

# 85 | remembering home: nation and identity in the recent writing of Doris Lessing

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## abstract

In the UK, the writing of Doris Lessing has frequently been associated with left-wing politics and the second-wave feminist movement. Critics have concentrated primarily on issues of class and gender and have focused their attention on novels published in the 1950s and 1960s. This essay suggests that Lessing's work is over-ripe for reassessment in relation to ideas from post-colonial theory. Her writing repeatedly addresses questions about national identity and its imbrications with 'race'. These ideas intersect in complex ways with her more familiar analysis of gender and class. This essay discusses Lessing's recent novel *The Sweetest Dream* (2001), which was widely read as an attack on the political idealism of the 1960s. It relates the novel to her collection of essays, *African Laughter* (1992), her recent essay on the situation in Zimbabwe, 'The Jewel of Africa' (2003) and the second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade* (1997). Zimbabwe (previously Southern Rhodesia) is of crucial importance in these works. The article explores how Lessing makes use of notions of city, home and memory that can be instructively compared with some of Toni Morrison's ideas in her novel *Beloved* (1987) and the essays 'Home' (1998) and 'The Site of Memory' (1990). Lessing revises the notion of 'home' so that it becomes capable of both recognizing racial and national differences and moving outside them. She also interprets memory as productive for the individual and the nation only when it becomes, as Morrison would say, 'rememory': when it can acknowledge the importance of imagination in dealing with trauma and thus suggest the fluctuating, mobile status of identity. The article demonstrates that similar ideas about home and memory are present in her fiction, essay and autobiography, indicating that her intention is to explore generic classification and blur the boundaries between different methods of writing personal and political history. Lessing's work strongly suggests the possibility that apparently 'fictional' writings may be more fruitful than ostensibly factual ones in allowing individuals and nations to make sense of their immediate pasts.

## keywords

*African Laughter*; city; communism; Doris Lessing; gender; genre; history; home; identity; 'The Jewel of Africa'; narrative; nation; 'race'; 'rememory'; *The Sweetest Dream*; Toni Morrison; *Walking in the Shade*; Zimbabwe

## introduction

Doris Lessing has often been seen as the 'grande dame' of *British* writing, her work associated first with the political left in the 1950s and then with the second-wave feminist movement from the 1960s onwards. Lynne Segal suggests that

for those concerned with the intricate ways in which power relations shape personal lives within the Left, the political memoirs of women militants immediately predating the second-wave feminism that took root in Britain the 1970s [sic] are of particular interest (Segal, 2004: 8).

Segal includes the memoirs of Yvonne Kapp, Simone de Beauvoir and Sheila Rowbotham alongside the two volumes of Lessing's autobiography in her discussion, which focuses on 'repetitions and denials of fissures and follies on the Left, [and] the transmission of generational histories' (Segal, 2004: 26). The confluence of left-wing politics and feminism in analyses of Lessing's work certainly addresses important aspects of her personal political history as a writer and activist in the twentieth century. Lessing was, after all, a member of the Communist Party in Southern Rhodesia and Britain in the 1940s and 1950s and was profoundly affected by her experiences on the political left.<sup>1</sup> Equally, the publication of *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 was a transforming moment for feminism: the novel embodies the phrase 'the personal is political' and was once famously termed 'the first tampax in world literature' (Blau Du Plessis, 1989: 279–280) for its direct treatment of the female body. Regardless of the manoeuvres that Lessing has since made to distance herself from both Marxism and feminism,<sup>2</sup> her writing is persistently aligned with both political movements. Critics therefore run the risk of ignoring a repeated motif or refrain in her work: that of national identity and its connections with 'race'. This is not to say (in a simplified way) that Lessing's writing is 'about' 'race' and not 'about' gender and class, but instead to suggest that 'race' and nation are entwined with issues of gender and class in her work, not merely at the level of content but also in her formal and generic choices.

Critics have generally neglected to use ideas from post-colonial theory when discussing Lessing's work. The joint guest editor of a recent special issue of the journal *Doris Lessing Studies* on 'post-colonial Doris Lessing' comments on the fact that few post-colonial theorists use examples from Lessing's work to support their points, an absence he finds remarkable (Chennells, 2001: 4). He speculates that Lessing's distance from African nationalism (Chennells, 2001: 5) and the 'near-total silence' of black Africans in her work (Chennells, 2001: 6) may explain this absence, but argues that partial silence implies not ignorance, but a refusal of 'the temptation to advocacy' (Chennells, 2001: 6). Lessing will not impose her own voice on those who have been the victims of the colonial encounter. Chennells argues that critics should see Lessing as a post-colonial writer because she 'is at one with post-colonial theorists who proclaim cultural hybridity as the irretrievable condition of post-colonial modernity' (Chennells, 2001: 8).

**1** See Lessing's account of leaving the British Communist Party in *Walking in the Shade* (Lessing, 1997; 1998: 190–198 and 241).

