

Colonial Naturalism: Reading Doris Lessing's *African Stories*

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RÉSUMÉ

La réédition en 2014 des African Stories (première parution en 1965) de Doris Lessing est vantée par son éditeur comme “un livre central dans l’œuvre d’un écrivain vraiment aimé” qui forme un “brillant portrait de la vie africaine.” Une critique de Newsweek affirmant que “le contact et le goût de Lessing pour son continent sont si forts que l’Afrique semble devenir l’univers,” suppose une vision réaliste de l’Afrique et des Africains. Face à de tels éloges, il est intéressant de noter que Lessing est une écrivaine blanche, anglo-européenne et pas du tout africaine. Son Afrique est une construction européenne. Comment situer alors les African Stories de Lessing? Le langage et le comportement hautement racistes de ses personnages et, parfois même, la structure thématique des histoires est particulièrement problématique. Ses histoires montrent simultanément le caractère moral destructeur du colonialisme tout en inscrivant un langage et des tropes racistes acceptés qui soutiennent des points de vue de longue date sur l’Afrique et les Africains. Selon nous, une approche éclairante consiste à comprendre les African Stories de Lessing à travers le prisme du naturalisme colonial, un angle qui expose la nature compliquée et problématique de l’écriture sur “l’autre.”

ABSTRACT

A 2014 re-issue of Doris Lessing’s African Stories (first published in 1965) is extolled by her publisher as “a central book in the work of a truly beloved writer” that forms a “brilliant portrait of African life.” A review in Newsweek claiming that Lessing’s “touch and taste of her continent is so strong, that Africa seems to become the universe,”¹ presumes a realistic view of Africa and Africans. Given such praise, it is worth noting that Lessing is a white, English-European writer and not African at all. Her Africa is a European construction. How then to situate Lessing’s African Stories? Particularly problematic is the highly racist language and behavior of her characters and, even at times, the thematic structuring of the stories. Her stories simultaneously show the destructive moral character of colonialism while also inscribing accepted racist language and tropes that support long-held views of Africa and Africans. I propose that a helpful approach is to understand Lessing’s African Stories through the frame of colonial naturalism, an angle which exposes the complicated and problematic nature of writing about the “other.”

A Nobel laureate, Doris Lessing remains an acclaimed British author. In 2008, she was ranked fifth by *The Sunday Times* on a list of the 50 greatest British novelists since 1945.² Her

¹ See the Simon and Schuster website, consulted 09.09.23. < <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/African-Stories/Doris-Lessing/9781476767154> >. The *Newsweek* article is quoted without a specific reference.

² “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945.” *The Sunday Times*, 5 Jan. 2008. Consulted 09.09.23. <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-50-greatest-british-writers-since-1945-ws3g69xf90>>.

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acclaim, however, has not been without criticism. Her Nobel win in 2007 was greeted with both praise and derision. The likes of Harold Bloom believed that it was “pure political correctness” and that while her early work had “a few admirable qualities” her later work was “unreadable.”³ Although she eschewed being closely identified with feminism, many feminists praised her selection and applauded her contribution to gender politics – in particular, *The Golden Notebook* (1962). The speculative fiction inhabitants of the literary landscape were equally pleased with her win because of her later novels in this genre.⁴

The focus here, on Lessing's *African Stories*, is due to their almost universal acclaim; yet, regardless of this admiration, reading her texts through the lens of naturalism, particularly colonial naturalism, highlights for the reader the complicated and problematic issues that are embedded in representations of the “other.” Zolian naturalism recognizes that texts are constructed within cultural, social, and ideological contexts. With Lessing, these contexts are complicated, particularly for post-colonial readers. While Lessing is well known for her opposition to the colonial enterprise in southern Africa, her stories in illuminating the racism of the white-settler experience employ at the same time racist language and tropes that perpetuate the colonial image of Africa and Africans as inferior “others” measured against European norms.

Lessing was and remains personally and professionally controversial as a writer, skillfully eluding easy categorization. Her alignments – personal, ideological, and geographic – have always been complex: she married twice and divorced twice; she became a communist, then denounced Marxism; whereas meriting the status of feminist icon, she rejected the label of feminist; although born in Iran (as Doris Tayler), she grew up in Africa and moved to England.⁵ What is agreed upon and praised is that her commitment to social justice issues began while she was in Africa. Early on she discovered Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, a novel that deeply resonated with her. Carole Klein, her biographer, writes how Lessing at fourteen developed “an intense identification with Schreiner's novel, and with the young woman who had written it, who ‘felt so close, like a sister’”; she goes on to say that Doris Tayler (Lessing),

made her real break with her family at fourteen and surely her courage was stimulated by the writer [Schreiner] she had just discovered, who not only shared her dreams of escape and achievement, but, most important, had lived out the dreams, blazing a path for her to follow.⁶

This path led Lessing to reside in Salisbury, the capitol of the former Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), a move characterized by a her growing awareness of injustice, including gender and race discrimination, which cemented her lifelong involvement with matters of social inequity.⁷ Not surprisingly then, as James Gindin states, “Miss Lessing's commitment to a sense of social

³ Harold Bloom. Qtd. in Sarah Crown, “Doris Lessing wins Nobel prize,” October 11, 2007. Consulted 09.09.23. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/11/nobelprize.awardsandprizes>>.

⁴ For further discussion on Lessing's Nobel win see *Doris Lessing, Border Crossings*, eds. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum International, 2009) 1-3. Also see Harold Bloom's critique of her work in his “Introduction,” *Doris Lessing*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2003) 1-7.

⁵ See Amy Witherbee, “Doris Lessing” (New York: Great Neck Publishing, Mar. 2023)1. Consulted 10.18.23. <<https://burmanu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=f5h&AN=19133864&site=eds-live&scope=site>>.

