

Doris Lessing, Feminism and the Representation of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT This article examines the complex intertwinements of feminism, anti-colonial Marxism and imperialism in the work of the recent Literature Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing, particularly in her writings on colonial Africa and the travelogue *African Laughter*. The article outlines the implications of these intersections for the representation of Zimbabwe against some political, aesthetic and epistemological developments in Lessing's oeuvre. Through a reading of *African Laughter*, the article argues that a crucial tension is at stake between Lessing's political project of giving voice to black Zimbabweans and the western female protagonist as the authoritative subject of this project. The aim is to render an innovative perspective of Doris Lessing's status as a feminist icon, which she gained in the wake of her acclaimed novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), by proceeding from postcolonial feminist scholarship.

KEY WORDS feminist postcolonial theory ♦ intersectionality ♦ Doris Lessing ♦ literary criticism ♦ travel writing

Although the recent Literature Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing has tackled various themes in many genres, her acclaimed novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) has made her into one of the major feminist icons of literary history. One of the founders of feminist literary criticism, Elaine Showalter, for instance, has devoted considerable attention to Lessing's work (Showalter, 1978). In her introduction to *The Golden Notebook* in 1971, however, Lessing resisted the reductive label of 'feminist' and spoke out against those who claimed the multifaceted novel merely 'as a useful weapon in the sex war'. As Lessing continues, 'the essence of the book . . . says implicitly and explicitly that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise' (Lessing, 1999 [1962]: xv). This latter point precisely resonates with

developments in feminist theory since the 1970s, which included an increasing attention to the exclusions and simplifications involved in unitary categories such as 'woman' and 'feminism' and in undifferentiated statements on the basis of their illusionary monolithic nature. Recent feminist theorists have considered gender as an intersectional category for the purpose of grasping how the world is not only and simply shaped by gender relations, but also by intertwining power relations relating to other social categories such as ethnicity and class (Anthias and Yuval Davies, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). The vexed status of white women and the complex relationship between feminism and imperialism has particularly increasingly dominated postcolonial feminist agendas (Burton, 1994; Grewal, 1996; Mills, 1991; Siegel, 2004; Ware, 1992). In the wake of these developments, I reconsider Lessing's feminism by taking her caution 'not to divide things off' to heart. That Lessing's feminism intersects with colonial history as well as with her involvement in Marxism will be an important issue to address in the discussion.

I examine Lessing's consistent focus on anti-colonial white female protagonists and assess its implications for the literary representation of (colonial and postcolonial) Zimbabwe in her oeuvre. Particular attention is devoted to Lessing's most recent travelogue, *African Laughter* (Lessing, 1992), a representation of Zimbabwe and its colonial past that is overtly concerned with transitions in everyday life. Before embarking on the analysis of *African Laughter*, I render an outline of some aesthetic and epistemological developments in Lessing's oeuvre and show how these affect her representations of Zimbabwe. Lessing's early writings are characterized by a social realist aesthetic and suggest a belief in progressive history and in human reason as an instrument of change. Lessing's subsequent writings gradually adopt more experimental forms and indicate more contingent views of history and human subjectivity. As I argue, *African Laughter* navigates between social realism and experimentalism in order to represent Zimbabwe without exercising control over it. However, a crucial tension exists between *African Laughter's* political project of giving voice to Zimbabwean subjects and the western female protagonist functioning as the authoritative subject of this history. This tension is approached by drawing on theoretical insights from travel writing scholarship and feminist postcolonial criticism.

ZIMBABWE IN LESSING'S OEUVRE

Doris Lessing was born of British parents in Persia (Iran) in 1919. When Lessing's father saw images of Southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) displayed at one of the empire exhibitions in the mid-1920s, he decided to migrate with his wife and two children and pursue a career in maize

farming. The family lived in isolation in the Rhodesian countryside. After the Second World War, Lessing left Southern Rhodesia to make her way to London with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950). In the mid-1950s, she was declared a 'prohibited immigrant' by the country's white government because of her writings, which engaged with communism and denounced the treatment of black people in colonial Africa. Lessing was not to return to Southern Rhodesia for more than a quarter century, though she continued to write about Africa. It was not until Zimbabwe gained independence under black majority in the early 1980s, that Lessing was allowed entrance to the country again.