**2** Consider for example the furore occasioned by Lessing's statements at the Edinburgh books festival in 2001 about the failures of feminism (see, Gibbons (2001)). In relation to communism, Lessing has recently claimed that she only 'had about two years of the pure "being a Communist" in Southern Rhodesia. It disappeared very fast because I was married to a 150% Communist, Gottfried Lessing. That cures you very quickly' (Appignanesi, (2002)).

Raised in what was then the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, Lessing did not leave Africa to come to London until the age of 30 and has made periodic returns in the 50 years since, which have been the subject of the autobiographical essays *Going Home* (1957) and *African Laughter* (1992) and have provided material for the fiction, including her recent novel *The Sweetest Dream* (2001). The two volumes of her autobiography (1994, 1997) have also been as concerned with her experiences in Southern Rhodesia as her life in England and her recent article 'The Tragedy of Zimbabwe' (2004b) is about the current situation in Zimbabwe. This article will address the equivocal and complex analysis in Lessing's recent work of issues of 'race', nation, home and exile and demonstrate the way these are woven into the more familiar concerns with gender and class in her writing. It will begin by discussing Lessing's use of particular conceptions of the city and the home as a means of exploring the connections between 'race', nation and identity. Lessing's ideas here can be fruitfully compared with those in Toni Morrison's essay, 'Home' (Morrison, 1998). The article will then analyse Lessing's understanding of memory and connect it with Morrison's conception of the creative use of memory, or 'rememory', in *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987) and 'The Site of Memory' (Morrison, 1990). Reviews of *The Sweetest Dream* will then be discussed in order to demonstrate reviewers' concern with Lessing's use of genre and the semi-autobiographical status of the novel. Lessing's essays and autobiography will be compared with *The Sweetest Dream*; the similarities between these texts suggest that Lessing is attempting a manipulation of genre, one which challenges the way we write political and personal history.

## city and home

In her introductory essay in the collection *The House that Race Built* Toni Morrison remarks:

I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape – Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement. From Martin Luther King's hopeful language, to Doris Lessing's four-gated city, to Jean Toomer's 'American,' the race-free world has been posited as ideal, millennial, a condition possible only if accompanied by the Messiah or situated in a protected preserve – a wilderness park.

But for the purposes of this talk and because of certain projects I am engaged in, I prefer to think of a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father's house of many rooms. I am thinking of it as home.

(Morrison, 1998: 3, emphasis in original)

In a series of metaphors, a world in which 'race' does not matter becomes a gated city, a wilderness park, theme park or protected preserve with attendant

implications of the fortress mentality. The fortress excludes precisely that ('race') which is said 'not to matter', which of course means that 'race' is intrinsically part of the structure. Later in the essay, Morrison elucidates key questions that have dominated her work: 'How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling' (Morrison, 1998: 5). Her choice of Lessing's image of the four-gated city as a 'race-less' utopian dreamscape, which unknowingly contains precisely what it attempts to exclude, is interesting for a number of reasons. Lessing first uses this image of the city in her 1952 novel *Martha Quest*, the first in a five-volume series of linked *bildungsromane* called 'Children of Violence' (1952–1969). The series as a whole is remarkable in its spread across two continents, in its historical sweep and in its shift away from realism and towards science fiction. The last two volumes in the series, *Landlocked* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969), clearly demonstrate the impact that breaking off to write the far more experimental *Golden Notebook* had on Lessing's previous attachment to realism. In *Martha Quest* the four-gated city is clearly positioned as a naïve, idealistic day-dream. The heroine, a young white southern-African girl repudiates 'race' prejudice and recognizes how she has been formed by it, yet ironically is unable to make significant moves outside it. The fact that the 'race-free' city is gated to exclude all those Martha dislikes is ruefully acknowledged by the narrator to be a problematic element in the fantasy:

Outside one of the gates stood her parents, the Van Rensbergs, in fact most of the people of the district, forever excluded from the golden city because of their pettiness of vision and small understanding: they stood grieving, longing to enter, but barred by a stern and remorseless Martha – for unfortunately one gets nothing, not even a dream, without paying heavily for it, and in Martha's version of the golden age there must always be at least one person standing at the gate to exclude the unworthy.

(Lessing, 1990: 21–2)

In the last novel in the sequence, the title of which is *The Four-Gated City*, Martha still has utopian daydreams about such a city, but cannot avoid imagining it surrounded

just like all the cities we know, like Johannesburg for instance' by 'a shadow city of poverty and beastliness. A shanty town. Around that marvellously ordered city another one of hungry and dirty and short-lived people. And one day the people of the outer city overran the inner one and destroyed it

(Lessing, 1972: 151).

The novel ends with a series of small-scale nuclear and chemical accidents that devastate European and North-American civilization and redraw the map of global power. Lessing's work does, therefore, as Morrison and others (Singleton, 1977) recognize, make frequent use of the image of the city. However, the utopian ideals of racial integration or assimilation as 'dreamscape' that this

might imply are always critiqued, deconstructed, or ironized. Lessing shares Morrison's concern that nonracist should not mean not 'race' specific.

