce, 2018, Introduzione e cura di Michela Marroni, Traduzione di Salvatore Asaro e Mara Barbuni.

Come presentare l'opera di Elizabeth Gaskell al lettore contemporaneo? L'approccio alla variegata produzione dell'autrice può sicuramente beneficiare di una mediazione critica, specie per un pubblico che poco conosce della temperie socio-culturale all'interno della quale si è sviluppata. Ancor più complesso è conciliare la molteplicità di approcci specialistici che la riguarda, che evidenziano ora il suo interesse per il mondo rurale, ora per quello metropolitano-industriale; il ripiegamento intimistico, da una parte, e la partecipazione sociale animata dall'adesione all'unitarinessimo, dall'altra.

La recente edizione critica de *Le confessioni di Mr Harrison*, curata da Michela Marroni, offre una risposta a questo interrogativo. Collocato all'interno della collana *Partecipio Passato* (diretta da Silvia Tatti, Edizioni Croce), il volume rispetta pienamente i propositi di quest'ultima: riconsegnare al pubblico classici della letteratura mondiale, aprendoli a più livelli di ricezione tramite un meticoloso inquadramento storico e socio-culturale. Nel caso specifico, un attento apparato di note fornisce preziose informazioni di contesto e al contempo appoggia la traduzione, realizzata da Salvatore Asaro e Mara Barbuni, entrambi ormai 'veterani' della narrativa gaskelliana. Come nota Asaro in una conversazione fra traduttori apparsa sul blog della stessa Barbuni, "Elizabeth Gaskell è un'autrice dalle mille sfaccettature, le sue frasi sono valigie ipertrofiche di rimandi, di sottotesti, e spesso è difficile mantenere tutto in traduzione; e poi ha un ritmo impetuoso che va a braccetto con la storia".¹ Dalla lunga frequentazione con Gaskell, Asaro e Barbuni derivano una sicurezza non comune nel restituire non solo la sottile (e talvolta tagliente) ironia tipica dell'autrice, ma anche le minuzie coloristiche che caratterizzano i singoli personaggi di questo piccolo mondo di provincia, tanto apparentemente stagnante quanto denso di stratificazioni sociali e di idiosincratie affettazioni.

Fa da premessa al testo l'introduzione di Marroni, "*Mr Harrison's Confessions*: utopia e disincanto in un villaggio della memoria" (pp. ix-xxx). Nello spazio di tre densi paragrafi, Marroni passa in rassegna nuclei di significato fondamentali che animano il racconto e che pervadono capillarmente la produzione di Gaskell,² situando diacronicamente la novella ed evidenziando al contempo i nodi tematici qui abbozzati che troveranno completo sviluppo nelle opere più tarde.

Tale principio sottostà al necessario inquadramento storico che apre la premessa al testo ("All'origine del contrasto: Elizabeth Gaskell e il piacere dell'invenzione"). In apertura del paragrafo, Marroni rileva come la critica incaselli Gaskell in una prospettiva dicotomica, individuando "nella tematizzazione del contrasto tra modi di vita

1. M. BARBUNI e S. ASARO, "Dialogo fra traduttori", <http://ipsalegit.blogspot.com/2016/04/dialogo-fra-traduttori.html> (ultimo accesso 20 dicembre 2018).

2. I cui titoli sono ben rappresentati all'interno della collana *Partecipio Passato*: *Mary Barton* (2016) e *Delitto di una notte buia* (2017), a cura di F. MARRONI; *I Fratellastri* (2016), a cura di M. MARRONI; *La casa nella brughiera* (2016), a cura di R. ANTINUCCI e i *Racconti* (2017), a cura di A.E. SOCCIO.

il tratto dominante della sua immaginazione” (p. ix). E certamente, come mostra una rapida ma cogente premessa di carattere storico, la perdita di orientamento causata dai nuovi processi di industrializzazione e accentuato urbanesimo ha profondamente segnato le “radicali trasformazioni dell’assetto sociale e della visione epistemica avvenute nella prima fase dell’era vittoriana” (p. xii). Tuttavia, il suddetto binarismo trova una sia pur parziale conciliazione nel solco della forte personalità di Gaskell:

È fuor di dubbio che Gaskell apparteneva a quella categoria di persone che al cospetto dei problemi sociali non chiudevano gli occhi. Sapeva bene che un essere umano che metteva la sordina alla propria coscienza e pensava solo ad accumulare ricchezze non era degno di rispetto e considerazione. La sua formazione religiosa e la personale reattività di fronte alle ingiustizie le davano il coraggio per esprimere il suo pensiero in modo molto forte e chiaro, sia pure nelle modalità proprie della scrittura finzionale. La sua era una voce che corrispondeva a quella della borghesia illuminata che credeva in se stessa e nel suo ruolo, senza tuttavia distogliere lo sguardo dalle emergenti piaghe sociali. [...] Esistevano intellettuali che, senza mai abbandonare il terreno solido della classe di appartenenza, sentivano il bisogno di impegnarsi per ideali che contemplavano un nuovo ordine basato sulla democrazia e sui diritti delle fasce sociali più umili. Gli unitariani erano sempre in prima linea in questa battaglia. Da fervente unitariana, Elizabeth non faceva eccezione (pp. x-xi).

È necessario, ricorda Marroni, non limitarsi ad attribuire l’attivismo di Gaskell a una propensione innata, ma contestualizzarlo nella formazione unitariana e nel *milieu* di quella Manchester che è stata teatro della maturazione dell’autrice e in seguito grande protagonista della sua opera letteraria. Proprio dal concreto impegno unitariano Gaskell deriva una conoscenza delle classi subalterne e della società industriale, che si fonde a un’acuta percezione della sempre più marcata polarizzazione tra mondo urbano e mondo rurale, sviluppata nella transizione tra Knutsford e Manchester (la stessa Knutsford che è possibile rintracciare dietro la fittizia *Cranford*). Una transizione talvolta traumatica, che vede il verde di Cranford opporsi al nero di Manchester, la rete sociale talvolta persino ipertrofica del villaggio campestre al profondo, straniante isolamento della città industriale (pp. xv-xvi).

La reminiscenza “indulgente” (p. xv) non cede però mai a una rappresentazione idillica e acritica: scegliendo di registrare impressioni e prospettive di personaggi che scivolano tra le fessure di una dicotomia troppo accentuata tra borghesia industriale, da un lato, e mondo rurale, dall’altro, l’autrice offre spaccati inconsueti della società vittoriana e delle sue contraddizioni.

In particolare, come emerge nel secondo paragrafo (“La professione medica prima della fine dell’innocenza”), la figura del medico consente di portare avanti un’analisi straordinariamente penetrante dei diversi strati sociali e delle loro relazioni, inserendosi trasversalmente ad essi. Un’operazione di brillante anticipazione delle aspettative del proprio pubblico, oltre che ideologica:

Mr Harrison’s Confessions fu pubblicato anonimo tra il febbraio e l’aprile 1851 su *The Ladies’ Companion: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of the Fashions*, una rivista che, come annuncia il sottotitolo, mirava a conquistare le lettrici delle classi emergenti, con l’intento primario di aggiornarle sulle novità della moda. A ben vedere, questo genere di pubblicazione va

vista come espressione del cambiamento in atto che interessava, naturalmente, anche gli aspetti inerenti ai modi di vita, al gusto nel vestire, all'igiene e al benessere personale. Elizabeth Gaskell, proponendo il suo racconto a puntate, probabilmente era consapevole che le vicende di un giovane medico – Mr Frank Harrison, appunto – alle prese con le trame amorose e i capricci delle donne di un villaggio rurale avrebbe attratto l'attenzione delle lettrici (p. xvii).

Mr Harrison passa senza soluzione di continuità da un tirocinio londinese a un praticantato nella piccola Duncombe, inconsapevole sasso giunto ad agitare le acque della placida – e stagnante – cittadina rurale. Affiancando il medico del paese, un uomo equo ma di raro formalismo, Mr Harrison diviene immediatamente oggetto delle trame matrimoniali della gran parte della popolazione femminile di Duncombe, generando una serie di disavventure infuse di tutta la carica dissacrante dello *humour* di Gaskell. Una satira garbata, marca di un pensiero “prossimo a quello di Jane Austen”, capace di “osservare gli avvenimenti umani con un misto di ironia, disincanto e saggezza” (p. xiv), e che si allarga democraticamente a includere tutti i personaggi del racconto. Ne sono vittima le ‘pretendenti’ di Mr Harrison, spesso tiranneggiate da madri disposte a tutto pur di assicurar loro un marito, tanto quanto le stesse signore di Duncombe e il patriarcato con cui di fatto paiono dettare la vita pubblica del villaggio. Né vengono risparmiate le figure maschili: primo fra tutti Mr Harrison, ‘uomo di mondo’ venuto dalla metropoli ma totalmente ignaro delle delicate dinamiche che gli si sviluppano attorno; come lui sono bersaglio i sonnachiosi padri, appagati da una vita placida e ripetitiva e del tutto inconsapevoli degli intrighi delle consorti, salvo quando vengono chiamati a intervenire; nonché Jack Marshland e Mr Morgan, le cui rispettive doti di scanzonatezza ed estremo rigore non valgono a sottrarli all’onnipresente macchina matrimoniale a cui tutta Duncombe finalmente soccombe.

