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‘Second World Life Writing: Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin*’

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Abstract

The first volume of Doris Lessing’s official autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994) returns her to memories of her African childhood, but also necessitates that she reassess the status of official and ‘fictionalised’ accounts of the past, especially her own story of the impact of colonization and Empire on her family, herself and the native African population in Southern Rhodesia. At the time *Under My Skin* appeared In the 1990s, feminist critics were working out the distinctive features of women’s autobiographical writing, and much more recently those of postcolonial life writing have been identified by critics such as Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009). This article will consider whether categories such as feminist autobiography, autobiography of empire or postcolonial autobiography are actually helpful in reading *Under My Skin*, and will investigate whether or not it is more appropriate to consider the text as an example of ‘second world’ life writing. As a second-world writer, to use Stephen Slemon’s 1990 term, Lessing’s ambivalence about issues of gender, race, empire and nation, both her complicity with colonialism as the daughter of white invader settlers and her resistance to it, become easier to analyse. In order to understand how this ambivalence plays out in the text the article will investigate whether the trope Helen Tiffin (1998) identifies as particular to second world women’s life writing – dispersive citation – is useful in reading Lessing’s autobiography and making sense of her intervention in the genre of life writing.

Although Doris Lessing’s work has always engaged imaginatively with her own experience, the appearance in 1994 of the first volume of her autobiography, *Under My Skin*

marked her most explicit intervention in the genre of what has come to be called life writing. This first volume is inevitably concerned prominently with her memories of growing up in Southern Rhodesia. Of course Lessing had written about her African childhood before: in the first volume of the Children Of Violence novels, *Martha Quest* (1952), and in the essays *Going Home* (1957) and *African Laughter* (1992), which both cover return trips home that Lessing made, first to Southern Rhodesia during the period of its Federation with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1954-63) and subsequently to Zimbabwe after Independence. The generic status of both *Going Home* and *African Laughter* is complex; both are part travel writing, part memoir, part essay, and there is a sharing of material across these texts, the autobiography and the fiction. However, it is *Under My Skin* that is credited with the sub-title *Volume 1 of My Autobiography, to 1949* and is thus given, by Lessing at least, the most status as life writing.¹ In my 2010 book on Lessing I argued that writing histories that are at one and the same time personal and political is particularly key to her late work.² This project of making connections between personal and national identity is one that both returns her to her childhood in Africa, and also necessitates a reappraisal of the status of official and ‘fictionalised’ accounts of the past, particularly her own accounts of the impact of colonization and Empire on her family, herself and the native African population in Southern Rhodesia.³

In the 1990s, at the time *Under My Skin* appeared, feminist critics were delineating the distinctive features of women’s autobiographical writing, and much more recently those of postcolonial life writing have been identified by critics such as Bart Moore-Gilbert.⁴ This article will consider what is involved in positioning *Under My Skin* within categories such as feminist autobiography, autobiography of empire or postcolonial autobiography. The text has received comparatively little critical attention, but most readings of *Under My Skin* place it as an autobiography of empire, but one that embodies an incipient critique of colonialism.

Victoria Rosner examines the ‘complex feelings of attraction and repulsion’ that Lessing feels towards her childhood home in *Under My Skin* as an ‘architectural representation of colonial subjectivity’.⁵ Gillian Whitlock also reads the text as an analysis of the ‘tenuousness and anxiety of white supremacy’, written from the perspective of ‘the dissident within’.⁶ Anthony Chennells discusses Lessing’s refusal of the formal devices of imperial romance so dear to earlier white autobiographies of Zimbabwe.⁷ There is, therefore, a recognition that Lessing was caught up in the trappings of empire, but also recognition of her resistance to those trappings. Other critics, however, have been more explicitly critical of Lessing’s stance in her writing about imperialism. In her discussion of *African Laughter* (which is set in the context of Lessing’s other life writing including *Under My Skin*) Sarah de Mul argues that ‘the vexed status of white women and the complex relationship between feminism and imperialism has particularly increasingly dominated postcolonial feminist agendas’, and concludes that ‘the critical attention to imperial culture by women (travel) writers cannot a priori be considered subversive’.⁸ She sees *African Laughter*, then, as a failure in terms of offering effective ‘writing back’ to empire. It is, however, as Alice Ridout suggests, also possible to see a text like *Under My Skin* as a typically postcolonial one because of its cosmopolitan outlook, which can only ever suggest the provisionality and mobility of identity.⁹