The image of 'home', which Morrison suggests as an alternative to the city or the house, is also present in Lessing's latest novel, *The Sweetest Dream*, and in her essays and autobiography. For Lessing the concept of 'home' is always bound up with its other, exile. Home is not always a place of safety and familiarity but necessarily includes within it differences, resistances and dependencies that must be acknowledged and that cannot be excluded and positioned as exterior. As Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty suggest:

The tension between the desire for home, for synchrony, for sameness, and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it, is made clear in the movement of the narrative by very careful and effective reversals which do not erase the positive desire for unity, for Oneness, but destabilize and undercut it.

(Martin and Mohanty, 1986: 208)

They discuss Minnie Bruce Pratt's autobiographical essay 'Identity: Skin Blood Heart' in relation to issues of inclusiveness and incorporation of difference within white middle-class feminism and examine how it 'unsettles not only any notion of feminism as an all-encompassing home but also the assumption that there are discrete, coherent, and absolutely separate identities – homes within feminism so to speak – based on absolute divisions between various sexual, racial or ethnic identities' (Martin and Mohanty, 1986: 192). Like Pratt's essay, Lessing's novel writes home as a key concept for the women characters in the novel, but also critiques it when proffered as a grand narrative that remains the same throughout twentieth-century political history. In one sense, then, Lessing always acknowledges, not merely what Freud refers to as the presence of *das Heimliche* (the homely) in its apparent opposite, *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny/unhomely) (Freud, 1955, 1919) but also the necessity of admitting the presence of the uncanny or unhomely in the homely.

*The Sweetest Dream* spends much of its time attacking the homes, or safe-houses, people find in utopian idealism in various different forms: in crude Marxism, in radical feminism and in certain types of nationalism. The dream of the title encompasses any metanarrative that suggests that 'they were all on an escalator of Progress, and that present ills would slowly dissolve away, and everyone in the world would find themselves in a happy healthy time' (Lessing, 2001: 54). Key to the novel is the point that the idealism of 1960s political radicalism was often at the expense of women's emotional and domestic labour and later generations' emotional development. The heroine of the novel, Frances Lennox, spends much of her time cooking and caring for her extended family, which consists, at different points, of her ex-mother-in-law, her ex-husband's child with his second wife, various friends and hangers-on of her own children and finally, her ex-husband himself. Many of the important scenes in the novel involve lengthy discussions about where different people will sleep and others focus on the preparation, serving and eating of huge meals around the kitchen

table. The image of the kitchen table as the focus for the home is one that Lessing has used elsewhere (notably in *The Fifth Child* (1989b, 1988)) and here it generates an important debate in the reader about the virtues and vices of the nuclear family and its alternatives. It is possible to read the novel as conservative and reactionary (Lynn Segal terms it 'a truly reactionary work' (Segal, 2004: 15)), as a critique of single parenting and the values that allow 'Comrade' Johnny (Frances's revolutionary Marxist ex-husband) to dismiss the role of father and the claims of his wife and children on his money and property. In some important ways *The Sweetest Dream* does imply that his children are damaged by his behaviour and the linked cycles of dependency and rebellion it generates. However, it is equally possible to see that the ways in which home and family life are represented are potentially productive in acknowledging difference. The novel implies that the family is certainly not about genetic or blood ties; neither is it about the economic ties that operate through the exchange of women in marriage: such relationships are the most flawed, painful and transient in the text. Instead, the family is a loose agglomeration of people who are connected emotionally in a variety of ways.

The dream of political idealism that the novel satirizes is also connected with, indeed dependent on, the subordinated status of the once British colonies in Africa, which emerge during the novel as independent nation states. Throughout the novel Lessing explores interesting analogies between the Lennox family and the nation of 'Zimlia' (a thinly disguised Zimbabwe). Lessing interweaves Africa into the novel from the beginning, initially as an 'adjunct' to the revolutionary Marxist agenda of people like Johnny Lennox. Early in the novel he begins making all-expenses paid trips to Africa funded by the Left to assist 'the comrades' in their struggle for independence. As time goes on Frances finds that she is cooking and caring for comrades from the African nationalist movements who become important political figures after independence. What therefore begins as 'incidental background' to the lives of the main characters is deliberately allowed to overtake and critique them. The latter half of *The Sweetest Dream* is about Sylvia Lennox (Johnny's daughter with his second wife) and her work in a mission hospital in Kwadere, Zimlia. Sylvia's life in Zimlia includes encounters with corrupt officials in the new regime, attempts to educate her patients dying of AIDS, and fruitless negotiations with representatives of the various International Aid and Finance organizations. She is more successful in her efforts, with the help of priests and nuns who represent the local Catholic church and the local Nganga or witch-doctor, to establish a rudimentary hospital, school and library. Her story suggests how the 'dream' of the novel's title has impacted negatively on the cherished national identity of the newly independent Zimlia. The country, like the Lennox family, has been failed by grand narratives such as Marxism and functions most effectively at the local, not national level. As Chennells suggests: 'that global visions blind people to what has a significant

existence only in the local is a seminal [sic] idea in the novel'. He continues: 'Lessing knows Africa well enough to understand that "Africa" signifies a concept as much as a geographical location' (Chennells, 2002: 300).