⁶ See Carole Klein, *Doris Lessing: A Biography*, (London: Duckworth, 2000) 51-53.

⁷ See Klein's detailed development of Lessing's views, particularly in her chapter, “Breaking the Colour Bar” (94-98).

responsibility and to a pursuit of those oppressed by society also infuses her fiction about colonial Africa [...].”⁸

Her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950, and still in print), and her *African Stories* have been read and primarily appreciated as straightforward, realist accounts of her time in what was then Rhodesia and as condemnatory of colonialism as practiced in that part of Africa. The British Council website states that *The Grass is Singing* “explores the complacency and shallowness of white colonial society in Southern Africa and established Lessing as a talented young novelist.” Her listing further states:

She is now widely regarded as one of the most important postwar writers in English. Her novels, short stories and essays have focused on a wide range of twentieth-century issues and concerns, from the politics of race – which she confronted in her early novels set in Africa – to the politics of gender, which led to her adoption by the feminist movement, to the role of the family and the individual in society, explored in her space fiction of the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁹

Her realism extends to the point where readers can positively identify individuals and buildings that appear in her fiction.¹⁰ Lessing lived in Rhodesia from 1925 to 1945, having moved there with her parents when she was six years old – a formative period of her life. Due to her outspoken opposition to the colonialist enterprise, she was declared a “prohibited alien” and thus banned from Rhodesia and South Africa in 1956, an experience she writes about in a short essay: “Being Prohibited.”¹¹ She draws from her experiences in Rhodesia for her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), and for her first collection of short stories, *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1951). Her stories set in Africa were expanded and published in two volumes in 1973: *This Was the Old Chief’s Country: Collected African Stories, Vol. 1*; and *The Sun Between Their Feet: Collected African Stories, Vol. 2*. These stories were reprinted – with two additional stories – in 1981 as *African Stories*.¹²

In this paper, I suggest the reading of these stories through the lens of naturalism, particularly Zola’s notions of “the laboratory and the laboratory experiment”¹³ as the basis for fiction, where characters find themselves in a specific set of circumstances. For Lessing’s fiction, if there is indeed an encapsulating description, a “laboratory of human behavior” is certainly operative, her laboratory being the white-settler society of southern Africa.

Her later view of her early work is somewhat complicated. For Lessing, the “highest point of literature” was the realist novel of the nineteenth century – the novels of “Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, [and] Chekhov.”¹⁴ She writes: “I hold the view that the realist

⁸ James Gindin, “Doris Lessing’s Intense Commitment,” in *Doris Lessing*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2003) 9-26.19.

⁹ British Council, “Doris Lessing,” [Britishcouncil.org](https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/doris-lessing). <<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/doris-lessing>>.

¹⁰ See Colin Style, “Doris Lessing’s ‘Zambesia,’” *English in Africa* 13.1 (1986): 73-91. <www.jstor.org/stable/40238583>. Style compares Doris Lessing’s “Zambesia” to his familiarity with Zimbabwe (Rhodesia).

¹¹ Doris Lessing, “Being Prohibited.” First published in the *New Statesman*, April 21, 1956. Reprinted in *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, ed. Paul Schlueter (New York: Vintage, 1975) 155-60. Hereafter, the quotations taken from this collection will be referred to as *A Small Personal Voice*.

¹² An earlier edition, also titled *African Stories*, was published in 1964.

¹³ See David Bell, “‘Thérèse Raquin’: Scientific Realism in Zola’s Laboratory,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 24. 1-2 (1995-1996): 122-32. 123. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23536931>>.

¹⁴ *A Small Personal Voice* 4.

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novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing; higher than and out of reach of any comparison with expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism, or any other ism."¹⁵ The fact that she includes naturalism in her list of despised "isms" and seeks instead to align her work with the great realists presents a challenge to the critic in placing her early work under the naturalist umbrella. A difficult situation, perhaps, but the possible difference between a writer's stated purpose and the assessment of the reader needs to be considered. Also, one notes that on her list of admired authors is Balzac, whom Zola declared to be the father of the naturalist novel.¹⁶

Perhaps Lessing's espousing of elements of naturalist aesthetics is most evident in her work situated in the southern part of Africa. In fact, the stories present remarkable naturalist Petri dishes of white British settler society during the first half of the twentieth century. While these works are readily acknowledged as portraying realist renderings of settler life and society, they are also lauded as critiques of British colonialism. A naturalist reading complicates the assessment of Lessing's stories, however. Can a white settler's account truly be "realist," that is, be considered a comprehensive presentation of African reality? The white settler's view will predominate since that is what the writer knows best. A look at four stories I have chosen to examine – "Little Tembi," "The Old Chief Mshlanga," "No Witchcraft for Sale," and "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange" – help to answer questions of representation.

The racism demonstrated by characters in Lessing's stories can be understood as contributing to a pattern of condemnation of colonialism. In "Little Tembi," for example, Jane adapts to settler life by enjoying putting her nurses' training to work, "nursing the natives" who are "just like children."¹⁷ When she is brought Tembi, a severely ill child whose mother believes he "will die," Jane is determined to keep him alive and essentially adopts him. When she has a child of her own, a distance begins to develop between Jane and the formerly favored Tembi. Tembi's life does not turn out well. In the end, Jane makes another effort to save him by urging him to escape the coming police and thus avoid going to prison for his crimes. He refuses and is arrested. Jane, devastated, asks her husband: "'What did he *want*, Willie? What is it he was wanting, all this time?'"¹⁸ The story's ending, with Jane's inability to know the answer to her question, challenges the reader to respond and, in so doing, turns the story into an evisceration of the "white savior" trope – where a white character "rescues" or "saves" a person of color from his or her plight and thus becomes the exemplary hero.

