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► **To cite this version:**

Rita Barnard. Nadine Gordimer's Transitions: Modernism, Realism, Rupture. *Cycnos*, 2018, Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories: parcours critiques*, 34 (3), pp.19-33. hal-03208240

HAL Id: hal-03208240

<https://hal.science/hal-03208240>

Submitted on 23 Jun 2022

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Nadine Gordimer's Transitions: Modernism, Realism, Rupture

Rita Barnard

University of Pennsylvania

Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*, her remarkable – and remarkably varied – collection published in 1991 is Janus-faced, poised at a moment that Johan U. Jacobs once termed “post-apartheid and pre-democratic” (199). It is clearly a work arising from the South African transition, very broadly speaking; but while one might be tempted to historicize the work in precise relation to F. W. de Klerk's surprise unbanning of the resistance movements and the initiation of negotiations for a new democracy in 1990, the volume in fact stretches our conception of “transition” both backwards and forwards in time. It also spans Europe, South Africa and other African countries in such a way that a more flexible term like “liminality”, as Fiona McCann has suggested, may be more apt to capture the chronotopes and theoretical resonances of the volume.¹ Alternatively, one might propose that we could see Gordimer's vast oeuvre *as a whole* as transitional, concerned as it is with the dynamic evolution of a society and, more radically, with historical rupture.²

This said, periodizing questions continue to loiter around the volume that concerns us here: questions that it refuses to answer directly, but that it engages and complicates in interesting ways. When, after all, was the transition? The 1980s? The 1990s? Right now? For clearly South Africa today is still in some sense “post-apartheid and pre-democratic”. Yes, the people have the vote, but democracy and citizenship remain elusive, given fixed allegiances to the party of liberation, the abiding power of traditional leadership, corruption and nepotism, political murders, control or attempted control of the media, the sexual abuse of women, and a threatened override of some of the compromises guaranteed in the constitution. These disappointing possibilities are

¹ See McCann's contribution to this volume.

² We might think here, as one of the most powerful cases in point, of *July's People* which is essentially an extended meditation on revolution as the aporia of a permanent rupture. See Barnard (2018, 57-60).

neither unforeseen nor unrecorded in *Jump and Other Stories*; the stories that bookend the volume, 'Jump' and 'Amnesty', are distinctly ambivalent about the future and they speak to our confusing present, as I will note in the conclusion of this essay. Here, it may be worth bringing to mind the often-cited epigraph to *July's People*, itself a citation from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: "The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." By now scholars of South African literature know the line so well that we perhaps miss what a curiously ambivalent formulation it is: radical transformation and suspension are uneasily and paradoxically yoked. And it is precisely this ambivalence, I would argue, that is characteristic of much of Gordimer's work, including many of the stories in *Jump*.

It is true that some South African literary critics have begun to use the term "post-transitional" (see Frenkel and McKenzie); but my feeling is that this periodization is ultimately unhelpful. To be sure, the triumphal, winning-nation story has met with skeptical counter-discourses since the Mbeki presidency, but that does not mean we are "post" anything in South Africa; and as long as writers and citizens continue pondering the relationship between the old and the new, the notion of "transition" will remain unavoidable. In fact it is, as Leon de Kock has argued in his new book, *Losing the Plot: Crime, Writing and Reality*, the key term for South African literature in the post-apartheid period (de Kock 2). If the rupture between the apartheid era and the present has not been clean, it does not disable the term: indeed, it just adds greater urgency to the challenge of imaging the relationship between past, present, and future – and Gordimer's work thoroughly takes on that challenge.

The attempt to make sense of this triple relationship is actually a good way of defining "temporality", a term that requires as much attention in approaches to Gordimer as "spatiality", which, given her abiding interest in the geographies of apartheid has attracted more critical attention to date. It might therefore be useful to provide a sense of Gordimer's attention to time and chronology through a quick look at her late story-cum-essay, 'Gregor':

Back in the Forties, I was given to understand: first, you will meet a man, both will fall in love, and you will marry; there is an order of emotions that goes with this package process. That is what love *is*.

For me, who came along first was Marcel Proust. The strange but ineluctable disorder of Charles Swann's agonizing love for a woman who wasn't his type (and this really no fault of her own, he fell in love with her as what she was, eh?); the jealousy of the Narrator tormentedly following a trail of Albertine's evasions.

