Interregnal Identity Processes:
A Phenomenological Reading of Gordimer’s *July’s People*

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Abstract:

In this critical reading of Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*, the study investigates how different power structures affect the points of view and identity processes of the novel’s main characters. S. Ahmed’s (2009) conception of “Whiteness,” as a means of orienting in the world, is discussed and used as an interpretive tool when reading *July’s People*. In particular, the ongoing and unfinished history of objects and bodies represented in the novel and how these relate to whiteness and the process of “othering” is explored. Furthermore, the privileged viewpoint or position attached to whiteness as a narrative orientation is related to thoughts on pedagogy. Moreover, it is stressed how in the construction of identity, language and dialogue are fundamental parts of a complex process. Finally, it is argued that the role of literature in this process is potentially emancipating.
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Introduction

The novel *July’s People* was written by Nadine Gordimer in 1981, several years before the 1994 end of the Apartheid regime in South Africa. In the novel, a (black) revolution against the (white) system of rule is narrated. The lives of a liberal white family, the Smales, and that of their black servant, July, go through a radical change parallel to the revolutionary upheaval of the South African society. An interregnum is reflected in the identity processes of the characters through the transformations their points of view undergo. The detailed descriptions of some of the characters’ inner gazes and of how they perceive the world sensorial and emotionally, pave the way for a phenomenological reading of the novel. Lorraine Code argues that *July’s People* “develops what amounts to a […] phenomenological descriptive analysis of people and events” (Code 2011: 216).

Sara Ahmed, professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, presents in her article “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” a way of understanding—through the lens of phenomenology—the concept of whiteness as a means of orienting in the world. According to Ahmed: “Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space and what they ‘can do’” (Ahmed 2009: 149). What someone ‘can do’ can be referred to as agency. In this analysis, Antonio Gramsci’s ideas of agency and hegemony, together with Ahmed’s definition of a phenomenology of whiteness are applied as the theoretical framework guiding the essay’s critical reading of *July’s People*.

In the second, didactic part of this paper, the findings in the analysis are combined with the thoughts on pedagogy as formulated by Paulo Freire. Moreover, some reflections are offered on the consequences of linguistic imperialism—the concept coined by Robert Phillipson—for Swedish students of the English language. As a residue of the colonialist paradigm, the reinforcement of English can be seen as part of the hierarchical structuring of society. In the postcolonial mode of explaining the world, an awareness of structures can be emancipating. Edward Said’s account of the process of ‘othering’ is employed in both the analysis and the didactic part. In the latter, it is discussed how the process of othering and identity processes are connected and how these relate to the ongoing history of society. Furthermore, the function of reading literature and engaging in dialogue are presented as central for the consolidation of interregnal identity processes. The aim of this paper is to investigate identity processes in *July’s People* and to see how these relate to culture bearing
concepts such as power, language and history, which are relevant for literary studies in English at the high school level in Sweden.

**Point of view and orientation through racial identity**

In *July’s People*, the concept of race, intertwined with the concepts of class and gender, are the main components around which the characters are composed. The point of view—the point from which each character sees, the ‘here’—of each character is affected by the racial identity they have. This racial identity changes during the course of the narrative, as does each character’s point of view. At the beginning of the narrative, July’s characteristics are (still) those of the black servant, a subordinate position in a colony such as South Africa, controlled by whites.

The white upper middleclass Smales family has employed July as their servant. Thus the relationship between them entails various hierarchical structures; the race politics of South Africa at the time the novel is set gave the Smales a structural power and advantage over July, both through their economical and their racial position. Although when the narrative begins the Smales have already come to July’s village—to hide from the war brought about by the black revolution taking place—they bring with them the ways and views of “back there” in the town where they used to live. The hegemony of whiteness continues to influence all dealings between the Smales and July, at concrete levels such as the fact that July lived in a backyard room in the town residence, separate from the Smales’ house, accessible but kept apart. This situation much resembles the countrywide situation of the Bantustans in South Africa, where black people were forced to live. The Bantustans were kept apart from, but very dependent on, the cities—which were dominated by whites. In turn, the prosperity of the cities depended on the accessibility of cheap workforce. At more abstract levels, the hegemony of whiteness is represented in the way the Smales see July, and more importantly in what they do not see.

As Sara Ahmed maintains: “whiteness is an orientation” (2007: 154), meaning here that the colonialist discourse and practices have over time become so woven into the lives of people living in the colonies that they orientate themselves in the world under constant influence of that hegemony, not seeing it fully. Ahmed quotes the German philosopher Husserl in his work *Ideas*:

If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has its own
domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things appear and do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions.

(Ahmed 2007: 150)

The basic directions of ‘here’ of each Ego, each individual, depend on the domain of perceptual things—things that can be perceived, abstract or concrete —available to that individual. Depending on the culture one is brought up into—with race, class and gender constituting some of the cultural components—some things become available for perception, some do not. According to Ahmed, “The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body, and the ‘where’ of its dwelling. Given this, orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places” (Ahmed 2007: 151).

The Smales family has been oriented in their white suburb during Apartheid, which is the world they have inherited. They had a comfortable life; July was an object and a resource for their comfort. They cannot see things from his point of view, and this clouds their assessment of the reality of their relationship and the way in which he experiences it. Code addresses the lack of concern of the liberal stance that Bam and Maureen represent:

It is a liberal stance that enlists the polite terminology of tolerance, which too readily descends into indifference —especially epistemic indifference. It relies on a cluster of careless assumptions about ‘them’, in how they are and are not just like ‘us’. Although the white folks know that they would not want to live as they require/allow July to, they assume it is fine for him, hence that they have treated him well. (Code 2011: 213).

July’s experience is vague to the reader and filtered through other characters’ interpretation, up until near the end of the novel where his point of view comes forth. This hinders the reader from seeing things his way, July’s ‘here’ is relatively unknown. However, this obstruction of viewpoint is not absolute. There exist possibilities of interpreting situations variously.

At the beginning of the novel, July asks with politeness: “You like to have some cup of tea? —July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind” (Gordimer, 1982: 1). July’s bending can be understood as the simple physical act of crouching (the doorways of the mud huts are low). It can also be interpreted as the more emotionally dense gesture of subordination; an association which the context may well bring forth. However, at a hermeneutic level, it can also be understood as turning. The turning and bending of circumstances and its dialectical relationship with the act of interpretation of
circumstances, is a theme in the novel. Consequently, the question of who has the power to interpret a situation and to claim its authority is crucial. July, with the white Smales family as visitors in his home, is the one who begins the day for them, he is *there* before them. To them, he is: “July, their servant, their host” (Gordimer, 1982: 1). Thus, July’s position is both that of the servant and the host, at the same time inferior and superior. The problematical power relations between the Smales family and July stem from the colonialist discourse into which they have all been socialized. They interpret the world differently depending on their point of view; they ‘bend’ the world differently depending on the surrounding circumstances.