However brilliantly Lessing describes the Petri dish-colonialism of the white settlers and, consequently, their normalization of dehumanizing racial language – which of itself is complicated when read as a depiction of Africans typically imagined by Europeans –, the situation becomes even more problematic when racist language and characterization contribute to the thematic structuring of the narrative, particularly in the voice of the omniscient narrator. For example, descriptions of Africans include phrases such as, "He would play to my father's appreciation of the comic, but he would never play the ape, as some Africans did, for our amusement" and is described as "grunting savagely."¹⁹

¹⁵ *A Small Personal Voice* 4.

¹⁶ Graham Robb, *Balzac: A Biography* (London: Picador, 1994) 421. Robb also notes the work of Hippolyte Taine who "confirmed Balzac's view of himself as a literary 'Naturalist'" (421).

¹⁷ Doris Lessing, "Little Tembi," *African Stories* (New York: Touchstone, 1981) 129-151. 129. All quotations from Lessing's stories and her preface, refer to this edition, and "Lessing" only will be indicated.

¹⁸ Lessing 150, 151. Italics in the text.

¹⁹ Lessing, "The Nuisance" (96-102) 99, 98.

Part of Lessing's valuing of the nineteenth-century novel is its evocation of a "moral climate."²⁰ To assess this aspect in her stories set in Africa, particularly given the complicated dynamics of race and class portrayed, it will be productive to consider the representation of "the other" as the product of the naturalist gaze. The assessments of moral climates regarding Africa has changed, perhaps most notably with Chinua Achebe's famous critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He argues that the novel "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality."²¹ Achebe goes on to say that Conrad "did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and to a large extent remains the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it."²² For the reader of Lessing's stories, Achebe's critique of Conrad hovers in the background as a corrective reference point.²³

A 2014 re-issue of Lessing's *African Stories* is extolled by her publisher Simon and Schuster in an unsigned text as "a central book in the work of a truly beloved writer," with the comment that the "beautiful collection" forms a "brilliant portrait of African life"; the publisher's website further states that this is some of her "best work," an "essential book."²⁴ Even if one accounts for a publisher's marketing hyperbole, the fact that the work is re-issued with the claim that these stories are "vital to all of us [...], perceived by an artist of first rank writing with passion and honesty about her native land"; a review attributed to *Newsweek* on the same website notes that Lessing's "sense of setting is so immediate, the touch and taste of her continent is so strong, that Africa seems to become the universe."²⁵ This is extravagant praise for descriptions of life in Africa penned by a white British writer. Her universal "Africa" is, more accurately, a European construction.²⁶ How then to situate Lessing's realist and, as I argue, "naturalist" African stories?

Lessing, in the preface (1981) to her collected *African Stories*, comments on the "salience of the colour class."²⁷ Approaching Lessing's *African Stories* through the inescapable frame of colonialism reveals a naturalistic view of Africa recognizable to and understood by Europeans, even as they condemn colonialism while still employing "accepted" racist language and characterizations of the African "other."

²⁰ *A Small Personal Voice* 5.

²¹ See Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 782–94. Rpt. in *Heart of Darkness. An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources Criticism* [1961], 3rd Edition, ed. Robert Kimbrough (London: W. W Norton & Co., 1988) 251-61. 252. Henceforth, all quotations from Chinua Achebe will be taken from this edition of Conrad's novel.

²² Achebe 261.

²³ Eve Bertelsen is one critic who uses Conrad as a reference point for discussing Lessing. See her "Veldtanschaung: Doris Lessing's Savage Africa," *Modern Fiction Studies* 37.4 (1991): 650, 658.

²⁴ Simon and Schuster's website markets the re-issue of Lessing's *African Stories*. Consulted 09.09.23. <<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/African-Stories/Doris-Lessing/9781476767154>>.

²⁵ Simon and Schuster. See also footnote no. 1.

²⁶ Lessing's "Africa" is certainly different from that of approximately contemporary indigenous African writers. A further development would be a comparison of Lessing's stories with the works by some of these authors: for example, Peter Abrahams (born in the same year as Lessing, 1919), who wrote *Mine Boy* (1946) and *Wreath for Udomo*; Frank Brownlee (1876-1952) and his *Cattle Thief: The Story of Ntsukumbini* (1929); Rolef Reginald Raymond Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928 – 1st novella in English by a Black South African). And there are other authors who would merit consideration: Ahmed Essop (b. 1931), Bessie Head (b.1937), Archibald Campbell Jordan (1906-1968), C. E. Moikangoa (b. 1879), Es'ka (Ezekiel) Mphahlele (b. 1919), and Solmon T. Plaatje (b. 1876). See *The Penguin Book of Southern African Stories*, ed. Stephen Gray (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1985). Published works by these authors are unfortunately hard to come by. That fact itself is a racist colonial legacy.

²⁷ Lessing 5.

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Typical analyses of Lessing's work set in Africa, *The Grass is Singing* and the *African Stories*, focus on connections to her life and lived experiences in Africa and the contemporary political situation, including social issues. Her stories are widely admired as fictionalized out-workings of real lives in a specific geographical and historical reality. Critics have examined various themes that resonate with received European literary tropes. For example, the landscape is a recurring motif. The presumed openness and exoticism of the African *veld* forms the ground for the colonial obsession with establishing borders and boundaries where the vicissitudes of power, domination, racism and, eventually, the failures of colonialism play out – both in relationship to the physical landscape and in the behavior of the settlers. This emphasis on a place that is foreign and *other* is one of the ways colonialism manifests human behavior as a state of persistent precarity concerning “the other,” in the lives of the white settlers. Here, for example, is a typical description of the landscape:

Sitting low here, the encircling piles of boulders seemed like mountains, heightening the sky on tall horizons. The rocks were dark grey, but *stained* with lichens. The trees between the boulders were meager, and several were lightning-struck, no more than *black skeletons*. This was *hungry* country, growing sand and thin grass and rocks and heat. (594).²⁸

Note the pejorative, *othering* language, no doubt thematically important, but it is also language that caters to the already established and accepted European notions of what Africa is *really* like.