Southern Rhodesian life under white minority rule has been an important focus, particularly of Lessing's earlier work written in the 1950s and 1960s. The focus on Africa gradually disappeared from Lessing's oeuvre in the 1970s and 1980s. Published in 1992, *African Laughter* not only thematizes a return journey to Zimbabwe, it also signifies the return to Africa in Lessing's oeuvre. Moreover, the travel narrative precedes by a year the publication of the first volume of her acclaimed autobiography *Under My Skin* (1993), narrating Lessing's life in Southern Rhodesia until she moved to London in 1949. If *Under My Skin* is a genealogy of the self, then the travelogue *African Laughter* can be considered as its spatial counterpart, a genealogy of the space Zimbabwe. In the following paragraphs, I outline how *African Laughter* is informed by a transition, which took place in Lessing's oeuvre from the mid-1960s onwards.

Social Realism in the Early Writings

Set against an African background, Lessing's earlier writings adopt an aesthetic of 'social realism'. Conventionally, social realism is considered to centre around a cluster of assumptions: the belief that objective reality exists and is translatable; the perceived coincidence between the sign and its referent; the assertion that to narrate life is to represent it in the whole of its authenticity; and, finally, the notion that a literature committed to social action is able to transform the world into something other than it is (Herzberger, 1991; Shapiro, 1973). Focusing on social relationships and the hardships of everyday life, these works display Lessing's effort to write historically concrete and truthful representations of African colonial societies. They mirror the ugly realities of colonial life and sympathize with the disenfranchised, in particular with black workers and western women. Lessing's earlier writings cover various 'fictional' genres, such as the novel (*The Grass is Singing*, 1950), the bildungsroman (*Martha Quest*, 1964) or the short story (*This Was the Old Chief's Country*, 1973: 1974) as well as 'non-fictional' genres, such as the travelogue (*Going Home*, 1957) or the essay (*A Small Personal Voice*, 1974). Despite generic differences, the

works above illustrate Lessing's conviction that colonial Africa can be scrutinized by means of an aesthetic of social realism.

In the aforementioned works, the narrative voice pertains to the construction of an insightful frame of reference that defines, comments upon and interprets the colonial society depicted. The narrative voice is omniscient, and her rational interpretation is represented as a truthful one (Budhos, 1987: 21; Gardiner, 1989: 83–5; Singleton, 1977: 185). Usually western white female characters – Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* or Martha in *Martha Quest* – are described acting in colonial African societies. The narrative voice records the complexities, tensions and ambiguities between the various mental and moral realities within the colonial societies. For instance, both in *The Grass is Singing* and in *Martha Quest*, the omniscient narrator describes how the main protagonist feels displaced within colonial culture since her desires and dreams are at odds with the prevailing values and rules of this culture.

Lessing's social realist writings often map out the trajectories of white (predominantly) female protagonists towards self-realization (Thorpe, 1978: 5). These protagonists are depicted within a colonial society, characterized by social segregation between the races as well as the sexes. In this microcosmos, it is socially required that urban sensibilities and ideas about 'British civilization' be translated into the rural environment of African colonial culture. The white female protagonist feels alienated from this colonial reality, which confines her, and she desires to escape from it. In *Martha Quest*, for instance, Martha imagines such a momentary escape. She thinks of walking back from the station to her home, something which white girls were not supposed to do: 'She imagined that eyes would follow her, queerly, as she set off, on foot, along a road where a dozen cars might be expected to pass that afternoon. *White girls do not . . . [sic]*' (Lessing, 1964: 65). As the fragment illustrates, *Martha Quest* thematizes Martha's self-realization, which is thwarted by the gendered and racial behavioural codes of African colonial culture.

In their confined situations, Lessing's female protagonists identify with black Africans. In their eyes, blacks too suffer from white male minority rule. Nevertheless, black African characters are only depicted on the side and they seem only there to serve the central theme of white female self-realization. They are frequently staged, yet, only to the extent that they play a role as domestic servants within African colonial culture. They are flat characters, represented from the outside, and their mental and moral realities are often omitted. *The Grass is Singing*, for instance, suggests that the domestic servant Moses has murdered the protagonist, the white woman Mary Turner. Yet, his motives remain unfathomable. The absence of character in the representation of Moses is problematic. On the one hand, *The Grass is Singing* is highly conscious of the oppressive function of silence and isolation in the life of Mary Turner. On the other hand,

Moses himself remains psychologically blank and is stripped of any speech of his own. Since Moses is deprived of individual characterization, he seems to stand for a general black menace to western women. In this manner, he is depicted as the epitome of the western stereotype of 'Black Peril'. Although the depiction of Mary Turner's miserable life implies a critique of the racist, hypocritical and narrow-minded ideas circulating in African colonial culture, *The Grass is Singing* also reinforces some of these very colonialist ideologies. Thus, Lessing's social realist writings appear primarily concerned with 'a white Eve in a petrified garden' and the depiction of black Africans above all serves this theme (Visel, 1988).¹

