Well, there I was, with my years in Southern Africa behind me, society as startlingly unjust as Dickens’ England. Why, then, could I not write a story of simple good and bad, with clear-cut choices, set in Africa? The plot? Only one possible plot—that a poor black boy or girl should come from a village to the white man’s rich town and . . . there he would encounter, as occurs in life, good and bad, and after much trouble and many tears he would follow the path of . . . I tried, but it failed. It wasn’t true.

— Doris Lessing, Preface to African Stories, 7

In an essay entitled, “Where do Whites fit in?” published in 1959, Nadine Gordimer talks about her fluctuation “between the desire to be gone [from South Africa]—to find a society for myself where my white skin will have no bearing on my place in the community—and a terrible, obstinate and fearful desire to stay. I feel the one desire with my head and the other with my guts” (34). Though Gordimer describes this fluctuation as the outcome of her uncertain future as a white person in postcolonial South Africa, the notion of a split or double identity, which has become the hallmark of postcolonial experience, can be extended to describe the situation of the colonial subject in Africa. Growing up in an apartheid system meant the adoption of European culture and values as a measure of white superiority over the native. At the same time, European ideas became the source of inspiration of a whole generation of anti-apartheid writers. Gordimer, who grew up under a steady diet of Chekov, Maugham, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and others, “didn’t wake up to Africans and the shameful enormity of the colour bar through a youthful spell in the Communist Party . . . but through the apparently esoteric speleology of doubt, led by Kafka rather than Marx” (“Whites” 26). Elsewhere she says, “The problems of my country did not set me writing; on the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling, falling through the surface of ‘the South African way of life’” (“A Bolter and Invincible Summer,” 54). Doris Lessing’s largely autobiographical novel Martha Quest reveals the intimate connection between the flowering of Martha’s (and presumably Lessing’s) consciousness and her absorption with reading. While trying to understand her dislike for her mother and her isolated existence in colonial Africa, Martha begins to “see” herself through literature. She wonders,

for if one reads novels from earlier times, and if novels accurately reflect . . . the life of their era, then one is forced to conclude that being young was much easier then than in is now. Did X and Y and Z, those blithe heroes and heroines, loathe school, despise their parents and teachers
who never understood them, spend years of their lives trying to free themselves from an environment they considered altogether beneath them? (17)

But if European literature forms one agon of their consciousness, the other, equally important, influence upon Lessing and Gordimer of “guts” against the demands of the “head” was their experience of a racially segregated society. Lessing writes in *Going Home* that “one cannot talk truthfully about Africa without describing it,” and that “if one has been at great pains to choose a theme which is more general, people are so struck by the enormity and ugliness of the colour prejudices which must be shown in it that what one has tried to say gets lost” (18-19). I suggest that one way to read the novels *The Grass is Singing* by Lessing and *July's People* by Gordimer is to see them as a fusion of “head” and “guts,” the familiarity with and training in European traditions of writing, fused with the experience of growing up in colonial Africa. Such a reading will allow us to view the characterization of white and black characters in both novels, but especially in *The Grass is Singing*, as “types” that have been familiarized by Western literature. Lessing’s “Afterword to the Story of an African Farm” reveals this double aspect of white African writing that attempts to represent the African experience as something other than and outside of European culture, but uses the literary conventions and paradigms of Europe to do so. While praising Olive Schreiner’s book as “the first 'real' book [she'd] met with that had Africa for a setting . . . [and] the substance of truth, and not from England or Russia or France or America, necessitating all kinds of mental translations, switches, correspondences, but reflecting what [she] knew and could see (98-99),” Lessing nevertheless suggests that we read the novel and its characters through the Western prototypes of Caliban, Prospero, Faust, Rochester, Heathcliff and others. But there is a further point to be made about the “guts” aspect of their novels that goes beyond Gordimer’s recognition that Katherine Mansfield and Pauline Smith “confirmed for [her] that her own colonial background provided an experience that had scarcely been looked at, let alone thought about” (“Bolter” 55). I suggest that the location and representation of Africa and Africans in both the novels, arising from the writers’ special commitment to anti-apartheid values, exerts a pressure on the narrative. While both novels dramatize the disintegration of the white subject upon the reversal of power relationships between the master and servant in terms of a complete breakdown of a system of colonial identifications, the failure to find a resolution within the rubric of that narrative at once critiques and replicates the apartheid system and its stereotypes. The figure that undergoes this journey into the heart of darkness, the one who makes the move from “head” to “guts” is the white woman, the colonial mistress of the black servant.

