[00:00:00] **Jakob Lothe:** He was there in front of her, so startling, so utterly unexpected, panting right into her face. He stood dead still, and she stood dead still. Every vestige of control, of sense, of thought, went out of her, as her room plunges into dark at the failure of power, and she found herself whimpering like a child, like an idiot or a child. Animal sounds came out of her throat, she gibbered. For a moment it was fear itself that held her by the arms, the legs, the throat. Not fear of the man or any single menace he might present, but fear, absolute, abstract.

[00:00:57] **JIM PHELAN:** This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. or another host. Today, I'll be talking with Jakob Lothe, who has selected Nadine Gordimer's “Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?”

[00:01:19] which was first published in 1947 when Gordimer was just 24 years old. Jakob Lothe is professor of English emeritus at the University of Oslo, where he taught from 1993 to 2020. Jakob's books in English, Jakob has also published several in Norwegian, include Conrad's Narrative Method, 1989, which brought the news from narratology to the study of Conrad's works, and Narrative in Fiction and Film, 2000.

[00:01:49] Jakob is currently completing a monograph entitled Memory and Narrative Ethics, Holocaust Testimony, Fiction and Film. Jakob also led a research group dedicated to narrative theory and analysis at Norway's Center for Advanced Studies in Oslo during the 2005 06 academic year. Under Jakob's leadership, the group produced three volumes of essays, Joseph Conrad, Voice Sequence History Genre, 2008, Franz Kafka, Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading.

[00:02:22] 2011, and After Testimony, the Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future, 2012. I was fortunate to be part of that research group. In fact, my experience with Jakob and the others in the group is one of the highlights of my career. And I'm grateful that it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship with Jakob.

[00:02:44] Jakob has also edited or co edited several other books about the short story, about narrative ethics, about the future of literary studies, and more. But I'll close out this introduction by highlighting Jakob's book, Times Witnesses, Women's Voices from the Holocaust, his set of ten remarkable interviews with ten survivors of the Holocaust published in English in 2017.

[00:03:10] Jakob, is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners before you read Gordimer's Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?

[00:03:16] **Jakob Lothe:** I would like to thank you, Jim, for inviting me to participate. And I could perhaps also very briefly say that this latest book that you mentioned about narrative presentations of the Holocaust is, I don't want to grade my work really.

[00:03:30] I've tried to write about many topics, but it is special for me, because I can build on devote chapter one to, at least some discussion of four of the stories in Poems Witnesses for women who are still alive, even though they are now very old in their nineties. So nothing more to say now, really, looking forward to our conversation.

[00:03:58] **JIM PHELAN:** Okay, good. Well, we'll begin then with Yakov reading Nadine Gordimer's poem. Is there nowhere else where we can meet?

[00:04:07] **Jakob Lothe:** It was a cool gray morning and the air was like smoke. In that reversal of the elements that sometimes takes place, the gray, soft, muffled sky moved like the sea on a silent day. The coat collar pressed through against the neck and the cheeks were softly cold. As if they had been washed in ice water. She breathed gently with the air on the left strip of felt fire, cold silently, flameless overhead, A dove hurt.

[00:04:48] She went on over the flat straw grass following the trees. Now on now off the path, away ahead, over the scribble of tws. The sloping lines of black and platinum grass, all merging, tones but no colour, like an etching was the horizon, the shore at which Loud lapped. Damp burnt grass puffed black, faint dust from beneath her feet.

[00:05:23] She could hear herself swallow. A long way off, she saw a figure with something red on its head, and she drew from it the sense of balance she had felt at the particular placing of the dot of a figure in a picture. She was here, someone was over there. Then the red dot was gone, lost in the curve of the trees.

[00:05:51] She changed her bag and parcel from one arm to the other. and felt the morning palpable, deeply cold and clinging against her eyes. She came to the end of a direct stretch of path and turned with it round a dark fringed pine and a shrub, now deliberately, now delicately boned, that she remembered hung with bunches of white flowers like crystals in the summer.

[00:06:21] There was a native in a red woollen cap, standing at the next clump of trees, but the path crossed a ditch and was bordered by white splashed stones. She had pulled a little sheath of pine needles, three in a twist of thin brown tissue. As she walked, she ran them against her thumb, down smooth and stiff, up catching them.