The question of how the Colour Bar can be transcended by means of a social realist aesthetic poses an important problem to Lessing's earlier writings about African colonial society. Her writings display a relentless preoccupation with inequalities between races, classes and sexes that prevail throughout African colonial culture. Yet, representations of black Africans serve to focus on white female self-realization. They are represented from an anti-colonial female, yet western point of view. As a result, black characters are depicted without speech, character and mental activity and the African landscape is romanticized. Portraying thus the disenfranchised blacks, Lessing's social realist writings are complicit in reproducing the very colonial ideologies that they simultaneously condemn fiercely. Literary scholar Lorna Sage connects this paradox in Lessing's social realist writings to the author's position in Africa as a child of white settlers. She says that Lessing 'is encountering her settler's problem, and hasn't found a solution' (Sage, 1983: 28). Similarly, in a 1980 interview with Michael Thorpe, Lessing explains that she was simply unable to depict black Rhodesians in her earlier writings since 'in Rhodesia as a white person my contact with the blacks as equals was just nonexistent' (Thorpe, 1980: 102). Despite their anti-colonial stance, Lessing's social realist writings cannot but describe the reinforcing cycles of the status quo. Despite the fact that the omniscient narrator conveys an anti-colonial message, Lessing's social realist writings continue to describe black Africa from a privileged western position.

Formal Experimentation in the Later Writings

From the mid-1960s onwards, Lessing gradually deserted her focus on the social inequalities in colonial Africa. This shift of focus is accompanied by a formal transition in her oeuvre. An important issue in the discussion of this transition is that Lessing lost faith in Marxism as an optimistic ideology of history at approximately this time. Published in 1962, Lessing's most acclaimed work, *The Golden Notebook*, foregrounds the doubting of Marxist politics. The protagonist Anna states in the opening pages: 'Now we have to admit that the great dream has faded

and the truth is something else' (Lessing, 1962: 51). In the novel, the mental collapse of Anna is paralleled with the gradual downfall of the Marxist Party in Britain, when internal problems concerning mismanagement are revealed. Moreover, Anna's experience as a member of a communist group in Africa made her realize that the ideology of communism is sometimes incompatible with the surrounding reality:

The 'line' was simple and admirable. In a colour-dominated society like this, it was clearly the duty of socialists to combat racialism. Therefore, 'the way forward' must be through a combination of progressive whites and black vanguards. . . . At the moment there were no black trade unions, for they were illegal and the black masses were not developed yet for illegal action. . . . So our picture of what ought to happen, must happen in fact, because it was a first principle that the proletariat was to lead the way to freedom, was not reflected anywhere in reality. (Lessing, 1962: 86)

In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna realizes that the communist 'line' is incommensurable with the African colonial context. The fact that an unbridgeable gap divides progressive whites from inferiorized blacks poses a real problem to the Marxist politics that Anna and her white friends had been pursuing. In the African colonial context, marked by racial segregation under white minority rule, it is unimaginable that the black proletariat would instigate 'the way forward'. The quotation marks used to ironically formulate 'the way forward' resonate a questionable ring to the progressive notion of history, which this communist phrase implies. As this fragment illustrates, *The Golden Notebook* explicitly expresses doubts about the communist ideas and their related notions of progressive history and the belief in rationality as an instrument of social change.

Furthermore, *The Golden Notebook* is exemplary for a shift in Lessing's writings from a social realist aesthetic to increasingly experimental forms. The theme of Anna's departure from Marxism is intricately connected to the novel's formal experiment, particularly to the abandonment of an omniscient narrative voice. Formally characterized by multiplicity, non-linearity and fragmentation, *The Golden Notebook* intersperses the basic storyline with a range of notebooks that recount the experiences of Anna in various ways. The storyline of Anna and Molly, two politically committed single mothers in London, is interwoven with Anna's five notebooks: one narrating the African experience during her adolescence, another her political life, a third is a novel Anna is writing, the fourth is a personal diary and, finally, the story of her turbulent love affair with an American writer while she is on the brink of insanity. *The Golden Notebook* stages multiple narrators denoting Anna's manifold identities, be they past, present or variously imagined. Therefore, plural, non-linear and fragmented narration in *The Golden Notebook* has come to replace the strongly rational, singular narrative voice of Lessing's earlier social realist writings. The novel suggests that a Marxist

epistemology, characterized by a progressive notion of history and a notion of subjectivity as a conscious agent of history, has been abandoned. Rather than an interpreter or spokesperson whose consciousness distances her from the society she observes, Anna is a subject who finds herself in the very middle of history. In multiple ways (as an artist, a communist, a mother, a woman), Anna interacts with her surroundings, but she is not able to rationally analyse what is happening, even if she tries to in her notebooks.