Lessing's writing remains inescapably constructed and framed within a Eurocentric vision even as she critiques the colonial enterprise. Her “realist” Africa remains *other*, a foil for Europe and European values even as these values are also shown to be ethically and morally bankrupt in her “Africa.” When analyzing her stories and their complex social issues, which Lessing exquisitely and poignantly renders, the reader needs to consider the different types of white settlers and their behavior towards Africans and Africa. Without a doubt, a deep systemic racism practiced by the white settlers rises to the surface in Lessing's account of their interactions, but that is not all that going on.

What is not as clearly or fully shown, nor can it be by a European writer, is how precarity is experienced within the lives of the indigenous peoples of Rhodesia. What can be portrayed is a white *perception* of the impact and consequences of colonialism – often presented as physical displacement and accompanied by a moral disorientation on the part of the European characters. The effects of the physical displacement of colonials have been skillfully crafted in the story titled “The Old Chief Mshlanga.” Here, Lessing presents the transformation of a young white girl's perception of Africans, from fear and ignorance to an awakening empathy and understanding. The girl – much like Lessing herself – is brought up reading books about the English landscape and finds that the African veld “meant strangeness, though she could remember nothing else” and that “it was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language.”²⁹ In her white mind, the Africans are conflated with the landscape: “The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and rocks. They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, who existed merely to serve, to say ‘Yes, Bass,’ take their money and go.”³⁰ Such a description is an accurate and damning indictment of white racism, yet the conflation of Africans with a perceived natural, animalist world – while perhaps meant as an

²⁸ Lessing, “The Sun Between Their Feet” 583-98. 594. Emphasis added.

²⁹ Lessing, “The Old Chief Mshlanga” 47-58. 48.

³⁰ Lessing 48.

indictment of the facticity of white “civilization” – becomes problematic because it represents the accepted and oft-repeated *de facto* Western narrative attributed to Africa and Africans, and in a sense *becomes* “Africa” for that population.³¹

The girl’s dawning sense of alienation and displacement stands in contrast to the Chief’s eviction from his land. As Walder notes:

Behind “The Old Chief Mshlanga” lies the major determining act of colonial rule in the area, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, and an act analogous to the earlier Natives Land Act of 1913 in South Africa, equally designed to ensure that land ownership by Africans was limited to demarcated reserves. The effect of both acts was to transform Blacks who lived outside those reserves into wage or tenant labourers for white farmers, who thought they could therefore live the Arcadian fantasy that beckoned to the poor or frustrated from Britain [...].³²

The story focuses on the girl’s growing enlightenment regarding her living situation in Africa. She reads “more books,”³³ not about England – earlier presented as a childish fantasy –, but about Africa. She wrestles with the notion that Africa is “my heritage, too” and has become aware of the language used to describe the “natives”:³⁴ grown men are called “boys” (as in “house boy” and “garden boy”) and the use of expressions, such as “savage,” “niggers,” and “kaffirs” is ubiquitous.³⁵ In contrast, respect is shown for the humanity and dignity of the Chief and his family: the chief’s son, a cook for the family is referenced as a “young man” rather than “boy.”³⁶ He finally confronts the white farmer, stating “[m]y father says: All this land, this land you call yours, is his land, and belongs to our people.”³⁷ The story ends however problematically, where the last paragraph could be the reflection of the now grown girl or perhaps could also be read as the narrator’s tongue-in-cheek conclusion that the land is now a “lush warm valley” – more like England; it is “allotted” to a “lucky” settler and not to be reclaimed by the descendants of the chief.³⁸

The third story to be considered in this study, “No Witchcraft for Sale,” can be read as challenging racial stereotypes in its illustration of the consequences when a white family, the Farquars, for their gain, try to exploit an African healer, Gideon, who serves as their cook. By setting up a structure of doubles (Gideon’s son and Teddy; and then the white scientist and Gideon), Lessing surgically lays bare the inequities of colonialism. Teddy, with “downy golden head and his blue eyes” is doted upon and cared for by Gideon, who calls him “Little Yellow Head”; the reader learns by way of Gideon, that “Little Yellow Head is the most good thing we have in our house.”³⁹ A subtle knife-sharp irony follows, with the omniscient narrator’s comment:

³¹ By way of disclosure, I was born in South Africa and raised in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. In the 1960s and 1970s such characterizations of Africans were readily accepted as accurate and true.

³² Dennis Walder, “‘Alone in a Landscape’: Lessing’s *African Stories* Remembered,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (June 2008): 111.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42799517_%27Alone_in_a_LandscapeLessing%27s_African_Stories_Remembered>.

³³ Lessing 51.

³⁴ Lessing 51.

³⁵ Lessing 51, 56.

³⁶ Lessing 51.

³⁷ Lessing 57.

³⁸ Lessing 58.

³⁹ Lessing, “No Witchcraft for Sale” 67-76. 67.