[00:06:53] Gentle resistance as the minute serrations snagged at the skin. He was standing with his back towards her, looking along the way he had come. She pricked the ball of her thumb with the needle lance. His one trouser leg was torn off above the knee, and the back of the naked leg and half turned heel showed the peculiarly dead.

[00:07:22] powdery black of coat. She was nearer to him now, but she knew he didn't hear her coming over the damp dust of the path. She was level with him, passing him, and he turned slowly and looked beyond her, without a flicker of interest, as the cow sees you go. The eyes were red, as if he hadn't slept for a long time.

[00:07:49] And the strong smell of old sweat burned at her nostrils. Once past, she wanted to cough, but the pang of guilt at the red, wary eyes stopped her. And she had, and he had only a filthy rag, part of an old shirt, without sleeves, and frayed away into a great gap from underarm to waist. It lifted in the currents of cold as she passed.

[00:08:19] She had dropped a trio of pine needles somewhere. She didn't know at what moment. So now, remembering something from childhood, she lifted her hand to her face and sniffed. Yes, it was as she remembered. Not as the chemists pretend it in the bath salts, but the dusty green scat, vegetable rather than flower.

[00:08:46] It was clean and humid, slightly sticky too, packy on her fingers. She must wash them as soon as she got there. Unless her hands were quite clean, she couldn't lose conscious of them. They obtruded upon her. She felt a thudding through the ground like the sound of her hair running in fear. And she was going to turn around, and then He was there in front of her, so startling, so utterly unexpected, panting right into her face.

[00:09:22] He stood dead still, and she stood dead still. Every vestige of control, of sense, of thought, went out of her, as her room plunges into dark at the failure of power, and she found herself whimpering like a child, like an idiot or a child. Animal sounds came out of her throat, she gibbered. For a moment it was fear itself that held her by the arms, the legs, the throat.

[00:09:55] Not fear of the man or any single menace he might present, but fear, absolute, abstract. If the earth had opened up in fire at her feet, If a wild beast had opened its terrible mouth to receive her, she couldn't have been reduced to less than she was now. There was a chest heaving through the tear in front of her, a face panting beneath the red hairy woolen cap, the yellowish red eyes holding her in distrust.

[00:10:34] One foot, cracked from exposure until it looked like broken wood, moved, only to restore balance in the dizziness that follows running. But then a move seemed towards her, and she tried to scream, and the awfulness and dreams came true and nothing would come out. She wanted to throw the handbag and the parcel at him, and as he fumbled gracefully for them, She heard him draw a deep, hoarse breath, and he grabbed out her hand, and, uh, it came.

[00:11:11] His hand clutched her shoulder. Now she fought with him, and she trembled with strength as they struggled. The dust puffed round her shoes and his scuffing toes. The smell of him choked her. It was an old pyjama jacket, not a shirt. His face was sun and there was a pink place where the skin had been grazed off.

[00:11:38] He sniffed desperately, out of breath. Her teeth chattered. Wildly she battered him with her head, broke away, but then snatched at the skirt of her coat and jerked her back. Her face swung up and she saw the waves of a grey sky. And the crane breasting them, beautiful as the figurehead of a ship. She staggered for balance, and the handbag and parcel fell.

[00:12:08] At once it was upon them, and she wheeled about, but as she was about to fall on her knees to get there first, a sudden relief, like a rush of tears, came to her, and instead, she ran. She ran and ran, stumbling widely off through the stalks of dead grass, turning over her heels against hard winter tussocks, blundering through trees and bushes.

[00:12:41] The young meosas closed in, lowering a thicket of twigs right to the ground, but she tore herself through, feeling the dust in her eyes. and the scaly twigs hooking at her hair. There was a ditch, knee high in blackjacks, like pins responding to a magnet that fastened along her legs, but on the other side there was a fence and then the road.

[00:13:11] She clawed at the fence, her hands were capable of nothing, and tried to drag herself between the wires. But her coat got caught on the barb, and she was imprisoned there, bent in half, while waves of terror swept over her, in heat and trembling. At last the wire tore through its hold on the cloth, wobbling frantic, she climbed over the fence.

[00:13:44] And she was out. She was out on the road. A little way on there were houses, with gardens, postboxes, a child's swing, a small dog sat at the gate. She could hear a faint hum as of life, of talk somewhere, or perhaps telephone wires. She was trembling so that she couldn't stand. She had to keep on walking quickly down the road.