Lessing's analysis in *The Sweetest Dream*, then, accepts what Benedict Anderson (1983) terms the 'imagined' status of nations and seeks to examine the 'style in which they are imagined' (Anderson, 1991: 6). Unlike Anderson, however, who sees 'race' as a remnant from traditional culture, Lessing sees the concept of 'race' as intrinsic in national identity: co-existent with the Enlightenment project of modernity as its unacknowledged but ever-present other. Like Bhabha, she suggests that 'racism' is not simply 'a hangover from archaic conceptions of the aristocracy, but a part of the historical traditions of "civic" and liberal humanism that create ideological matrices of "national" aspiration, together with their concepts of "a people" and its imagined community' (Bhabha, 1997: 182). Indeed, at its most negative, nationalism in *The Sweetest Dream* is a kind of 'derivative discourse', as Chatterjee (1986) describes it, which borrows its politics from the Marxism of privileged English Comrades like Johnny. The impact of this dependency corrupts and nearly strangles both post-independence Zimlia and successive generations of the Lennox family. The novel clearly suggests that there are similarities between the memorializing and narration of nations, individuals and families. However, it is also possible that the text offers the prospect, as Bhabha would put it, of establishing 'the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as "containing" thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased and translated in the process of cultural production' (Bhabha, 1990: 4). Chennells argues, for example, that the novel's conclusion, where Sylvia decides to return home with two Zimlian boys, undertakes just such a rewriting. It

affronts the belief that identities derive from race and nation, a belief that is still enthusiastically promoted in parts of Africa. The children will die unless they are taken from Zimlia to England, and the novel implies that if to take them is cultural or racial murder then so be it. But it is not only the children who benefit from being taken away from their home. By their presence, the Kwadere children confirm, if further confirmation were needed, that the family is more than a genetic inheritance. The Lennox family has been, throughout the novel, a voluntary community. That is one of its strengths. As a trope, the Lennox family is placed in opposition to meta-narratives of social determinism, whether these are Marxism, Pan-Africanism or one or other of the many versions of globalization.

(Chennells, 2002: 301)

Although the Lennoxes may have been more marked by dependence on Utopian idealism than Chennells here admits, the family home contains the potential to become the kind of home Toni Morrison wants to find 'outside the raced house' (Morrison, 1998: 8), as she puts it: 'race-specific but nonracist' (Morrison, 1998: 5), acknowledging difference but capable of moving 'outside' it. As Franklin, one of the officials in the Zimlian government who first encountered the Lennoxes as

a child who ate and slept in their family home remembers: 'A funny thing: he felt that that house in London had more in common with the ease and warmth of his grandparents' huts in the village ... than anything since' (Lessing, 2001: 435).

## rememory

Franklin's remark suggests that something akin to Toni Morrison's concept of rememory is also apparent in *The Sweetest Dream* and is linked in the novel, as it is in Morrison's work, with ideas about home, nation and identity. In *Beloved*, memory is an important way of accessing the inner life of those who have been excluded from official history, a way of challenging what has been termed the 'wilful forgetting' (Morrison, 2003: 130) of the traumatic and violent experiences of slavery. For Toni Morrison, memory is creatively linked with imagination to form rememory:

The absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told – is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us. How I gain access to that interior life is what drives me and is the part of this talk which both distinguishes my fiction from autobiographical strategies and which also embraces certain autobiographical strategies. It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth.

(Morrison, 1990: 302)

The 'literary archeology' that Morrison describes here also involves the writing of trauma on the female body, which 'create[s] a close affinity between corporeality and textuality' (Feng, 2002: 152).

Such rituals 'mobilize the collective force of the community and through the power of sympathy free traumatized characters from layers of repressed memories and further empower them to battle against imposed racial, sexual and class oppressions'

(Feng, 2002: 154).