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“Because of that ‘we’ Mrs. Farquar felt a warm impulse towards her cook; and at the end of the month raised his wages. He had been with her for now for several years; [...].”⁴⁰ This information is the prelude to the disclosure that Gideon has a son – not named and referred to as “a small piccanin” – born at the same time as Teddy who “could be seen peering from the edge of the bush, staring in awe at the little white boy with his miraculous fair hair and Northern blue eyes.”⁴¹ The racist societal structure is further exposed when Gideon, who sees Teddy “put out his hand curiously to touch the black child’s cheeks and hair,”⁴² says:

“Ah, Missus, these are both children, and one will grow up to be a baas, and one will be a servant”; and Mrs. Farquar smiled and said sadly, “Yes, Gideon, I was thinking the same.” She sighed. “It is God’s will,” said Gideon, who was a mission boy. The Farquars were very religious people; and this shared feeling about God bound servant and masters even closer together.⁴³

Multiple layers of revelatory ironies play out in this short passage, ending with religion as the trump card for the justification of the racial structure. The story soon pivots, **as** it becomes apparent that Gideon is not acquiescent to the structural injustice of his situation. Teddy, who we learn is “about six years old,” has already absorbed the white sense of racial superiority when he uses his scooter with a double purpose. On the one hand, he wants to impress Gideon – shouting “Look at me!” – and be praised for being “clever”; on the other, in the next instant, he tries to scare “Gideon’s youngest son,” who now has the responsibility and status of “a herdsboy” when he comes to see this toy: “He was afraid to come near it, but Teddy showed off in front of him, ‘Piccanin,’ shouted Teddy, ‘get out of my way! And he raced in circles around the black child until he was frightened, and fled back to the bush.”⁴⁴

When reproached by Gideon, Teddy claims justification by “defiantly” asserting: “He’s only a black boy,” with a laugh.⁴⁵ From this moment Gideon’s relationship with Teddy changes, the narrator marking the shift in attitude: “Now Gideon would not let his flesh touch the flesh of the white child. He was kind, but there was a grave formality in his voice that made Teddy pout and sulk away.”⁴⁶ The social distance now made evident between the black and white child leads to the main event of the story: Teddy is bitten by a venomous snake and will certainly go blind without the intervention of a remedy, a particular “white fleshy root” that Gideon knows of. The cutting, with its ironic resonances, and the religious symbolism of the following sequence showcase Lessing’s skill:

Without washing it, he put the root in his mouth, chewed it vigorously, and then held the spittle there while he took the child forcibly from Mrs. Farquar. He gripped Teddy down between his knees, and pressed the balls of his thumbs into the swollen eyes, so that the child screamed and Mrs. Farquar cried out in protest: “Gideon, Gideon!” But Gideon took no notice. He knelt over the writhing child, pushing back the puffy lids till chinks of eyeball showed, and then he spat hard, again and again, into first one eye, and then the other. He

⁴⁰ Lessing, 67-68.

⁴¹ Lessing 68.

⁴² Lessing 68.

⁴³ Lessing 68.

⁴⁴ All the quotations in this paragraph are from Lessing 68.

⁴⁵ Lessing 68

⁴⁶ Lessing 68, 69.

finally lifted Teddy gently into his mother's arms, and said: "His eyes will get better." But Mrs. Farquar was weeping with terror, and she could hardly thank him: it was impossible to believe that Teddy could keep his sight.⁴⁷

This scene alludes to the story in the New Testament book of John when Jesus heals the blind man with a poultice of saliva and mud; and, in response to the miracle, no one – neither bystanders nor the healed man himself – is able to understand or "see" what has happened.⁴⁸ Likewise, none of the whites in "No Witchcraft for Sale" see or understand what for them is a miraculous event. Only Gideon knows. As the story spreads in the community and when a white doctor and then a white scientist come to the farm to ask Gideon for the "root," Gideon feigns ignorance and is "unable" to find the root ever again, thus thwarting their effort to take possession of his knowledge and his having to surrender it to colonial appropriation.⁴⁹

What must also be understood for Lessing's *African stories* to be read, let alone admired, by a European audience as constituting a "brilliant portrait of African life," the stories must be constructed to meet and even reinforce a European notion of what constitutes an "African life" even as, in the case of "No Witchcraft for Sale," these works undercut and seek to eviscerate the dehumanizing narrative architecture of colonial realities. The stories are framed in a recognizable and accepted white discourse of European perceptions and understanding of African realities. The "real" Africa, for them, is the constructed experience of colonial settlers, even as Lessing's narratives showcase the failure and futility of the white colonial experience. This angle creates a bifurcated reality: a critique of colonialism within a colonial discourse. This assertion is not a critique of Lessing as much as it is a call to read her stories, not as unadulterated fictionalized records of colonialism but as complicating while even at times being complicit in colonialism and its legacies.

Lessing is aware of the challenges. In her review of Laurens van der Post's romantic and idealized view of Africa and Africans, in his *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958), she writes:

An African once said to me that beyond the white man's more obvious crimes in Africa, there was the unforgivable one that "Even the best of you use Africa as a peg to hang your egos on." To this crime Mr. van der Post is open. *So are all the rest of us.*⁵⁰

Lessing's self-inclusion here is important not only for her awareness but also for readers who appreciate her *African Stories*, as the admission points to the central conundrum of European understanding, representation, and construction of "the other."

In the essays edited by Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins on the work of Doris Lessing, entitled *Border Crossings*, they begin by noting the considerations and complexities of Lessing's life – a "Persian-born, Rhodesian-raised and London-residing novelist" – and how this background complicates categorizing her. Their solution is to frame her as one who crosses not only physical borders but also personal, political, and social borders and expectations. Hence, they

⁴⁷ Lessing 69-70.