**Agency interrupts hegemony**

At the very beginning of the novel, Nadine Gordimer has placed an epigraph by Antonio Gramsci: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (Gordimer 1982). In *July’s People*, ‘the old’ represents the colonialist white supremacist society and ‘the new’ denotes the black people taking charge of the country. ‘The interregnum’ stands for the moment the characters grapple with. Antonio Gramsci stated the importance of agency in the face of oppression. Agency is what challenges hegemony. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is non-static and incomplete, which means it is constantly re-created (Mayo 1999: 38) and thus susceptible to change. Referring to Frantz Fanon, among others, Ahmed defines whiteness as “an ongoing and unfinished history” (Ahmed, 2007:149). Like Gramsci, Ahmed points out the re-creation of patterns and practices, with the trail of history shaping this re-creation to an extent. The connection between Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Ahmed’s concept of whiteness as an orientation—and as an ongoing history—is represented in the novel. The hegemony of whiteness is made unstable in *July’s People*. Yet, to July, acquiring agency is a profound process.

July’s becoming the host of the Smales family gives him a position where he can discover his own agency—he can see the possibility of it. Having lived with racial oppression and white hegemony his whole life, he is not, however, fully aware of having agency. From his perspective, his racial identity limits his access to agency. This is demonstrated in the passage where he thinks about his pass-book—something black servants had to have on them during Apartheid—which he has not destroyed although it is no longer valid: “He needed someone—he didn’t yet know who—to tell him: burn it, let it swell in the river, their signatures washing away” (Gordimer 1982: 137). July feels the need to turn to someone for advice—
simultaneously, he himself formulates the instruction: “burn it, let it swell in the river”, thus, to some extent, he turns to himself. There is a need expressed here of getting rid of what is defining him in the dependent relationship July has had with the Smales. He yearns for the signatures of authority imprinted on his old servant identity, symbolized by the pass-book, to be washed away. The signatures represent the hegemony underlying and defining the master-servant relationship. July is unaccustomed to defining himself. He realizes that the old is dying, yet he still reasons from a subordinate point of view; he partially remains in the old structures of acknowledgement.

However, in the (fictional) historic moment the characters live in—of crisis of the white hegemony—a new ground of possibilities comes into being. The continuous process of hegemony can be interrupted:

[T]here exist moments wherein the whole process undergoes a crisis. This indicates that there can be room for counter-hegemonic activity, which can be very effective at highly determinate moments. There are also excluded areas of social life that can constitute a terrain of contestation for people involved in such counter-hegemonic activities (Mayo 1999: 38).

In July’s People, the crisis of the white hegemony brings forth the black revolution. As for the “excluded areas of social life” (ibid.), the Bantustans in South Africa, where black people were forced to live, constituted such a terrain of counter-hegemonic contestation. July’s village is most likely situated in such a Bantustan. The village is also the physical ‘here’ of the characters at the beginning of the novel. The more abstract ‘here’ of the characters is the moment of crisis they live, which was brought forth by racial discrimination. The different layers of ‘here’ from which the characters orientate, are in addition affected by other power categories.

The intersecting power categories gender, class and race (also sexuality) are manifested in the way the characters orientate themselves in the world and, as a consequence of these orientations, in how they relate to each other. Each situation in which they encounter involves the traces of history and inherited domains of perception they carry with them, as it were. This conditions the point of view from which they see each other and how they interpret events, thus they take part in re-creating the ongoing history. Nevertheless, a change in orientation may bring forth the occurrence of agency, which in turn transforms this process of re-creation, thus rearranging power dynamics. Moreover, the varying practices available to the orientated bodies collaborate in manifesting the different categories of power. For example, Bam’s game-hunting is such a practice—imbued with the privileges and violence of the colonial,
patriarchal orientation. Objects, abstract and concrete, make up nodes around which these orientations and practices are carried out. Some such concrete objects in the novel are: July’s pass-book, Bam’s vehicle and Bam’s gun. As for the abstract objects, language is one such example which will be investigated and discussed below. The transformation of objects and orientations correspond to the transformation of the ongoing history.

Objects and orientations

The vehicle, Bam’s yellow bakkie, in July’s People is a central object of power. First, it is what enables the Smales family to escape a probable death in the war zone their home town has become. However, they have to hide in the car; July is the one behind the steering wheel. Already the power relationship between them has shifted, in that they have to rely completely on July. Second, the vehicle represents the possibility to return some day. The claim on the vehicle as their possession is analogous to their claim on being able to go back. To go back both in the sense of physical motility and in the sense of going back to the way things were, as in reversing the changes. As the story unfolds, this claim becomes less and less patently obvious as the power relations between July, Bam and Maureen transform.

As Ahmed shows, race determines how objects become available. The reachability of the vehicle, as an object within reach for somebody by way of orientation, transforms. July, as the Smales’ servant and their host, is the one who takes care of things for them. The shifting power dynamics between the Smales and July change the reachability of the vehicle for them.

We inherit the reachability of some objects, those that are ‘given’ to us, or at least made available to us, within the ‘what’ that is around. I am not suggesting here that ‘whiteness’ is one such ‘reachable object’, but that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with. (Ahmed 2007: 154)

From being reachable only for a white, male, rich person such as Bam, in the orientations of his ‘here’ back there, in the town, the bakkie becomes the possession of July. The vehicle goes through a transformation. At first its seats provide a place to sleep for the children; the inheritance of the reachability of objects is illustrated through this. Then, Maureen worries that someone will discover their presence because of the car and pass “on that information to
any black army patrol. If not acting upon it themselves?” (Gordimer 1982: 13). At this, July expresses the changed dynamics of their new situation:

July broke into snickering embarrassment at her ignorance of a kind of authority not understood—his; and anyway, he had told them—everybody—about the vehicle. (…)
— I tell them you give it to me.— (Ibid.)

This claim on authority becomes a trope enabling July’s agency, which is uttered as a claim on the vehicle. At a later stage, July comes to them, enthusiastic about his acquired driving skills: “—You know I’m turning round already? I’m know how to go back, everything” (Gordimer 1982: 59). Here, the turning of circumstances is illustrated through July’s appropriating of the vehicle. His agency is demonstrated through this. When the Smales warn him that he might get stopped while driving it; “If they catch you, without a license…” (Ibid.), July dismisses them, laying out the facts of the new state of affairs; “No one there can ask me, where is my license. Even my pass, no one can ask any more. It’s finished” (Ibid.). The old order has ended. Authority as they have known it is overthrown.

When the Smales express their fear of being found because of the vehicle, it can be interpreted as being at the same time a cunning way of trying to get back the control of it. July’s response is that he will declare that it was a gift given to him by the Smales: “You know I’m tell them. I get it from you in town. The bakkie it’s mine. Well, what can they say?” (Ibid.). This made up narrative about the bakkie being a gift can be considered an act of agency on July’s part. Thus the change in July’s orientation opens the door towards agency, which in turn is followed by reachability of objects. As a consequence, agency changes the ongoing history of July’s making. Moreover—to an extent—it offers a plausible change in the on-going history of the—at that time—racist South Africa. July is acknowledged as an individual with agency who is at the same time a part of society—not apart from society.