La stessa funzione ironica, tuttavia, permette di indagare – riflette Marroni – anche su un piano più ampio: *Le confessioni di Mr Harrison* rappresenta uno “snodo fondamentale della narrativa gaskelliana” (p. xviii), in quanto ultima sua opera che ancora mostri una commistione di umoristico e tragico, poi abbandonata nei romanzi. Una linea che, prosegue la curatrice, si sdoppia a partire proprio da questa novella, distinguendo come si è detto in opere ironico-satiriche e opere votate alla rappresentazione della dimensione tragica dell’esistenza.

Antecedente a *Cranford* di soli sei mesi, la novella evidenzia infatti una raffigurazione dell’ambiente rurale meno appiattita sul piano satirico:

Laddove Cranford è una cittadina che non conosce la dimensione tragica della vita, con i suoi abitanti che vivono quasi fuori dal tempo, Duncombe invece appare storicamente più storicamente determinata e, quindi, anche più realistica. In *Mr. Harrison's Confessions* la morte, anzi la Morte [...] manifesta ben presto la sua presenza in anni in cui era a tutti evidente il disagio sociale e il senso di ingiustizia (p. xvii).

Riconducendo all’ambientazione storica (la fine degli anni Quaranta) “la volontà di evitare una fuga dai problemi del presente”, Marroni rimarca una sostanziale continuità specie rispetto a *Mary Barton* (1848) nella raffigurazione del decadimento

e del lutto, temi su cui Gaskell si sofferma con premura quasi autoptica. Al dolore spirituale, indagato con l'empatia che contraddistingue l'opera dell'autrice, si affianca spesso il particolareggiato affresco della sofferenza carnale, che la professione di medico del giovane protagonista ha buon gioco a giustificare: sia nel caso del giardiniere John Brouncker, che rischia l'amputazione del braccio a seguito di un incidente sul lavoro, che in quello ben più sofferto del piccolo Walter, il quale tristemente non sopravvive a una febbre improvvisa.

L'uso di tecniche realiste, accostate non a caso alla "minuziosità della pittura olandese" (p. xix), si esplica in una spiccata accuratezza descrittiva che non risparmia né i personaggi secondari né gli ambienti in cui si muovono, attenta a immortalare ogni dettaglio: sia esso l'arcuarsi di un sopracciglio o la polvere sollevata da un carrozino. Accade così che, a dispetto dell'ambientazione contemporanea, la Duncombe de *Le confessioni di Mr Harrison* determina un tentativo di recupero memoriale mirato a fissare nostalgicamente lo spazio rurale nei propri "sistema di vita e modo di essere" (p. xix), così lontani da quelli del mondo urbano industrializzato.

Nella sfera spazio-temporalmente isolata di Duncombe si declina anche la funzione del protagonista e, più in generale, della sua professione, da leggersi nel quadro più ampio del macrotesto gaskelliano come "la matrice e la drammatizzazione *in nuce* di tutti gli altri medici presenti nell'*opus* gaskelliano" (p. xx), e in particolare di Mr Gibson, padre della protagonista di *Wives and Daughters*, Molly. Per quanto la raffinatezza formale, la complessità architettonica e la cura nel tratteggio dei tipi umani raggiunte nell'ultimo romanzo (incompiuto) siano lontane da quanto offerto da una novella come *Le confessioni di Mr Harrison*, il *trait d'union* della figura del medico suggerisce un fruttuoso raffronto:

[T]ra le "confessioni" di un giovane medico di provincia e il romanzo esiste un comune denominatore costituito dalla memoria gaskelliana, sempre tesa ad affrontare, in maniera più o meno esplicita, le ipotesi dialogiche tra passato e presente. In tal modo, in entrambe le opere tale memoria attiva, operando selettivamente, costruisce attorno all'immagine di medico un paradigma narrativo che, a ben vedere, collega personaggi quali Gibson e Harrison alle radicali trasformazioni dell'assetto sociale e della visione epistemica avvenute nella prima fase dell'era vittoriana (p. xii).

