CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN DORIS LESSING'S *AFRICAN LAUGHTER*

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Abstract: Doris Lessing's African Laughter is an account of four journeys to Zimbabwe. The travelling protagonist, the author herself, was born of British parents, spent her childhood on a large farm in Southern Rhodesia, and first came to England in 1949. Declared a prohibited immigrant by the colony's white government, Lessing was prevented from returning to Southern Rhodesia because of her anti-colonial ideas. Since the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, she has been allowed entrance again, and African Laughter recounts Doris Lessing's journeys made between 1982 and 1992.

This paper aims to demonstrate that, in her African writings, Doris Lessing works both within and beyond the colonial experience, and that she understands the rigorous limitations of colonial society, which relies for identity and cohesion on the attempt at maintaining its own narrow boundaries. Despite all these, she imaginatively steps outside those borders. This extended vision enables her to see beyond the false colonial myth of white superiority, of the necessity that blacks and whites should never mix.

Furthermore, the analysis will show that Doris Lessing disrupts the conventional linearity of African travelogue, undermining the distancing, commanding gaze of most postcolonial travel writing. She breaks the mould of conventional travel writing on Africa by criticizing the legacy of colonial discourse, and by confronting the alienation of the colonial gaze as an aspect of her own identity.

By blending personal and political experience, objective and subjective perspectives, documentary interest and empathy, it becomes increasingly apparent that, for the author, Africa is more than a geographical place; it is a metaphor for displacement and for the writing experience.

Keywords: Africa, identity, myth, nostalgia, memory, travel writing.

Multiculturalism is the emblem of Doris Lessing's entire literary production as well as of her whole life experience. A prolific contemporary British writer and the recipient of more than twenty literary prizes and awards, Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran) and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) until 1949, when she came to England with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*. The novel was published in 1950, and brought its author immediate success. Since then she has never ceased writing, producing a huge number of novels, short stories, narratives, exploring a variety of themes.

After a seven-year absence, Lessing returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1956, in order to revisit the country of her childhood. At the end of her trip – during which she had been under constant surveillance by the political police – her presence was declared undesirable in both Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, because of her political views. The experiences of this trip are narrated in her book *Going Home* (1957), partly a personal narrative, partly a travel notebook. It was only after Rhodesia had gained its independence in 1980 that she was able to return to that part of Africa. *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992) describes her four visits to Southern Africa, between 1982 and 1992.

The years spent in Africa influenced Lessing deeply, both as a maturing woman and as a writer. 'Africa belongs to the Africans', she wrote in 1956. 'The sooner they take it back, the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it' (*Going Home*, 11). Undoubtedly she is one of 'those' who feel at home in it, to the extent that ever since she left Africa, she has regarded herself as an exile. She is, after all, 'an expert in unsettlement' (Sage,

11), or, in Judith Gardiner's words, 'a colonial in exile', whose work is characterized by 'a fruitful unsettledness that makes… [her both an] inheritor…and [an] antagonist…to imperialism…. The English literary tradition is the reassuring heritage of a mother tongue, but it is also somewhat alien' (Gardiner, 13).

Doris Lessing's writing career was forged by Africa. Her main, haunting theme is definitely grounded in the problem of how, as a white settler, she can deal with oppression: the inner and outer dimensions of her condition as an exile, in Africa (where she is British) and in 'her' country, where she longs for her African experience. The tensions in Lessing's stories clearly rely on the coexistence of a romantic response to the African bush and the author's awareness that the capitalism of the settlers was to blame, as it sought to transform it into profitable settlements. The landscape, its people – both black and white – Africa's recent history and present society, which informed most of her first thirty years, are the subject matter of a major part of her writing.

In her African writings, Doris Lessing works both within and beyond the colonial experience. She understands the rigorous limitations of colonial society, which relies for identity and cohesion on the attempt at maintaining its own narrow boundaries. In spite of that, she imaginatively steps outside those borders. This extended vision enables her to see beyond the false colonial myth of white superiority, of the necessity that blacks and whites should never mix. The most important feature of her African texts however, is the endeavour to re-imagine relationships between liminal white and black heroes in Southern Rhodesia. In her exploration of this liminality, which is, her life-long obsession, Lessing advocates convergence rather than categorization.