My contention is that Lessing’s autobiography offers us a very particular engagement with the genre of life writing, one that does not fit easily within categories such as postcolonial, or feminist life writing, or straightforwardly within the genre of imperial autobiography. This essay will investigate whether or not interpreting the text’s ambivalence about issues of gender, race, empire and nation is made easier by analysing it as ‘second world’ life writing. As a second-world writer, the daughter of white invader settlers, Lessing is, as Stephen Slemon has it, both ‘complicit in colonialism’s territorial appropriation of land,

and voice, and agency’ while at one and the same time proposing what he calls ‘strident and spectacular figures of postcolonial resistance’.¹⁰ In order to understand how this ambivalence plays out in the text I want to investigate whether the trope Helen Tiffin identifies as particular to second world women’s life writing – dispersive citation – is useful in reading Lessing’s autobiography and making sense of her intervention in the genre of life writing.¹¹

First, however, I want to return to the critical literature on life writing in order to set discussion of Lessing’s autobiography in the context of other work on this complex and border-crossing genre. It was Paul De Man’s 1979 essay ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ that first made clear how strategic the performance of authentic subjectivity in the autobiography actually is.¹² For feminist critics of women’s life writing it is precisely this possibility of play with ideas about the coherent self that makes autobiography attractive, along with the opportunity it offers to cross the borders between different genres and disciplines. What has come to be known as ‘intersubjectivity’ is key to the understanding of memory, narrative and identity in women’s life writing.¹³ What have been termed ‘intercultural’ or, subsequently, postcolonial autobiographies also value these elements of the genre, although they are perhaps more equivocal about challenging conventional ideas of the universal subject, and aware of its appeal to the powerless or subordinate.¹⁴

Bart Moore-Gilbert summarises the arguments of feminist critics about the differences between men’s and women’s life writing as follows: women’s life writing can be characterized by its use of a model of subjectivity as ‘dispersed and decentred’ rather than ‘sovereign, centred, unified’; its conception of selfhood is dialogical and ‘essentially social and relational’,¹⁵ and it emphasizes the importance of embodiment for women’s subjectivity. For Moore-Gilbert, the features of postcolonial life writing by postcolonial authors of both genders that can be noted in addition to those identified by feminist critics as common in the work of women life writers are as follows: the impact of colonialism in subject formation

(particularly in creating decentred subjectivity); the relation between ethnicity and embodiment; the importance of geo-cultural location and displacement to the subject, and formal experimentation with traditional conceptions of the genre of autobiography (for example, with the autobiographical pact, or the assumption that the author and narrator of life writing are identical).¹⁶

A problematic aspect of Moore-Gilbert's otherwise excellent book is the way in which it persistently sets feminist and postcolonial criticism of life writing against each other, and offers up postcolonial criticism of life writing as a 'corrective' that fills in the gaps in feminist critical work on the genre.¹⁷ He suggests, for example, that 'one might even be tempted to argue, in Spivakian terms, that the consolidation of the feminist subject of a revised Auto/biography studies...has been achieved partly at the expense of the widespread occlusion of contributions made to the genres of life-writing by the (formerly) colonised'.¹⁸ In a footnote Moore-Gilbert makes explicit that his argument here draws on Gayatri Spivak's 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), which is critical of (liberal white Western) feminist scholarship for such colonizing tendencies. In effect he is suggesting that so much feminist work on women's autobiography has actually prevented critics from reading and working on postcolonial autobiography. There are a number of problems with this argument: first it seems that an autobiography can be *either* postcolonial *or* by a woman, and second, that feminist and postcolonial critical traditions are mutually exclusive. In fact Moore-Gilbert sometimes sees a more supportive relation between the two, so that postcolonial criticism of life writing works from the insights of feminist criticism in an acknowledgement of earlier work, but this still does stage a temporal disjunction between what are seen as fundamentally separate fields of endeavour, which implies that recent work corrects the failings of what went before.¹⁹

Moore-Gilbert's use of Spivak's essay in particular universalises feminist approaches to life writing and treats feminism as monolithic in its approach, failing fully to admit the vast differences between different feminist positions. Unfortunately this is an all-too-easy reading of feminism in our era of austerity, neo-conservatism, and backlash. Instead, it is important to argue both for the historically and geographically specific differences of feminisms plural, and also to think about the *intersection* between feminist and postcolonial approaches to life writing. Doris Lessing's work offers an extremely interesting case in point. Lessing was explicitly equivocal (to say the least) about feminism, despite the significance of *The Golden Notebook* for women readers and feminist critics²⁰ and her work sits uneasily as part of the canon of *postcolonial* writers.²¹ It is only possible to understand Lessing's autobiography and her intervention in the genre of life writing by being precise about her position in relation to issues of race, nation, gender and class and precise also about how she creatively and imaginatively reworks those issues in her texts.