[00:14:16] It was quiet and grey, like the morning, and cool. Now she could feel the cold air round her mouth and between her brows, where the skin stood out in sweat, and in the cold wetness that soaked down beneath her armpits and between her buttocks. The pot pumped slowly and stiffly. Yes, the wind was cold. She was suddenly cold, damp cold all through.

[00:14:49] She raised her hand, still fluttering uncontrollably, and smoothed her hair. It was wet at the hairline. She guided her hand into her pocket and found a handkerchief to blow her nose. There was the gate of the first house before her. She thought of the woman coming to the door. of the explanations of the woman's face and the police.

[00:15:21] Why did I fight? She thought suddenly. What did I fight for? Why didn't I give him the money and let him go? His red eyes and the smell and those cracks in his feet, fissures, erosion. She is shattered. The code of the morning flowed into her. She turned away from the gate and went down the road slowly, like an invalid, beginning to pick the blackjacks from her stockings.

[00:15:56] Okay, thank you , Jakob. It's a very powerful story, and gives us a lot to talk about maybe Thank you. One place to start is with how much is left out, right? That is, there's a lot that we don't know. We don't know the names of the characters. We don't know their ages. We don't know the time of day.

[00:16:17] **JIM PHELAN:** We don't know where the woman is going. We don't know the contents of the bag and the parcel, and so on. Now, we're talking about a short story here, and it's, kind of traditional for some short story writers to take advantage of this brevity of the form, right, and its fictionality, to strip the narrative down to its essentials.

[00:16:41] And that might be a place to start with this story. So what, seem to you to be the essentials? What does she keep? So she leaves out all this stuff, but in the service of. getting us to focus on other things. So, what are the main things for you?

[00:16:56] **Jakob Lothe:** there are several things. very complex short narrative.

[00:17:01] And paradoxically, in a way, I'm not sure it is a real paradox, but it is striking brevity, textual brevity, contributes. in part, engenders that complexity.

[00:17:15] **JIM PHELAN:** Yes.

[00:17:16] **Jakob Lothe:** I mean, had it been longer, it could have been complex, but it would have been complex in a different way.

[00:17:21] **JIM PHELAN:** Right. Yeah.

[00:17:23] **Jakob Lothe:** personally, I think it is, a very powerful narrative.

[00:17:27] And I also think, incidentally, that Gorderman's short stories, certainly a story like this one, is at least As powerful as her novels, including her best novels. don't know, there is this very I think very good critic of the short story whose name is Charles May. He has listed a number of criteria or perhaps rather characteristics of the short story as a genre.

[00:17:54] And one of the criteria or characteristics that May mentions. Is, what he calls, the short stories refusal to explain. Mm-Hmm. Refusal to explain. And, when I link that observation, which I think is a very perceptive point. Mm-hmm. this story. I find that this is, a valid observation and more than that, it is an observation that, becomes, for me, a characteristic of the story. But then if I ask, what doesn't it explain? Then again, I'm, hard put to give a good answer because there is so much here that we don't know, as you said. We know very little about the woman, the protagonist, the white woman. We know virtually nothing about the black woman.

[00:18:43] Man, he is almost certainly black.

[00:18:46] **JIM PHELAN:** Right? The word native is, is a sign. I think that, that I have very strong sign of, uh, of the race, the races. Yeah.

[00:18:53] **Jakob Lothe:** Yeah. And then, if we happen to know something about gima which I don't think really we have to do in order to appreciate the story.

[00:19:01] we unavoidably, I think situate the meeting, in the open felt, the word felt is even used at least once, and that is in South Africa,

[00:19:11] **JIM PHELAN:** right, right.

[00:19:12] **Jakob Lothe:** So then there is all the associations of, the word apartheid, which Gordimer doesn't use, but it becomes part of my interpretive thinking.

[00:19:25] **JIM PHELAN:** Right. Right. It's a kind of frame or that there's sort of a built in assumption that this is the condition in South Africa under which this, you know, under which this encounter happens. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Right.

[00:19:39] **Jakob Lothe:** But then, that said, I think it is very important not to become too specific either. Right.

[00:19:46] Because if we do, then Some of the complexity of the story is, lost, because part of Gordimer's achievement here, and I think it is a very significant achievement, is to give us the basic elements of a meeting that could perhaps have been a positive or meaningful meeting that turns out to become violent, and a meeting turns into a confrontation.