Very little critical attention has been paid to her Southern African writing, a corpus of texts marked by a 35-year gap: two were published in the 1950s, and two in the 1990s. In *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*, Green refers to *Going Home*, *African Laughter* and *Under My Skin* (8), but offers no analysis of these texts in her book-length study of Lessing's vision of change. Similarly, Bertelsen only mentions, yet does not examine Lessing's extended 'autobiographical narratives' (15) in her introduction to *Doris Lessing.* In his 1978 study of Lessing's African writing, Michael Thorpe concludes with confidence: 'Since The *Four-Gated City* was published in 1969 Lessing has no longer been identifiable as an African writer in the strict sense, that is, her subject matter is no longer African and her themes have no specific relevance to Africa' (101). On the contrary, I will argue that quite the reverse is true: Lessing has written extensively about Southern Africa since Zimbabwe achieved independence in 1980, and since South Africa finally dismantled apartheid in 1994. The re-emergence of her Southern African writing is not merely an objective response to political change, but also a deeply felt consequence of the lifting of her ban as a prohibited immigrant in both countries, a status she resented for more than twenty-five years.

Lessing's study of race and class begins in her first novel, *The Grass is Singing,* which depicts the failure of intimacy between a white woman and her African male servant. In this first novel, the relationship between the 'poor' white woman and the native becomes an ideological paradigm. The autobiographical texts Lessing has written since she moved to England are less confined to the poor white paradigm and become more optimistic, less categorical in their exploration of the relationship and intimacy across the race barrier. Furthermore, she is determined to express empathy, primarily through dialogue. She explains

in her preface to *African Stories,* that 'colour prejudice' is symptomatic 'of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun' (8). Several critics have written about Lessing's interest in empathy. Green discusses Lessing's understanding of 'imagination as empathy' (22) and the 'empathic receptiveness' of her characters (221). Judith Gardiner mentions empathy in her book, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy*, but confines her study to Lessing's short stories.

Thus, Lessing explores the possibility of transgressive relationships between the 'week links' (Bertelsen 16) among Southern African settlers and Africans. In other words, she establishes convergence zones, where very dissimilar places and people (otherwise unlikely to interact) meet. In doing so, Lessing undermines, as Ann Stoler (1995) puts it, the myth of a white bourgeois hegemony in Southern Rhodesia (116), that 'intensely race and class-conscious colonial society' (Thorpe 6).

Lessing's 'pre-independence' *Going Home,* written less than a decade after *The Grass is Singing,* deals with the 'poor white' problem seen as a challenge of colonial myths about white hegemony, and explores the possibility of interracial dialogue. Yet, the author is reluctant to imagine her own transgressions, and struggles to maintain the text's objectivity. Lessing's 'post-independence' texts, *African Laughter* and *Under My Skin,* revise *Going Home,* and are more successful in their subjective study of myth and dialogue. The distinction between these periods is crucial, because these three books are distinguished by their chronological position in relation to Zimbabwean Independence. In turn, independence functions as a metaphor for Lessing's own growing up as a writer, of her experiments with genre and subjectivity.

It becomes increasingly apparent that Africa is more than a geographical place; it is a metaphor for displacement and for the writing experience. It has given her the strength and an almost overwhelming sense of being an outsider in the culture of the West, upon which she has cast a cold eye, as well as a stranger in Africa to which she has never delivered the 'Great South African Novel' (42), in the words of the critic Eve Bertelsen.

However, in *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992), Lessing made a symbolic gesture: a change of name for that part of Africa she grew up in. In her detailed study on naming patterns in Lessing's fiction, *Rereading Doris Lessing Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*, Claire Sprague observes that naming has always been a political strategy for Doris Lessing. Indeed, in *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing uses the name Rhodesia for her Southern African settings, but in *Martha Quest* she permanently changes that name to Zambesia, probably after the Zambesi River. 'That name change is significant. It demonstrates Lessing's discomfort with the English-imposed Rhodesia. So over thirty years before Africans repossessed the name of their land, Lessing symbolically repossessed it for them' (Sprague, 166). Above all, *African Laughter* is, on the one hand, a more experimental work as far as the narrative technique is concerned, and, on the other hand, she foregrounds dialogue and empathy between blacks and whites in the newly Independent Zimbabwe.

In *African Laughter* Lessing assumes a quasi-sociological role, piecing together many discursive modes, including interviews, records of conversations, historical and geographical information, to show how attitudes in post-Zimbabwe evolve during her four visits from 1982 to 1992. Past speaks to present, black speak to white, political promises confront what happens in practice, the narrative, and the people she meets speak with many voices, praising

achievements, discussing shortcomings, always pointing to the dynamics of development, but the writer's displacement and its irony remain.

Offering multiple perspectives of black and white Zimbabweans, Lessing explores the complex relationship connecting trauma, nostalgia, and 'the bush', a topography that has been depleted by colonization. Seen with her 'other eye', the violent legacy of white occupation of the land is particularly well-drawn. One might be tempted to interpret Lessing's concept of writing with the 'other eye' as an attempt to speak from the position of the racial 'other' and therefore, however unintentionally, contributing to a project that re-colonizes non-whites. But, as John McCallister notes, Lessing destabilizes the objectifying and elusive colonial gaze by engaging with multiple forms and perspectives, thereby creating 'an alternative form of narrative that will not unwittingly re-inscribe the epistemology of colonialism in the structure of the narrative itself' (13). Lessing also examines how perceptions of landscape are culturally informed, implying that whites' attitude toward the bush differ from those of Mashona and Matabele inhabitants: "An anthropologist said, 'When I'm with the old people, I have to remind myself they live in a different landscape. Each rock, tree, path, hill, bird, animal has meaning"' (*African Laughter*, 348). Lessing's approach can be aligned with Dominick LaCapra's notion of objectivity which, contrary to objectification, is a meticulous form of research that involves empathy and respect for the other and 'the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own' (40).