Proprio il medico, figura in larga parte liminale, depositario delle confidenze dei propri pazienti ma anche del loro benessere fisico – e investito, nell'atteggiamento positivista della prima epoca vittoriana, di una funzione quasi sacrale di ricerca del 'vero' – è capace di saldarsi indissolubilmente alla temperie socio-culturale del periodo. Questo, naturalmente, ne fa uno strumento d'indagine insolitamente duttile, come intuito da Gaskell e sottolineato da Marroni.

Nel paragrafo finale, "Confessioni semiserie di un medico di famiglia", l'esplorazione dei temi della temporalità e dell'obliquità della professione medica viene infatti riformulata in chiave narratologica: e per prima cosa, occorre notare che la scelta di un narratore omodiegetico ma del tutto impreparato rispetto ai codici sociali ai quali è chiamato a sottostare provoca un immediato avvicinamento tra il lettore e Mr Harrison.

A livello formale, la scelta della struttura confessionale influenza naturalmente il tono di confidenza assunto dal protagonista, ma presenta due ulteriori risvolti: in primo luogo, situa fermamente la vicenda in un passato che, per quanto non remoto, può dirsi superato, essendo il lettore informato sin dall'*incipit* e dall'idillio domestico ivi proposto che la vicenda ha avuto esito positivo. È quindi pacifico che "l'io narrante e l'io esperiente, pur riuniti in una stessa persona, rappresentano due istanze diverse, cioè due modi diversi di osservare le cose del mondo" (p. xiii): ne è prova il tono di ironico distacco assunto dall'ormai ammogliato Mr Harrison. La modulazione tonale, è necessario notarlo, non si realizza sempre con fluidità, ma resta cifra di quel

tentativo gaskelliano di tematizzare in un'unica coerente visione i due poli della sua immaginazione letteraria: lo sguardo sempre attento a cogliere gli aspetti comici della quotidianità, da un lato, e la sensibilità sociale di chi si rende conto che la vita è più spesso commedia che tragedia, dall'altro (p. xxvi).

C'è poi da considerare la differenza tra narratario e destinatario reale dell'opera: se a livello diegetico il racconto di Mr Harrison è sollecitato e accolto dal fratello Charles, scapolo e per il momento privo di radici,³ Gaskell si rivolge invece alle lettrici del *Ladies' Companion*. Il gioco farsesco di cui Mr Harrison è protagonista inconsapevole fa evidentemente appello alla competenza del lettore perché riconosca gli stilemi che strutturano la vicenda, tipici del *courtship novel*, oltre che (nella focalizzazione sul giovane medico) del *Bildungsroman*. Un dialogo attivo segnalato anche, nota Marroni, da una fugace 'ribellione' metanarrativa: "Bene, allora: 'C'era una volta un giovane e valoroso scapolo' assai indeciso su dove trasferirsi, una volta terminata la specializzazione in chirurgia [...]. Non riesco proprio ad andare avanti come giovane e valoroso scapolo, devo usare la prima persona" (p. 4). La funzione paideutica della novella è dunque doppia: diegeticamente orientata a Charles, perché anch'egli sappia districarsi nell'inaspettatamente tortuosa ricerca di una moglie, ma in buona sostanza rivolta alle lettrici della rivista, a cui lancia un monito,

un richiamo al realismo [...]: l'amore non è costituito soltanto dal desiderio di amare – ed è sempre un errore costruire il nostro discorso amoroso su indizi e segnali che sono fondati sul nulla. In ultima analisi, quello della scrittrice è un racconto in cui, in chiave di gender, spiega il modo in cui le ragazze vittoriane erano educate per essere al servizio dell'uomo, sempre tenendo a bada la propria intelligenza (p. xxix).

Il racconto, per quanto scorrevole e di tono ironico, offre quindi uno spaccato di vita borghese che stimola un confronto dialettico utile a rivedere le narrativizzazioni (storiche oltre che letterarie) di cui la società vittoriana è stata fatta oggetto, aprendo a prospettive interpretative ancora scarsamente percorse, che possono trovare successiva applicazione a testi di più ampia circolazione ad esso coevi.

3. Ne sono prova la sua carnagione abbronzata e l'accento ad un soggiorno 'esotico': "Se dovessi stancarmi, posso sempre andare a dormire e sognare di ritornare uno scapolone tutto solo, a Ceylon, e risvegliarmi quando hai finito, scoprendo di stare ancora sotto al tuo tetto" (pp. 3-4).

Conformemente allo spirito della collana a cui appartiene, il volume non solo riconsegna al pubblico italiano un testo di indubbio valore intrinseco, ma, tramite l'accurata individuazione storico-critica, ne fa anche strumento per una lettura politemica dei classici della letteratura vittoriana.

Camilla Del Grazia
Università di Pisa

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
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