Ahmed maintains that:

If history is made ‘out of’ what is passed down, then history is made out of what is given not only in the sense of that which is ‘always already’ there before our arrival, but in the active sense of the gift: as a gift, history is what we receive upon arrival (Ahmed 2007: 154)

The vehicle changes, from being an object symbolizing what the next generation of whites—the Smales children—would receive as a gift (re-creating the past of white supremacy through possession) to an object asserting the agency of those formerly suppressed, like July.
Furthermore, when the vehicle first appears, it provides an articulation of the dynamics and practices inherent to Bam’s and Maureen’s marriage.

The presentation of the vehicle (Gordimer 1982: 5-9) describes how Bam stages the colonialist practices through his game-hunting, for which the vehicle is bought. Simultaneously, the episode describes the hierarchical relationship between Bam and Maureen, one which is both the result of—and the underlying, defining structure of—the practices proper to their white, hetero-normative, middleclass (consumer) orientation. They both construct, or ‘do’ a type of femininity and masculinity suiting their inherited orientations. Bam ‘only’ shoots fowl and “would no sooner shoot a buck than a man” (Gordimer 1982: 6); that is to say he is not really a killer, he only moderately acts out the inherited colonial practice as a way of ‘doing’ a certain kind of (liberal) masculinity. As the story goes, his masculinity is reaffirmed by the purchase of a car, the bakkie;

The vehicle was bought for pleasure, as some women are said to be made for pleasure. His wife pulled the face of tasting something that set her teeth on edge, when he brought it home. But he defended the dyed-blonde jauntiness; yellow was cheerful, it repelled heat (Gordimer 1982: 6).

The hierarchy between Bam and Maureen is established; he has more money and the freedom to buy what he likes. The merger of the car and “some women” as being “made for pleasure” (Ibid.) reveals the objectifying nature of patriarchal discourse, attributed to Bam. Furthermore, the episode shows the dynamics or the script of a middle-class, white, married heterosexual couple. He can be frivolous and childlike; she is cast as mother (the binary Madonna/whore) and more sensible—as when she smiles at him and says, half reprimanding, half condoning: “Anything will spot you a mile off, in the bush” (Ibid.). This script or discourse of the Smales couple is proper to their lives in the town, the way they see things fits with the scenario of “back there”. Within this discourse, July becomes an object of their (white, upper middleclass) gaze.

Ahmed refers to Fanon’s explanation of how the body is “made black by becoming the object of the hostile white gaze” (In Ahmed 2007: 153). So the white gaze, the gaze from a point of view whose inherited orientation is whiteness, objectifies other bodies. The objectification of other bodies, other persons, belittles their experience of the world, and superimposes one gaze over another. Through the gaze we extend ourselves into space. As Ahmed maintains: “a body extends into space through how it reaches towards objects that are already ‘in place’ (2007: 153). The Smales, up to the point where the power relation changes, relate to July as if he were an object of their gaze. Coming to his village and becoming
dependent upon his good will, they have to revise this view. Maureen reflects on this as she is caught between the gratitude she feels towards July “We owe him everything” (Gordimer 1982: 58) and the loyalty she still has for her husband; “She was setting out the facts before herself, a currency whose value had been revised” (Ibid.). The objectifying gaze is stalled, it needs revision.

The revision begins with Maureen and Bam looking at each other and talking to each other. However, the negotiation of gaze and language in relation to old and new circumstances take them into a new perception of themselves and each other. Talking of the gun, Bam asks Maureen if she can see him as a mercenary: “Her inner gaze was directed by him, at himself. She had been asked to note someone who had just arrived, but she saw the man who had been left behind” (Gordimer 1982: 126). He tries to direct her inner gaze, but fails—the hierarchy between the two is thwarted. They relate to the new circumstances with the ideas they have been taught, where the colonial government installed chiefs in the villages to create class stratification, which would prevent the black people to join each other in a revolution. But since it has happened, and the revolution is a fact they live under, everything is made unstable; ‘if it’s been lies, it’s been lies” as Bam states (Gordimer 1982: 127). All hierarchical relations are put into question, whether they are based on gender, race or class. As they become aware of this and try to talk about it, they realize that their thoughts get stuck in the old vocabulary, so saturated with the liberal stance they up until that moment have identified themselves with.

He struggled hopelessly for words that were not phrases from back there, words that would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the blacks, out of themselves. --- But the words would not come. They were blocked by an old vocabulary (Gordimer 1982: 127).

Language itself can be seen as an object here. The reachability of “words that were not phrases” (Ibid.) is limited due to orientation. Consistent with Ahmed’s claim—that whiteness as an orientation puts certain things within reach—the blocking of new words by an old vocabulary shows the non-permeability of colonialist, by default racist, hegemony. When some things are put within reach, other things are put out of reach. Orientation defines to a large extent “what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with” (Ahmed 2007: 154).

The language made available to Bam by way of inheritance suited the circumstances he lived in “back there”. In the ‘here’ of his situation in the village, as July’s guest and at the mercy of the village chief and whoever claims authority over him and his possessions, his
inherited language fails him. When he tries to take hold of the situation, to explain it to Maureen and to himself, the words come out as dead phrases. The “morbid symptom” (as in Gramsci’s quote, above) hereof is anger; “The words were not there; his mind, his anger, had no grip. —You saw he ‘let me’ drive, going there? ...A treat for me. July’s pretty sure of himself these days” (Gordimer 1982: 127). The uneasiness of his new position—dependent on his former servant—makes Bam angry.

The point of view Bam has harbored has lost its actuality, and this disorientates him. He suddenly becomes aware of his own frailty caused by his racial identity when he says they have to leave; “The two of them were regarding—he himself was conscious of—a heavy blond man, his reddened skull wrinkled with anguish above angry eyes. —Where? Where?” (Gordimer 1982: 129). Bam sees himself from the outside, as an ‘other’. He does not know where to go anymore, he is disorientated and uncomfortable. Ahmed explains the relationship between comfort, environment and race:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view. White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape. The bodies and spaces ‘point’ towards each other, as a ‘point’ that is not seen as it is also ‘the point’ from which we see. (Ahmed 2007: 158)

Bam can no longer see things the way he used to ‘back there’, where he used to fit, where he was comfortable. By not fitting in his current circumstances, the surface of his body comes into view—the reddened skull not used to being exposed to the sun, used to being inside of buildings extending his shape. Out ‘here’, in the countryside, under the sun of the new circumstances, he is exposed to himself and the limits his racial identity suddenly imposes on him and his (former) point of view. The limits to his power manifest in his body and in his (lack of) language.

Power relationships are embodied through language, in its wider sense; including body language, spoken as well as unspoken words and meanings. The changing of power relationships forces Bam into a subordinate position. This in turn thwarts the established hierarchy between Bam and Maureen. The embodied, sexual aspect of their relationship is, by extension, also thwarted. This is demonstrated through the language of her body when, at one point, Maureen undresses in front of Bam: “The baring of breasts was not an intimacy but a castration of his sexuality and hers” (Gordimer 1982: 90). Since Maureen’s part as ‘Madonna’ no longer applies, she looks for a new way of staging femininity as she has known it: in
relation to a (powerful) man. Even though she is freeing herself from the subordination she has lived in her relationship to Bam, at a deeper level she still acts out the script of subordinate femininity, it is a part of her identity as a woman. During this development, Maureen’s relationship to July changes.