This epistemological shift leads Lessing to thematize and accept, however restlessly, to adopt repetitive and cyclic histories in her later fiction work. The extent to which the past determines people's present thoughts and behaviour increasingly becomes the most prominent question. By the 1980s, Lessing's shift away from social realism culminates in the writing of science fiction. As British literary scholar Judith Gardiner contends, 'if she can create new environments in fiction, Lessing can get people to experience new situations vicariously and so change their thinking' (Gardiner, 1989: 120). Following Gardiner, Lessing's engagement with the genre of science fiction is a formal mode to address the question of history through imagining realities anew. Lessing abandons a social realist aesthetic and replaces it by other forms she uses to transform conventional and cyclic patterns of thoughts. Hence from the mid-1960s onwards, Lessing has destroyed realism, in order to safeguard it through formal experimentation. She has saved the notion of identity only by resorting to a multiple notion of identity in *The Golden Notebook*, or to a vague collective plural in the five science fiction books of the *Canopus in Argos* series. She has preserved history, yet, it is no longer a progressive notion of history. Her persistent hope to escape cyclic notions of history leads to a notion of history that is established in eternal worlds in science fiction.

In what follows, I read *African Laughter* against the foregoing outline of the formal, political and epistemological shifts in Lessing's oeuvre. Written in 1992, the travelogue announces Lessing's return to a thematic focus on Africa. This return, however, is only partly a regression to the social realist aesthetic that characterized Lessing's 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: BETWEEN SOCIAL REALISM AND EXPERIMENTALISM

Acoustic Bricolage

African Laughter consists of four chapters, and each chapter narrates one journey. The four chapters lack a 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, 2004:17). The narrative of the four journeys is constructed as four compilations of narrative fragments. These fragments are typographically divided by blank spaces and bold titles. The titles 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', 'Aid Workers Talk'). Sometimes they convey a more enigmatic, literary message ('Over the Rainbow', 'Fat Cat Admonished', 'Passionate Protagonists'). Para-textually, these fragments and their typographical features suggest being 'a bricolage' characterized by non-linearity, diversity and simultaneity, suggesting that the fragments are put together in a random manner.²

In these fragments, daily practices, particular situations and conversations are narrated. The style of direct and indirect speech prevails over panoramic, descriptive and observatory scenes. The emphasis on colloquial language in *African Laughter*, conveyed in direct and indirect speech, cannot be overestimated. Direct and indirect speech is commonly known to create an effect of immediacy and vivacity. It is a form of narration that 'shows', rather than 'recounts' (van Boven and Dorleijn, 2003: 249). In travel writing, direct and indirect speech is often used to mimic and instantiate the immediate and direct nature of the cross-cultural dialogues the traveller has. In *African Laughter*, however, the use of direct and indirect speech is exploited for a different end. It reinforces the representation of the Zimbabwean everyday as a fragmented compilation of voices, as an 'acoustic bricolage'.

In *African Laughter*, the systematic focus is not on the traveller's physical journey and her travel experiences. This is partly because *African Laughter* only loosely adheres to the authority of the retrospective I-narrator, which is common in most travel writings. The I-narrator moves from the forefront to the background and back again. That the protagonist's travel experience is slipping out of focus is reinforced by the typographical composition of the narrative fragments (enveloped by blank spaces and headed by bold titles). This composition constantly 'interrupts' the traveller's physical journey. For the reader, it creates a horizon of expectations that is less concerned with the chronological sequence of the journey.³

Instead, the blank spaces in between the fragments halt the succession of interrelated events. Bold titles introducing new, unrelated pieces of information force the reader to refocalize attention. Because of these para-textual features, the reader is encouraged to complement and complicate what she has read before with every new fragment. It is the reader's task

to seek coherence among the succession of narrative fragments, which seem rather arbitrarily ordered.

In many fragments, other characters act as focalizers, while the retrospective I-narrator narrating her journey experience retreats to the background. This form of embedded focalization in direct speech creates the impression that characters themselves voice their personal opinions on particular topics. 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, TRAINING. (Lessing, 1992: 416–17)

This triple character-bound focalization suggests that Zimbabweans in 1989 have contradictory views of how the country should be pulled out of deadlock. Their opinions are enumerated and presented in a similar manner. They are preceded by the subject uttering them, and expressed in colloquial language. This formal similarity suggests that all three are equally valid. It is a neutral and nuanced depiction of Zimbabweans' opinions about potential solutions. Their opinions seem unmediated by value-laden statements or overt comments. The travelling protagonist has temporarily left the stage.