All the characters in *The Sweetest Dream* engage in continual negotiation with memory and the past, although some do so more successfully than others. Obviously Lessing's white European characters enter this process from a considerably more privileged starting point than Morrison's, victims of slavery and white supremacy who bear the traces of their history on the body in different ways (which will be discussed in more detail later). However, Lessing characterizes the twentieth century as a begetter of 'children of violence' (to borrow from the title of her five-volume series discussed earlier) and seeks to address the different effects on different cultures and peoples, not only of two world wars but also their 'connection with the violence of the colonial encounter' (Watkins, 2003: 191). Johnny Lennox's parents, for example, meet on the eve of



the First World War. His English father Philip, a secretary in the Berlin embassy, carries the memory of Johnny's mother Julia, whom he meets when she is fourteen years old, throughout the painful experiences of the trenches. Julia represented for Philip the exotic and foreign other when contrasted with his sisters' typically 'English' middle-class friends: 'jolly tomboys enjoying the exemplary summer that has been celebrated in so many memoirs and novels' (Lessing, 2001: 26). His parents' preference is for 'Betty ... teased because she came to supper with solid brown arms where white scratches showed how she had been playing in the hay with the dogs' (Lessing, 2001: 26). After the war the two lovers 'have to decide whether their dreams of each other for all those terrible years were strong enough to carry them through into marriage. Nothing was left of the enchanting prim little girl, nor of the sentimental man who had, until it crumbled away, carried a dead red rose next to his heart' (Lessing, 2001: 26). Philip's marriage has consequences for his career: 'certain posts would be barred to him ... and he might find himself in places like South Africa or Argentina' (Lessing, 2001: 27). The narrator concludes: 'these two people, who had been so fatally in love, had lived always in patient tenderness, as if they had decided to protect their memories, like a bruise, from any harsh touch, refusing ever to look too closely at them' (Lessing, 2001: 37).

Repressing memory is shown to have negative effects, however, for both the individual and the nation. The revolutionary circles in which Johnny and for a time Frances move continually deal with eruptions of unpleasant memories that run counter to their adherence to the Communist dream. As information about Stalin's atrocities and the labour camps filters into public consciousness through the publicized memories of gulag interns, Johnny refuses to abandon his strict attachment to 'the Dream'. The novel ends with him still drinking to Stalin in his eighties. Similarly, the dreams of education and land for all that were offered to the people by the Nationalist leaders who come to power in Zimlia prove after independence to be dangerous memories, swallowed by the inefficiency and corruption of officialdom. It is only those individuals and, by implication, nations that can productively engage in the rewriting and revising of memory to include the repressed, the unpleasant and the inferior or subordinated that can succeed. As Feng claims:

To make a traumatic experience into a narrative memory, in Toni Morrison's terms, is to make something 'unspeakable spoken.' Providing a narrative form for an unspeakable memory helps the victim go beyond the dis-ease of individual suffering and reach the reality of a history, in this case, the history of physical and mental colonization.

(Feng, 2002: 168)

One good example of successful remembering in *The Sweetest Dream* is the case of Sylvia, who finds that her hybrid existence between London and Zimlia is 'like the equivalent of a decompression chamber' (Lessing, 2001: 327). In London discussing Frances' latest trials with her lover's teenaged children, Sylvia is

haunted by the memory of Rebecca, a woman from Kwadere who works an eighteen-hour day and has lost two children to AIDS, from which she later begins to suffer herself. In comparison with this woman's existence, Frances's problems seem insignificant. The harsh intrusion of memories of Zimlia when Sylvia returns to London forces a revision of her own belief systems and concepts of self: 'her own real self, her substance, the stuff of belief, was leaking away as she stood there' (Lessing, 2001: 367). During a serious bout of malaria, Sylvia reflects that her role as do-gooder has less to do with her attachment to Catholicism than 'something in her nature that had seen to it that she was in as poor a place as possible' (Lessing, 2001: 445). Sylvia abandons Catholicism, the 'dream' or meta-narrative that she lived by, and dies unexpectedly towards the end of the novel, leaving Frances to care for the two children from Kwadere. In its final scene the loose-knit family group looks on as the children from Zimlia play with Frances's grand-daughter, who moves from person to person, creating a magic circle out of the diverse people in the room. This open ending is not without its ironies. The legacy of dependency we have seen in both family and nation state may be recurring yet again. However, it is also possible that Sylvia's memory and the presence of the two Zimlian boys in the family group may have the potential to inspire a new sense of community, family and home. This potential rewriting of the concept of home necessitates the inclusion and revision, rather than repression, of memory (or rememory) and the modification of the 'Englishness' of the family group by the Zimlian children in the next generation.

## **genre and fictive status**

Reviews of the novel were generally positive about its themes, but less impressed with Lessing's control of structure and delineation of character. They were also preoccupied with the text's generic and fictive status. A review in the *New York Times* terms the novel a 'hodgepodge of styles, themes and characters', 'without daring narrative innovations' and suggests that 'the reader is left with the sense that Ms. Lessing is simply tossing everything she's ever written about before into this kitchen-sink of a novel, with no regard to the niceties of narrative construction or rudiments of storytelling'. The characters, this reviewer adds, are 'paper dolls' or 'line drawings' (Kakutani, 2002). *The New Statesman* regrets the novel's 'inconsistencies and unnecessary digressions' and its 'repetitive' feel (Merrill, 2001: 83). *Bookforum* finds the novel too preoccupied with polemics and accuses Lessing of using her characters as 'abstractions for advancing arguments' (Mukherjee, 2002). Most of the reviews also comment on the Author's Note to the novel, in which Lessing states: 'I am not writing volume three of my autobiography because of possible hurt to vulnerable people. Which does not mean that I have novelized autobiography. There are no parallels here to actual people, except for one, a very minor character' (Lessing, 2001). Reviewers

