



Interstices of Law: Narrative Repetition and Deferred Justice in Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*

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Abstract

This article examines Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* (1994) through the intersection of legal philosophy and narrative theory to interrogate the paradox of transitional justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on Peter Brooks' concepts of "repetition and difference" and legal rhetoric, the study traces how the "interstices" of law—procedural loopholes, temporal delays, and constitutional gaps in land reform—generate narrative energy while perpetually deferring justice. Through a paired reading of the Odendaal attack and the Philemon Maseko murder, the paper argues that these legal gaps function as productive voids: they produce the conditions of black homelessness and racial violence that the law ostensibly seeks to resolve. The analysis demonstrates how the white lawyer Vera Stark's trajectory from a subject of revenge desire to a bureaucratic witness of structural injustice mirrors the novel's critique of legal formalism. The article further explores how the "shroud of order" metaphor captures law's double function of concealing and preserving corporeal violence, and how the "fallible" Constitutional Commission institutionalizes rather than resolves legal interstices. Ultimately, the paper contends that Gordimer transforms legal loopholes into narrative form, revealing justice not as a terminal state but as a perpetual, unstable movement between procedural delay and the ethical demand for immediate recognition.

Keywords

Nadine Gordimer; *None to Accompany Me*; democratic transition; narrative desire; justice

1. Introduction: Legal Interstices and Narrative Desire

Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* (1994) opens with a legal paradox of democratic transition in South Africa: the abolition of apartheid laws produces not justice but "interstices" (p. 164), the "loopholes" (p. 13) that delay land restitution while criminalizing the black squatters. Existing scholarship predominantly situates Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* within the "interregnum" literature of South Africa's democratic transition, emphasizing its mapping of spatial reconfigurations and emergent social identities. As Stephen Clingman and Dominic Head observe, the novel engages "the issues of the day, such as land rights, violence, and constitutional negotiations" (p. 648; p. 46), while Sarah Nuttall and Rita Barnard focus on how Gordimer "traces out the new demographics of cities and new ways of living to explore the transition" (p. 731; p. 3). Recent criticism has further expanded this socio-political reading by attending to the novel's queer subplots, arguing that Gordimer rethinks her earlier conception of sexuality to assert the queer subject as a vital counter-narrative to post-apartheid homophobia (Ojiakor & Ezenwamadu, 2022,

p. 249). Yet these socio-political readings often overlook Gordimer's own legal-philosophical reflections on the paradox of transitional justice. Gordimer maintains that "leveling of material conditions is the primary criterion of justice in South Africa" (Gordimer, 2010, p. 562) and insists that "a more equitable distribution of wealth may be enforced by laws" (*Essential Gesture*, p. 265). Simultaneously, however, she cautions that law "tramples equity underfoot; it neither provides food for the hungry nor shelter for the homeless; it merely alters the social foundation that South Africa has long possessed" (Brink, 1998, p. 30). This tension, where law is both the necessary instrument and the structural obstacle to justice, remains under-examined at the level of narrative form. Reading the novel's paired violent incidents, the Odendaal attack and the Maseko murder, through Peter Brooks's concept of "repetition and difference" and legal rhetoric (Brooks, 1984, p. 99; "The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric", p. 19), this explication traces how Gordimer transforms the legal "interstices" (gaps between law and equity) into narrative repetition, demonstrating how the procedural delays of land reform generate the "textual energy" of the plot while perpetually deferring justice. In the novel, these interstices are not negative spaces but productive voids: they produce the "homeless" condition that violence then solves, and they generate the narrative gaps between Vera's legal success and its violent tragedy, even as they foreshadow the "fallible" Constitution Commission work that marks law's perpetual incompleteness.