In the process of coming to terms with the new circumstances, Maureen also comprehends that the way in which she has seen July has been a result of her own former socially superior position. Language plays a decisive part in this process. July is provoked by Maureen’s accusations of him having stolen trivial household items from her:

Why did you take rubbish? ...I said nothing because I was ashamed to think you would do it.—
—You— He spread his knees and put an open hand on each. Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully (Gordimer 1982: 152).

Maureen’s idea of July as a dignified servant who could be trusted by his employers not to steal—and her indignation at his taking “small things” (Ibid.) anyway—crumble when she realizes it has all been only her side of the story. She ‘understands’ the underlying meaning of July’s language, albeit the words are not reachable for her.

She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him (Ibid.).

The shift in their power relationship is seemingly embodied through the underlying meaning of July’s language use. The underlying meaning of July’s utterance is (as staged by the narration) reachable to Maureen, as a result of her orientation. Her previous position as subordinate to Bam was due to the patriarchal nature of their relationship “back there”. She feels she can relate to July’s having to live up to somebody else’s idea of him, to be objectified through the gaze of someone socially constructed as superior to oneself.

Subordination due to gender and the practices entailed correspond in many ways to subordination due to race. In fact, whiteness as an orientation involves several subordinating practices, intersecting variously.

Intriguingly, the text itself, *July’s People*, takes part in the subordinating practice coming from whiteness as an orientation. This is pointed out by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in “The Burden of English”, where she discusses the cultural and political implications of the implied reader of *July’s People*. Spivak argues that:
The text belongs to the native speaker. But the rhetorical conduct of the text undermines and complicates this. The desire of the radical native speaker of English is in the sentence: “She understood although she knew no word.” How fragile the logic of that sentence is; there are no guarantees. (…) In Gordimer’s text there is the strong suggestion that rather than understand the “burden” of Mwawate’s [July’s] words, the peculiar situation of being addressed by him in his tongue produces in her an understanding of a narrative of, precisely, the infelicity of their communication. (Spivak 1993)

Thus, according to Spivak, although the text undermines and complicates the fact that the implied reader is a native (white) English speaker, the fact remains. While there is a desire to abridge the pitfalls of miscommunication, the white gaze superimposed over the ‘other’s’ in claiming to understand him without knowing his language, re-enacts the colonialist practice of representation. Then again, it can be argued that Spivak’s reading could be held accountable for an essentialist stance; the position of ‘native speaker’ is not an entirely unproblematic one.

**Naming practices**

The practice of naming carries with it history laden power connotations significant for the identity process. Names point out directions for orientation, both for those calling as well as those carrying them. In *July’s People*, the reader’s gaze is forced into complicity with the Smales, since July is referred to by the name they use. His tribal name, Mwawate, is only mentioned in passing at the chief’s place, when he asks Bam about guns; “How many you got there by Mwawate’s place? (…) Of course, ‘July’ was a name for whites to use; for fifteen years they had not been told what the chief’s subject really was called.” (Gordimer 1982: 120) The reflection that ‘they had not been told’, is telling—it has not even occurred to them that they could have asked. Mwawate, July, has not been a person in his own right to them. Even as it dawns on them that he has another name he is referred to as “the chief’s subject” (*Ibid.*).

It becomes almost a play with words, since subject in this phrase means subordinate. Even in a subject position—as opposed to object, having a name, being someone who is not merely their servant—Mwawate/July is viewed by the Smales as inferior. Furthermore, the double names of July/Mwawate contain the contradictions of the hegemonic structure manifested in the Apartheid regime. As maintained by Dominic Head:

[July’s] two names calling attention to the split-personality enforced upon him: he has a role to play populating his designated rural village (signified by his
African name), yet this also necessitates his absence working in service, for which he requires another name that whites can use (JP, 120). Both names are, in effect, required by the regime (since it enforces two identities), and the contradiction of naming points merely to the contradictions inherent in the politics it pursues. Identity itself is shown to be determined through the control of spatio-temporal practices (Head 1994: 126).

July/Mwawate’s identity process is bound up with the hegemonic structures at work through the control of spatio-temporal practices, such as the practice of naming. July/Mwawate is required by the Apartheid regime to be at two places, filling two functions—staying apart and staying subdued. Thus, in accordance with Apartheid’s contradictory logic, he must have two names.

The name of Maureen is an “Anglicized form of Máirín, a pet form of Máire, which is the Irish cognate of Mary.” (Wikipedia) Thus the name carries with it various associations of importance to the character’s orientation, as far as inheritance goes. The fact that her name is the Irish cognate of Mary, shows the colonialist history, where Ireland was one of the first British colonies. This illustrates how she already in her name (from her birth) carries with her the orientations repeated through the ages. Furthermore, Mary—in Christianity the mother of Jesus—is the archetypal Madonna. The colonialist discourse carries with it the binary thinking where women are the opposite or the lesser version of men, and exist primarily as objects to satisfy needs. The Madonna archetype serves to install the expectation of a housekeeper and child nurturer, in order for the man to be able to procreate and have a stable, functioning home and at the same time is able to go out and live his life the way he pleases. The binary opposite of the Madonna, the Whore, in turn serves the male sexual need. The negativity connected to the Whore category serves to control and limit female sexuality and the power it would otherwise entail; furthermore it serves the purpose of creating boundaries for the Madonna archetype.

Maureen in July’s People struggles with these binaries. Away from the town house, the Madonna archetype loses meaning, something which gives Maureen a sense of relief. At the same time it awakens a sexuality she both enjoys and feels shame of. Right after she has realized that for July “to be intelligent, honest, dignified for her was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others” (Gordimer 1982: 152), she starts seeing him in a new way. He is embodied under her gaze as a man in his own right; she looks at his face, his mouth and his eyes (Gordimer 1982: 153). They are standing alone together, “The skin of her body was creeping with an ecstatic fever of relief, splendid and despicable to her” (Gordimer
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1982: 153). Sexuality hovers over the scene, albeit ambiguously. Yet she will not relate to him as the ‘Madonna’ she was for Bam. She tries on the Whore-image, jokingly, with July; however she draws on cultural references he doesn’t have, enlarging the gulf between them:

She lurched over and posed herself, a grotesque, against the vehicle’s hood (…). The death’s harpy image she made of herself meant nothing to him, who had never been to a motor show complete with provocative girls. She laughed and slapped the mudguard vulgarly (Gordimer 1982: 153).

On the one hand, the discourse within which she associates is not July’s, not by far. The sexualized imagery of girls posing in motor shows is not reachable to his visualization; it is not something he has come across in his life. Furthermore, they do not even share the same language (English) to any great extent. July’s/Mwawate’s English is limited to what he has needed as a servant in an English speaking residence. His own language, with which he expresses his emotions, is unknown to her. On the other hand, the grotesque carries with it connotations of change, according to Bakhtin: “[the grotesque] discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads man out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable” (Brandist, 2005). Thus, there are different modes of signification operating in the scene. Through the image of the grotesque, Maureen’s process of emancipation latches on to that of July/Mwawate. They both live the experience of doubleness; orienting themselves at the same time from a position as inferior—retaining the traces of history—and as superior, or simply free, due to the changing of circumstances. Although their emancipation processes are to an extent parallel, they are still culturally and socially separated by their former relationship.

Bamford’s name carries with it connotations of the origins of colonization; “The lineage of the name Bamford begins with the Anglo-Saxon tribes in Britain” and families carrying this name took part in colonization (http://www.houseofnames.com/bamford-family-crest). The British colonization relied on a discourse based on the glorification of the white man. Bamford’s name is of a doubtless old British origin. He is also referred to as “the white man” several times in the novel (e.g. Gordimer 1982: 61, 74). Thus, the discourse of the White Man can be connected to his character. Edward Said explains this discourse:

Being a White Man --- was a self-confirming business. One became a White Man because one was a White Man; more important, “drinking that cup”, living that unalterable destiny in “the White Man’s day”, left one little time for idle speculation on origins, causes, historical logic. Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality. It involved a reasoned position towards both the
white and the nonwhite worlds. It meant—in the colonies—speaking in a certain way, behaving according to a code of regulations, and even feeling certain things and not others. It meant specific judgments, evaluations, gestures. It was a form of authority before which nonwhites, and even whites themselves, were expected to bend (Said 2003: 227).

Bamford’s orientation is conditioned by this discourse, causing him to behave and speak in a certain way, when directing himself to July; “Bam did not raise his voice; had never shouted for him, back there. The White man (Bam saw himself as they would see him) would walk out into the yard, reasonably, when there was a reproach to lay at the door of his room” (Gordimer 1982: 61). The inner gaze of Bam is directed at himself through what he thinks to be “their” view of him. However, “their” view—July’s and his friends’—is not really taken into account, as it is Bam’s version of the ‘idea of the White Man’ which conditions the layers of his inner gaze. Being a ‘White Man’ is a part of Bam’s identity, as he acts out the practices belonging to its discourse. Furthermore, the name Bamford derives ”from the Old English words beam, meaning tree or plank, and ford, meaning river crossing. In this case the name referred to a settlement near which there was a tree or plank laid across a river to make a dry crossing” (http://www.houseofnames.com/bamford-family-crest). The fact that their new habitat lays near a river adds another meaning to his name. The river symbolizes, among other things, change. He will have to let go of his privileges, to lie down and let others use him to cross over the river to the other side, in a metaphorical sense.

**On-going history embodied**

On-going history is embodied through the action of individuals. Ahmed maintains that grasping an object “is an orientation towards the future, insofar as the action is also the expression of a wish or intention” (Ahmed 2007: 153). A body reaching for and grasping an object with an intention directs itself and its proximate world towards the future. Furthermore, Ahmed (referring to Fanon) states that bodies have the capacity to do that work “only given the familiarity of the world they inhabit” (Ibid.). To be able to orientate oneself towards the future, the immediate world—‘here’—has to be familiar. In *July’s People*, July asserts to some extent his agency by claiming the vehicle as his own through the made up narrative of it being a gift (Gordimer 1982: 59). After this, there is a scene in which he starts rearranging things in the hut where the Smales sleep: “(...) he began to push about the small, crowded,
darkened space, dragging and shaking things into a private order” (Gordimer 1982: 62). The orientations of the characters in the space that is July’s village, changes; objects and their place correlate to this change. July’s private order manifests how he extends into space, orienting himself towards the future. Ahmed, referring to the work of Fanon, points out that ‘Doing things’ depends not so much on intrinsic capacity, or even upon dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things ‘have a certain place’ or are ‘in place’ (Ahmed 2007: 153)

By extending himself—putting things into place, following a private order—July makes the world available for action, his action—as opposed to their, the Smales’s, action. Moreover, the use of the word ‘private’ is a marker of perspective. Through Maureen’s and Bam’s viewpoints, July’s “shaking things into a private order” (Gordimer 1982: 62) excludes them, establishes a boundary. ‘Private’ marks more of a ‘locking somebody out’ than does e.g. the word ‘personal’. To July, the order he establishes may be experienced as his personal one. He makes the world more available for himself as he is beginning to acknowledge his own place, his ‘here’, as a person in his own right, in contrast to his former place as servant. The Smales feel othered by July’s actions, just as their previous actions have contributed to othering him. They recognize the pattern, so to speak, although from the other side of the mirror. July’s personal order is, for him, charged with less tension, it is his way of establishing familiarity with the world, as a place for action.

However, in a world marked historically by colonialism and the hegemony of whiteness, familiarity is also tinged with its discourse. Ahmed argues that “the racial and historical dimensions are beneath the surface of the body” (Ibid.). These racial and historical dimensions are also manifested in the novel. While July moves around in the hut, they all share an almost viral sensation of “a contempt and humiliation that came from their blood and his” (Gordimer 1982: 62). The mentioning of the character’s blood draws attention to what moves under the surface. The process of ‘othering’, as explained in Orientalism by Edward Said, always includes the one who ‘others’. In July’s People, the racial and historical dimensions of the process of othering are exemplified as “an archetypal sensation”:

The wonder and unease of an archetypal sensation between them, like the swelling resistance of a vein into which a hollow needle is surging a substance in counterflow to the life-blood coursing there; a feeling brutally shared, one alone cannot experience it, be punished by it, without the other. It did not exist
before Pizarro deluded Atahualpa; it was there in Dingane and Piet Retief (Gordimer 1982: 62).

Archetypes surface as the characters’ orientations change. Pizarro deluding Atahualpa was one of the launching pads of colonialist conflict based on racism. The original pattern of that situation is invoked in the sensation the characters experience; the feeling is shared, but it is a violent one and as such it cannot be harbored by an amiable relationship. The South African version of that defining situation is the violent conflict between Dingane and Piet Retief. The pattern is one of betrayal of confidence and its consequences are violent. The betrayal is also a part of the process of othering. A ‘we’ betray a ‘they’ in the act of separating, of creating a boundary. In this act, the very existence of the other(ed) is put into question—the result of which involves the threat of elimination. Yet boundaries are never definite, like horizons they move with our gaze. As bodies extend themselves through their gazes, their boundaries/horizons shift.

The idea of patterns repeating themselves fits with Gramsci’s description of hegemony as a pattern of power re-creating itself, as well as Ahmed’s notion of on-going history. The racial and historical dimensions of these patterns and the ‘archetypal sensation’ creating unease manifest in the bodies of the characters. Orientation entails the body and its surroundings; they are connected, if you will, through orientation.

Re-orientation through objects (Maureen)

Objects, as we have seen, are filled with the information infused into them through orientation. In short, the world is experienced with/through a body, and a body always carries with it past experiences that have shaped it; simultaneously, it re-creates or creates new experiences shaping it.

What you come into contact with is shaped by what you do: bodies are orientated when they are occupied in time and space. Bodies are shaped by this contact with objects. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, and in turn affects what bodies can do. (Ahmed 2007: 152)

The shift in Maureen’s orientation is illustrated through the objects she comes into contact with, and the re-evaluation of the experiences connected to them. At the beginning of the novel, she orients herself in the new place with the help of remembered objects, since the village hut where they live reminds her of her room when young; “At first what fell into place was what was vanished, the past” (Gordimer 1982: 3). Maureen wakes up not knowing where
she is and with the first attempts at orienting herself, she reaches into a non-existent past, a pre-marriage self; “In the dimness and traced brightness of a tribal hut the equilibrium she regained was that of the room in the shift boss’s house on mine property she had had to herself” (Ibid.). At the same time as the remembered room represents her more independent identity, so to speak (before being first and foremost a mother and a wife)—almost a Woolfian ‘room of one’s own’ enabling agency—it contains objects representing bourgeois life and colonial practices:

Picking them up one by one, she went over the objects of her collection on the bookshelf, the miniature brass coffee-pot and tray, the four bone elephants, one with a broken trunk, the khaki pottery bulldog with the Union Jack painted on his back. A lavender-bag trimmed with velvet forget-me-nots (…)(Gordimer 1982: 3).

Maureen’s orientation is conditioned by her past as the shift boss’s daughter. The objects that have been reachable to her carry the insignia of class, race and gender proper to a white, colonialist, patriarchal hegemonic structure. The objects of this new place are unfamiliar to her. She hears “calls in one of the languages she had never understood” (Gordimer 1982: 4) —showing the unreachability of language as a perceptual object, part of the hegemonic structure. As she “slowly began to inhabit the hut around her” (Ibid.) unfamiliarity is the reigning principle. The hut is “empty except for the iron bed, the children asleep on the vehicle seats” (Ibid.) the familiar objects—the bed, the vehicle seats—are reachable for her orientation, however: “the other objects of the place belonged to another category” (Ibid.). The objects that were already in place are unfamiliar to Maureen: “nothing but a stiff rolled-up cowhide, a hoe on a nail, a small pile of rags and part of a broken Primus stove” (Ibid.). Though she sees the native objects of the village hut, she sees the place as empty; the objects are ‘no-thing’, since they belong to another category. Ahmed maintains that:

[S]paces acquire the shape of the bodies that ‘inhabit’ them. We could think about the ‘habit’ in the ‘in-habit’. (…) In a way, we can think about the habitual as a form of inheritance. It is not so much that we inherit habits, although we can do so: rather the habitual can be thought of as a bodily and spatial form of inheritance. (Ahmed 2007: 156)

As Maureen attempts to inhabit the hut, she looks around her. Only the habitual objects, aid her in orienting herself. The boundaries of her extension into space are however defined by the unfamiliar objects. The cowhide, the hoe, the rags and the stove are outside of her domain of perceptual things, and thus create the horizons of her perceptual world.
Later on in the narrative, another object—a book—of Maureen’s possession serves as a portal into a new understanding of the world as she knows it. The shift in her orientation begins with the realization that the enjoyment of reading is no longer within her reach: “the transport of a novel, the false awareness of being within another time, place, and life that was the pleasure of reading, for her, was not possible” (Gordimer 1982: 29). As she stops to realize this, she re-orientates and casts off the old ways and strategies to conceive herself and the world around her: “She *was* in another time, place, consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as someone’s breath fills a balloon’s shape. She was already not what she was” (*Ibid.*). This realization of not being what she was, unable to reach the objects that used to shape her—such as the abstract object, or practice, of ‘pleasure in reading’, and the illusion of ‘being within another time’—positions her in the space between self and other, us and them, resulting in the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘they’: “They had nothing” (*Ibid.*). It is unclear whether ‘they’ refer to the Smales or to the people living in July’s village. This ambiguity momentarily unites ‘them’ all into an equality of dispossession. Maureen’s view of the world, up until that moment defined through the othering practices of whiteness as an orientation, transforms. The ambiguity of ‘they’ opens up for an understanding of possession and power as something which is arbitrary. The legitimacy of the claim for power and possessions due to an alleged superiority based on physical traits and genealogy does not endure a cross-examination. Maureen’s realization of this fact and the contiguous transformation of her viewpoint lead her to re-orientate. Maureen’s re-orientation moves her into less defined distinctions of identity, which destabilizes her previously fixed (white) perspective. While she cannot leisurely experiment “the false awareness of being within another time, place and life” (*Ibid.*), since she is removed from the habitual space making that false awareness possible, her inner gaze is halted and thus transformed.

However, right after that, she falls back into the habit of the othering gaze; “In their houses, there was nothing” (*Ibid.*). Yet, Maureen’s transformed view now comes with the new strategy of looking again: “At first.”(*Ibid.*) is added. She lingers, and lets the unfamiliar slide into view: “You had to stay in the dark of the hut a long while to make out what was on the walls” (*Ibid.*). By lingering, she allows her gaze to extend into the unfamiliar, moving the horizons of her ‘here’ in the world. Furthermore, by extension, her past is also transformed and her inheritance is reconsidered.

As she moves around in the village, orienting herself from her new point of view, the layers of her inner gaze reverberates with the surroundings: “she caught a glimpse of a single painted circle, an eye or target, as she saw it” (*Ibid.*). The scene of Maureen seeing an eye, “as
she sees it” explains the intricacy of point of view; the writer (Gordimer) describes what she ‘sees’ in her mind’s eye, which is again seen, and transformed in uncountable ways by the inner gaze of the reader, who aligns his or her view with the character’s (Maureen), who in turn is looking at a manufactured eye, ‘as she sees it’ from her point of view. The staging of the intricacy of point of view is repeated when Maureen sees something she recognizes as familiar:

An impression—sensation—of seeing something intricately banal,
manufactured, replicated, made her turn as if someone had spoken to her from back there (Ibid.)

The objects in July’s People are like keys that unlock perspectives. Maureen’s sensation of seeing something makes her turn, and by turning she opens up a new perspective of her past—history speaks to her, if you will, through the objects that have become reachable to her because of the shift in her orientation. She sees two objects:

The one was a medallion of the kind presented to black miners who pass a First Aid exam on how to treat injuries likely to occur underground, the other was a black miner’s badge of rank, the highest open to him (Ibid.)

These objects put in perspective to Maureen her childhood experiences. The badge reads “BOSS BOY” (Gordimer 1982: 30); the voice from the past belongs to a real life person who has carried these insignia defining, limiting his identity through the colonial practices subjugating him. Maureen’s father was a mine shift boss, she recalls his pride in ‘his’ BOSS BOY, the group leader of the exploited black miners. Maureen sees herself in the midst of this on-going history of subjugation which, like the badge, is “banal, manufactured, replicated” through the practices of colonization. The paradox of the given title ‘boss’ and the demeaning epithet ‘boy’ put together, mirrors the paradox of any relationship between white and black in a society like South Africa during Apartheid. In a racist hegemony, the ones positioned as superior and the ones positioned as the others who must be kept apart still need to relate to each other as human beings. The violence imposed by such a system perverts all relationships within it.

Maureen reconsiders the relationship she had with her family’s female servant Lydia. An episode which describes them walking home from school together and getting photographed, shows the problematic power dimensions of point of view. Lydia carries Maureen’s school case on her head, when a photographer appears and takes a photo of them as they cross the street. Later, Maureen sees the photo in a book with the text “White herrenvolk attitudes and life-styles” (Gordimer 1982: 33). The question of why Lydia had carried her bag is left
unanswered, yet it is hinted that there might not be just one answer to that question. The book where the photo appears is a coffee-table book, an object with class markings. The photographer lies to them when taking their photo he promises that he will send it to them. Already the image is skewed—the intentions of the photographer are not entirely honest, his point of view is the one that is reproduced in the book, where somebody adds the defining interpretation of the image through text. Maureen appears not to have known anything about the politics of the context in which they related at that time—affectionately—to each other; hers is an epistemic ignorance. Still, the fact remains: Lydia carries Maureen’s case.

Why had Lydia carried her case?

Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that, together? Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason she and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn’t know? (Ibid.)

Maureen’s revision of the events of her youth leaves her without a clear answer. At the same time the questions are surreptitiously posed to the reader: who in society has the power to define the significance of situations and events that occur, and furthermore, which role does literature play in this signification? Homi K. Bhabha writes in the foreword to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, that: “The ‘social’ is always an unresolved ensemble of antagonistic interlocutions between positions of power and poverty, knowledge and oppression, history and fantasy, surveillance and subversion” (1986: xxv). In the ‘unresolved ensemble of antagonistic interlocutions’ of the social/society, Maureen is not sure which side she is on. She does not know what is real and what is fantasy. She does not know whether her life experiences have been lived through a clueless false awareness, and hence the limit between fiction and reality is made unstable; through Maureen’s transformed gaze, the reader is offered a possibility to question his or her own viewpoint on the on-going history of the world. Finally, Maureen’s deepened view helps her unveil circumstances and connections previously hidden to her. At the end, disoriented, “She runs” (Gordimer 1982: 160), in accordance with the ambiguity of many events in the narrative, it is unclear whether she is running away from responsibility or towards emancipation. Both are possible, neither is a certainty.

Reading *July’s People* alongside e.g. Ahmed’s and Said’s texts, one can appreciate the complexities of the construction of identity and how physical that process always is. After all, as subjects we perceive and inhabit the world through and with our bodies. The (ongoing) history of both spaces and of the different shapes and colors of bodies, gives rise to power
positioning of superiority and inferiority. We act from different power positions and orientate differently in the world depending on how we perceive space, how we perceive ourselves and each other. In turn, our perceptions rely heavily on inheritance and habituality. In the novel, the characters experience how the (ongoing) history of their present affects how they orientate themselves in the new space that the societal changes have forced them to inhabit. The instability of power and possessions and thus the instability of the meaning of objects, influence how the characters perceive themselves and each other. Their relationships undergo significant changes, reflecting the changes in societal relationships between the white and the black communities in South Africa. The interregnum referred to in the epigraph by Gramsci at the outset of the novel, is one that goes far beyond political and governmental change.

In the ongoing history of the world, the postcolonial (although in many actual respects neocolonial) period in which we live affects us all deeply, at an existential level. How identity was—and still often is—perceived in the old paradigm, which allowed colonialism, stands in contrast to how identity is viewed as a process or a construction within the postcolonial understanding of the concept. If the former view is mainly about limits—drawing limits between and within bodies and spaces—then the latter is more about questioning and dissolving these limits. When limits are dissolved, ambiguity is one of the results. Dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty can be seen as a major task for the coming generations. Consequently, literary fiction is a means which can advantageously engage and exhibit indefinite identity processes. Reading literature which deals with such matters, such as Gordimer’s *July’s People*, can aid us in understanding how to maneuver in new social paradigms.
Literature, dialogue and language education

The study of literature in the language classroom can be a fruitful pedagogical activity. In analyzing literature, students have the possibility of engaging in many different kinds of dialogue. Possibilities for multiple dialogues arise: dialogue between the reader and the text, dialogue with peers as well as teachers, and a more abstract yet significant dialogue between the student or students and the world in their creation of on-going history. Analyzing literature, the students have the possibility to engage in discussions about history, society, identity, and the power structures involved in their making. Languages themselves are, as has been discussed and established in the analysis of July’s People above, objects of varying status in a hierarchical system.

As for the privileged position of English as a ‘core subject’ in the Swedish school system, discussions about literature and power structures in society may lead to the question of why English holds such a privileged position. Robert Phillipson (2009) argues that linguistic imperialism is a fact that is willed by some authorities. It is not, as argued by some, a simple matter of “loss of (language) domains” to the natural spread of English as a lingua franca, but rather a conscious and organized imperialistic endeavor that English should hold an increasingly powerful position in the world (Phillipson 2009 passim). Thus the fact that students in Sweden are obligated to the study of English, from an early age, is in itself another organizing structure built into society. Linguistic imperialism is another expression or consequence of a hierarchal mindset, which in the on-going history of the world favors the English language and consequently the English-speaking culture with all that entails. The cultural privileging of English can only be maintained through the subordinated status of other dialects and languages. Likewise, the linguistic modes by which identity is constructed and social relationships valued, if other than Standard English, will be deemed inferior.

The connection between identity, power and society is explained by Edward Said through the process of othering:

The construction of identity (…) involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”. Each age and society re-creates its “Others”. Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of “other” is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies. (…) In short,
the construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society (...) (Said 2003: 332).

The continuous contest for power is what in part defines us as human beings, and it is an important part of the construction of identity. We are forced to relate to structures of power in the construction of our identities. However, dialogue offers a respite from the power contest. Receptiveness is of key importance. From the viewpoint of a dialogic approach one may, as Maureen in July’s People, postpone the decision of what it is one sees—by ‘looking again’ and letting the unfamiliar slide into view without passing judgment. In doing so, transformation is made possible.

Nevertheless, in the English classroom, the presumably transformational dialogue that might occur during the literature discussion is expected to be held in English. As such, it takes part in the process of linguistic imperialism as explained by Phillipson. English can be seen as a cog in the power machinery molding the students’ identities. The symbolic power of English is addressed by Phillipson, referring to Bourdieu: “symbolic power requires, as a condition for its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it” (Phillipson 2009: 128). Both teachers and students of the English language thus take part in the play of symbolic power. The overwhelming presence of English in the Swedish society makes it hard to question the necessity to learn and teach it; in order to be successful academically and career-wise, English is of key importance. That is not to say it is not questioned. It is not clear what constitutes agency in this particular hegemonic setting, with English being both a feature of an imposed power structure and at the same time a supposedly desirable object. Symbolic power requires subjugation, at the same time, ambiguously, to adhere to it—to learn English—can lead to a process of emancipation. Thus, it is also possible to invest another kind of politics and ethics in English language use.

The social aspect of learning opens up for ambiguities. There is the possibility of learning together, of transforming the world with love, if you will (Freire 1993: 25). There is, simultaneously, a process of power, with disposition of power and powerlessness, positions of superiority and inferiority continuously changing yet more often than not adhering to the re-creation of hegemonic structures. Agency, which is the potential interrupter of the hegemonic re-creation, can take on different shapes within the ambiguous setting which constitutes the English classroom. For agency to become possible, a change in orientation is necessary. Such a change in orientation can come about through an awareness of the on-going history of the world. The varying expressions of the identity process of societies involving power positioning include e.g. the Apartheid system in South Africa, which—from an angle—can be
accessed through *July’s People*. The novel can be used as one way of becoming aware of the complexities that follow with the identity process, which in turn can be reflected in the personal lives of the students. Questions of what makes up the “here” of the students could prove to be powerful pedagogical tools. Open dialogue, then, is fundamental for the process of knowledge.

**Dialogue beyond hegemonic structures**

As Donaldo Macedo writes in the foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> [D]ialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. (…) I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (1993: 17).

In education, the importance of dialogue manifests in the creation and re-creation of words and concepts. In order to understand new words and concepts (and not just learn them ‘by heart’) one often needs to engage in dialogue. Paulo Freire maintains that “To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it” (Freire 1993: 88). To be able to name the world, one needs words. Freire argues that words consist of two interdependent parts, namely: action and reflection. The words, in order to have transformational power, have to be ‘true’, which to Freire means that they are at the same time ‘praxis’—the words' two dimensions (action and reflection) have to be balanced.

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire 1993: 87).

In the encounter between human beings, the interchange of ‘true’ words in the practice of naming the world may result in dialogue. However, dialogue, according to Freire, requires love.

The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. (Freire 1993:89)

Thus, in order to change the world together—to name the world together—in dialogue, human beings have to engage in relationships based on love. Objectification is not love. Freire
maintains the idea that dialogue can only occur between “responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination” (*Ibid.*). Perhaps then, perfect dialogues are rare, since few relationships are completely infused with love and entirely free from practices of objectification and domination. Given this, the dialogue promoted by Freire is a utopian yet desirable practice. The ambivalence and duality of real life relationships often impede dialogue. However, dialogue does occur despite systems of domination.

Within education, the most common learning format involves a teacher responsible for students in classes of varying sizes. This relationship is in its nature one of domination—the teacher has power over the students since she or he is the one assessing and evaluating their learning progress. At the higher levels of education, what in Sweden is called *gymnasiet*, the students are not obliged by law to attend. This removes some elements of domination in the teacher-student relationship since it is then presupposed that the students attend of their own free will. Nonetheless, the assessment element is perhaps more significant at the higher levels, since it to some degree decides the future career possibilities of the students. Taking this into consideration, the above quote by Macedo, referring to the necessity of dialogue for the learning process, produces some questions. How can genuine dialogue occur between teachers and students when the relation is one of domination? In my experiences both as a student and a teacher, dialogue does occur, although it is not commonplace. A space or a feeling is created in the relationship where the hierarchical roles are momentarily dissolved. The desire for learning and the authentic interest in listening become reality, for a moment.

**Literature and the identity process**

Reading and talking about literature can facilitate the occurrence of ‘true’ dialogues. As maintained by Anna Thyberg in her essay “Litteraturläsning som kontaktzon” (2009) (freely translated as *Literature reading as zone of contact*), students’ discussions about reading experiences resemble the kinds of conversations they have outside of the school context (Tornberg et al [red.] 2009: 99). That is to say, the literature discussions tend—in Thyberg’s research—to engage students in more authentic conversation where genuine feelings and opinions are expressed. In addition to the valuable language practice offered, the chances for dialogue and thus the social aspect of learning increase.

However, Thyberg problematizes what the students actually learn in these dialogues. The tendency to take on the privileged position and to engage in processes of othering is presented in her findings (Tornberg et al [red.] 2009: 101). The teacher’s aim might be that the students
become more aware of the ethical assumptions they harbor, which guide their thinking about the world, and thus the way in which they re-create the ongoing making of history. Nevertheless, the students’ tendency, as often, is to (re-)create and strengthen difference. Thyberg quotes Jay (1994):

While a first step toward ethical intersubjectivity may be to recognize and respect someone else’s difference from me, that realization still tends to leave me in the privileged position: I have the luxury of deciding to be tolerant and liberal. The structure of superiority is left intact. The sense of my own settled and unquestioned identity is also left intact, while all the otherness is projected onto someone else (Jay 1994: 626)

This theme of identification with the privileged position is one that we find challenged in *July’s People* (Gordimer 1982). It can be argued that this process, represented in the character Maureen, is overturned in Gordimer’s novel. Maureen starts out with a privileged viewpoint which, further on in the narrative, transforms. For this very reason, the novel may (at the right level of language proficiency) be adequate for stimulating the kind of dialogue that problematizes the structures of superiority. It can make possible the discovery that identity is not something stable, rather it is constructed.

In the construction of identity, language and dialogue are fundamental parts of the process. Objects, both abstract and concrete, become familiar through a naming process. Through dialogue with others, familiarization with some objects takes place, the words achieve a certain meaning in relation to the objects and how they are perceived. Likewise, some objects fall outside of the perceptual horizons of the subject. The words designating such unfamiliar objects are ‘empty’ until filled with content through dialogue. In the language classroom, the different identity processes of the students give them different linguistic and cultural perspectives:

The acquisition process is […] socially differentiated; all human beings develop their personal linguistic and cultural repertoires. Therefore language and culture are always different from individual to individual, characterized by a specific perspective and a specific horizon of understanding (Risager 2006: 37).

Thus, the horizons of a person’s ‘here’ are defined by his or her socially differentiated linguistic and cultural repertoire. As has been stated in the above analysis, these horizons are made up of unfamiliar, not-yet-named objects. In *July’s People*, Maureen lets some unfamiliar objects slide into view and to become a part of her ‘here’. This change in her way of orienting herself, leads to her experiencing a destabilization of identity. This experience is due to her
physical removal from a familiar space to one that is unfamiliar. That radical experience is perhaps not one everybody has in their lifetime, although to individually different degrees it is possible to relate to the experience. For students, the words and concepts (representing abstract and concrete objects) they come in contact with when reading—and analyzing together—have the potential to open up their perspectives and to move their horizons.

According to Code, *July's People*

[…] can open possibilities of intelligibility in naturalized epistemology, showing rather than stating how ‘the other’ might indeed bring ‘the self’ up against its own limited horizons. Here, I cast July as ‘the other’, and Maureen as ‘the self’, while simultaneously positioning the reader as both self and other. Reading human lives through narratives that make new sense of them, if never definitely or completely—whether they present themselves as straightforwardly fictional, as autobiographical, as ethnographical investigations—opens the way for readers to re-imagine forms of life that cannot have been theirs, challenges their expectations in matters of recognition and oppression, and can animate strategies of thinking toward a critically creative instituting social imaginary where the occupants of positions of privilege might begin to take responsibility for how that privilege has made them. (Code 2011: 216).

Through dialogue, the individual meanings and understandings can be negotiated and can lead to the acquisition of a common, social construction of knowledge.

The individual differences can, as we have seen, lead to a process of othering which reinforces hegemonic structures. However, if one is aware of this risk and acknowledges it, the appreciation of differences and a negotiation of meaning through dialogue can lead to a common ground where similarities are also found and a confirmation of the open-endedness of identity—as well as the advantages of such a view—can be promoted.
Works cited