generally felt that the novel suffers from this decision, that it 'lacks the acuity, accountability and density of her own autobiographical writings' (Mukherjee, 2002) and that 'the autobiography would have had a sharper focus' (Merrill, 2001: 83). Alternatively, the decision is seen as confusing: 'an awkward melange lacking both the realism of great fiction and the truthfulness of history' (Williams, 2001). Equally, reviewers refuse to believe that the novel is not part *roman a clef*; after all, when questioned about the 'real' identities of the characters, Lessing teased: 'these people are middle-aged, and some of them are very well-known ... I just wouldn't want to embarrass them' (Ettler, 2001).

**3** During her writing career, Lessing has written, amongst other things, science fiction, a comic book and the libretti for two operas based on her science fiction novels.

The aspects of structure, style and characterization that have been criticized, when accompanied by Lessing's suggestive preface, can be interpreted as part of her continual interest in the possibilities that are occasioned by experimenting with genre. As Chennells states: 'in her long career, Doris Lessing has used many genres and has never left them as she found them' (Chennells, 2002: 297). There was general dismay amongst the literati when Lessing began writing science fiction in the 1970s (Hanson, 1987) and she has a unique ability as a writer to cross publishers' categories and niche markets.<sup>3</sup> It is equally important, then, to situate this novel and its stylistic choices in relation to Lessing's recent work in other genres. Lessing's collection of essays, *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1993; 1992), contains, in its account of visits made in 1982, 1988, 1989 and 1992, remarkable similarities to the Zimlia sections of *The Sweetest Dream*. These include discussions of non-governmental organizations, the new black bureaucracy, the lives of white farmers, teachers in mission schools, experiences on Air Zimbabwe and at customs, the work of the convents and local clinics, the AIDS epidemic, and disquisitions on Robert Mugabe and his wife (Matthew Mungozi in *The Sweetest Dream*). The essays also cover much more explicitly Zimbabwean history, the Bush War and Land Reapportionment. Like *The Sweetest Dream* the essays are dominated by ideas about memory, home and identity. John McCallister argues that their 'concern with memory, and particularly with the relationship between memory and the sense of belonging, is also part of a more radical project .... its objects are to contest the dominant, colonializing mode of African travel writing and to propose a model of what a truly post-colonial travel literature might be like' (McCallister, 2001: 12). Lessing spends a considerable amount of time plucking up the courage to return to the sites of her old family home on a farm and to a hotel where she spent many weekends with friends as a young woman (fictionalized as the Mashopi Hotel in *The Golden Notebook*). The twists and turns of memory that these visits provoke occupy much of the text, and the same points about the fallibility (but therefore creative flexibility) of memory (or rememory) are generated by meeting up with her brother, a conservative white farmer who has very different childhood memories from Lessing.

Strikingly, Lessing uses the same image of the bruise that I have discussed earlier in relation to Julia and Philip in *The Sweetest Dream* to raise issues of memory and rememory in *African Laughter*. However, whereas Julia and Philip have refused to examine their memories, to touch the bruise, here Lessing revises this image to suggest an alternative way of remembering trauma:

Suppose one was able to keep in one's mind those childhood miseries, the homesickness like a bruise on one's heart, the betrayals – if they were allowed to lie in the mind always exposed, a cursed country one has climbed out of and left behind for ever, but visible, not hidden... would then that landscape of pain have less power than I'm sure it has?

(Lessing, 1993: 305).

The simile of the bruise works here less on the body than 'on the heart', which is one way in which Lessing's use of rememory differs from Morrison's, where the physical traces of trauma are also literal. However, the choice of bruising as an analogy is interesting as bruising is more visible on white than on black skin. It is as if in choosing this simile Lessing encourages the reader to examine how bodies 'wear' different histories of oppression because of skin colour. The simile of the bruise also includes notions of home, landscape and country that are integral to the narrator's sense of identity. As a prohibited immigrant for the twenty-five years of white rule preceding the visits detailed in *African Laughter*, Lessing was directly forced to confront her own conceptions of home, nation and identity:

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 on 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?

(Lessing, 1993: 12–13).

The domestic image of typically English mashed potato is juxtaposed here with sadza (staple Zimbabwean food of maize porridge) to form a mixed diet that echoes Lessing's fragmented and multiple subjectivity and suggests the importance of her own (and Zimbabwe's) hybrid historical location. As Bhabha suggests:

hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks – as the basis for cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race.

(Bhabha, 1994: 219)

The metaphors of occupying spaces and 'opening out' of boundaries have interesting parallels with Lessing's image of identity as a leaky lake of tears which makes moist everything she thought was dry. In 'The Site of Memory' Toni Morrison also connects memory with flooding:

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'.