Written in 1992, the travelogue announces Lessing's return to a thematic focus on Africa, however, this return is only partly a regression to the realist aesthetic that characterized her earlier writings set in Africa. Although travel writing is conventionally a genre imbued with notions of realism, truthfulness and veracity, *African Laughter* formally experiments with these notions. *African Laughter* consists of four chapters, and each narrates one journey, without any linear chronological structure. Although three out of four chapters start off with a description of the traveller's flight with Air Zimbabwe and her arrival, the subsequent travels through Zimbabwe are narrated in a fragmented way. *African Laughter* challenges the traditional travel plot, at least if we consider the travel genre to be an account of a singular, chronological journey from departure to arrival (Borm, 17).

The narrative of the four journeys is constructed as four compilations of narrative fragments, typographically divided by blank spaces and bold titles, which introduce referential information such as places ('Talk on the Verandahs', 'In the Offices' or 'The Mashopi Hotel'), topics ('Aids', 'Corruption' or 'Witchcraft') or people and types of people ('Garfield Todd', 'The Travelling Classes', 'The Farmers in the Mountains'). Sometimes they convey a more enigmatic, literary message ('Over the Rainbow', 'The Monologue'). These fragments suggest being what Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) called 'a bricolage', a postmodern aesthetic technique, characterized by non-linearity, diversity and simultaneity. In these fragments, daily practices, particular situations and conversations are narrated, in direct or indirect speech, which divert the readers' attention from the I-narrator. That the protagonist's travel experience is slipping out of focus is reinforced by the typographical composition of the narrative fragments and other characters who act as focalizers. For instance, in the fragment titled 'So what should be done?' the I-narrator is effaced, and only the views of the three characters remain:

> Marxist student: The bourgeois Revolution has failed. Now we must have a revolution of the Proletariat.
> Black farmer: Transport, it's all transport. If only Comrade Mugabe would organize transport…
> White man: (born in the country, plans to stay in it, on innumerable boards, committees, charitable governing bodies): First you take the brakes off investment. But that won't change anything until something else happens….training, training, training…it's training that we need… (416-17)

Rendering people's opinions and conversations in direct speech, this form of bricolage includes various versions of the colonial and postcolonial past, as narrated by individuals who recount their daily lives. As a result, history's intentions come to be presented as the intentions of manifold subjects, and no certainty is claimed about what those intentions might be. Since Zimbabwe is represented as a plurality of voices and details, any human attempt at understanding its past, present or future proves to be deficient. By registering Zimbabwe's particularities, such as eating habits, transport, political figures or farming techniques, the impression is created that the individual voices are, as one character says, 'nothing but straw[s] blown in the winds of history' (379).

In terms of the new political state of Zimbabwe, Lessing, on her first trip in 1982, notices that people are working hard for a new future, she perceives 'the vigour, the optimism, the determination of the people' (10). In her following travels, however, her optimism about the new government gradually declines. She observes that people of both races find the Robert Mugabe regime inadequate, as he does not have enough educated people in administrative positions: people who are placed in governmental positions are not university graduates, but Comrades coming from the Bush (155). Her final trip is totally pessimistic since 'people have given up hopeful expectations' (431).

In terms of the white and black citizens' attitude toward each other, Lessing notices that hostility still endures. For example, her brother, who defends colonial ideology, defines the black people as 'inferiors' (48). In John McCallister's view, Lessing's brother refuses to acknowledge that he is the same as blacks in his fear of going native (12); however, his tenuous sense of superiority and his claims to the land in the new Zimbabwe also relies on nostalgic claims of his civilized relationship to the land. The adaptation of at least some of the whites to the African culture, which they once disdained, is noticed by the narrator with irony: 'Nothing is more satisfying to the ironies-of-history nerve than to watch those whites who stay in Zimbabwe but preserve their feelings of superiority, filling their plates with sadza. *Then* – in the old days – sadza was kaffir food and no white would dream of eating it' (358).