Rendering people's opinions and conversation in direct speech, this form of acoustic 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. There is no omniscient voice speaking with more authority than another. 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. From this point of view, the aesthetic of the acoustic bricolage suggests a model of history that finally rests on the random or the ineffable nature of life.

As a result, *African Laughter* depicts Zimbabwe by means of a patchwork of voices on everyday topics, covering a broad spectrum and ranging from eating habits and transport to political figures and farming

techniques. Zimbabwe is registered in its rich particularities. The impression is created that the individual voices are, as one character says, 'nothing but straw[s] blown in the winds of history' (Lessing, 1992: 379). Consequently, reading *African Laughter* is as listening to a microphone that is pointed in the direction of varying sound sources. The result is an acoustic bricolage, composed of intensified, yet unrelated, sound bites of Zimbabwe. Assembling a coherent sound entity of Zimbabwe, however, remains difficult.

In his much-acclaimed *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, 1978: 7). The claiming of this superiority is to a large extent related to the fact that travel writing as a genre is suggested to be a form of ethnographic writing. As James Clifford argues, ethnographic writing 'enacts a specific strategy of authority involv[ing] an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text' (Clifford, 1988: 25). Since travel writing conventionally uses a realist ethnographic style, it produces the illusion of truthfulness and authorizes the western predominantly male traveller to express his views and perspectives of non-western cultures. *African Laughter's* open-ended and indefinable representation of Zimbabwe, then, stands in stark contrast to the ethnographic authority and truthfulness that the male-connoted genre of travel generically induces.

In doing so, Lessing's representation of Zimbabwe resonates with feminist geographer Gillian Rose's argument that the idea that space is knowable, mappable and describable and, consequently, controllable, is fundamentally a patriarchal concept (Rose, 1997). Rose contends that the female body engages with the world in a less controlling, much more flexible, tangible and indefinitely varied way, an engagement that challenges masculine ways of knowing space (Bassnett, 2002: 229–30). This feminine approach to the world challenges the rigid boundaries between the private and the public sphere. In Rose's feminist geography, the everyday is valued as an end in itself, rather than as an inferior realm serving the public sphere. As Susan Bassnett similarly contends: 'For feminists, an alternative mapping consists of tracing patterns from the most banal and trivial everyday events so as to create a completely different set of identifiable structures outside patriarchal control' (Bassnett, 2002: 230). In its slipperiness, atemporality and unrepresentability lies a good deal of the power of the 'acoustic bricolage' conveying Zimbabwean life. However, as I wish to argue in what follows, the reader is drawn to one particular voice in the acoustic bricolage, the voice of the I-narrator. Her autobiographical narrative of the return journey to the colonial past has considerable implications for *African Laughter's* representation of Zimbabwean life in transition.

The Traveller's Return Journey: Anti-Colonial Memory and the Representation of Black Zimbabweans.

The I-narrator stands out as a recurring voice in the acoustic bricolage, even though she continuously slips out of focus. As the autobiographical protagonist, she has a delineated identity and a personal history, even though these are characterized, as we see in what follows, by various ambivalences and discrepancies. The retrospective first-person narrator focalizes her alter ego at the time of travel and narrates the latter's trajectory. Her route is mapped out, making use of the first person pronoun, the simple past tense and modifiers of space or time, as in, for instance, 'When I returned to the country where I had lived for twenty-five years . . .', or 'It took me two hours to drive that short distance from Harare to Marondera' (Lessing, 1992: 11, 28). Phrases such as these add a clear journey structure, characterized by a specific chronology and a geography. It contrasts to the narrative form of acoustic bricolage, which is characterized by non-linearity, diversity and simultaneity.

The I-narrator's voice plays a crucial structuring role in the composition of the acoustic bricolage. An important reason why this is the case is that, generically, the retrospective I-narrator narrating the journey is important in travel writing. As Jan Borm notes, 'the reader [of travel writing] will presume that the author is *predominantly* concerned with the account of a journey he or she actually made' (Borm, 2004: 17). Departing from Borm's assumption, we could reasonably claim that the reader's concern with the author's autobiographical journey influences her reading of fragments in which the journey is concealed. Against all odds, the reader tries to read the travelling protagonist's presence into the various speech utterances. From this perspective, the first person narrator's identity and life story has important implications for the unruly history and simultaneous and diverse identities making up the representation of Zimbabwean life, which is implied in the form of acoustic bricolage.

In the fragments that enact Doris Lessing as the autobiographical travelling persona, her journey and the conversations she has with the people she encounters take centre stage. Her personal thoughts, memories and observations of Zimbabwe are emphasized. In this respect, it becomes crucial to analyse how the traveller's social makeup (female, white, British, anti-colonial) ideologically charges her account, in particular her account of the transition from the colonial Rhodesia she remembers to the independent society to which she returns.

In the opening pages of *African Laughter*, the traveller explains that, after an interval of 25 years, she returns to the country where she lived as a child and left for London as a young woman at the age of 30. Published in 1957, Doris Lessing's travel book *Going Home* narrates a return to Southern Rhodesia by an autobiographical traveller who reports with scepticism on

the Central African Union, which was just established at the time. In this first travel book, Doris Lessing hints at the status of Prohibited Immigrant she would be assigned a little later and which would prevent her from re-entering the country until 1982. Lessing considers the ban as an exclusion from her own 'best self' (Lessing, 1997: 12). This best self is characterized rather ambivalently, and in the following fragment is exemplified by a recurring dream she had, after she found out about the ban:

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. (Lessing, 1997: 12)

The dream illustrates that the prohibition to enter Rhodesia sparked off rather mixed and ambivalent feelings of longing and belonging. The phrase 'my people' suggests a feeling of belonging. Yet, 'my people' is repeated to point out feelings of belonging to two racially marked collectives, black and white, who were irreconcilable in the segregated context of Southern Rhodesia. The narrator cannot identify wholeheartedly with either of the two collectives. The whites, amid whom she was raised, rejected her because of her anti-colonial ideas. The blacks, with whom she politically affiliated, did not see her, as they resided on the other side of the Colour Bar. The dream implies that the traveller's experiences of Southern Rhodesia were situated, to paraphrase the title of Louise Yelin's (1998) study, at 'the margins of empire'. Recollected on her return, the traveller's 'best self' is at root filled with tensions and ambivalences. As her gender, racial and political affiliations continuously clash with one another, the traveller's geographies of belonging are always already displaced. Her whiteness prevented her from identifying unproblematically with the black anti-colonial struggle. Her gender and political points of view distanced her from identifying with colonial culture. In this manner, Lessing portrays herself as an anti-colonial British woman with an imperial background.

The return to Zimbabwe makes the traveller go down memory lane. Recollecting her colonial childhood, Lessing remembers black Zimbabweans as servants and workers on white farms. Subsequently, her account of them remains exclusively restricted to the realm of the white colonial culture, while the lives of black Africans outside the white colonial private sphere remain underexposed.⁴

Perceiving her past through the Zimbabwean landscape, the narrator remembers black characters as walk-ons in her anti-colonial memories of Rhodesia. They are unilaterally remembered as victims of colonial oppression. They are flat characters and described from the outside. The fragment 'The Bush' clearly illustrates this point. Envisioning the Lessing family on a day out camping in the bush, the narrator starts imagining the lives of the black 'boys' who accompanied the family. Her mother assigns

household tasks to the servants and they are kept at a distance, a few metres away from the tents in which the family resides. This particular memory sparks off the traveller's self-reflexive thoughts and it is stated that the entire trip seemed rather absurd to her. To remember and critically comment upon the situation, the narrator takes up the viewpoint of one of the black servants:

Later I had to wonder what that man was thinking, taken on this amazing trip in a car. . . . They put on special clothes to sleep in. They washed continually in a white enamel basin set on a soap box under a tree. And they never stopped eating, just like all the white people. 'They eat all the time,' he certainly reported, returning to his own. (Lessing, 1992: 22–3)

As the above fragment illustrates, the black servant of the family is staged as a focalizer within Lessing's anti-colonial narrative. Lessing's imagination of the black servant's thoughts glides over into the coopting of his voice. Since the servant acts as focalizer, the white British family is described from an outsider's point of view and their daily habits and customs are defamiliarized. This estranged depiction of colonial culture reinforces the anti-colonial critique. Appearing to be voiced by the black servant, it expresses the traveller's self-reflexive ideas of her past.

In the paradigmatic article 'Under Western Eyes', feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes western feminist writings about Third World (women) because of their 'authorizing signature' that endorses ethnocentric universalism (Mohanty, 1997: 273). Her critique serves well to scrutinize the representation of Zimbabwe, as pursued in *African Laughter*. Attributed with epistemological and ontological authority, the I-narrator of *African Laughter* is the only recurring subject in the travel narrative who has a clearly defined subjectivity and personal history. Despite the fact that the form of acoustic bricolage renders manifold opinions and subjects who recount their life experiences, the autobiographical voice of the I-narrator is generically assigned with the authority to create a definite temporality to the transitions of Zimbabwean life depicted. This assumption implies that, despite the fact that the acoustic bricolage presents Zimbabweans in their own speech, ultimately, the Zimbabwean voices in *African Laughter* never truly rise above their object status.