(Morrison, 1990: 305)

Rememory forces the acknowledgement of the 'truth' about the past by recognizing memory's creative fallibility and identity's fluctuating, mobile status. Lessing comments:

In any case it [memory] is such a flickering, fleeting record. Sometimes I feel I could wipe it all away with one sweep of my hand, like brushing away a kind of highly coloured veil or thin rainbow ... and there still sits the autobiographer, uneasy about her memories, about the truth, and the book is not being written. Why a book at all? Why do we have this need to bear witness? We could dance our stories, couldn't we?

(Lessing, 2004c: 98, ellipsis in original)

In 'The Tragedy of Zimbabwe' (2004b) Lessing discusses the worsening crisis in Zimbabwe generated by Robert Mugabe's policy of compulsory land reappropriation. The essay begins with the words of President Samora Michel of Mozambique and President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania to Robert Mugabe at independence in 1980: 'You have the jewel of Africa in your hands .... Now look after it' (Lessing, 2004b: 231). Lessing writes: 'Twenty-three years later, the "jewel" is ruined, dishonoured, disgraced' (Lessing, 2004b: 231). This metaphor of the corruption of innocence provides the framework for the essay and suggests that one of its key strategies will be to make use of others' memories, sayings and stories (as well as Lessing's own) to argue her case. Although the seriousness of the situation in Zimbabwe and the comparative brevity of the piece generate a more polemical and less discursive tone than in *African Laughter*, the content is similar to both the earlier essays and *The Sweetest Dream*. In addition, the narrative has a personal quality and directness that associates it with storytelling. The narrator considers interpretations and rejects them: it is too simple, for example, to see Mugabe as a 'tragic' figure. She uses her own memories of what people were saying at different points in Zimbabwe's history: 'when you travelled around the villages in the early Eighties you heard from everyone, "Mugabe will do this ... Comrade Mugabe will do that ..."' (Lessing, 2004b: 233); 'This week (January 2003) I heard from one of the Book Team. "I was out this week. I was talking about books to people who haven't eaten for three days"' (Lessing, 2004b: 235).

She constructs the essay around a series of episodic memories: 'Another little scene: it is 1982, two years after Independence, and there is still a sullen, raw, bitter, postwar mood' (Lessing, 2004b: 239). Lessing criticizes the official history of the situation in Zimbabwe, as it forms before her eyes, for emphasizing the experience of white farmers who have lost land at the expense of the stories of those black farm-workers who have also lost homes and livelihoods. In a letter to the *New York Review of Books* in a subsequent issue, Janet Jagan argues that Lessing ignores the role of opposition leader Joshua Nkomo in the history of Zimbabwe. She concludes: 'the whole episode of Mugabe's treacherous behaviour in relation to Nkomo needs to be woven into her article if we are to have a balanced view of the situation in Zimbabwe' (Jagan, 2003). Lessing's reply, whilst acknowledging that she should have 'said something about' Nkomo (Lessing, 2003), is interesting in that it again returns to memory as a privileged site for 'historical' reconstruction; implicitly she rejects the idea that an essay should provide the 'balanced view of the situation' Jagan requires. She states that she knew Nkomo in London before the Lancaster House agreement (which ended white rule in what was then Southern Rhodesia) and remembers him as 'a pretty stupid man, but on a public platform a spellbinder'. She concludes: 'I do not think Joshua Nkomo's entry in the history book can add much luster to Zimbabwe's story' (Lessing, 2003). Lessing's return to the image of Zimbabwe as a jewel that has now lost its lustre is a final way of suggesting that the country's situation is better told as a 'story' rather than a 'history'. The problem of history is that it fails to acknowledge its inevitable exclusions or biases; the story, however, can offer its own kind of truth through what Toni Morrison termed 'literary archeology', which moves from the image to the text through memory (Morrison, 1990: 302). Lessing operates in a similar way, delving episodically into her own and others' memories and sayings to creatively explore Zimbabwe's past. As Lessing wrote when preparing the first volume of her autobiography, 'I have to conclude that fiction is better at "the truth" than a factual record. Why this should be so is a very large subject and one I don't begin to understand' (Lessing, 2004a: 141).

## conclusion

The second volume of Lessing's autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, also contains suggestive similarities with *The Sweetest Dream*. At its conclusion, in the year 1962, Lessing writes:

We were all still on the escalator Progress, the whole world ascending towards prosperity. Did anyone challenge this happy optimism? I don't remember it. At the end of a century of grand revolutionary romanticism; frightful sacrifices for the sake of paradises and heavens on earth and the withering away of the state; passionate dreams of utopias and wonderlands and perfect cities; attempts at communes and commonwealths, at co-operatives and kibbutzes and kolkhozes – after all this, would any of us have believed

that most people in the world would have settled gratefully for a little honesty, a little competence in government?

(Lessing, 1998: 368).

The ironic distancing from utopian images of 'perfect cities' returns us to the home where this article started, to the distrust Lessing shares with Morrison of the sweetest dream and her attempt to create an alternative. So is Lessing merely repeating herself? I would argue that she is using what have previously been termed narrative strategies of doubling and repetition (Sprague, 1987) in order to make readers question distinctions between genres and revise the relative status of fiction, essay and autobiography. In addition, doubling functions to deconstruct binary oppositions such as truth and fiction, centre and periphery and feminine and masculine. Since the work of De Man (1979) critics have questioned the assumptions of authenticity invoked in autobiographical forms and have demonstrated how these are strategic linguistic constructions. Feminist critics have also argued that women writers in particular have found the narrative devices of autobiography appealing for a number of reasons. Autobiography is challenging precisely because it disrupts generic and disciplinary boundaries (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2000: 1), and allows performative play with notions of self and authenticity (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2000: 7). It encourages an 'intersubjective' conception of the self, narrative and memory (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2000: 3; 5). There is also an important body of work in autobiographical forms by those of subordinated races and cultures, for example the slave narratives that Morrison discusses in 'The Site of Memory' (Morrison, 1990). Writers of 'intercultural' autobiographies (Hokenson, 1995) construct a self in the space between different languages and cultures. What has also been termed 'the life writing of otherness' (Rusk, 2002) necessarily modulates between strategies that dislocate the universal subject and strategies that acknowledge its appeal to the disenfranchised. Rusk's first chapter discusses *A Room of One's Own* under this rubric, demonstrating that, before Lessing, women writers like Virginia Woolf found the autobiographical essay a flexible way of insinuating feminist ideas into the heart of patriarchal forms.

Lessing's work in these genres argues for a revision of the conventions we use to prioritize autobiography as truth, the novel as fiction, and the essay as opinion. Her work parallels all three forms, with the intention of making serious points about the narration and memory of personal and political history. As Aaron S. Rosenfeld suggests in a discussion of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Lessing 1974 speculative fiction,

by suggesting that this most fictional, because least realistic, of forms can be autobiographical, Lessing signals her desire to fuse truth and fiction, and to represent a conception of the particular self that is inseparable from a larger conception of the collective

(Rosenfeld, 2005: 47).

To accept the fragility of categories such as genre and work against generic classification acknowledges the possibility that apparently 'fictional' writings, rememories rather than official Memory, may be more fruitful than ostensibly factual ones in allowing individuals and nations to make sense of their immediate pasts. As Morrison writes:

My inclusion in a series of talks on autobiography and memoir is not entirely a misalliance. Although it's probably true that a fiction writer thinks of his or her work as alien in that company, what I have to say may suggest why I'm not completely out of place here. For one thing, I might throw into relief the differences between self-recollection (memoir) and fiction, and also some of the similarities – the places where those two crafts embrace and where that embrace is symbiotic.

(Morrison, 1990: 299)

Or, as Lessing herself writes:

So, when you are shaping an autobiography, just as when you shape a novel, you have to decide what to leave out. Novels are given shape by leaving out. Autobiographies have to have a shape, and they can't be too long. Just as with a novel, you have choice: you have to choose. Things have to be left out. I had far too much material for the autobiography. Yet it should be like life, sprawling, big, baggy, full of false starts, loose ends, people you meet once and never think of again, groups of people you meet for an evening or a week and never see again. And so as you write your autobiography it has to have a good deal in common with a novel. It has a shape: the need to make choices dictates that. In short, we have a story. What doesn't fit into the story, the theme, gets cut out[.]

(Lessing, 2004c: 98–9)

Negative reviews of the novel are, then, misplaced in their reading of it as verbose, repetitive and polemical, with caricatured or 'flat' characters. The text's verbosity and repetitions emerge as scathing critiques of the political idealism of the second half of the twentieth century that demonstrate its unacknowledged dependence on the invisible labour of women and those struggling to emerge from British colonial rule. The characterization of the English comes to seem deliberately one-dimensional. The fact that many reviewers praise the second half of the book (where the action moves to Zimlira) and note the disappearance of these 'flaws' suggests that Lessing's stylistic choices in the first half of the novel are intended to make a broader cultural critique of the ideologies and mores of England at the expense of Africa. The review that refers to the text as a 'kitchen-sink novel' (Kakutani, 2002) begins to seem nothing more than sexist and ageist. Yet of course in one sense, Lessing's work is about the kitchen-sink in its remembering of home, nation and identity.

## **acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Jago Morrison for alerting her to Toni Morrison's reference to Doris Lessing's use of the city in her essay 'Home', and Gordon



Johnston for pointing out Segal's essay on memoirs of women on the Left. Christina L. Bell suggested the different effects of bruising on black and white skin in her comments on an early version of this article that was presented at the 'Hystorical Fictions: Women, History and Authorship' conference at the University of Wales Swansea, 5–7 August 2003. Thanks also to the two anonymous readers of this paper for their helpful suggestions.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400321

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