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said identifies travel writing as a genre historically complicit with the colonial project, one which prescribes to the western traveller 'a flexible positional superiority' over the non-western cultures represented (Said, 7). The claiming of this superiority is to a large extent related to the fact that travel writing as a genre, he suggests, is a form of ethnographic writing. Similarly, Tim Youngs notes that colonial travel writing was important not just for what it said, but also for the 'structures of attitude and reference' it established (Youngs, 10-11). Chief among these is a way of looking at the other from a 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' perspective (Pratt, 216-21). Doris Lessing disrupts the conventional

linearity of African travelogue, undermining the distancing, commanding gaze of most postcolonial travel writing. She breaks the mould of conventional travel writing on Africa by criticizing the legacy of colonial discourse, and by confronting the alienation of the colonial gaze as an aspect of her own identity.

I stood there, needless to say limp with threatening tears, unable to believe in all that magnificence, the space, the marvel of it. I had been brought up in this place. I lived here from the age of five until I left it forever thirteen years later. I lived here. No wonder this myth country tugged and pulled…what a privilege, what a blessing. (315)

What distinguishes this statement of Lessing's return to the landscapes of her youth from the tormented struggles of her fictionalized persona, Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook* is the softening of the idea of nostalgia as a 'lie'. There is not so much a sense of loss as of recovery, even of wonder, and acceptance of both what has been forgotten and what has been remembered. She even recognizes that her sense of loss is not only personal, but also general, 'every day there are more people everywhere in the world in mourning for trees, forest, bush, rivers, animals, lost landscapes…you could say this is an established part of the human mind, a layer of grief always deepening and darkening' (318). This may be seen as her way of connecting the past with the present, by creating an ironic gap between the myths of Africa, and the realities of the present.

Memory and nostalgia play a crucial role here, as they are in a process of continuous reconstructions and recycling. They are sites of ongoing conflict, contestation and symbolic struggle. In the fragments that enact Doris Lessing as the autobiographical travelling persona, her personal thoughts, memories and observations take centre stage as a collapse of distancing and objectivity.

In *Going Home*, Lessing sees her interdiction of entering Africa as an exclusion from her own 'best self' (12). As a prohibited immigrant, after twenty-five years, in *African Laughter*, this best self is characterized rather ambivalently, and it is exemplified by a recurring dream:

> I dreamed the same dream night after night, I was in the bush, or in Salisbury, but I was there illegally, without papers. 'My' people, that is, the whites, with whom after all I had grown up, were coming to escort me out of the country, while to 'my' people, the blacks. Amiable multitudes, I was invisible. This went for months. To most people it comes home that inside our skins we are not made of a uniform and evenly distributed substance, like a cake-mix or mashed potato, or even sadza, but rather accommodate several mutually unfriendly entities. It took me much longer to ask myself the real question: what effect on our behaviour, our decisions, may these subterranean enemies have? That lake of tears, did it slop about, or seep, or leak, secretly making moist what I thought I kept dry? (12-13)

The dream reveals that the prohibition sparked off rather mixed and ambivalent feelings of longing and belonging. Yet, 'my people' is repeated in order to point out feelings of belonging to two racially marked collectives, black and white. The narrator cannot identify wholeheartedly with either of them. The whites, among whom she was raised, reject her because of her anti-colonial ideas. The blacks, with whom she politically affiliated, do not see her. The domestic image of typically English mashed potato is juxtaposed here with sadza (Zimbabwean food) and forms a mixed diet that echoes Lessing's fragmented and multiple identities. The dream implies that the traveller's experiences of Africa were situated, to

paraphrase the title of Louise Yelin's (1998) study, at 'the margins of empire'. As her gender, racial and political affiliations continuously clash with one another, the traveller's geographies of belonging are always displaced.

Her awareness of the dangers of colonial fantasizing about the African soul, combined with her sense of the socio-political realities of her corner of Africa, enable her to distance herself from the limitations of personal nostalgia. For her, 'myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth' (35) which caries with it both historical and personal history. For the writer the matter is more complicated:

> This business of writers' myth-countries is far from simple. I know writers who very early build tall fences around theirs and afterwards make sure they never go near them. And not only writers all the people I know from former dominions, colonies, or any part of the earth they grew upon before making that essential flight in and away from the periphery to the centre: when the time comes for them to make the first trip it means stripping off new skin and offering exposed and smarting flesh – to the past. For that matter every child who has left home to become an adult knows the diminishing of the first trip home. (301)

Lessing's dilemma is that of all white settler writings. How much is it possible to represent the Other? Or, how much of those whose experiences one is excluded from by the situation in which one is brought up, is it possible to find in oneself? The urge to rewrite the colonial past as a result of the promptings of creative nostalgia poses an acute challenge, which Lessing cannot always meet – as she realizes, struggling with new kinds of narrative. This may be what underlies some of Lessing's pursuits of border crossings. Having moved from the margins of the British Empire to its centre, where, although apparently at home, she reflects a sense of rootlessness – not literally, but in terms of redefining the self through a series of imaginative constructions.

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