A span of thirty one years separates *Grass is Singing* from *July's People*. Much had changed in South(ern) African history from 1950 to 1981, with the strengthening of the anti-apartheid and black consciousness movements, leading to that period of instability that gave rise to the peculiar anxieties of *July's People*. But in my reading I place them together as literary counterparts of colonial Africa. On the face of it, Mary, the heroine of *Grass* who has used the whip on Moses, her servant, suggests all that is abhorrent in the apartheid system, and seems to represent the polar opposite...
of Maureen, the liberal heroine of July’s People who has even cooked for her servant, July. But what is interesting is that upon the reversal of roles between the mistress and the servant brought about by the force of personality in Grass and by that of history in July’s People, both narratives assume a similar trajectory, where the white woman is transplanted from the security of the city into the openendedness of the African landscape. Here, without the resources and comforts of the city she gets estranged from her white companion and develops a peculiar relationship with the black servant that amounts to a subversion of the apartheid system. Both Mary and Maureen are placed in a triangular locus in the novels, represented by the estranged white male, the servant-turned-master African, and the opaque and fearful African landscape. Both novels end with a sense of defeat and alienation, with Mary offering herself up to be murdered by Moses, and Maureen fleeing from her family and July towards an uncertain and meaningless future.

Grass is Singing traces back the events that led to Mary Turner’s murder at the hands of her “houseboy” Moses. Mary has a double signification in the novel. First, as a representative of white settler society she becomes the protagonist whose journey from the city to the veld sets the scene for the unraveling of apartheid system in the disintegration of her identity. Earlier in the novel, Mary builds a new identity for herself in the city—“the undistinguished, dead-level appearance of South African white democracy (34)”—by repressing memories of her dysfunctional family and her childhood in the impoverished veld. Mary’s inability to deal with the unrelenting African landscape and the idle native (the most common stereotype of white African fiction) separates her from her husband Dick Turner, whose love for his land is matched by his (relative) humaneness towards his black workers. Second, as a white woman in Africa, Mary’s journey from the city to the veld and into the heart of darkness is also one from sexual repression to an awakening of sorts, a Lawrentian plot that allows Lessing to conflate her criticism of the patriarchy and racism of white settler society.

An impoverished farmer’s wife with a tin roof over her head, Mary nevertheless is the mistress of her African servant on whom she vents her frustrations, by bullying him she empowers herself. Inhumanity towards the native servant becomes her only self-expression made possible by apartheid, which guaranteed that “white civilization will never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person” (165). The conflation of self-assertion and dehumanization that is implicit in her role as the white mistress can be seen in the following passage that describes her brief experience of taking Dick’s place as the overseer of native workers in the farm:

When one of the men paused for a moment in his work to rest, or to wipe the running sweat from his eyes, she waited one minute by her watch, and then called sharply to him to begin again. . . [I]t seemed to her an insolence directed against her authority over them when they stopped, without permission to straighten their backs or wipe off the sweat. She kept them at it until sundown, and went back to the house satisfied with herself, not even tired. She was exhilarated and light-limbed, and swung the sambok jauntily on her wrist. (126)
When Moses, the mission-educated native that she had once lashed across the face in a fit of fury and fear enters her house, Mary undergoes a change. The recognition of her attraction towards Moses leads to the reversal of their mistress-servant relationship, and also the overturning of the power equation where she now feels helplessly in his power. Never ceasing for a moment to be conscious of his presence about the house, her feeling was one of irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even of some dark attraction. It was as though the act of weeping before him had been an act of resignation—resignation of her authority, and he had refused to hand it back. (179)

Mary's sexual awakening through her attraction for the other bears a close resemblance to Connie in D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, who also feels an attraction towards her inferior as an escape from the confinement of a loveless marriage. But transplanted within a racially segregated Africa, the story of sexual awakening and fulfillment that Lessing intertwines with the theme of female oppression in white colonial society undergoes a transformation. Not only is there no possibility of a fulfilling sexual relationship with Moses (Mary has to be killed and she recognizes that fact), but Moses cannot escape his signification as the other who appeals to Mary not as someone shares a common language and an interest in history and politics, but rather as a male who is remarkable in his bodily aspects, his largeness, his stillness, his mobility and his “sour animal” smell. Against the repeated descriptions of Moses' animalistic and overpowering presence in the novel, it is important to remember J.M. Coetzee's caution that “[t]he representation of personal appearance by the novelist is an act of composition masquerading as an act of reading: pretending to read face, body, and dress as a constellation of signs, the novelist is in fact engaged in composing a figure out of them (156).” While Mary undergoes a change from hating the native to submitting to a daughter-and-lover like dependency upon him, Moses remains at the end of the novel (except for a brief moment where he is shown as defiant of authority) as a still figure leaning against a tree, a native who has a domineering and sexual presence. He is the very image of the inscrutable African landscape with its searing heat that Mary could not withstand and which has perhaps driven her into irritation and cruelty: “The sweat poured off her all day; she could feel it running down her ribs and thighs under her dress, as if ants were crawling over her. She used to sit quite, quite still, her eyes closed, and feel the heat beating down from the iron over her head” (70). On the other hand, Moses would stand “immobile and silent for hours, under the unshaded force of the sun which seemed not to affect him” (165). Mary's death at the hands of the native is presented as the native's repossession of colonized land, where the African bush slowly devours white civilization:

When she was gone, she thought, this house will be destroyed by the bush, which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it, for ever, so that nothing remained . . . First would come the rats . . . They would swarm up over the furniture and the walls, gnawing and gutting till nothing was left but brick and iron, and the floors were thick with
droppings . . . Then the rains would break . . . on and on, endlessly, and the grass would spring up in the space of empty ground about the house, and the bushes would follow, and by the next season creepers would trail over the veranda and pull down the tins of plants . . . A branch would slowly nudge through the broken windowpanes, and, slowly, the shoulders of trees would press against the brick, until at last it leaned and crumbled and fell, a hopeless ruin, with sheets of rusting iron resting on the bushes. Under the tin, toads and long wiry worms like rats' tails, and fat white worms, like slugs. (231)

In her Preface to *African Stories*, Lessing discusses the psychological impact of the African experience upon its subjects in a language that orients Africa as a space that defies cognition or representation:

I believe that the chief gift from Africa to writers, white and black, is the continent itself; its presence which for some people is like an old fever, latent always in their blood; or like an old wound, throbbing in the bones as the air changes. That is not a place to visit unless one chooses to be an exile ever afterwards from an inexplicable majestic silence lying just over the border of memory, or of thought. (Preface 6)

The trans-historical “gut” lexicon of “fever” and “blood” finds a different expression in the *Children of Violence* series, where Martha's Romantic relationship with the rural landscape of Africa becomes the (only) signifier of her inability to fit into white African society, in colourful descriptions of the veld that contrast sharply with the flat descriptions of the silent natives inhabiting it. Lessing's realization that “Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape (Preface 6)” highlights the peculiar relationship between white writers and the African landscape where as Coetzee says, the poet “scans the landscape with his hermeneutic gaze . . . [for] a meaningfulness as a landscape of sings (9)” in order to address the larger question of “whether the land speaks a universal language, whether the African landscape can be articulated in a European language, whether the European can be at home in Africa” (167). *Grass is Singing* reveals the limitations of the Romantic and/or exotic paradigms through which Lessing seeks to anchor herself within a conquered land further rendered alien through apartheid. The adoption of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* as an inspiration for her novel is significant as it reinscribes the white experience of Africa in terms of a landscape of alienation and sterility, a representation that can be used equally effectively by both apologists and critics of apartheid. Lessing's reading of Schreiner's novel—“The sun burns down over the Karroo; the pitilessly indifferent stars wheel and deploy; and two young creatures look up at the skies where they see their unimportance written, and ask questions, can find no answers—and suffer most frightfully” (“Afterword” 104-5)—may well form the blueprint for *Grass is Singing*. While commenting on Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, Stephen Gray suggests that it is virtually a cliché of Southern African fiction that it should depict vast natural forces at work on puny beings in a way which is degrading and humiliating to human ambition . . . The land dries the vital juices out of its inhabitants, stunts them, and . . . disallows desire to take root in the land and belong (150-51). That Mary should seek
out her death at the hand of Moses against the searing and merciless African landscape suggests at once the harshness of an apartheid society that would not allow a human relationship between them, but also that gap between the white settler and the native and his land that justifies their apartness.

The finality of the break down of Maureen's identity as a white woman, wife, mother and mistress of her suburban house and her servant July is dramatized at the end of July People when she runs towards the helicopter and crosses “the landmark of a bank she has never crossed to before” (159). Earlier in the novel we are told, “Maureen could not walk into the boundlessness. Not so far as to take the dog around the block or to the box to post a letter. She could go to the river but no farther, and not often” (26). The novel is set in the interregnum between colonial and postcolonial South Africa, where Maureen Smales and her family are forced to take refuge in July's village. Similar to Grass is Singing, July's People shows the move from the security and comfort of the city to the opacity and rootlessness of African bush as the important precursor for the loss of white identity. The nightmare of placelessness is the premise of the novel, the unimaginable situation where a rich, white family could, within moments, get transplanted into the other aspect of a landscape they have inhabited all their lives. Maureen's inability to read a novel in that setting testifies to their arrival into the heart of darkness: “She was in another time, place, consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination” (28).

While Mary undergoes a trajectory from numbness into sexual awakening in Grass in a move that parallels her transition from hatred to human kinship towards the native, in July's People Maureen takes this trajectory a step further. The nullification of her relationship with her husband Bam in the realization, “what was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut, a man without a vehicle, (97) "triggers the existant dissolution of her identity, rather than the formulation of a new one. A dissolution, which is also a dispossession of their car, their gun, their children, their servant, which leads to the collapse of time, space and memory:

She was not in possession of any part of her life. One or another could only be turned up, by hazard. The background had fallen away, since that first morning she had become conscious in the hut, she had regained no established point of a continuing present from which to recognize her own sequence. The suburb did not come before or after the mine.

20, Married Quarters, Western Areas, and the architect-designed master bedroom were in the same rubble. A brick picked up might be Lydia's loaf. (139)

Her body inscribes the logic of their situation. Not only does Maureen lose her sexual attraction for Bam, with “the baring of breasts” representing “not an intimacy but a castration of his sexuality and hers,” (90) but July's wife also laughs her at white
nakedness. What distinguishes this novel from Grass is Singing is an absence of the "colonial power context" without which "the white women's body and appearance seems devoid of its magic" (22). The absence of a power context between Maureen and July, coupled with the growing realization of "her inability to enter into a relation of subservience with him that she never had with Bam" (101) forecloses the awakening that Mary experiences with Moses. That moment of sexual possibility, as Maureen's last attempt at gaining an identity within a new Africa where July and his people were now masters, presents itself as a parody of the real:

The incredible tenderness of the evening surrounded them as if mistaking them for lovers. She lurched herself over and posed herself, a grotesque, against the vehicle's hood, her shrunken jeans poked at the knees, sweat-coarsened forehead touched by the moonlight, neglected hair standing out wispy and rough. The death's harpy image she made of herself meant nothing to him, who had never been to a motor show with provocative girls. (153)

At the end of the novel Maureen runs, "trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility" (160). In her move from the solidity of her earlier identity as a colonial with a conscience, an identity made possible only by July's subservience within her household, to a solitary one that is reduced to the rudiments of human existence—the desire for survival and only that—after "the knowledge that the shock, the drop beneath the feet, happens to the self alone, and can be avoided only alone," (41) Maureen becomes one with the landscape, ironically as she is fleeing from it. In defining herself only through her survival instinct she comes to resemble the locusts that had invaded their hut, "that refused to die although they were beaten again and again with a shoe and a yellow paste spurted from them" (47).

Gordimer's powerful encoding of the interregnum narrative within an existentialist framework that affirms nothing other than nothingness is her strongest statement yet on the ugliness of the apartheid regime. July's People is unequivocal in its dismissal of the liberal humanist framework as an alternative to the colonial legacy, with the clear realization that "the absolute nature [Maureen] and her kind were scrupulously just in granting to everybody was no more than the price of her master bedroom and the clandestine hotel tariff" (64-5). But it is also important to remember Kathrin Wagner's censure that in Gordimer's fiction "a certain impotence and paralysis of the will are presented as a norm and, despite Gordimer's unequivocal anti-apartheid stance, the protagonists of the novels are in general allowed little more than having their hearts in the right place" (27). While Gordimer has presented July's People as the writing of the interregnum that abounds in morbid symptoms, the anxiety of getting caught in that static universe between the demands of the "head" and "guts, and the fear that she, "dumped somewhere else and kindly treated, [might] continually plod blindly back to where [she] came from" ("Whites" 37) pervades all of her essays and her writings. Perhaps it is as a result of this anxiety that July and his people are not allowed to escape their role of avengers in postcolonial Africa, and in that description come to legitimize
white fears about black power and the apartheid relationship of hate between the races. If (according to Gordimer) the only way whites can fit into the new Africa is “sideways, where-we-can, wherever-they’ll-shift-up-for-us,” (“Whites” 32) then July’s People is a flight from that future. Gordimer further says rather revealingly, “there is nothing so damaging to the ego as an emotional rebuff of this kind. (More bearable by far the hate-engendered hate that the apartheiders must expect)” (“Whites” 32). This is why Maureen runs at the end after the breakdown of her liberal humanism, perhaps straight into the arms of the right-wing apartheiders, or perhaps into a confrontation with the rebels.

Works Cited


Keywords. White Person Poor White White Settler Economic Injustice White Liberal. These keywords were added by machine and not by the authors. This process is experimental and the keywords may be updated as the learning algorithm improves. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to come to England. This was because, to use the word in an entirely different sense, I was English. Edith Frampton, “Horrors of the Breast: Cultural Boundaries and the Abject in The Grass is Singing,” in Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (eds), Doris Lessing: Border Crossing (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 15–25 (p. 19).Google Scholar. 42. Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” Social Text, 10:2–3 (1992), pp. 141–53 (p. 141).CrossRefGoogle Scholar. 43. Ibid., p. 144.Google Scholar. The Grass is Singing, DORIS LESSING. Level 5 Retold by Andy Hopkins and Joe Potter. Series Editor: Derek Strange. The Grass is Singing by Doris Lessing Copyright © 1950 by Doris Lessing This adaptation published by Penguin Books 1992. 5 7 9 10 8 6. Text copyright (Â©) Andy Hopkins and Joe Potter 1992 Illustrations copyright © David Cuzik 1992 All rights reserved. When natives steal, murder or attack women, that is the feeling white people have. And then they turned the page to read something else. The people who knew the Turners did not turn the page so quickly. Many must have cut out the report, keeping it perhaps as a warning. However, they did not discuss the murder. The Grass is Singing study guide contains a biography of Doris Lessing, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. Mary Turner grows up in an impoverished family in Southern Rhodesia. She moves to the town and works well but is not able to associate well with other people, nor to marry. She decides to marry Dick Turner, a farmer, and leave the town to move to his farm. Chapter 3. Mary tries to acclimate herself to the rough life on the farm. She and Dick try making love, but Mary is put off by the experience. Dick feels guilty about this. Chapter 4. Mary notices that Dick speaks Kitchen Kaffir with the native house-servants and field workers. She tries to study the language herself so that she too may comm The Grass is Singing is a tale of subjection of a woman who was defeated and thwarted by the bullying of race, gender and other social discriminations. Mary Turner, the victim of such oppression, is unlike the other characters of Lessing, as she was never given any freedom. Isolation, mental and economic sterility and emotional vacuity are all that dominated her whole life. After her marriage she suffered from laxity and meaninglessness of ill-matched marriage. She was forced by the society to accept loveless marriage that she also saw in her parent’s life. As she grew up in a broken family. After the sad news that Doris Lessing passed away earlier in the year, and seeing everyone’s incredibly positive thoughts on her works I started thinking about all the authors, including Doris, who I hadn’t read but really felt I should have. Considering that The Grass is Singing is relatively slight at 206 pages, there is so much going on within it that I left the book feeling that Doris Lessing (who was only 25 when she wrote this) was an utter genius. The big story at its core initially seems to be the one about race and the racist attitudes of society in what is now known as Zimbabwe. The way that â€˜nativesâ€™, as they were called, are treated is horrendous and we get to see this as we follow Mary once she marries Dick and joins him on his ramshackle farm.