[00:20:13] Right. And then she asks me, as a reader, to ask, why is this? And then I'm guided towards a possible answer, which it doesn't give, but I'm guided towards it and then again, I want to mention the narrative, the narrative method, because perspective is The key term here, I think, and that is the perspective is linked to, or limited, we could say, to the woman, to the female protagonist. And then, when she, at the end, asks these two questions that I read in the second last paragraph, in a way, because the woman's perspective is linked to the narrator's perspective, there is a sense in which she also invites me to ask.

[00:20:56] And then she might even invite me to think of meetings in my life as a Norwegian, I mean, that I have had, that could have perhaps become not violent the way this one is, but it linked to the of, not exactly flawed or, unfortunate meeting, , but we're all, I think, in our lives, experienced meetings that could have become better or more positive or more meaningful than they turned out to be.

[00:21:26] So, there is an element of human communication, its possibilities and its, failures, or its difficulties, that are linked to more specific problems of challenges in a South African context. I don't think one dimension excludes the other.

[00:21:46] **JIM PHELAN:** Yes. No, I agree. I agree. And I think your point about perspective is something that we want to talk a little bit more about.

[00:21:52] But it also seems to me that what you're just saying here about , applying the story and the relationship between okay, we can say it's the South African context but also not try to specify, you know, this is Johannesburg or , whatever. Yes. Right. But that also, I think, points to the significance of the title.

[00:22:15] And the kind of work that the title might be doing in framing this encounter, right? Because, in a way, the, title is, Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet? Is, the relationship between that as a question, and then this meeting, which becomes, as you say, violent, right?

[00:22:34] There's, an interesting frame for, this meeting both in the fact that it's a question and the fact that it's pointing to space and especially in the use of the first person plural we, so you know, thoughts about the relationship between the title and the, encounter.

[00:22:54] **Jakob Lothe:** yes, I think that is one of the most important issues, and also questions that we could ask, or perhaps even being invited to ask, about the story. as you know, Jim, I'm very interested in, narrative beginnings, and also re reading narrative beginnings. Yeah. And if, I just make this A bit speculative, perhaps, but not very much.

[00:23:17] Make this point that even if you don't re read the story, it deserves to be re read, you might re read the title, okay? And if you turn back to the title after having read the story, it becomes much more complex and suggestive, because, as I mentioned, the woman Or, Gordimer makes a protagonist ask these questions at the end.

[00:23:46] And those questions are asked by her, not the black person, who isn't really given a voice by Gordimer.

[00:23:54] **JIM PHELAN:** But,

[00:23:55] **Jakob Lothe:** the question in the title could perhaps, could possibly have been asked by the black

[00:24:03] **JIM PHELAN:** man. Okay, yeah.

[00:24:04] **Jakob Lothe:** and if you, admit, or if you think that is a possibility, then you could also extend that to include meetings you have had, perhaps in your life, that have become, for some reason, were difficult, or unsuccessful, or whatever.

[00:24:20] So, I think it is, very rare, at least to my knowledge, To phrase the title as a question, right? But here in this story, I think it works very well,

[00:24:30] **JIM PHELAN:** right? Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, and the we right I think you say There's so many possibilities for the we indeed. Yeah, and the woman the black man Gordimer and Herodians you know, extensions that we might make about that.

[00:24:46] Yeah, yeah. so good. Alright, well let's talk a little bit more then about the perspective. So, you, I mentioned a couple times that we are restricted to the white woman's perspective. We have our only access to the black, we don't have any access to his voice, except perhaps in the title, to his thoughts, to his feelings it's all her.

[00:25:09] So, what about that as a obviously a choice that Gordimer is making in the construction of the story to restrict access to everything through the white woman?

[00:25:24] **Jakob Lothe:** Yeah. Well again, I think it is a very good choice. it works in his story. And you can speculate why, and you can discuss or think about the implications.

[00:25:35] If I just were to mention one, aspect, possibility or one reason why the perspective is limited to that of the white woman, could be that she doesn't know much. Which, what it suggests to me. It reveals some of her ignorance of the other,

[00:25:55] **JIM PHELAN:** the black man.

[00:25:57] **Jakob Lothe:** And then again, it is tempting at least to link this to apartheid, which was a terrible system predicated at least partly on the lack of knowledge or lack of contact between white people and blacks.