2. The Odendaal Attack: Narrative Retardation and the Abortive Revenge Plot

The white lawyer Vera Stark works in the Legal Foundation, resolving various disputes and problems, such as the homeless blacks' squatting on land near white farms and the white farmers' reluctance to return land to the black tenant-labourers. As a "primal scene", a fruitless negotiation between Odenville squatter representative Zeph Rapulana and the white farmer Tercius Odendaal initiates a signifying chain of the subsequent violence. The first violent incident, the Odendaal attack, functions as a moment where narrative appears to veer toward the tragic revenge while preparing for the ethical complication. When Vera learns via newsreader that the armed white farmers have attacked a black squatter camp, killing nine people, her response is immediate and visceral: "Violence boiled up in her from somewhere. If the Odendaals kill, kill back" (Gordimer, 1994, p. 116). This stimulates readers' desire for symmetric justice, the revenge plot that would balance racial attack through reciprocal violence. However, the narrative retards the desire through obstacles: Vera calls Rapulana's home repeatedly, "the phone rang and rang"; she drives to the police station, where the white officer responds with perfunctory indifference (pp. 113-15). These plots literalize the legal interstices. Just as the law "allows" black squatters temporary residence while criminalizing their presence (p. 13), the ringing phone promises connection while deferring it. Both the legal loophole and the mechanical failure operate through the same structural logic: the incomplete gesture that maintains the status quo and the textual energy.

Crucially, the scene's resolution refuses the generic expectation it has aroused. Rapulana survives, wounded but alive. The revenge plot is aborted, its energy preserved and displaced. Vera's recognition "All her impatient, angry flesh the violence that, like others, she called mindless" (p. 116) marks her transformation from a subject of revenge desire to a witness capable of understanding blind violence without enacting it. As the plot progresses, the legal closure of the Odendaal attack reveals a deeper interstice of law. When Odendaal's subsequent appeal to claim the black squatters' temporary residence is dismissed by the judge, "the door shut in Odendaal's face, and this single return of land to its people was their right" (p. 214). The word "single" denotes both the solitary nature of this victory and its quantitative inadequacy. Against the "nine dead," the "single return" exposes the exchange rate of legal justice, an asymmetry that Rapulana immediately translates into spatial terms: "We (the homeless black) have too many graves and too few houses for the living" (p. 215). Here, the interstice shifts from the temporal "ringing phone" to the spatial and existential "graves outweigh houses". The only legal victory achieves procedural closure while perpetuating the existential lack. To be exact, the interstice of law produces not systemic justice but a singular, unreproducible exception; the "single" victory is a loophole's accident, not the law's justice. This prepares for the second narrative repetition: the murder of Philemon Maseko.

3. The Maseko Murder: Structural Homology and the Redirected Desire

The Legal Foundation has one more success in overturning white farmers' eviction notices on tenant-labourers. However, Philemon Maseko is shot dead by a group of white farmers. This plot exposes a structural homology: the law's loopholes produce violent outcomes, while the significant variations are as follows. In the first incident, Vera stands as an outside observer whose emotional response is unmediated by the professional role. In the second, she occupies

the position of an inside professional, the legal representative to the victim. The temporal relation shifts accordingly: where the Odendaal attack unfolds in the immediate presence, the Maseko murder occurs belatedly, after the legal “success.” Their outcomes diverge critically: where the first offers Rapulana’s survival, the second imposes the closed fact of death. Most significantly, Vera’s discursive register transforms entirely: where the first incident provoked the intense revenge “kill them back,” the second produces the bureaucratic reflection “they ought to publish some sort of a crisis paper in addition to the report” to urge a revision of property and land laws (p. 163). All the shifts represent what Brooks calls the redirection of desire, the transfer of textual energy from one object to another when the original proves unattainable (Brooks, 1984, pp. 108-09). Meanwhile, this redirection is compelled by the legal interstice itself. The temporal misalignment between law and violence is specifically a misalignment between the law loophole and the corporeal injustice. Recent scholarship on land restitution has confirmed that such violence is not merely a historical residue but an ongoing structural feature of South Africa’s redistribution imperative, where the incongruities between theory and practice perpetuate racialized conflict (Kiguwa, 2024, p. 1). The novel’s key passage captures the misalignment with devastating precision.