⁴⁸ See The Gospel of St. John 9:2-22 for the striking parallels between the Biblical narrative and Lessing's story.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Gideon's name can be translated as "great warrior" and "one who cuts down." Both meanings have symbolic resonances. See Keshia Roelofs, "Gideon," <<https://www.thebump.com/b/gideon-baby-name>>. Although Gideon heals Terry, he effectively "cuts down" all attempts by-the whites to gain his knowledge.

⁵⁰ My emphasis. Qtd. in Dennis Walder, "'Alone in a Landscape': Lessing's *African Stories* Remembered," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (June 2008): 108. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42799517_%27Alone_in_a_LandscapeLessing%27s_African_Stories_Remembered>.

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argue that the idea of “border crossings” is the central metaphor of her life and work⁵¹ – a stance supported by Lessing’s autobiographical writings. Lessing’s Communist affiliation was, as they note, a “central attraction” due to the “party’s engagement with racism, colonialism and the colour bar.”⁵² They also note, however, that Lessing’s “autobiographical writings make it clear that she had little contact with black Southern African people.”⁵³ Not surprisingly then, Lessing’s protagonists are white settlers with indigenous Africans often acting as foils. Since white concerns and struggles are at the center of the narratives, while African characters and concerns are on the margins, a precarity-inducing tension develops between the two. Ridout and Watkins recognize this situation: “Indeed, to explore Lessing’s life during this period and her subsequent writings about these experiences is to see most clearly the complex permeations of the ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ before, during and after Independence.”⁵⁴

Patricia Louw, a (white) professor at the University of Zululand, has written extensively on Lessing’s *African Stories*. Her analysis, particularly of space and boundaries, highlights not only important themes in Lessing’s work but also shows the extent of the careful wielding of Lessing’s craft in writing stories so evocative of the lived realities of colonial settler life and experience in Rhodesia in the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁵ Addressing Lessing’s story, “The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange,” Louw’s focus is on place-making, in the sense of transforming a wild tract of land into a liveable space; in the “settler world” it consists of “the making of gardens.”⁵⁶ The protagonist in the story is a white English settler, Mrs. Gale, the farmer’s wife who within a protecting fenced yard “created over years of toil” an English garden.⁵⁷ A veritable, Garden of Eden imposed on the wild, exotic, and untamed wilderness that surrounds their farm in Rhodesia. Mrs. Gale achieves a measure of success, since viewing her garden was to experience “all this beauty and peace.”⁵⁸ For Mrs. Gale, her garden was “what she lived for: her flowering African shrubs, her vivid English lawns, her water garden with the goldfish and water lilies.”⁵⁹ Mrs. Gale, however, is unable to “keep out the strong odour of vegetation from the steamy river valley below her garden.”⁶⁰ Her life and her garden are disrupted by the arrival of a much younger woman (perhaps just 18), an Afrikaner newly married to the man Major Gale has brought in as hired help. The creation of the garden has served as a bulwark against the “pain of loneliness” – an endured reality for many settler women thus isolated on farms in the southern part of Africa.⁶¹

As Patricia Louw rightly notes, Afrikaners occupy an ambivalent and uneasy position in Lessing’s stories. As “whites” they occupy a status above the indigenous black Africans, but they are also presented and represented as belonging to a social class well below the English settlers – they are both “colonizers and colonized.”⁶² Louw’s focus is on the ways space and place are

⁵¹ Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins, “Introduction,” *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (London: Continuum International, 2009) 1-14. 3.

⁵² Ridout and Watkins 4.

⁵³ Ridout and Watkins 4.

⁵⁴ Ridout and Watkins 4.

⁵⁵ Among Patricia Louw’s essays is an important piece entitled “Inside and Outside Colonial Spaces: Border Crossings in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*,” in *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, eds. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum, 2009) 26-43.

⁵⁶ Louw (2009) 32.

⁵⁷ Lessing, “The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange” 103-28.107.

⁵⁸ Lessing 109.

⁵⁹ Lessing, 107-08.

⁶⁰ Louw (2009) 32.

⁶¹ Louw (2009) 32.

⁶² Louw (2009) 33.

contrasted: both interior – Mrs. Gale’s ordered home versus the house she prepares for the De Wets; and exterior – the white settler’s tamed garden and the wilderness beyond. The story’s conflict between the Gales and the De Wets centers on Mrs. Gale’s attempts to aid the young Mrs. De Wet, who is unprepared for life on the farm as a wife to a man whose only expectations of her are to cook and make babies. The sharply escalating situation crescendos with violence when the young and pregnant Mrs. De Wet is beaten by her husband in the presence of the Gales. Lessing focuses on the harshness and brutality, for settler women, of life on an isolated farm and on the differing ways the two women cope. On the one hand, the elderly Mrs. Gale has adjusted by maintaining a constructed nostalgia for England – her garden, her weekly letters to and from her best friend Betty, her sunsets, her hills, and her ordered routine of having tea. And, on the other, the young, newly married Mrs. De Wet is neither English nor a countrywoman, but rather accustomed to living in town surrounded by a large family. She is incapable of companionship with Mrs. Gale – who resents her intrusion into her established routine – and is driven to desperate measures to gain attention on her terms by “hiding under the bed” while others have spent the night looking for her and then she laughs at her husband when she is found.⁶³ In the end, Mrs. Gale is unjustly blamed by the men for the “damage” she has done which includes Mr. De Wet’s beating of his wife for her actions.⁶⁴ While it is a powerful story of male misogyny, what is missing from Louw’s reading is the space on the margins of the story, occupied – briefly but importantly – by Africans.