[00:26:13] And if you don't communicate, Through narrative, or in other ways, then knowledge about the other, the other person, is necessarily restricted. So, in that sense, if you link perspective to her, it is unsurprising that she knows so little about the, man who becomes her opponent in a way. Now, I use the term perspective, I like that term, our very denoted scholar, Mieke Ball, she uses the term focalization, and she also says, which I think is a very important point, that focalization, and I would Extend that point to include perspective is not necessarily linked only to the agent that sees Mm-Hmm.

[00:27:00] but could also be linked to the agent or person or character who is being looked

[00:27:05] **JIM PHELAN:** at the vocalized. Right? Yeah.

[00:27:08] **Jakob Lothe:** Ized focalization. Focal ized.

[00:27:11] **JIM PHELAN:** Right.

[00:27:12] **Jakob Lothe:** Okay. And then the ized person here. We know that there must be a perspective. He must also have his, he has his perspective. What, but our knowledge or information about that is not just restricted, it is simply, it doesn't exist.

[00:27:29] **JIM PHELAN:** It's absent, right, we don't get it at all. It's absent, yes. Right, right, right, right.

[00:27:33] **Jakob Lothe:** And that is,

[00:27:34] **JIM PHELAN:** right, so in a way,

[00:27:36] **Jakob Lothe:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:37] **JIM PHELAN:** So in a way, what we're getting is the focus on her perceptions and feelings and so on. Right. And that I think is striking. Right. And we can, talk about a little bit of a progression, right?

[00:27:51] First she sees the, red hat and then she, Places that in the landscape, it's, it's a balance and so on, and then she walks past and she feels like okay, and she's noticing and she, you know, what he looks like, what his clothes are like, et cetera, but she's also like playing with those pine needles, right?

[00:28:13] It's like a kind of distraction or something like that, and then when he runs and gets in front of her, that's when we get the passage about. The fear, right? Her reaction is fear, right? And there's, again, because we don't know anything about him there's this sort of like, what, why are you so afraid?

[00:28:35] What is , okay, so he's poor, his clothes are tattered and torn and so on, but before he does anything, she's overwhelmed by fear. Right? And I think the other aspect here that maybe is worth bringing out is, of course, not only race, but gender, right? So, yeah, white woman, black man and then her response, which is, it seems to be, again, connected to things beyond the specifics of the, situation, right?

[00:29:05] The assumptions that she's making Do you want to comment any further on that? Yeah,

[00:29:10] **Jakob Lothe:** I agree, absolutely. It's strange, isn't it, that a progression is important in the story, and there is very considerable progression on at least two levels that are intertwined in a very interesting way. First, there is progression or plot in the sense that they meet, and They have this meeting that becomes a confrontation.

[00:29:35] They fight, and then she runs away from him. And eventually, or soon after, she reaches this fence, which is also metaphorically very loaded in the context of apartheid, and she is in a way, saved, in inverted commas. But that is, just one dimension, because there is also progression as regards her own, I hesitate a bit to use the word development, but there is a certain character development on her part over the course of the narrative.

[00:30:08] And if there hadn't been that development, you would hardly have asked herself these questions, at the end, you know. So, I think those questions are in themselves an indication of a change, or development, or growth on the part of the white woman. But, again, Gordimer refuses to explain. I mean, in a way, she explains a bit, because she makes her ask these questions, but she doesn't really say.

[00:30:37] or indicate how much the woman has understood,

[00:30:41] **JIM PHELAN:** but

[00:30:41] **Jakob Lothe:** at least there is a certain movement.

[00:30:45] **JIM PHELAN:** Yes.

[00:30:45] **Jakob Lothe:** And, uh, I've written a short piece on this, short story in which think I used the expression, a qualified Pope at the end, I mean, without those questions, I think the ending would have been even more resigned, even bleaker than it is now.

[00:31:01] **JIM PHELAN:** Right. And I think, you know, it's also striking that once you gets the questions, right? It's, yeah, we get her voice, right? We switch to the first person. We do. Yes. You know what, what did she say? Why did I do ? Yeah. There are a couple other things about the encounter that I think maybe are worth touching before we go to the ending.

[00:31:23] And I think it's important to talk about the ending. We have the fear, right, which, which is so powerful, so strong, she capitalizes it Gordimer capitalizes it and so on and she tried to scream and the awfulness of dreams came true and nothing would come out all this is before there's any.