First we have to admit that Lessing's story is one of privilege, which she acknowledges. Although by their own standards and those of their class her parents were poor, they were still at the top of their social 'tree' as white British invader settlers who made the choice to leave England for Southern Rhodesia. As Lessing makes clear in her discussion of the 'poor white' class:

[a]ll my childhood we were told how poor we were, how hard up, how deprived of what was our right. I believed it. Then, at school, I met children from really poor families. There was a stratum of people, white, in old Southern Rhodesia, who lived just above hunger level, always in debt, in flight from debtors, with drink and brutality waiting to swallow them up.²²

The early awareness of social stratification amongst white society demonstrated here suggests that the fact that Lessing benefitted from her elevated social position did not prevent her from being uncomfortable in it and from attempting to understand and analyse it. In *Under My Skin* she ponders 'how to account for the fact that all my life I've been the child who says the

Emperor is naked, while my brother never, not once, doubted or criticized authority' (pp. 16-17).

The tension that results from being the child who will not 'see' the Emperor's new clothes, but still benefits from them, has been referred to as the 'neither/nor territory of white settler-colonial writing', or, as Stephen Slemon defines it, 'Second-World' writing. Slemon explains as follows: 'we might profitably think of the category of the settler cultures of Australia, Canada, southern Africa, and New Zealand as inhabiting a "Second World" of discursive polemics – of inhabiting, that is, the space of dynamic *relation* between...binaries such as colonizer and colonized, foreign and native, settler and indigene, home and away'.²³ It is an interesting exercise to situate Lessing's writing, including her life writing, in its 'second-world' context in order to examine how productive the idea of the second world is for reading this work. For Slemon, 'second world' is a writing and reading position as well as a way of describing certain social, geographical and economic aspects of the history of colonisation. He argues that 'second world' also involves 'a critical manoeuvre, a reading and writing action', claiming that:

[t]he ambivalence of literary resistance itself is the "always already" condition of Second – World settler and post-colonial literary writing, for in the white literatures of Australia, or New Zealand, or Canada, or Southern Africa, anti-colonialist resistance has never been directed at an object as a discursive structure which can be clearly seen as purely external to the self. The Second-World writer, the Second-World text, that is, has always been complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even at those moments when they have promulgated their most strident and spectacular figures of post-colonial resistance'.²⁴

The idea of ambivalence towards resistance is an important aspect of *Under My Skin*, in which we can see how Lessing's sense of fractured subjectivity admits both her implication in and attempted refusal of the imperial and patriarchal discourses around her. Slemon's reference to 'Second-World settler *and* post-colonial writing' might seem to be unhelpful here, unless we remember that his argument in the essay overall is that Second World writing should not be dismissed from the postcolonial canon merely on grounds of

complicity with colonialism. It may also, in practice, be difficult to make a distinction between the second world writer's position as both complicit and resistant, and Homi Bhabha's well-known notion of hybridity,²⁵ but the attraction of the idea of second-world writing is precisely that it captures this notion of implication, or complicity, as well as the idea of resistance. Helen Tiffin puts this particularly clearly in her argument that women settler-invader colony writers particularly, are 'hampered – or perhaps energized – by their ambivalent positions within their own systems of colonialist oppression [and] have found difficulty in constructing a stable – or even unstable – identity'.²⁶ It remains important that we engage with those writers, like Lessing, whose work dramatizes the difficulty of resistance to and the attractions of complicity with the colonising culture.²⁷

In general terms, it is the case that Lessing's work shares a number of features with other second world writing: a focus on the land and on the dominant but frangible identities it produces: attention to the class distinctions that segment white society; an interest in ideas about miscegenation and myths of 'black peril'. Her writing always embodies that 'second world' tension, which Tiffin identifies as being both 'hampered' and 'energised' by one's position. More particularly, however, this essay will now focus on Tiffin's identification of a trope in second world writing which she calls 'dispersive citation'. She defines this as 'a specific kind of postcolonial oppositional practice, one that is not restricted to settler-colony writing or to writing by women, *but one particularly appropriate to the complex site where these positions intersect*' [my emphasis].²⁸ Discovering a literary trope particularly appropriate to the second world woman writer is usefully discussed here in terms of a node in a network, or point of intersection, and this idea is certainly a productive one in understanding what makes Lessing's life writing both unique, or specific to her, and at one and the same time typical of her position as a second world woman writer of her generation. There is the potential to use this trope to understand first of all her life writing, and secondly

that of other women in her position. Thirdly, analyzing *Under My Skin* as second world life writing may enable a resolution to the quarrel Moore-Gilbert stages between feminist and postcolonial critics of life writing, or undermine that quarrel's founding premises, discussed earlier.

In Tiffin's elaboration of the figure of dispersive citation, she focuses particularly on the different ways in which the writers she is considering (Jessica Anderson and Daphne Marlatt) 'cite' Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. To summarise, for Tiffin, *Frankenstein* is important in two ways: firstly for its play with the idea of the self and the other, and how that gets worked into what she calls 'patterns of persisting identification (and recoiling separation) between the monster and his creator, and a complex of family, not-family, home and exile'.²⁹ Secondly she discusses how the novel deals with the dispersal of the technology of language and books in the world (meaning us to think of the way the monster learns to think and feel when hiding in the cottage, and his observation of Felix and Agatha and their family, as a model for how invader settler cultures have educated / indoctrinated indigenous peoples). In relation to her first way of thinking about how dispersive citation works, Tiffin focuses in particular on ideas about family, reproduction, parenting, childbearing and how the 'figuration and rhetoric of Empire and the family...masked the destructiveness of conquest'.³⁰ In both these elaborations of how dispersive citation operates there is material of use in relation to Lessing's *Under My Skin* as a second world autobiography.

As many critics have noted, Lessing's difficult relationship with her mother dominates the book, and much of her work.³¹ If we see Lessing's presentation of this relationship in terms of Tiffin's understanding of the one between *Frankenstein* and his monster: as a dispersive citation of Shelley's text, then we can acknowledge the ramifications of how Lessing presents this relationship as extending beyond the personal to encompass

ideas about empire, conquest and colonization. As Gillian Whitlock puts it in her account of *Under My Skin* in *Intimate Empire*, Rhodesia was the ‘*Frankenstein* of settler cultures’.³²

Amongst the plethora of novels that are referred to in *Under My Skin*, *Frankenstein* is not one of them, although Percy Shelley’s poetry is mentioned once as inspiring reading for Charles Mzingele, the only black African member of the Left Book Club (p. 309). However, the absence of explicit reference to Mary Shelley’s novel is so pointed, that it can be said to create a spectre that haunts the text. Lessing must have read *Frankenstein* from her reworking of it in *The Fifth Child* (and many critics have made clear the extensive parallels between the two texts).³³ At one level, as Andrew Smith has it, ‘the spectre is an absent presence, a liminal being that inhabits and gives shape to many of the figurations of trauma that characterise the Gothic’.³⁴ Beyond the Gothic, Julian Wolfreys argues that spectrality is constitutive of textuality itself, arguing that ‘[t]o speak of the spectral, the ghostly, of haunting in general is to come face to face with that which plays on the very question of interpretation and identification’.³⁵ He continues ‘[t]he text thus partakes in its own haunting, it is traced by its own phantoms, and it is this condition which reading must confront’.³⁶

In fact, the more one considers *Under My Skin* the more Shelley’s novel appears to haunt it. First there is the title, borrowed from the Cole Porter song, which also provides the first epigraph, given pride of place in the paratext immediately after the glossary on its own page, before a series of further epigraphs from Idries Shah and Edward T. Hall clustered together on the next page.³⁷ The metaphor of having ‘got you under my skin’ certainly fits with Tiffin’s discussion of *Frankenstein*’s ‘reproduction of the self that produces unexpectedly abhorrent “others”’³⁸ and with the literal creation of the monster in Shelley’s novel as a composite of body parts. As Hilary Mantel observed in her review of *Under My Skin*: ‘[t]hroughout the book Lessing is interesting on the topic of living within a woman’s body, listening to it or refusing to listen to it, recognising or refusing to recognise the truths it

presents to reason and intellect'.³⁹ Here Mantel notes the sense of strangeness and alienation that embodiment produces, although issues raised by awareness of whiteness can also be considered alongside Mantel's emphasis on gender.

Perhaps even more importantly than its working through issues of embodiment, *Under My Skin* operates through creating a series of self / other relationships that are sometimes literally and sometimes quasi-parental / filial, then suggesting the equivalence between them, only then to destroy that equivalence. In Shelley's *Frankenstein* this is the central motif of the text. As the monster says to Victor: ' "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me"', to which Victor eventually responds: 'For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were'.⁴⁰

The most important parent-child relationship in the text is Lessing's relationship with her mother. Early on in *Under My Skin*, Lessing describes herself as trying to understand better her relationship with her mother but not in terms of what she calls the 'narrowly personal aspect' (p. 15). She continues on to describe setting herself against her mother from the age of fourteen 'in a kind of *inner emigration* from everything she represented' (p. 15) [my italics]. The metaphor here cannot be accidental, and will be revisited. In terms of the 'narrowly personal', however, we cannot ignore the extent to which Lessing concentrates on how she and her mother both failed as mothers. At birth, Doris failed to be the wished-for boy. As a baby, she was apparently (according to her mother's recollection) starved, despite appearing to grow and put on weight. Her mother failed to cuddle her and provide the physical closeness and reassurance that she needed.

In her turn, when she became a mother, Lessing left two children, and then, perversely, had another, which led to her having to endure 'carefully controlled' (p. 401) social situations where she saw her other two children, with her ex-husband (their father) and

his new wife. Lessing writes that she accepted these picnics because she felt so in the wrong, and ‘felt dragged along by powerful currents, contradictory ones’ (p. 401). What is very buried here is the implicit parallel between apparently ‘bad’ mothers – Lessing’s mother and Lessing herself – and the sense that powerful currents run across the generations between mother and daughter. Whether these currents are causative, and whether they operate at the level of biology or society, or whether in fact this distinction is over-simplified, is important in Lessing’s life writing as well as her other work, as Clare Hanson suggests, arguing that against the background of an abiding interest in genetics, Lessing ‘emphasizes the disconnections and differences between mothers and daughters, in particular, and stresses the importance of “adoptive” or “social” motherhood’.⁴¹

The same metaphor of bad parenting is used frequently to describe the relations between white farmers (the invader settler class) and the black native population. Discussing her servants, Lessing writes:

There was no such thing as legal working hours. Frank and I paid the servants everywhere we were much more than the custom, risking the anger of neighbours. ‘You’ll spoil them. You mustn’t let them get out of hand.’ *The same words as used for small babies*, in fact. ‘You’ve got to let them know who’s boss.’ (p. 234) [my italics]

The coercion and even violence involved in supposedly benign maternalism is clear in the phrases ‘get out of hand’ and ‘let them know who’s boss’. As Tiffin makes clear: ‘[t]his sentimental, powerful and persisting figuration and rhetoric of Empire and the family – mothers and fathers, parents and children – masked the destructiveness of conquest and the continuing colonization of indigenous peoples’.⁴²

On other occasions, however, Lessing makes a series of almost deliberately awkward equivalences between white invader settler and native African experience, as if to attempt to negate or minimize this metaphorical bad parenting and suggest instead a fraternal relationship, but also to point out the extent to which such a fraternal relationship is itself romanticised. In one instance, her father and his ‘bossboy’, Old Smoke, spend time together

smoking and talking. Lessing writes that '[b]oth men smoked, my father his pipe, and Old Smoke dagga, or pot. That was why he was called Old Smoke' (p. 53). The spurious sense of equality created here (two men companionably smoking together and putting the world to rights) extends to a discussion of the impact of the white family's farm on the land:

What impresses me now is not how much effect our occupancy had on the landscape of the farm, but how little. Below the hill on one side was the big field, the hundred acres, and there were smaller fields here and there. Cattle kraals, tobacco barns – and the house on the hill. *The farm labourers' village on a lower hill merged into the bush, as our house did.* (p. 55) [my italics]

On the surface Lessing is only talking here about the *landscape* rather than the land: the picturesque *appearance* of equivalence in insignificance, but implicitly, given her dissection elsewhere in the text of the violent impact of white farming on the native population in terms of land ownership, social and cultural life etc. it is not difficult to see the kind of equivalence created here between the white farmer and the native black African and their dwellings as deliberately awkward.

On another occasion Lessing writes about how handy her brother Harry was with a gun. The game he shot was given to the family or the native compound. She continues: '[a]ll the farming families ate as much bush meat as could be shot, to keep bills down, just as, in the compound, Africans set their dogs on duikers or larger buck, or brought them down with skilfully thrown stones, or catapults, or spears' (p. 112). This attempt to point out similarities of diet and cultural behaviours around food is contradicted earlier in the text, where Lessing writes that the farm labourers only ate meat about once a month and mostly ate mealie meal, a diet that 'would be applauded by nutritionists now, but was regarded as bad then, because of its lack of meat' (p. 72). Again, we have an attempt to suggest the likeness or similarity between the white invader settler and the native black African, but that likeness is again made awkward and the awkwardness is emphasized if we consider comments about diet elsewhere in the text.

In a few instances these equivalences become more explicitly personal. On one occasion Lessing characterises her own naivety at the point when she first arrived in Salisbury as a young woman as follows: ‘I was as raw and inexperienced as a black girl now of the same age in Zimbabwe, whose lack of money and opportunities makes Britain, Europe, seem as far as the stars’ (p. 203). At the point in the narrative when she becomes pregnant with her second child and her mother thinks it is too soon after the first one, Lessing writes: ‘I defended myself, said why shouldn’t a strong young woman have two babies one after the other, all the black women did didn’t they?’ (p. 238). Discussing her habit of walking the streets late at night, she writes: ‘now it would be impossible for a young woman, black or white, to go strolling there so casually’ (p. 378). The extension of this attempt at equivalence between the invader settler and the native African to femininity generally (‘a young woman, black or white’; ‘a strong young woman...all the black women’) and also to Lessing herself (a privileged white woman) is distanced to some extent by time (‘*now* it would be impossible’; ‘a black girl *now*’ [my italics]). To return to Tiffin’s characterisation of second world women writers as ‘hampered – or perhaps energized – by their ambivalent positions within their own systems of colonialist oppression’, we can see how Lessing’s shifting position in relation to this equivalence is explicitly awkward, uncomfortable and rhetorically almost denies its own similarity. Tiffin notes that the writers she is considering use dispersive citation as a strategy to ‘erode the distinctions between European settler-invaders and their racial “Others”’,⁴³ but quite obviously in Lessing’s case the strategy of erosion leaves its own uncomfortable traces and marks.

The second way in which Tiffin argues that dispersive citation works is via the more material dispersal of the technology of language and books in the world. Here also there is plenty of relevance in *Under My Skin*. The material lack of books in the lives of the native population is a prominent theme in the text and an issue that preoccupies her right up to her

Nobel acceptance speech.⁴⁴ Towards the end of *Under My Skin* Lessing writes that '[n]ow I think the only real use we were to any of the black people...was that our books were lent and given to anyone who asked for them' (p. 392). Even the servant was known as 'Book', although he had to remain ignorant of the visits of black people who arrived pretending to be on an errand and then stayed to read, in case he 'informed the whole neighbourhood that his employers were entertaining blacks' (p. 392). The irony of the fact that the servant's access to books is merely through the nickname his employers give him is not lost on the reader here: the domestic space is one that is not safe, and not open to everyone.

More particularly, in terms of the dispersal of ideas, is the discussion earlier in the text of one of Lessing's Communist friends, Kurt's, relationship with his driver, Musa. A refugee and intellectual who has spent time living in communes and is well-versed in psychoanalysis and philosophy, Kurt is purportedly writing a book, and explains it all to Musa. His response is worth quoting at some length:

From time to time Musa might enquire, 'But what is so new about that?' (The unconscious. Repression. Incest. The Id. Good and Bad Breasts. Even the collective unconscious.) 'I knew that when I was so high.' And he held out his hand about five inches above the earth where ants were carrying away cake crumbs larger than themselves. 'Except that I didn't have a father so I couldn't kill him. You have to be a white man to have a father so that you can hate him. If I had a father I would have more food because I wouldn't have to give all my food to my mother and my sister and my friends. No, all that is for rich whites. You have money. You have fathers.' (p. 341)

Musa's response to Kurt's great work is to insist on both its familiarity (hence lack of originality) and its cultural and economic irrelevance in his family. The very model of bad parenting – the Oedipal model – is here made culturally specific and read as the symptom of privilege: '“You have money. You have fathers.”'. In this sentence Musa dismisses the father-son relationship (perhaps officially the most loaded narrative in western patriarchal culture) as insignificant: he re-reads that relationship in material terms as one that, if it existed, would only benefit him.

Previously we have been talking about Lessing's relationship with her mother as the dominant one in *Under My Skin*, and although this is undoubtedly the case, her relationship with her father is important too. His amputated leg, his long-term illness with diabetes, and his drawn-out death all correlate with Tiffin's emphasis on dismembering and remembering focused on the body of the father in part of her article. Victor Frankenstein is of course both father and mother to the monster. Strikingly, one of the novels Tiffin writes about involves the protagonist remembering her father's legs climbing stairs in front of her; this is a traumatic memory, but one that allows the heroine to begin to deal not just with her grief after his death, but also her understanding of her home city as backward and inferior.

In *Under My Skin* Lessing's father's leg becomes a synecdoche for her feeling about him, and the white invader-settler farmer class that he represents. Early in the text, Lessing views the leg as an impediment, but one with which her father manfully struggles to cope:

My father most valiantly fought the disadvantages of a wooden leg. It was when I saw Captain Livingstone, who only walked on safe flat places, that I understood how much my father did with his. He went down mine shafts, deep ones, in a bucket, the stiff leg sticking out, knocking against the shaft wall, and making the bucket spin, while he shouted up from the depths: 'Wait, hold it,' and the windlass was held still, the spin slowed, and he was able to go down. He dragged himself through enormous clods of a newly ploughed field. He drove the old car everywhere, through the grass and bush and rough places where there was no road. When he later got gold fever he walked miles with the prospecting hammer and the divining rods. That is, until he became too ill. (p. 102)

Lessing's father here meets all the requirements of the intrepid settler-farmer who masters the land (and the wooden leg) rather than being mastered by them. The final sentence, however, qualifies what has gone before, with a proleptic flash forward to future times when his amputation will enable him to become the victim of his situation and also stand for Lessing's own guilty implication in that situation. Later on, once Lessing has left home, she returns to find him 'less on the lands [...] Now he slept after lunch for a couple of hours, and so did she. I tiptoed into their room and saw him lying there, on his back, as he always did, his wooden leg stiffly out, his hand gripping the bed rail as if he feared to be swept away by a wave or a

wind' (p. 159). Accompanied by false teeth on the bedside table, with his wooden leg sticking out of the bed clothes, Lessing's father seems perennially caught in the winds of history, a dismembered remnant of a colonial culture that lasted, as Lessing says elsewhere in the text for 'exactly ninety years' (p. 160). In the end diabetes results in her father being hardly able to walk, no longer able to safely drive, and finally becoming bed-ridden, before dying. Most obviously a traumatic marker of his own and Lessing's feelings about WWI, the wooden leg takes on a life of its own to become a fetishised and dismembered relic of the British empire in Southern Rhodesia. Lessing's own guilt about this is apparent in the related metaphor she uses to describe the impact of her childhood on her: 'my early childhood made me one of the walking wounded for years' (p. 25). Wounded by the legacy of both parents, Lessing was also wounded by her colonial past and her embryonic resistance to it.

Under My Skin offers an extensively dispersed citation of models of both paternal and maternal relation that borrows implicitly from Shelley's novel, suggesting, in the course of its working and reworking such models, how culturally specific they are, and how they were used to uphold ideas about empire. Lessing writes near the end of the text: 'People in their twenties do not find it easy to believe that their friends, layabouts or adventurers, these often directionless, inept or revolutionary mates of playmates, are going to turn into the Fathers and Mothers of the city, and generally run the world' (p. 403). In this instance the bad parent produces a damaged child who will in turn grow up to reproduce the wrongs inflicted on it. However, it is possible for the second world life writer, in making use of the model of dispersive citation, to encourage a self-aware reflection on this process, and to embody the process of what Lessing refers to as 'inner emigration' from not only the mother, and the father, but that process and its personal and political values. In this model of second world life writing we can find what was earlier referred to as the node in a network that allows us to take account of Lessing's position as a second world writer, and acknowledge the importance

of gender, race, nation and class in her life writing. We are also able to understand the patterns of collusion and resistance that ‘hamper’ but also ‘energise’ the text. This allows us to settle the quarrel that Moore-Gilbert stages between feminist and postcolonial criticism of life writing, by permitting us to do both at once.

¹ It is also worth noting here that Lessing’s 1974 novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* was originally subtitled ‘An Attempt at an Autobiography’. See her discussion of this in *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 28-9.

² Susan Watkins, *Doris Lessing*, Contemporary World Writers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 140-1.

³ In evaluating this reappraisal and its impact it is worth giving consideration, as with all life writing, to the complex operations of nostalgia. Dennis Walder argues that ‘the imaginative reconstruction of the past may be a conservative and parochial activity [...] equally, it maybe a radical and disturbing activity’ (See Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011, p. 12.) In relation to Lessing he notes the mixture of both in her writing about Africa and her inability to always meet the ‘acute challenge’ of ‘rewrite[ing] the colonial past as a result of the promptings of creative nostalgia’ (p. 84).

⁴ See Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self Representation* (London: Routledge, 2009),

⁵ Victoria Rosner, ‘Home Fires: Doris Lessing, Colonial Architecture and the Reproduction of Mothering’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 18, 1 (1999), 59-89 (84; 59).

⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography* (London: Cassells, 2000), p. 198.

⁷ Anthony Chennells, 'Self Representation and National Memory: White Autobiographies in Zimbabwe', in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*, ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), pp. 131-144.

⁸ Sarah De Mul, 'Doris Lessing, Feminism, and the Representation of Zimbabwe', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 16, 1 (2009), 33-51 (34; 47).

⁹ Alice Ridout, 'Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin*: The Autobiography of a "Third Culture Kid"', in *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum, 2009), 107-128.

¹⁰ Stephen Slemon, 'Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World', *World Literature Written in English*, 30, 2 (1990), 30-41 (38).

¹¹ Helen Tiffin, 'The Body in the Library: Identity, Opposition and the Settler-Invader Woman', in *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 374-88.

¹² Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1979), 919-30.

¹³ Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000). See p. 1 for the argument about genre and discipline, p. 7 for the point about performative conceptions of subjectivity and pp. 3 and 5 for the notion of intersubjectivity.

¹⁴ The term is Jan Hokensen's. See 'Intercultural Autobiography', *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Vol. 10 (1995), 92-113. See Bart Moore-Gilbert for the point about the appeal of conventional ideas of the subject to the subaltern (p. 15).

¹⁵ Moore-Gilbert, p. xviii.

¹⁶ Moore-Gilbert, p. xxi.

¹⁷ Neither of the two reviews I have read makes any comment about this aspect of the book.

See David Huddart, Bart Moore-Gilbert. *Postcolonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation*. Review. In *Biography*, 33,3 (2010), pp.549-53 and Philip Holden, *Postcolonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation*. Review. *Life Writing*, 7, 3, (2010), pp. 333-337.

¹⁸ Moore-Gilbert, p. xvii.

¹⁹ See p. 15, where Moore-Gilbert writes that there is ‘considerable mileage for postcolonial colleagues in adapting some of the insights and techniques of feminist inflections of Auto-biography studies to our own purposes’. At this point I should note that Moore-Gilbert discusses equal numbers of male and female writers in detail in the book.

²⁰ See my discussion of Lessing’s opinions about feminism and her work in relation to feminist criticism in Watkins, pp. 22-3; pp. 167-171.

²¹ See my discussion of postcolonial criticism of her work in Watkins, pp. 172-175.

²² Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 65. Further references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses in the text.

²³ Slemon, p. 38. It is worth noting here that Slemon never makes reference to the more common understanding of the term ‘second world’, as the former Communist-Socialist industrial states: the territory and sphere of influence of the former USSR. (I would like to thank Professor David Punter for this insight, in response to an earlier version of this article given as a paper at the Doris Lessing conference, University of Plymouth, 12-13 September 2014.

²⁴ Slemon, p. 38.

²⁵ Homi Bhabha famously uses the term ‘hybridity’ to suggest the way in which the voice of the coloniser is inevitably mixed up in the voice of the colonised. This ‘contamination’ or

lack of purity in the colonised voice, is what enables the challenge to or resistance of the coloniser. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 112-16.

²⁶ Tiffin, p. 377.

²⁷ It is also important to situate this debate within the larger one about the degree of difference between settler-colonial and colonial cultures. For excellent introductions to some of the issues raised see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, and also Penelope Edmonds and Jane Carey, 'A New Beginning for Settler Colonial Studies', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 3, 1 (2013), 2-5. My use of the term 'invader-settler', for example, is intended to acknowledge what Edmonds and Carey refer to as the 'particularly contested and often violent material and cultural dynamics' of those colonies where 'the settlers had come to stay' (Edmonds and Carey, p. 2).

²⁸ Tiffin, p. 179.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

³¹ Lessing's relationship with her mother is the subject of much of her writing, including especially in terms of life writing the essay 'Impertinent Daughters', in Doris Lessing, *A Small, Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, ed. Paul Schlueter (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 101-160. Critics writing about the mother-daughter relation recently include Daryl Cumber Dance, 'Emily and Annie: Doris Lessing's and Jamaica Kincaid's Portraits of the Mothers They Remember and the Mothers They Might Have Been', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 19,1 (2010), pp. 1-21; Kerry Myler, 'Madness and Mothering in Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*', *Doris Lessing Studies*, 31, 1-2 (2013), pp. 15-20; Robin Visel, 'House/Mother: Lessing's Reproduction of Realism in *The Sweetest Dream*', in *Doris*

Lessing: Interrogating the Times, ed. Debrah Raschke, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis and Sandra Singer (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 2010), pp. 58-74.

³² Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (London: Cassells, 2000), p. 198.

³³ See for example Isobel C. Anievas Gamallo, 'Magic, Fable and the Gothic in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*', in *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 113-24; Ellen Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Debrah Raschke, 'Lessing's *The Fifth Child*: From Fairy-Tale to Monstrosity', *Doris Lessing Studies* 23, 1

³⁴ Andrew Snaith, 'Hauntings' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 147-154 (p. 147).

³⁵ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. x-xi. Thanks to Joanne Watkiss for suggesting this source.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. xii.

³⁷ It is worth noting here the importance Lessing gives to popular music in the formation of her identity and culture. Elsewhere in *Under My Skin* she quotes extensively from song lyrics of the period, as can be seen in the Acknowledgements. Her attitude to this popular culture can be seen in her ambivalent, maybe even negative comments immediately after quoting from the lyrics of the 1936 song 'There's A Small Hotel' by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart: 'From every house, at the same moment, into all those receptive brains, and into mine too, feeding my longing for love and escape' (p. 376).

³⁸ Tiffin, p. 379.

³⁹ Hilary Mantel, 'Pointing out the Defects', *London Review of Books*, 16, 24, 22 December 1994, pp. 23-4, <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v16/n24/hilary-mantel/pointing-out-the-defects>> (Accessed 8 March 2015).

⁴⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1818; 1985), p. 145; p. 147.

⁴¹ Clare Hanson, 'Reproduction, Genetics, and Eugenics in the Fiction of Doris Lessing' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 1:1/2 December 2007, p. 175.

⁴² Tiffin, p. 380.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 385.

⁴⁴ Doris Lessing's Nobel lecture, then entitled 'A Hunger for Books' was delivered on Friday 7 December at the Swedish Academy, Stockholm, by Nicholas Pearson, Doris Lessing's publisher in the UK. It was published in *The Guardian*, in the Review section on Saturday, 8 December 2007. See Doris Lessing, 'A Hunger for Books', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/dec/08/nobelprize.classics>> (Accessed 28 August 2014). The text of the lecture can also be read on the Nobel Prize website, although the lecture has been retitled 'On Not Winning the Nobel Prize.' The website states that 'the Nobel lecture has been changed according to the wish of the author.' See <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture.html> (Accessed 28 August 2014).