In terms of Mohanty, in many western feminist writings 'Western feminists alone become the true "subjects" of . . . counterhistory. Third World women, in contrast, never rise above the debilitating generality of their "object status" ' (Mohanty, 1997: 271). This is particularly indicated by the traveller's celebratory, yet, ahistorical, representation of black Zimbabweans. For instance, during her encounter with a black hitchhiker, called Gore, the traveller praises his exuberant laugh and considers it as representative of 'the African Laughter' of a universal, atemporal category of Africans: 'He shook with laughter, the marvellous African laughter born

somewhere in the gut, seizing the whole body with good-humoured philosophy' (Lessing, 1992: 80). It is worthwhile remembering that 'African Laughter' is also the title of the travelogue. In this phrase, a biologization of the African 'race' is suggested. Optimism and cheerfulness are presented to be typical of African culture and connected to the physical gesture of laughing. Consequently, it is suggested that the 'good-humouredness' of the 'African' philosophy is an innate biological feature shared by all Africans. Ghanaian-British theorist of race Kwame Antony Appiah explains this process as follows:

Where race works – in places where 'gross differences' of morphology are correlated with 'subtle differences' of temperament, belief, and intention – it works as an attempt at metonym for culture, and it does so only at the price of biologizing what *is* culture, ideology. (Appiah, 1992: 45)

In a review of Lessing's *African Laughter* in *New Republic*, titled 'The Art of Sympathy', Appiah criticizes Lessing's 'silence about the interior lives of black Zimbabweans' (Appiah, 1993: 34). It is indeed the case that the interior lives of black Zimbabweans are effaced to make room for a celebratory, biologized notion of African identity.

Since the traveller's anti-colonial memory remembers black people predominantly as colonial victims and from an outsider's point of view, the transition of black Zimbabwe from the colonial past to the postcolonial present is represented a priori as a progressive movement. On a visit in 1988 to a 'Communal Area', a poor living area for blacks, Lessing states that these areas might be dreadful places, but that the 'Reserves' in Southern Rhodesia were much worse. And she adds: 'here is a transformation that can be valued and understood only by people who know what it was all once like' (Lessing, 1992: 167). On a closer look, one could wonder, whether the western traveller, who is raised among the white settlers, is really able to know how 'it was all once like' for the black Africans inhabiting the Reserves. Seeing the colonized blacks merely from the outside, as victims of racial segregation, Lessing tends to interpret any change from this white-dominated hierarchical situation as a positive one. Thus, paradoxically, the traveller's striving for black emancipation is based upon a (ahistorical and celebrated) misrepresentation of black Zimbabweans.

It is worthwhile reminding ourselves at this point that Lessing's social realist writings implied outside representations of black characters. From this perspective, the traveller's narrative of her return journey in *African Laughter* reproduces these representations of black Zimbabweans. However, *African Laughter* differs from the social realist writings in that the importance of the female anti-colonial journey experience, including her memories and observations of the African peoples and landscape, is downplayed because it is embedded in the compilation of manifold narratives of individual voices, which together combine to create the acoustic bricolage.

CONCLUSION: 'NOTHING BUT A STRAW BLOWN IN THE WINDS OF HISTORY'⁵?

During the past decade, a large number of memoirs and return travel narratives of colonial Zimbabwe have been published by male writers, such as Chris Cocks's *Fireforce* (2006), Dan Wylie's *Dead Leaves* (2002), Peter Stiff's *See You in November* (2002). The latter reify male-connoted nostalgic memories of white Rhodesia, by focusing on masculine themes such as the Selous Scouts and the hardships of Rhodesian soldiers during the war for independence. It is striking, by contrast, that the self-reflexive rendering of one's situatedness in everyday colonial culture is visible not only in *African Laughter* but also in memoirs and return travel narratives of Rhodesia written by white female writers, such as Alexandra Fuller's *Scribbling the Cat* (2004) and Lauren St John's *Rainbow's End* (2007).