[00:31:44] physical encounter. Yes. Right. Then, his hand clutched her shoulder, so there it begins, and then she fought, right? There's a lot of emphasis on her action, right? And less on his. I mean, he does grasp her shoulder, clutch her shoulder. But it's also that she uses her head to strike him, right?

[00:32:10] Yes. and then he pulls on her coat, right? And then, She staggered for balance and the handbag and parcel fell at once he was upon them, right? He's, easy for us to say, but he's interested in the parcel of the handbag. he seems less interested in doing violence to her, right?

[00:32:29] He wants, those things. And then it's at that moment, right? Where after they fall As she was about to fall on her knees to get there first, a sudden relief, like a rush of tears, came to her and instead she ran. Right? And it's like, okay, that moment, and then I think we could link that to her questions.

[00:32:51] And it's almost like , maybe she realizes that that's all it is. or that's the main thing. He wants the handbag and the parcel. she doesn't have to be afraid of being assaulted and then that links back to the whole thing about, title, Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet, Can We Meet In Some Other Different Way?

[00:33:11] Et cetera. And that's all, again, tied up with all the assumptions about racial difference, gender difference and so on that we've, that we've talked about. the other thing about it, that middle section is, you know, in terms of, if we think about how. Gordimer handles time in the story, right?

[00:33:29] if we use Jeanette's idea of story time and discourse time, story time is not that much longer than discourse time but the greatest duration is given to the encounter, right, and that, progression of fear and , the interaction, the, the physical confrontation, and then her decision to, leave and run, right?

[00:33:58] And it makes that encounter sort of the central focus of the story. it's like the node that we can go back to as we think about those questions, as we think about the title and so on. So, , I've just given you my, my, my take on how the time is working.

[00:34:17] Go ahead. You, you say what you want to say about the time and the story. Very,

[00:34:21] **Jakob Lothe:** very important aspects of the story. I think encounter, the word you used, is very interesting here because encounter becomes the confrontation. Right,

[00:34:32] **JIM PHELAN:** right.

[00:34:33] **Jakob Lothe:** and that is a very different kind of meeting from encounter. A meeting that could have happened, under different circumstances, perhaps even in a different societal situation with no apartheid.

[00:34:47] it's very interesting, I think, that when Gordimer wrote this story, published it in 1947, apartheid was not yet an official sort of policy or system in South Africa. but the foundation for, or the attitudes that led to apartheid were really operative

[00:35:08] **JIM PHELAN:** already.

[00:35:08] **Jakob Lothe:** And, Gordimer could see this, so in one sense, this is just one dimension, but it's, it indicates some of the story's complexity.

[00:35:18] You could also read this story as a warning against apartheid I'm not saying it is, it's sort of proleptic or a flash forward, but. there is certainly an element of her skepticism about the system that

[00:35:32] **JIM PHELAN:** Right.

[00:35:33] **Jakob Lothe:** That Right. Invalidates or even makes meetings right. Positive meetings.

[00:35:39] Impossible. Right. And then getting back to your, comment on fair, it's very interesting that much of the discourse time is, as you said, devoted to the meeting or the confrontation, but even within that. And much of the discourse is devoted not to the meeting itself, but to her experience of the meeting, even before it occurred.

[00:36:00] So not an experience in its real sense, but a kind of fear, and then a capital F, which makes it, to me at least, a very general kind of fear. And what you suspect, that I suspect as a reader, is that, I mean, what is the source of this fear? Could it be? A kind of attitude to blacks or to the other that she has learned or been sort of accustomed to at home or together with other white people in South Africa.

[00:36:33] then realization then linked to this key word relief, that this was probably not as dangerous as it in a way should have been. According to the ideology of Apartheid, because essentially what the man wanted was something to eat.

[00:36:52] **JIM PHELAN:** Yeah. We think, yeah. Right. Right. And I mean, again, it's not you know, he doesn't speak all that I mean, he grabs her shoulder, right, he's going for the bag, and so on, so it's not as if there's no reason to feel okay, , there's some kind of invasion of my personal space, et cetera, there's , he wants to take my property, those kinds of things, I don't want,, you know, we shouldn't totally, turn this into, oh, she's , inventing some kind of, offenses on his, part, but it does, you know, this whole situation is layered in the, ways that we've been talking about it. It's,

[00:37:26] **Jakob Lothe:** it's layered and one dimension doesn't exclude the other. Right. Yeah. Yeah, but it says something about the the complexity of the story.