Swept away was the confetti. I now had different expectations of what experience might have to take on. My apprenticeship to sexual love changed; for life. (63-64)

What Gordimer discovers in Proust – and modernism, more generally – is an overturning of the set sequence of heteronormal bourgeois life, or, more abstractly, what Fredric Jameson, in his recent work on realism, has identified as the narrative time of the preterite (*passé simple*): the telling of a story or a destiny that is already completed, predetermined and closed (Jameson 2013, 18-21). The disruption of foreordained plots and quotidian surfaces by whatever is strange, open-ended, new, and future-oriented (a different temporal and narrative principle, which we may associate with national allegory) is absolutely characteristic in Gordimer. This feature of her work was first theorized by Lars Engle under the rubric of the “political uncanny,” and it is so pervasive that we could even say that such rupture *constitutes* the plot of a slew of Gordimer's short stories, including ‘The Termitary’, ‘The Life of the Imagination’, and, importantly for our present purposes, ‘Once Upon a Time’ in *Jump and Other Stories*.³ Two modes of time, then, in Gordimer: one is the habitual destiny of the ordinary South Africans – the time of a kind of routine *passé simple*, though devoid of the old pleasures of story or *récit*, in which both history and a sense of the future is repressed – and the time of rupture, a thrust into the future associated with the “*peuple à venir*” (to use the terms Jameson has deployed in his recent redefinition of the notion of national allegory), which disrupts the normalized experience of preordained time (Jameson 2012, 481).

I cite Jameson's work and his reflections on the antinomies of realism very deliberately, because, along with Jed Esty and Colleen Lye's *Peripheral Realisms* collection and Matthew Beacham's *Adventures in Realism*, it seems to me to provide an apt critical

³ For a fuller discussion of the ideas of the political uncanny and of history as rupture, see Barnard (2007, 53-65).

framework for a reassessment of Gordimer. To reread her work from the 1990s today revives and sharpens certain questions of form and genre – and particularly questions regarding temporality, realism, and what we could call the problem of meaning. To put it simply: if realism is grasped as a matter of description, of rendering the factual details of a given social world (and this is, of course, too narrow a definition), what does it *mean*? How does this world become not only legible, but significant?

Recent South African criticism, and we may think here again of Leon de Kock's *Losing the Plot* and also Hedley Twidle's reflections on the growing importance of non-fiction, is quite perceptive and challenging in this regard. De Kock points out that a number of features of present-day South African life make it very difficult to *know* what is actually going on.⁴ We are dealing, after all, with a polity that is objectively confusing in its polyculturalism and that is subject to competing regimes of information and disinformation. (The harassment of journalists and the nefarious interventions of the Bell Pottinger public relations firm on behalf of disgraced former president Jacob Zuma are among the most shocking symptoms of this distressing cognitive situation.) Twidle has even suggested that this might be a time in which novelists might have to cede to non-fiction writers, because the kind of knowledge that enables literary fiction (or that presumed to do so) is simply not available. South Africans live in such disparate "kingdoms of consciousness" (13) that realism of the old sort seems somehow presumptuous – even to some of the stars of the South African literature firmament, like Marlene van Niekerk and Antjie Krog (5). What Roland Barthes used to call the "referential code", whereby a phrase like "one of those" readily designates a recognizable social type, does not seem to be available.

It is interesting to note, then, that in 2005 Gordimer's de-authorized biographer, Ronald Suresh Roberts, felt compelled to begin his massive and at times brilliant work, *No Cold Kitchen*, by defending Gordimer against claims that she was a realist. Roberts reminds us that she "admires allegory" and that her work is extremely metafictional. He even quotes her as saying in her afterword to a collection of essays on J. M. Coetzee: "Realism? Nothing is more unreal than simulation of outward

⁴ In this South Africa is not so different from the rest of the world, especially the United States, which has rightly been said to be in the grip of an epistemological crisis (Roberts David).