Reading Lessing's *African Laughter*, however, I have argued that the critical attention to imperial culture by women (travel) writers cannot a priori be considered as subversive. First, I have discussed *African Laughter*'s experimental form, which I have named 'acoustic bricolage'. This narrative form is characterized by a number of para-textual features and narrative techniques, such as direct speech, the prioritization of second-order focalization and the downplaying of the I-narrator's journey, which suggest simultaneity, diversity and fragmentation. Subsequently, acoustic bricolage suggests that history cannot be captured into an orderly temporal narrative and is only the personal opinions and experiences of manifold subjects who are 'nothing but a straw in the winds of history' and that any attempt at understanding the transition of Zimbabwean life is deficient. Second, I have pointed out that, even though the traveller continuously slips out of focus, the fact that she is the only recurring voice that can be identified by a delineated identity and personal history is crucial in the travel account's ethnographic representation of Zimbabwe and its colonial past. I have questioned the anti-colonial style of authority of the traveller's narrative by displaying how the traveller represents the black Zimbabwean experience unilaterally as a progressive history. As a result, independent black Zimbabweans become generally and ahistorically celebrated as previously victimized postcolonial subjects.

Marked by political, social and economic crises, the current situation in Zimbabwe has changed dramatically since Lessing's return travels. In 2003, Doris Lessing published the article 'The Jewel of Africa' in *The New York Review of Books*, which charges President Mugabe in the name of 'the poor blacks who will yet again watch their land being taken from them' (Lessing, 2003: 8). In much the same way as *African Laughter*, this article includes representations of black Africans and their history, which are ultimately weighed by the future-oriented anti-colonial message the narrator tries to convey.

Thus, in representing Zimbabwe, *African Laughter's* political potential primarily resides in the epistemological and aesthetic move away from notions of mimesis, realism and truthfulness, which the genre of travel writing induces. Conventionally, these notions are crucial in travel writing's expression of ethnographic knowledge and the reader of travel writing is conventionally encouraged to be primarily concerned with the traveller's autobiographical journey. Despite its attempt to depart from mimesis, the anti-colonial I-narrator's account included in *African Laughter* is ultimately assigned more authoritative status than the other African voices rendered. As a result, not the African peoples but only the western female traveller becomes the subject of the anti-colonial history of Zimbabwe. At the same time as *African Laughter* portrays transitions of Zimbabwean life in its rich particularities, the travelogue cannot entirely avoid coopting black peoples and the African space for the articulation of anti-colonial female western self-expression.

NOTES

1. Another example is the short story 'The Old Chief Mshlanga', in which a white girl searches for the kraal of Chief Mshlanga, whose son works as a cook in her mother's kitchen. Her search brings her 'beyond our boundaries on that side [where] the country was new to me'. In the story, Chief Mshlanga and his son are staged for the purpose of expressing the girl's genuine interest in black servants. Her interest distinguishes her from her mother, who is interested in the chief's son being a 'good' native, rather than in his noble background. The girl's interest in the servant, particularly since it brings her outside the boundaries of her home, indicates that the short story 'The Old Chief Mshlanga' spatially maps out the white girl's desire to flee the white settlers' private space (Lessing, 1973: 165).
2. The notion of 'bricolage' has been imported in the social sciences by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). As an aesthetic technique, it has been deployed in literary criticism to understand the practice of using bits and pieces of older artefacts to produce a new work of art. It has been characterized as a postmodern aesthetic since the deliberate plucking of elements out of their original contexts and bringing them together arbitrarily often serves the blurring of traditional distinctions between the old and the new and between high and low art. Dick Hebdige has employed the notion of bricolage to explain how subculture style operates: 'The bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or [places] that object within a different total ensemble' (Hebdige, 1987: 104).
3. The notion of 'horizon of expectation' is coined by H.R. Jauss (1982: 23–4). It pertains to the memories readers have from reading earlier texts. A 'horizon of expectations' is construed on the basis of familiarity with the norms of existing texts, the relations of the text with other texts from the same historical period, and the measure in which a new text deviates from existing norms. A new text may either soothe or challenge an existing horizon of expectations by appropriating the very disciplines of a genre in a different way. The reader then needs to replace, correct, vary or alter his or her horizon of expectations accordingly.

4. To a certain extent, this underexposure is managed by means of intertextuality. An extensive list of books written by black Zimbabwean authors, including Tsitsi Dangerembga, Yvonne Vera, Charles Mungoshi (Lessing, 1992: 425–6) serves as a means to refer the reader of *African Laughter* to alternative sources documenting the black Zimbabwean experience. This list, and the insertion of scenes when the protagonist is reading these books, also facilitates the anti-colonial self-representation of the traveller. It creates a distance between her and the white settlers' community in which she resides, as the latter do not read these books. 'Some books have ideas in them, and most of the whites in Southern Rhodesian lager could not afford to consider the idea of themselves as the noble and misunderstood defenders of civilization' (Lessing, 1992: 32).
5. *African Laughter* (Lessing, 1992: 379).

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