No arsenal of repressive laws, no army, no police force can stabilize the situation—catch herself out in the jargon officialdom used to abstract and distract, draw the shroud of order over the body of Maseko with his bit of legal paper in his dead hand. No laws, no army, no police force can protect white farmers from the need and right of people desperate to find a place to live. She wrote and rewrote. (p. 163)

The word “shroud” merits etymological attention. The Old English “scrud,” which means “garment,” denotes both the cloth wrapping a corpse and anything that conceals. Gordimer’s metaphor operates on both sides: the legal language conceals the violence of death beneath procedural abstraction, yet also preserves death as the unrepresentable kernel that law cannot assimilate. The double function of “shroud”, concealment and preservation, structures the novel’s legal imaginary. The “order” that law establishes is always, implicitly, order as a shroud, the garment that marks what it cannot display. In the phrase “his bit of legal paper”, the diminutive “bit” reduces the legal protection into a fragment, diminishing the Legal Foundation’s victory to the point of absurdity: the document that should protect Maseko becomes, in death, merely a bit of scrap paper, outweighed by the “shroud of order.” The word “shroud” thus establishes homology between personal and political domains: both operate through deferred restitution that never achieves its object. The legal interstice here achieves its most destructive form: the law’s success coincides with its failure.

4. The Fallible Constitution: Institutionalizing Interstices

Vera later critiques the law of land reform, “the government is having the power to steal people’s property and afterwards set up commissions” (p. 283). However, the Technical Committee scenes narrate not triumph but procedural exhaustion: “week after week,” “sometimes busy until night”, even the committee’s work is explicitly described as “fallible” (p. 315). In classical rhetoric, “fallibilis” denotes capacity for error; here it marks the structural condition of the legal narrative. The fallible constitution does not resolve the interstice but institutionalizes it. Where the land reform’s interstices were accidental, the constitutional interstices are deliberate, the “percentage thresholds” (p. 315) that decide who is included and who is excluded. Every constitutional provision represents a decision that excludes its alternative. The narrator’s analogy, “the violent brotherhood between Cain and Abel” (p. 315), evokes a primordial violence preceding the legal order. The Cain-Abel logic does not suggest redemption but a perpetual tension: every legal protection for Abel produces Cain’s exclusion. “Only if it is possible to devise laws to bring this about” (p. 316) suggests that the interstice is not a gap between laws but the foundation of law itself.

Recent empirical research on South Africa’s land redistribution has demonstrated that these interstices are not merely narrative conceits but material realities. Mtero, Gumede, and Ramantsima argue that elite capture in land redistribution—resulting from the convergence of policy bias, corrupt practices, and class dynamics—has systematically diverted the fruits of restitution away from the landless poor (pp. 5-24). Their findings corroborate the novel’s prescient critique: the “fallible” commission does not merely err; it structurally reproduces the very exclusions it purports to remedy. Vera’s reflection on justice is also noteworthy, “challenging the law by means of its interstices and the great principles of justice beyond it: these stand somewhere between” (p. 164). This spatial metaphor, justice located “between” rather than beyond law, rejects both positivist justice as law and justice as natural law’s external ground. Justice emerges as a relation, as the perpetual movement between the law’s procedural delays and the demand for immediate recognition. This “endless end” is not a terminus but a perpetual becoming.

5. Conclusion: Justice as Perpetual Becoming

In Gordimer's sophisticated plotting of the deferred justice, the paired violent incidents perform the structural impasse of legal justice: its necessary delay, its fatal acceleration, its final acknowledgment of inadequacy. The interstices, namely loopholes in the law of land reform, gaps in constitutional protection, and delays in procedural time, are not failures of law but its constitutive condition. The novel educates its readers to abandon the desire for narrative closure as the desire for legal resolution, to recognize, with Vera, that "justice" names not a state to be achieved but a perpetual between: the "loophole" that promises while denying, the "graves" that outnumber houses, the "shroud" that conceals while revealing, and the "fallible" that protects while excluding. Through the novel's "interstices of law," justice is neither present nor absent, but perpetually deferred, a narrative condition literalized in the ringing phone that never connects and the legal paper that outlives its bearer. This is not pessimism but ethical realism: the refusal to substitute ideological fantasy for the difficult, fallible, necessary work of law.

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