Near the beginning of the story, a “native” brings a sack of mail. This unnamed African is associated with and presumed responsible for “A sour smell of raw meat” that emanates from the sack. In response to this odor, Major Gale responds with

a kindly contempt he used for his native servants: “Did the spooks get you?” and laughs. The native who had panted the last mile of this ten-mile journey through the bush filled with unnameable phantoms, ghosts of ancestors, wraiths of tree and beast, put on a pantomime of fear and chattered and shivered for a moment like an ape, to amuse his master. Major Gale dismissed the boy. He ducked thankfully around the corner of the house to the back, where there were lights and companionship.⁶⁵

There are several issues here: the use of highly racist language; the very real colonialist construction of Africans as being sub-human and animalistic; and the presumption of knowing the interiority of the African’s response to the wilderness. Another approach is to ask: What **is** the function of this incident and its description within the story? Given Lessing’s narrative abilities, the scene is not just there to lay bare the degrading realities of white colonial racism. First, the “smell of rotten meat” forecasts the consequences of one of the letters “in the post” – the disturbing news that the man Major Gale has hired and whose arrival is imminent has married and thus is bringing a wife with him:

At last he sighed, with a glance at her; and when she said: “Well, dear?” he replied at once, “The man has a wife.”
 “Dear me!” she exclaimed, dismayed.⁶⁶

⁶³ Lessing 127.

⁶⁴ Lessing 128.

⁶⁵ Lessing 103-104.

⁶⁶ Lessing 105.

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As the story unfolds, the young newly married woman becomes, metaphorically, the “sour raw meat” – much too young, inexperienced (raw), and soured on her marriage (neglected by her husband) and on her expected role as a woman in this colonial context.

In fact, the story presents as a naturalistic evisceration of the treatment of women – the young pregnant wife is beaten by her husband in the presence of Major and Mrs. Gale and, when Mrs. Gale tries to intervene, she is blamed for the whole situation:

Major Gale, who had caught and steadied his wife as she staggered back, said to her in a low voice: “Come, Caroline [first use of her first name]. Come. Leave them to sort it out.” “And what if he loses his temper again and decides to kill her this time?” demanded Mrs. Gale, her voice shrill.

De Wet got to his feet. Lifting his wife with him. “Go away now, Mrs. Major,” he said. “Get out of here, You’ve done enough damage.”

“I’ve done enough damage?” she gasped. “And what I have I done?”

“Oh nothing, nothing at all,” he said with ugly sarcasm. “Nothing at all. But please go and leave my wife alone in future, Mrs. Major.”

[...]

“He was upset,” said her husband judiciously.

She snorted. Then, after a silence: “So, it was all my fault.”

“He didn’t say so.”

“I thought that was what he was saying. He behaves like a brute and then says it is my fault.”

“It was no one’s fault,” said Major Gale, pattering her vaguely on the shoulders and back as they stumbled back home.

[...]

“Next time you get an assistant,” she said finally, “get people of our kind. These might be savages, the way they behave.”

And that was the last word she would ever say on the subject.⁶⁷

Aside from the misogynist behavior of the white male settler class and the way the scene implicitly condemns such behaviour, the treatment of the Africans in the story is used to set the context and reference for Mrs. Gale’s final comment: “These might be savages, the way they behave.” The “they” here are the Afrikaners: Mr. and Mrs. De Wet. Although white, within the British settler society and in the context of the Anglo-Boer war, members of this “other” white population “were cordoned by their heritage from the mainstream of Rhodesian society. Their adherence to separate language, religion, and customs made ostracism inevitable.”⁶⁸ Mrs. Gale’s crime was to attempt to assist the young wife, abetted by the cruel irony of Major Gale’s assertion when reading the mail that for Mrs. Gale, “It will be nice for you to have another woman about the place.”⁶⁹

Mrs. Gale’s use of the word “savage” of course, not only signifies the social status of Mr. De Wet but also the presumed natural state of Africans. This comment is situated within the second description of Africans (now plural) needed for the climax of the story. Mrs. De Wet has gone missing and is presumed to have wandered off into the veld and to be lost and even in danger.

⁶⁷ Lessing 128.

⁶⁸ Dane Kennedy, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1987) 21.

⁶⁹ Lessing 105.

Night is coming on. The decision is made to send out a search party with the assistance of the Africans. Mr. De Wet speaking to Major Gale declares, “We must get the boys out,”⁷⁰ using the colonial racist term “boys” for African males of any age.⁷¹ The following passage has inescapable echoes of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

Everything was drenched in moonlight. Soon they heard a growing clamour of voices from over the ridge, and a little later the darkness there was lightened by flaring torches held high by invisible hands: it seemed as if the night were scattered with torches advancing of their own accord. Then a crowd of dark figures took shape under the broken lights. The farm natives, excited by the prospect of a night’s chasing over the veld, were yelling as if they were after a small buck or hare.⁷²

Mrs. Gale, taking in the scene, comments: “I can’t bear to think of her being – pursued, like this, by a crowd of natives. It’s horrible.”⁷³

The sequence at the beginning of this story, when the African brings the post, combines with this scene to create a framework contextualizing the importance of the use of the word “savage” at the end of the story. While there is a condemnation of the colonial hegemony of the white British settler and racism vis-à-vis the white Afrikaner settlers, the treatment of Africans here serves as a foil for that critique. Such use also evades the blatant racism.