[00:37:34] **JIM PHELAN:** Yeah.

[00:37:35] **Jakob Lothe:** And as regards voice and the interlinking of or interplay of voice and perspective, it's very interesting. think that a part of these questions she asks at the end, they are very important. she doesn't have much of a voice, she either. And when she tries to speak or at the end.

[00:37:54] Or speak uh, at the meeting or confrontation. I think Guadalupe uses the expression animal sounds. So she, she doesn't really, I think it's maybe because of the fear she feels, which is a very general kind. She is not even able to speak, So they're both speechless, in a way, in the confrontation, which is also then projected or described by Gordon as a negative, sort of dangerous aspect of the meeting.

[00:38:25] **JIM PHELAN:** Right. Yeah. No, that's good. And I think just one other thing worth commenting on before we turn to the ending, which is there's so much attention to the woman's behavior. senses, right, that she's, we get , her, what she sees what she smells What she hears, right and then, of course, the physical touching.

[00:38:50] And then also the bodily responses you know, we get her after she's escaped, we, we're, well, also she's very aware of the cold, right? And then we have this juxtaposition of the feeling of the cold and the sweat pouring down her after this. So the link between the, mental and the physical you know, what she's thinking and, and then what she's taking in with four of her senses and then, what she's feeling with, her bodily responses.

[00:39:21] That's another dimension of the complexity of the, story and, how Gordimer is, kind of, even though she doesn't tell us so much else, that's part of what she, homes in on.

[00:39:34] **Jakob Lothe:** Yes.

[00:39:34] **JIM PHELAN:** so,

[00:39:35] **Jakob Lothe:** I think this short story, has so many qualities. One of them is, I think It's a wonderful demonstration of the interplay aesthetics and ethics.

[00:39:44] **JIM PHELAN:** OK

[00:39:45] **Jakob Lothe:** Charles May, I mentioned him a few minutes ago, this theorist. He makes this point that partly because of its brevity a short story tends to perhaps prioritize the aesthetic dimension. Hmm. At the cost or, or over the ethical dimension. And I'm not sure I agree. No. If you think of this story, I would argue that the questions, perhaps we're talking about them very soon, but the questions I would say are ethical.

[00:40:16] Ethical questions. Absolutely.

[00:40:17] **JIM PHELAN:** But the

[00:40:18] **Jakob Lothe:** reason why they become powerful is the aesthetics. That is the, the form, the narrative, right? Gordon's use of her narrator, and not least her manipulation of. What I would call attitudinal distance, or the distance concerning values and priorities between the narrator and, the woman, because at the beginning, as we have said, there seems to be a kind of affinity between the two, partly because the perspective is linked to the woman.

[00:40:48] But then at the end that distance increases, and yet it is also then modified at the very end, because then It is as though that White woman too becomes skeptical about her attitudes

[00:41:03] **JIM PHELAN:** and her

[00:41:04] **Jakob Lothe:** values in her meeting with the black man. So again, given its brevity, the story is, I think, impressively, remarkably complex.

[00:41:14] **JIM PHELAN:** Yes, I agree, right. And then, yeah, so maybe we can talk about the qualified hope and the ending there, right, in this connection. the two questions we get those and , we get the questions as she's thinking that she'll go to the gate, she'll go to the first house and explain what happened and so on. Then she asks the questions and then she decides not to go to the house, right? so she has the questions, why did I fight? What did I fight for? Why didn't I give him the money and let him go? Then she thinks of his red eyes and the smell and those cracks in his feet, Fisher's erosion. She shuddered.

[00:41:57] And we get the cold again, the cold of the morning flowed into her. And then we get the last paragraph, I think, where We get the narrator commenting reporting and interpreting a little rather than the perspective of the woman, right? She turned away from the gate and went down the road slowly, like an invalid, beginning to pick the blackjacks from her stockings.

[00:42:23] So, what do you make of, what do you make of our ending here? .

[00:42:26] **Jakob Lothe:** Well, I think it is a marvelous ending, but it's not easy to interpret , because as we've been saying is so complex and there are so many possibilities. one aspect of the ending is that it invites you to link it. I mean, the narrator or the, and er, using her narrator invites me as a reader to link the ending to the title.