reality; realism, whether in painting or in writing, doesn't exist" (15).⁵ But these observations hardly settle the issue, especially if, in the spirit of the new critical revisions of Lukács, we recognize that realism is much more than the simulation of outward reality. Indeed, I take from Roberts's oppositional mapping out of these formal descriptors a reminder that our critical terms are not only shifty, but often dialectical. Roberts opposes realism to "allegory"; but, as Jameson has pointed out, literary history has also set up realism vs. romance, realism vs. naturalism, and realism vs. modernism – and all these pairings can be reexamined – or abandoned (2012, 475). Does realism, for instance, need to be opposed to modernism? Hardly. Jameson, for one, has urged us to recognize realism for what it is: not a banal form of transparent description, but a form that has always taken on the task "of explor[ing] the hitherto unsaid and unexpressed and to bring figuration to what has always been excluded from public representation" (2007, 270). Which is to say that, rather than being the antithesis of modernism, realism is in fact modernism's first incarnation (Jameson 2002, 122-24). Jameson even suggests that we might call "realist" every work that problematizes the question of realism – realism the name for any narrative organized around the very interrogation of realism and the realistic itself (Jameson 2012, 478-9). So much for Roberts's opposition of realism and metafiction.

But what about the relation between realism and allegory? To address this question, I wish to turn to an old intervention, but one that strikes me as rendered current again by the new reconsiderations of realism. I am thinking of David Lodge's essay 'Realism, Allegory, and Symbolism: Some Speculation about the Novel' (1970). Lodge's argument proceeds with admirable clarity (perhaps because it precedes postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial modalities of criticism). It rests on the following propositions. Lodge notes, first and uncontroversially, that allegory and symbolism are modes of analogy: that both present one thing or concern in terms of another thing or concept. Next, he defines the novel as a literary form characterized by realism, which seems opposed to analogical modes. But, then he argues (and this complication is crucial to my reading of *Jump*, as will become clear) that this opposition is only apparent, because the development of the novel is marked by negotiations and compromises in which overtly

⁵ These points will also be discussed in my forthcoming essay, 'Relocating Gordimer' (2018).

analogical modes are allowed to permeate the apparently non-analogical mode of realism in the interests of meaning (Lodge 361).

This insight proves particularly fascinating with regards to modernist writers, where the compromise is highly unstable and is constantly renegotiated. One of Lodge's examples is Ernest Hemingway, whose meticulous, paratactic descriptions often accrue a symbolic valence – and whose influence on Gordimer is insufficiently acknowledged (Lodge 371).⁶ Another example is James Joyce. Lodge traces out Joyce's career in the following manner. In *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the realistic, empirical aspect of the work is dominant over the allegorical. In *Ulysses*, however, the two tendencies are balanced. The novel is, in many ways, the twentieth century's most realistic work, both psychologically and descriptively; but this worldly and referential dimension of the text is in balance with its allegorical dimension: the epic framework that structures *Ulysses* and gives the novel analogical and mythic resonances beyond the contemporary empirical surface. In *Finnegans Wake*, Lodge declares, "analogy is all" (372); the point of the narration has little to do with unique social materialities; indeed, we are perhaps removed so far from the empirical, that we come close to the dissolution of meaning. The basic assertion here, in sum, is quite fundamental: namely, that literary discourse (and in a sense all language) is analogical in so far as it is meaningful.

So: to turn – or return – to Gordimer. If her fiction often stages a tension between two temporal modes (the static time of description and the dynamic forward thrust of historic forces), it also offers fertile ground for observing the fluctuating compromise between realism and allegory. This is evident in novels, like *The Conservationist*, perhaps even more so in shorter works like *Something Out There* and especially in Gordimer's three late collections of short stories (*Jump and Other Stories*, *Loot and Other Stories*, and *Beethoven was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*), which all contain a variety of forms, with some stories veering almost entirely towards the analogical for the sake of interpretive meaning, and others more focused on the usual quasi-empirical presentation of setting and character.

But the most interesting stories, for my money, are the ones that jump, so to speak, from mode to mode. It would be easy to view, say, 'Once Upon a Time' as overtly allegorical – in the sense that it aims to

⁶ For an examination of Hemingway's influence on Gordimer, see Barnard (2018).

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tell us something about South African society in a time of turmoil and white anxiety. Indeed, as parable of the danger of defending personal safety by exclusion, it has not lost its pertinence: its figuration, especially the image of that vicious barbed wire security fence on the wall of a suburban home, is echoed in the final chapter of Jean and John Comaroff's recent book, *The Truth about Crime*, which offers a meditation – with photographs – of a particularly cruel security device called the “*Eina*” (the Khoi word for “ouch”). But what interests me here is that the story is not only a fable. The final “once upon a time” tale is introduced via both personal anecdote and a kind of geopolitical meditation about Johannesburg's verticality, as a city that is literally undermined. Moreover, the story carries within itself a critique of too much fabulation: it is after all the book of fairy tales he receives for Christmas that misleads the perfect white family's little boy, who gets himself sliced up by the careful security systems his parents set up to guarantee their safety. It is certainly possible to see the story as pointing to two kinds of temporality – the stasis of habit, for “living happily ever after” (the preterite) and the disruption of the diachronic (the “once upon a time,” which is to say history itself).⁷ But one can also certainly see the story as hovering between the realistic and the analogical-allegorical, tilting over to the former in its final slightly sadistic pseudo-bedtime story. I would venture to say that perhaps the “meaning” of Gordimer's fiction resides in these shifts from formal impulse to formal impulse or genre to genre: after all, even in the realist quasi-autobiographical part of the story, the vision of the literally undermined city is also a figure for the base and superstructure of South African economic and material realities.

Let us turn now to the story ‘Spoils’, which reviewers (including the novelist John Edgar Wideman) have identified as one of the strongest in the volume. It is also one of the most peculiar. That the story should feel Hemingway-esque is, I would argue, not only due to the content (a visit to a game lodge), but also to its sudden and somewhat surreptitious turn to symbol, masked, however, by its emergence from the quasi-empirical and observational “real” of setting, character, and action. This is clearly a story that wishes to project a rich sensory world and deploys Gordimer's longstanding gift for observation. Thus we have references to sensory details like the “nasal howl of the hyena” (168), along with

⁷ I interpret ‘Once Upon a Time’ in a somewhat similar way in *Apartheid and Beyond* (2007, 54-55).

meticulous (and racialized) descriptions of characters' bodies and physiognomies. For example, in the passage narrating a game-watching excursion, the reader is made to see and feel the farm children's "knobby heads with knitted capping of hair" (170) and smell the odor of wood smoke that accompanies the women who work at the lodge. 'Spoils' is certainly also a story that strives to give us empirical or quasi-empirical information of a historical context of violence, of detentions without trial, necklacings, and so forth. It opens with details of horrific news stories, like that of a boy who had both his arms broken by the police, or that of a girl doused with petrol and burned alive as a traitor. These generate in the main character no interpretable meaning, insight, or moral, but rather a profound feeling of nausea.

One curiosity of the story is that it describes the white guests at the lodge almost too explicitly as social types, the stockbroker, the political activist, the wit, the pretty girl, and so on (a strategy that might remind us of Lukàcs's conception of the social relevance of the realist novel). But it is as if the main character's woes generate a need to push beyond that level of realism. He is highly alert to how he and others offer performances of the known, that "serve as a protection against the fear of what one really is" (163): insisting, in other words, on a deeper revelation of reality, which we might be tempted to call modernist. Clearly, therefore, this is a story that not only foregrounds and problematizes "reality" and the "real" (to recall for a moment Jameson's revised definition of realism), but does so explicitly. The focal character meditates after seeing the lions:

No. Real. *Real*. Alone, he can keep it intact, exactly that: the stasis, the existence without time and without time there is no connection, the state in which he really need have, has no part, could have no part, there in the eyes of the lionesses. Between the beasts and the human load, the void. It is more desired and awful than could even be conceived; and he does not know whether he is sleeping, or dead. (173)

He articulates, in other words, an affective-temporal structure of stuckness, a cognitive crisis that, in some sense, besets not only the character, but the text itself. It is in this light that the ending of the story is interesting. When the company returns to the site of the lions' kill, Siza, a black man who works on the farm, takes his panga and carves himself a piece of meat from the carcass: "not a chunk or hunk",

Gordimer is careful to insist, but “a portion” (178). When asked why he does not take a larger piece, Siza explains: “The lions, they know I must take a piece for me because I find where their meat is. They know it. It’s all right. But if I take too much, they know it also. Then they will take one of my children” (179).⁸

And the story stops right there. As in Hemingway, there is no obvious interpretation of the event or action – the narration is quite bare – but this very terseness elicits a kind of puzzlement that then triggers the analogical operation: such is the nature of the modernist short story. Siza’s action and his words clearly restore a kind of chrononormativity in place of the focal character’s nauseating stuckness, as well as a moral middle ground with regard to the violent present of social transformation: instead of taking “no part” (like the troubled protagonist) or swallowing the ugly present whole (like the political activist), Siza takes only a “portion” and thereby seems to signify a new order, a balance between the violence of the killer and the greed of the scavenger. The story, in other words, tilts towards analogy and allegory in the interests of meaning.

I will conclude this meditation on realism, allegory, and transition in two ways. First, I would like to consider how the concerns of the story ‘Spoils’ have remained relevant and have even been reworked in Gordimer’s own short fiction. It seems to me that that story’s emphasis on rapacity and greed gets replayed in the titular and opening story of Gordimer’s next short story collection after *Jump*: ‘Loot’. This is for me one of her most fascinating late works, not least if we see in it the critical framework I have been proposing in this essay. ‘Loot’ describes a tsunami, the greatest ever, that draws in the ocean to reveal the miscellaneous world of objects (or perhaps our uneasy, reified unconscious):

The most secret level of our world lay revealed: the sea-bedded
– wrecked ships, facades of houses, ballroom candelabra, toilet
bowl, pirate chest, TV screen, mail-coach, aircraft fuselage,
canon, marble torso, Kalashnikov, metal carapace of a tourist

⁸ I approach this ending differently (in relation to the trope of meat eating) in my essay ‘The Final Safari’ (1998). There I read ‘Spoils’ as exemplifying what Roland Barthes has called “second order myth”: in other words, I use different and more politically skeptical terminology to describe the shift to the analogical or allegorical.

bus-load, baptismal font, automatic dishwasher, computer, swords sheathed in barnacles, coins turned to stone. The astounded gaze raced among these things; the population who had fled from their toppling houses to the maritime hills ran down. Where terrestrial crash and bellow had terrified them, there was naked silence. (3)

One can already tell that this list registers a problem of meaning by dint of its sheer miscellany – but Gordimer ends up satisfying our craving for something more interpretable in the story’s finale: a second monstrous wave arises and sweeps the crowds of scavengers lured by these objects away. It should not surprise us that, as in ‘Spoils’, the problem of meaning is registered in a way that brings up questions of temporality and, indeed, narrative form. “The saliva of the sea glistened upon these objects”, Gordimer tells us, and “it is given that time does not, never did, exist down here where the materiality of the past and the present as they lie has no chronological order, all is one, all is nothing – or all is possessible at once” (3). ‘Loot’, in other words, is analogical: while it opens with that time-honored formula, “Once upon our time” (3), it also seems to say something about South Africa’s disappointingly materialist national bourgeoisie: indeed, its rising kleptocracy. But ‘Loot’ is also, as Graham Riach observes in his excellent discussion of Gordimer’s late writing, metafictional: it deliberately exposes the central problem of realism in ways that are entirely compatible with the way I have explained it in this essay. ‘Loot’, as Riach puts it, “exposes also the pull in [Gordimer’s] work between a commitment to material detail and the desire for meaning that exceeds the particular” (1087). In this Gordimer is no exception: she is, instead, a writer whose operations beautifully reveal new ways of thinking about modernism and realism, about transition and rupture.

But the functioning of allegory in her work deserves a little more consideration, which I offer here as my second closing gesture. We might want to ask whether the analogical significance in her work resides – or resides most characteristically – in the discovery of a meaning that would yoke the characters and situations described with the fate of South Africa. In other words, is the allegorical dimension in Gordimer’s work best understood as national allegory, to revive Jameson’s most contested, but nevertheless very useful term? In some of the exemplary fictions I have explored here – ‘Once Upon a Time’, ‘Spoils’, and ‘Loot’ – that would seem to be the case. These are stories that ultimately seem to find

their meaning in what they imply about sociopolitical rather than individual matters: e.g., the nature of social space, or of property and the division of goods and resources in a particular transitional or post-colonializing context. These stories also seem to concern the disruption of a particular routine, stuck, or pathological temporality with a kind of thrust into the future which we could associate with the proleptic temporality of national emergence: the “*peuple à venir*” to invoke once more Jameson’s phrase. But what is fascinating about *Jump and Other Stories* is its great variety (while one can suggest patterns and tendencies, they are not discoverable everywhere), as well as its tendency to extend the idea of transition both into the past and into the present.⁹ And, indeed, the future.

Consider, for instance, the story ‘Amnesty’, with which the volume concludes. This is in the very obvious ways a story of the transition: the release of political prisoners and the initiation of negotiations for a democratic society are explicitly referred to. But in other ways this is a story that introduces a temporal experience that differs from the progressive futurity of national allegory. The first-person narrator of the story is a young woman who lives in rural poverty. Her partner moves to the city, becomes involved in the struggle, is imprisoned on Robben Island, and is eventually released along with other national leaders. His fate, in other words, is tied to South African political history and the forward thrust of revolutionary nationalism. But the experience of the

⁹ I am indebted here to Stephen Clingman’s comments at the conference ‘Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories*: “the alternate lives I invent”’ at the ENS de Lyon, 4-5 October 2018. In addition to ‘Amnesty’ which I discuss here, we might think also of the story ‘Jump’ and its resonant open-endedness. The temporality here is clearly liminal: it harkens back to the past, but also looks forward to a future. The focalizer (a turned counterrevolutionary, based somewhat on the actual Dirk Coetzee) meditates on the past atrocities he was party to, and seems to be on the verge of taking a very serious “jump”: committing suicide. It is a story that could readily be seen in light of Annel Pieterse’s meditations on the temporalities of betrayal in very recent South African writing: betrayal and its revelation, she suggests, enforce a revision of South Africa’s progressive chronology of the rainbow nation. It is a productive suggestion and one that provides us ways to see the contemporary resonances of ‘Jump’: resonances that are not identical to those of ‘Amnesty’, which I discuss here, but similarly show the ways in which Gordimer’s work is both relevant to its immediate contexts and presents her, as J. M. Coetzee once described her, as “a visitor from the future” (387).

young woman and the affective-temporal structure in which she has to dwell, is quite different: for her, life – both before and after the rupture brought about by the possibility of a new democracy – is defined by waiting. It is poignant to compare the story of her romantic expectations and their disruption with the bourgeois narrative evoked earlier in this essay in Gordimer’s celebration of Proust: “first you will meet a man, both will fall in love, and you will marry; there is an order of emotions that goes with this package process. That is what love *is*.” In the case of the narrator of ‘Amnesty’, the established order would be that the man asks the woman’s father if he may marry her, pays a bride-price or *lobola*, and after that is contracted, a shared, properly married life can begin. But in her case the course of the man’s politicization and the unfolding of national events in which he is involved, disrupts and suspends the story of love; and it does so in a way that is scarcely as liberating and empowering as the disruption of foreordained expectations that Gordimer finds in Proust. The woman is left aside, isolated, static. At the end of the story (and this is also the end of the collection as a whole), we find her still alone, still marginal, and still out of synchrony with national events that seem to be the domain of men, even as the farm on which she lives remains the domain of the white farmers, who, as the narrator observes, “allow us to squat on their land” (256). The final words are, fittingly:

[...] I’m waiting. Waiting for him to come back.
 Waiting.
 I’m waiting to come back home. (257)

What is so interesting, then, about Gordimer’s final story (as Katherine Hallemeier has suggested in her meditations on post-apartheid waiting), is that national allegory does not provide the only mode of analogy in the collection. Gordimer is able to, as it were, broaden out the implications of this isolated character’s fate, to give it symbolic resonance in ways that lift beyond the empirical detail, but do not therefore assume that the optimistic narrative of national liberation will provide the sole framework of interpretation. It is in this way that *Jump and Other Stories* extends far beyond the moment of the 1990s, and gestures towards a yet-incomplete project of freedom. It asks us to image forms of representation that may include lives whose meanings and temporalities still have to be invented.

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