While it is argued, as does Patricia Louw when she teaches Lessing’s stories at the University of Zululand, that while Lessing’s stories contribute to the “damage done to African culture by colonialism,” yet Lessing ultimately also subverts or undermines the colonialist enterprise.⁷⁴ Louw acknowledges that her black students “were initially resistant” to Lessing’s stories due to the use of racist language.⁷⁵ She notes Lessing’s assertion that her work is not “just the white man’s attitude towards the black, but people’s attitudes to each other in general.”⁷⁶ Generalizing the problem is just Louw’s clever way of avoiding issues that her African students notice. In her preface to the collected volume of her *African Stories*, Lessing also dilutes the issue:

And while the cruelties of the white man towards the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun.⁷⁷

The language here of “colour prejudice” is much softer and more accommodating than “racism,” but racism is most assuredly at play. Achebe succinctly encapsulates the issue, “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate.”⁷⁸ It is doubtful that Lessing would

⁷⁰ Lessing 124.

⁷¹ This routine use of the term “boy” for even old African men is indicative of the infantilization of colonial racism.

⁷² Lessing 124.

⁷³ Lessing 124.

⁷⁴ Patricia Louw, “‘The Vexed ‘colour problem’: Doris Lessing and the ‘African Renaissance,’” *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1.1 (2009) 18-21 18.< <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijhss/article/view/62103>>.

⁷⁵ Louw, “The Vexed ‘colour problem’...” 18.

⁷⁶ Louw, “The Vexed ‘colour problem’...” 19.

⁷⁷ Lessing 6.

⁷⁸ Achebe 261.

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consider herself “immaculate”; however, the European moral deformities are much weightier than a “prejudice.”

While it is true, as Louw argues, that, “[w]hen Lessing depicts characters in her stories making racist remarks or behaving in a condescending or paternalistic way toward blacks, she is showing what the settlers were like. Her views are different.”⁷⁹ Louw asks the binary question regarding the meaning Lessing assigns to African culture: “Does it support colonial discourse, or does it subvert and undermine it?”⁸⁰ The problem, of course, is that more is involved. The answer does not easily fall into the binary categories of either/or. The signifier, signified relationship is not singular and not as stable as Louw would like it to be. However much it can be argued that “traditional African culture is held up as something to be admired and tragically mourned for as it is destroyed,”⁸¹ as in “The Old Chief Mshlanga” or in the Christ-likeness of Gideon in “No Witchcraft for Sale,” that is not to say that readers should overlook or set aside other damaging signifiers and referents, particularly when they are embedded in the structure of the story.

The black American Nobel laureate (1993) influenced by Lessing, Toni Morrison, notes that it is possible to accept as normative – and hence real and true – that African Americans, as well as, I would add, African blacks, can be viewed as “symbolic figurations of blackness [as] markers” for a slate of significations.⁸² These often include evil and, in particular in the African context, infantilization, animalistic characterization, and savagery; they “have come to signify as well the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about” others of a different skin colour.⁸³ Morrison goes on to say: “National literatures, like writers, get along the best way they can, and with what they can. Yet they do end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind.”⁸⁴ What is on the “national mind” of readers of Lessing’s *African stories* are the views and experiences of white colonial settlers. Even as the settler experience is castigated, the “real” Africa that emerges remains alien, fetishized, and wholly *other*.

As has been argued, Doris Lessing’s African novels and short stories can be read as naturalist narratives of the harsh overt and subtle cruelties of European colonialism in Zimbabwe; indeed, it should be kept in mind that what she describes was inscribed to a large extent in the contemporary culture, from the settler perspective. However, the racism depicted and used for aesthetic effect, as in “The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange” – and in all of Lessing’s other *African Stories*, should not simply be subsumed as an aspect of the larger project of colonialism. The use of racialized language, particularly for structural purposes, does seem “to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind,” thus perpetuating racial stereotyping and its acceptability,⁸⁵ as Morrison suggests. She comments further on the experience of writing within a situation of structural racism:

To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For

⁷⁹ Louw, “The Vexed ‘colour problem’...” 19.

⁸⁰ Louw, “The Vexed ‘colour problem’...” 18.

⁸¹ Louw, “The Vexed ‘colour problem’...” 19.

⁸² Toni Morrison, *Playing it Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 14.

⁸³ Morrison 6-7.

⁸⁴ Morrison 14.

⁸⁵ Morrison 14. Morrison is writing about the figuration of African Americans in American literature; however, her considerations apply as well to white writers writing about Africa and Africans.

them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*.⁸⁶

One of the virtues of literary naturalism is that it both presents and critiques deplorable social realities, allowing for a fuller understanding of those dynamics. Even narrative fiction has become an important form of “truth-telling.” As a writer with an appreciation for other writers in a similar situation – for example, Doris Lessing and Zora Neale Hurston –, Morrison acknowledges:

Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power. The languages they use and the social and historical context in which these languages signify are indirect and direct revelations of that power and its limitations.⁸⁷

The laboratory Petri dish of Lessing’s *African Stories* showcases and reminds readers not just how value-entangled and nefarious colonialism was, but the stories also demonstrate the challenges and pitfalls of writing about “the other” in our post-colonial age. To reap fully the value of Lessing’s *African Stories*, a critical eye is necessary. Walder notes that one can read Lessing’s work,

with an awareness that there are no easy apologies or justifications for the historical injustice; nor, as we now know, will redress be easy. Individual and cultural memories may intersect, but they can also diverge, leading to conflict about who precisely has a just claim on the future.⁸⁸

In her Nobel speech awarded late in life, Lessing warns that “it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed.”⁸⁹ What matters is not only what we read but *how* we read. Lessing’s *African Stories* provide a laboratory for readers to examine and exercise their moral acumen set against the persistent cosmological background of racism, always present, always *there*, entangled with whatever else the stories may be about.

⁸⁶ Morrison 4.

⁸⁷ Morrison 15.

⁸⁸ Walder 112.

⁸⁹ Lessing, “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize,” The Nobel Prize speech, Dec. 7, 2007. Consulted 09.09.23. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2007/lessing>>.