[00:42:50] **JIM PHELAN:** Okay.

[00:42:51] **Jakob Lothe:** But also to the confrontation or the meeting that becomes the confrontation. So, on the one hand, there is, as I try to say, a very marked attitudinal distance, which is clearly indicated through this, comparisonal simile. Like an invalid, which is when Gorima is using or making her narrator use a very, very, very strong language here.

[00:43:17] Invalid. But then again, part of that distance, not all of it, but part of that attitude in the distance is qualified. Because you could say that even though she doesn't use the word invalid about herself, the questions that the woman asks in the preceding paragraph are also at least self critical.

[00:43:42] And they, what did I ask, what did I fight for? Why didn't I give him the money and let him go? as though, I'm not saying that she is presented as an invalid, far from it, but is an element of uncertainty. about her identity, about her life, perhaps even, her priorities, her values, that in a way then connected.

[00:44:07] To this simile or comparison in at the very, very end of the story.

[00:44:12] **JIM PHELAN:** Yeah, yeah, good. I also think you know, , I was struck by the use of that word invalid. I wonder if, if she was writing it in, 2024 whether she would use something else. I mean that because all the things that are loaded with that that term invalid , yes, sort of consciousness has been raised about some of that kind of language.

[00:44:34] yeah, but I think that she's she is trying to get at something like the difference between how she was walking when she started out and how she's walking now after the encounter, after these thoughts and so on, so even as, she's sort of processing it, she's still affected by it in some way that's, she's sort of carrying.

[00:44:54] with it. And, again, as you say, Gordimer leaves a lot for us to kind of fill in. Well, what , how much do we think she's changed? even the juxtaposition of the questions with her shuttering and, feeling a call to the morning again, like the, the complexity of the, whole thing.

[00:45:11] She stays with that all the way. She, she does, she does. Yeah. Yeah. And

[00:45:16] **Jakob Lothe:** one, this might, may, may sound a bit speculative, but it, there is also poss an interpretive possibility. I mean, if you approach this ending from the perspective of. apartheid and post colonial studies.

[00:45:29] **JIM PHELAN:** Yeah.

[00:45:30] **Jakob Lothe:** You might even suggest that tentatively that like an invalid could apply or could be related not just to the woman, but also to the system of apartheid.

[00:45:41] **JIM PHELAN:** Yeah.

[00:45:41] **Jakob Lothe:** Which fortunately later, uh, Turned out not to be on the side of history,

[00:45:46] **JIM PHELAN:** but

[00:45:47] **Jakob Lothe:** some kind of anachronistic system that is at odds with or opposed to fundamental human rights and so on.

[00:45:54] **JIM PHELAN:** Absolutely. So,

[00:45:56] **Jakob Lothe:** I don't know. kind of association reflection is, it's not specified. It is, as you say, left to the reader.

[00:46:04] **JIM PHELAN:** Right, right. But

[00:46:05] **Jakob Lothe:** there is a kind of. It was almost an element of mystery, an enigmatic story in some ways, because there's so much we don't know.

[00:46:15] **JIM PHELAN:** Right. But again, I think, you know, going back to some of the things you were saying about, the pre apartheid system and so on, if we think about the occasion of the telling, right, of, of Gordimer's writing, right, all the associations with, the racial, system, in South Africa, I think really do inform the story and, and help us make sense of it.

[00:46:37] Right? And the critique of that system it's clear, but it's also complex as you've been, saying. Yeah. So, yeah. Thank you. so we're coming to the end of our time. Is there anything that we didn't get to that you'd like to touch on, Jakob?

[00:46:52] **Jakob Lothe:** I think, Gordimer's, fiction and not least our short stories are not just interesting, I think they are important, and, I, just repeat what I said about their, suggestiveness, their complexity, both in themselves and also in the relation to her novels.

[00:47:09] So I think that she is still A main representative of South African literature and a main representative of the wonderful genre of the short story.

[00:47:19] **JIM PHELAN:** Okay. Yes. That's a good way, a good way to end. So, so thank you very much, Jakob. Pleasure. Pleasure. Yes. And I also want to thank our listeners and say we'd appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at projectnarrative@osu.edu

[00:47:37] on our Facebook page or on our Twitter account, which is at @PNOhioState. I'll also mention that you can find more than 20 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts.