



AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A CONTESTED GENRE

A GENDER AND POSTCOLONIAL READING OF DORIS LESSING'S *UNDER MY SKIN* AND *ALFRED AND EMILY*

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Questo articolo si propone di indagare come gli scritti autobiografici di Doris Lessing (1919-2013) - in particolare *Under My Skin* (1994) e la sua ultima opera *Alfred and Emily* (2008) - possano essere considerati "contro discorsi" che esplorano, trasgrediscono e sovvertono la scrittura di vita come genere letterario. L'ipotesi centrale di questo articolo è che Lessing abbia cercato di negoziare la divisione pubblico/privato, che costruisce un paradigma potente e duraturo per definire i ruoli di genere dominanti, svelando e al contempo nascondendo alcuni degli aspetti particolarmente privati della sua vita di donna che erano suscettibili di un'esposizione solo parziale nell'ambito pubblico. A riprova di questa ipotesi, l'articolo si sofferma sulla metafora autobiografica della 'figlia impertinente', e sulla figura più nascosta, e sicuramente più controversa, della 'madre negligente', per mostrare come queste due metafore autobiografiche siano il tentativo di Lessing di rappresentare il proprio passato coloniale e la propria esperienza di donna scrittrice in lotta sia contro le condizioni retoriche dominanti, sia contro le categorie normative che danno forma alla femminilità, a cui Lessing è stata esposta e che costituiscono categorie retoriche che governano la narrazione al femminile che sono state (e sono ancora) disponibili per narrarsi.

This article aims to investigate how the autobiographical writings of Doris Lessing (1919-2013) - in particular her final work *Alfred and Emily* (2008) and *Under My Skin* (1994), the first volume of Lessing's autobiography - may be considered 'counter discourses' that explore, transgress and subvert life writing as a literary genre. This article's central hypothesis is that Lessing tried to negotiate the public/private divide - a powerful and enduring paradigm for defining dominant gender female roles - by simultaneously unveiling and hiding certain intensely private aspects of her life as a woman that are susceptible to only partial exposure in the public realm. The autobiographical metaphor of the 'impertinent daughter', and the more hidden, and surely more controversial, figure of the 'neglectful mother', are powerful attempts for representing her colonial past and her experience as a woman, who struggled with dominant rhetorical conditions and with normative categories of femininity to which she was exposed and that were (and still are) available to narrate oneself.

I INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the autobiographical writings of Doris Lessing (1919-2013), Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2007. In particular, my analysis explores her final work *Alfred and Emily* (2008) and *Under My Skin* (1994), the first volume of Lessing's autobiography, in the light of the author's life narrative production, which also comprises memoir, travelogue, autobiographical fiction, and auto-fiction.¹ Taking a gender perspective, I shall examine the way in which Lessing's autobiographical works may be

¹ DORIS LESSING, *Under My Skin. Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949*, London, HarperCollins, 1994; EAD., *Alfred and Emily*, London, HarperCollins, 2008.

considered ‘counter discourses’ that explore, transgress and subvert life writing as a literary genre. In *Alfred and Emily*, as in *African Laughter. Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992), *Under My Skin* (1994), *Walking in the Shade* (1997), and other pieces, life writing is understood as ambivalent: on the one hand, the author is caught between the need to inscribe her life and that of her family within a political horizon in order to overcome the traumatic past of her country; on the other, Lessing openly discusses the dissatisfaction she feels with the limitations imposed by self-referential writing.²

While the relationship between life narrative and fiction remains an open question, I shall suggest that in literary terms this aporia is productive, providing a kind of laboratory for trying out new ideas, literary strategies, and techniques, and creating an open-ended process of experimentation that culminates with *Alfred and Emily*. This text can in fact be considered a paradigmatic example epitomizing Lessing’s multifaceted mode of thinking about life writing. The central hypothesis of this article is that Lessing was challenging the norms of the autobiographical genre when colliding with dominant gender norms that restricted women’s lives, creativity and authorial voice. By adopting the genre of life writing both within and against the conventions of formal autobiography, Lessing crossed the boundaries between different genres and interwove autobiographical fiction and personal reminiscences with theoretical speculations.

In order to show how Lessing’s experiments with life writing are implicitly bound up with gender, in the first section of the article I will investigate how women writers and gender literary criticism have contributed to the gendering of life writing to illustrate new ways to represent women’s subjectivities with alternative models of self-representation.³ By questioning the underpinned centrality of masculine – and western and middle-class – modes of subjectivity, these texts tried to resist, transgress and/or negotiate their own self-representations within the unstable and contradictory status

² EAD., *African Laughter. Four Visits to Zimbabwe*, London, Flamingo, 1993; EAD., *Walking in the Shade. Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962*, London, HarperCollins, 1997.

³ DOMNA STANTON, *The Female Autobiograph*, New York, New York Literary Forum, 1984; BELLA BRODZSKI and CELESTE SCHENCK (eds.), *Life/lines. Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988; SIDONIE SMITH and JULIA WATSON (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject. The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1992; SIDONIE SMITH, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body. Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993; LEIGH GILMORE, *Autobiographic. A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994; LAURA MARCUS, *Auto/biographical Discourses. Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994; LINDA ANDERSON, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century. Remembered Futures*, Prentice Hall/Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1997; ADRIANA CAVARERO, *Tu che mi guardi. Tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1997; CARLA LOCATELLI, *L’(auto)biografia: una figura di lettura nella politica co(n)testuale femminista*, in «DWF», XXXIX-XL (1998), pp. 90-113; SIDONIE SMITH and JULIA WATSON (eds.), *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998; TESS COSLETT, CELIA LURÝ and PENNY SUMMERFIELD (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography. Texts, Theories, Methods*, London-New York, Routledge, 2000; LINDA ANDERSON, *Autobiography*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001; LEIGH GILMORE, *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001; CARLA LOCATELLI, *Is S/he my Gaze? (Feminist) Possibilities for Autobiographical Co(n)texts*, in MICHELE BOTTALICO e MARIA TERESA CHIALANT (a cura di), *L’impulso autobiografico*, Napoli, Liguori, 2005, pp. 3-18.

of women's personal and public narratives.⁴

By adopting these theoretical and literary paradigms, in the second section I will read Lessing's meta-reflective passages in particular from *Under My Skin* and the essay "Writing Autobiography" to grasp the peculiar transgressions she enacts by blurring the permeable border between self-referential writing and fiction in order to deal with the uncertain distinction between privacy and autobiographical writing.⁵ This article's central hypothesis is that Lessing tried to negotiate the public/private divide – a powerful and enduring paradigm for defining dominant gender female roles – by simultaneously unveiling and hiding certain intensely private aspects of her life as a woman that are susceptible to only partial exposure in the public realm. If autobiographical truth is a construction, Lessing consciously experimented with life narrative as a way of revising and transgressing dominant gender norms that restricted women's lives and creativity, while paying particular attention to motherhood as a problematic condition for women's identity. The fact that being a mother is a complex condition in women's life is also shown by Lessing's own choices: as I shall discuss later, Lessing decided to pursue a literary career in England, leaving the children of her first marriage in Southern Rhodesia.

In the third and final section, my hypothesis is that the hybrid and fragmentary structure of *Alfred and Emily* highlights the fundamental bifurcation between life writing and fiction. Every attempt to find a synthesis is doomed to failure while, on the contrary, it is precisely the mechanisms that are at the basis of the two different narrative techniques of the book that should be put at the center of the critical analysis to capture the relationship between fact and fiction as well as the relations between the writing and written subjects that these texts reconfigure. In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing brings the private story of her family into the public sphere, while public history is reflected within the nuclear familial sphere and in her own birth. Her life accounts are thus *explicitly* constructed as a politically charged site at which to deal with the trauma of the First World War and the impact of colonisation and empire. However, in her life accounts Lessing foregrounds maternity in its complicity with colonialism, disclosing how motherhood can be implicated in power relations not only within the family, but also in wider social and political contexts.

The overall aim of this article is to draw attention to the critically important and largely unrecognised autobiographical work of Doris Lessing, a widely read and acclaimed woman writer who examined the status of women, and also to address a range of experiences of colonialism for negotiating and resisting the normative categories of femininity to which she was exposed.⁶ Lessing was in fact the Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2007,

⁴ LINDA ANDERSON, *Autobiography*, cit.; ALESSANDRA CONTINI e ERNESTINA PELLEGRINI, «Io senza garanzie». *Donne e autobiografia. Dialogo ai confini fra storia e letteratura*, in «Quaderns d'Italia», VI (2001), pp. 19-36. TREV LYNN BROUGHTON, *Autobiography. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge, 2007.

⁵ DORIS LESSING, *Writing Autobiography*, in EAD., *Time Bites. Views and Reviews*, London, HarperCollins, 2004.

⁶ LORNA SAGE, *Doris Lessing*. London New York, Methuen, 1983; SUSAN WATKINS, *Doris Lessing*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010; DEBRAH RASCHKE, STERNBERG PHYLLIS PERRAKIS, and SANDRA SINGER (eds.), *Doris Lessing. Interrogating the Times*, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 2010.

only the eleventh woman to win the prize in its 106-year history: the Swedish Academy acclaimed Lessing as an «epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny».⁷ Although Lessing's work has been widely read and translated and has also acted as a catalyst for debates on experimental and psychological writing and on women's role in society, the autobiographical writings remain marginalised and their significance under-researched. This article, by reappraising works composed during Lessing's long literary career, provides a unique opportunity to capture her engagement with the social and political issues of the twentieth century, against the historical backdrop of violence, wars and ethnic conflict, to address a range of experiences of colonialism and strategies of negotiation to resist the normative categories of femininity to which she was exposed.

2 WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

At the heart of the poetics of the subject since the late eighteenth century, and constituting the most productive site for the representation of consciousness, gender identity, education and inner life, autobiography has come to be recognized as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies over a range of categories including authorship, selfhood, representation and the fault-line between fact and fiction.⁸ George Gusdorf sees Rousseau's *Confessions* as «a brilliantly successful landmark» in the historical landscape defined as both Western and Christian, requiring a kind of consciousness of self which is «peculiar to Western man».⁹ If for a long time the writing of the self has been considered with a certain scepticism as a form of narcissistic ego display, during the twentieth century the proliferation of autobiographies, their pervasiveness and also their slipperiness, has produced innovative forms of life writing, leading to new ways of understanding the genres.¹⁰ The autobiographical genre has attracted fresh critical attention, becoming the object of authoritative studies and generating a new terminology.¹¹

Since the 1980s, feminist and post-colonial scholars across the disciplines have challenged the norms of this academic debate by embracing experience-based life narratives as a distinctly rigorous and more democratic mode of

⁷ NOBELSTIFTELSEN, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 2007*, «NobelPrize.org», [s.d.], url <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2007/summary/> consultato il 2 settembre 2019.

⁸ L. ANDERSON, *Autobiography*, cit..

⁹ GEORGE GUSDORF, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* (1956), in JAMES OLNEY (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.

¹⁰ LUCIA BOLDRINI and JULIA NOVAK (eds.), *Experiments in Life-Writing Intersections of Autobiography and Fiction*, Cham, Palgrave, 2017.

¹¹ ROY PASCAL, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960; JAMES OLNEY, *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972; KARL JOACHIM WEINTRAUB, *The Value of the Individual. Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978; JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Law of Genre*, in «Critical Inquiry», VII, 1 (1980), pp. 55-81; PHILIPPE LEJEUNE, *The Autobiographical Contract*, in TZVETAN TODOROV (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

engaging the world.¹² Inspired by 1970s feminist consciousness-raising groups, feminist literary critics initially focused their attention on the absence of women's writing, their voices, lives, genealogies and styles, all neglected within the literary tradition and long denied both a public audience and intellectual credibility.¹³ By promoting stories of personal struggle and other narrations of individual and historical experience, feminist literary criticism pushed the boundaries of academic and political debate to make room for the study of autobiography, while expanding its definition not only to include a new corpus of texts – such as journals, diaries, letters, travel literature, ethnographies and oral histories, autobiographical novels, and personal essays – but also as a practice that pervades many areas of our cultural lives – from visual genres to apps. In this article the increasingly common term 'autobiography' designates the particular practice of life narrative that emerged during the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the West as the genre that celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story. The term 'life writing' has a much broader reference, denoting writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject, including if written by subordinated subjects.

More importantly, in order to engage «the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms» and to «br[ing] into the open» the power dynamic behind such exclusions, second-wave feminism re-visioned the genre of autobiography as a privileged space for women's self-representation and a crucial act for constituting female subjectivity.¹⁴ In this way, the intersections between autobiography and the formation of subjectivity were problematized, displaying the profound political (and power) implications in operation within the distinctive rules governing this literary genre. As Susan R. Suleiman has summarized, «women, who for centuries had been the objects of male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations, had to discover and re-appropriate themselves as subjects».¹⁵ Autobiography thus plays an important role as a sort of political imperative for women to constitute themselves as subjects, if they are to escape being incessantly defined as objects. As Diane Elam has argued, «the genre of women's autobiography should be understood as a strategic necessity at a particular time, rather than an end in itself».¹⁶

Life narratives have also become a space of struggle and resistance. Transnational feminists have affirmed that experience-oriented writing is

¹² CRISTINA GAMBERI, *Autobiografie impossibili. Riflessioni sulle scritture dell'Io fra studi di genere e post-coloniali*, in MARIA SERENA SAPEGNO, ILENIA DE BERNARDIS, e ANNALISA PERROTTA (a cura di), *Critica clandestina? Studi letterari femministi in Italia*, Roma, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2017.

¹³ SHARI STONE-MEDIATORE, *Storytelling/Narrative*, in LISA DISCH and MARY HAWKESWORTH (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁴ SHARENE RAZACK, *Looking White People in the Eye. Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998, p. 36; CATHERINE MACKINNON, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 92.

¹⁵ SUSAN R. SULEIMAN, *(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism*, in EAD. (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture. Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 7.

¹⁶ DIANE ELAM, *Feminism and Deconstruction. Ms en Abyme*, London-New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 65.

itself «at the heart of the struggle» insofar as it creates a space for people to speak about «multilayered facets of their histories and concerns» that have been shamed into silence or dismissed as «‘feminine’ experience».¹⁷ «[T]he very practice of remembering and rewriting» by Third World women, says Chandra Mohanty, «is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps [...] of hegemonic masculinist history,» but also because writing is «a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself».¹⁸ And there is likewise little doubt that access to autobiography meant access to the identity for particular readerships, as Leigh Gilmore pointed out.¹⁹ According to bell hooks, autobiography and confessional narratives of women of colour are the most empowering mode of writing, representing the attempt of a colonised group in African-American literary history to emerge from silence and invisibility:

As a literature of resistance, confessional narratives by black folks were didactic. More than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guides, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another.²⁰

Without question, there has always been a strong feminist interest in autobiography in virtue of the attempt to connect the “personal” with the “political”, where women’s narratives were also critically investigated as private stories confronting dominant, patriarchal and sometimes conflicting discourses on femininity. For their evidence in public, semi-public and private discourses and for their emphasis on women’s experience as the origin of women’s knowledge, life narratives and stories of experience continue to exercise a persistent appeal as part of an effort to «break open political space» for «under-told and unauthorized experiences and knowledge» as also for their capacity to present unspoken and sometimes unspeakable narrations of female experience.²¹ The notion of silencing suggests that «women’s stories typically do not reach the public domain as readily as men’s».²² In other words, given that the rhetorical conditions through which it is possible to narrate oneself are determined by social and cultural arrangements, the narrability of one’s personal life should not be understood as a private discourse.

¹⁷ DIAN MILLION, *Felt Theory. An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History*, in «Wicazo Sa Review», XXIV, 2 (2009), p. 54.

¹⁸ CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY, *Cartographies of Struggle*, in EAD., ANN RUSSO and LOURDES TORRES (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 34.

¹⁹ L. GILMORE, *Autobiographic*, cit.

²⁰ BELL HOOKS, *Black Looks. Race and Representation*, Boston, South End Press, 1992, p. 59.

²¹ ROSEMARY CARBINE, *Turning to Narrative. Toward a Feminist Theological Interpretation of Political Participation and Personhood*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», LXXVIII, 2 (2010), p. 384; JAY PITTER, *Unearthing Silence. Subjugated Narratives for Environmental Engagement*, in ANDERS L. SANDBERG and TOR SANDBERG (eds.), *Climate Change. Whose Carrying the Burden?*, Ottawa, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010, p. 185.

²² T. COSLETT, C. LURY and P. SUMMERFIELD (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography*, cit., p. 3.

This contemporary debate on life writing and autobiography in literary criticism from a gender perspective is also inextricably linked to the ideas of the author, authorship and authority. According to Philippe Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same.²³ However, are all the subject positions equal and are all subjects believed and heard in the same way? Are all subjects positioned to enjoy a favourable status in terms of power, language and signature? According to Nancy Miller, in the case of those women whose voices have not been and are not being heard and who have lost and lose their identities, the issue of the signature «is not immaterial» and sincerity itself already implies a masculine subject, since women, simply on account of who they are, are less likely to be believed.²⁴ Because women have experienced issues of identity and writing their personal life's experience in different ways than men, the concept of authorship in its relationship with identity represents a complex field/terrain of investigation, demonstrating the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender power relations.

Even as life narratives have gained wide appeal by providing an alternative to exclusionary discourses that had contributed to the invisibility of women's experience, while also helping to reclaim their life stories as a useful political project to challenge the invisible standpoints of the oppressed, post-structuralist critics in the 1990s and some feminist scholars have warned against taking experience with naive realism while failing to take into account the social and cultural processes that have structured experience. Joan W. Scott and Wendy Brown were critical of the way in which "experience" can be posited as «incontestable evidence» and how it can provide the very foundation for claims of legitimacy, analysis and knowledge.²⁵ They also criticized the assumption that "experience" furnishes an internal truth, «the hidden truth of women's existence» that need only to be expressed to provide «the foundations of feminist knowledge».²⁶ Scott and Brown regard all experience-based texts as "feminist foundationalism", since both authors consider experience to be «thoroughly constructed»,²⁷ «a linguistic event» produced by discourses on the subject that differentiate and regulate desires, interests, identities, and spheres of existence.²⁸

Likewise, the adoption of the post-structuralist approaches of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and particularly Paul de Man has increasingly shifted attention to issues relating to self-representation and subjectivity, truth and confession, authenticity and author(ity) within and beyond the

²³ PH. LEJEUNE, *The Autobiographical Contract*, cit., p. 202.

²⁴ NANCY K. MILLER, *The Text's Heroine. A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions*, in «Diacritics» XII (1982), pp. 48-53, p. 53, and EAD., *Subject to Change. Reading Feminist Writing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.

²⁵ JOAN SCOTT, *The Evidence of Experience*, in «Critical Inquiry», XVII (1991), p. 773-797.

²⁶ WENDY BROWN, *States of Injury. Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 41-42.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 41.

²⁸ J. SCOTT, *The Evidence of Experience*, cit., p. 793.

text, questioning any sense of trans-historical female experience.²⁹ Some of the feminist critiques from the “margins” such as those by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty were pivotal in inaugurating a paradigm of theories whose intention was not to take sexual difference for granted, but as Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us, to include «the interaction of gender with other forms of power relations based on cultural categories as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, national origin, age, and so forth».³⁰ This new methodological approach shifted the attention to issues relating to a model of subjectivity that some understood as multi-layered, dialogical and «essentially social and relational» rather than «universal, centred, unified».³¹ While for others emphasis was placed on the performative dimensions of the act of writing one’s life, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued:

Autobiographical acts are anything but simple or transparent [...]. There is no coherent “self” that predates stories about identity, about “who” one is. Nor is there a unified, stable immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. Perhaps, then, it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act.³²

Such concerns were to be found in many life-narratives that in the late 1980s and 1990s emphasized the culturally mediated, ambiguous character of experience. Such stories did not look for a “hidden truth” in experience nor did they assume that experience was a prediscursive truth, but remained, on the contrary, creatively aware of the web of dominant discourses that they were confronting. The answer lies in recognizing the very mediated nature of the speaking subject, the fact that self-representation is always developed in terms of the available conventions and discourses: for Probyn there is never «a transparent self who speaks from the heart».³³ By examining the specific stylistic and narrative innovations such as splits in the first-person narrator,

²⁹ MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*, New York, Vintage, 1990; ROLAND BARTHES, *The Death of the Author* (1968), in ID., *The Rustle of Language*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1986, pp. 49-55; J. DERRIDA, *The Law of Genre*, cit.; PAUL DE MAN, *Autobiography as De-facement*, in «MLN», XCIV, 5 (1979), pp. 919-930.

³⁰ AUDRE LORDE, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*, New York, Persephone Press, 1982; GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, in «Critical Inquiry» XII, 1 (1985), pp. 243-261; GLORIA ANZALDUA, *Borderlands. The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987; CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY, *Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*, in «Feminist Review» XXX (1988), pp. 61-88; SUSAN STANFORD FRIEDMAN, *Locational Feminism. Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy*, in MARIANNE DEKOVEN (ed.), *Feminist Locations Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, New Brunswick-London, Rutgers University Press, 2001, p. 20.

³¹ SUSAN STANFORD FRIEDMAN, *Women’s Autobiographical Selves. Theory and Practice*, in SHARY BENSTOCK (ed.), *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Chapel Hill London, University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 74.

³² S. SMITH and J. WATSON (eds.), *Reading Autobiography*, cit., pp. 47-50.

³³ ELSPETH PROBYN, *Sexing the Self. Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*, London-New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 86.

oscillations in pronoun use, linguistic contaminations, etc., women authors contributed to establish a new model of life writing which «theoriz[e] their experience in radical and innovative terms».³⁴ As Paola Splendore has reminded us:

[L]'autobiografia, spazio privilegiato dell'espressione femminile, della ricerca del sé e dell'identità non è più ciò che era. Per mezzo di travestimenti, di scissioni dell'io narrante, di oscillazione pronominali, di contaminazioni di linguaggi, si è affermato un nuovo modello di scrittura autobiografica che nega la fissità del ritratto allo specchio e che attinge all'immaginazione oltre che alla memoria, mettendo in discussione o rendendo irrilevanti le codificazioni esistenti.³⁵

The formal instability and the transgression of the codified and canonical autobiographical genre seem therefore the result of a process of subjectification of historically oppressed groups, and also a conscious instrument of counter-hegemonic narratives questioning the literary tradition and the authority of the unitary subject.³⁶

This approach, which enabled the investigation of autobiography as a historical genre that produces the truth and authority of the speaking subject, was further supported by postcolonial critics, such as Anne McClintock, Lisa Lowe and more recently Bart Moore-Gilbert and Gillian Whitlock, who have also foregrounded the impact of colonialism on subject formation and the importance to the subject of geocultural location and displacement, examining the text with a methodology in which gender interacts with other forms of power relations based on cultural categories such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and national contexts.³⁷ Closely related to relationships between gender and geo-cultural locations is the function of testimony, a central paradigm that points towards the difficulties involved in bearing witness to horrific events, with its emphasis on trauma and memory.³⁸

In dialogue with these contemporary debates on women's autobiographical writing, the analysis of some of the meta-reflective passages from Lessing's life narratives may cast light on the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between genre and gender.

³⁴ LOURDES TORRES, *The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies*, in C. TALPADE MOHANTY, A. RUSSO and L. TORRES (eds.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, cit., p. 274.

³⁵ PAOLA SPLENDORE, *La difficoltà di dire io: l'autobiografia come scrittura del limite*, in ANGIOLINA ARRU e MARIA TERESA CHIALANT (a cura di), *Il racconto delle donne. Voci, autobiografie figurazioni*, Napoli, Liguori, 1990, p. 73.

³⁶ SUSANNE KNALLER, *Scattered Voices. Some Ranks on a Narrative Theory of Postcolonial Storytelling*, in «Germanic Review» CXXIV, 2 (1999), pp. 99–115; SHARI STONE-MEDIATORE, *Reading across Borders. Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

³⁷ LISA LOWE, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1991; ANNE MCCLINTOCK, *Imperial Leather, Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London-New York, Routledge, 1995; BART MOORE-GILBERT, *Postcolonial Life-Writing. Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation*, London-New York, Routledge, 2009; GILLIAN WHITLOCK, *The Intimate Empire. Reading Women's Autobiography*, London-New York, Cassell, 2002.

³⁸ L. GILMORE, *The Limits of Autobiography*, cit.

3 DORIS LESSING ON WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The debate regarding contemporary critical insights into women's life writings is essential to illuminate the analysis of Doris Lessing's autobiographical works and in particular the multifaceted mode of thinking about life writing that is found in numerous of her meta-reflective passages in *Under My Skin* and the essay "Writing Autobiography".³⁹

Life writing, for Lessing, is ambivalent. On the one hand, the writer is caught between the need to bear witness to a political horizon that is fading while wishing also to inscribe her life and that of her family within a cultural narrative in order to overcome the traumatic past of her country. On the other hand, she feels dissatisfaction at the limitations imposed by self-referential writing, a sort of postmodern scepticism appearing in her late life-writing texts, negating the very possibility of autobiographical representation, namely the writer's ability to reach the core of her subjectivity as a coherent and unified self. In literary terms, this theoretical aporia is productive. While the relationship between life narrative and fiction remains an open question for Lessing, who «has been preoccupied with the blurred dividing lines between fact, truth and fiction», this tension provides a kind of laboratory for trying out new ideas, literary strategies, and techniques, creating an open-ended process of experimentation that culminates with *Alfred and Emily*.⁴⁰

Lessing's complex and contradictory view and practice of autobiography cannot be grasped without some understanding of the relationships between autobiography, fiction, autofiction, and truth as these appear in some of her crucial works, because, as Lorna Martes argues, «Lessing may be counted among those writers who, while determined to produce truthful accounts in their writing, including in novels, simultaneously agonize over the possibility of a truthful account». ⁴¹ The concept of truth in life writing, for example, has been problematized in multiple ways: Lessing understands that telling the truth about the self is a contested notion; memory is fallible; the written words are inadequate to express experience; and she is reluctant to recognize how difficult it is to narrate the *Zeitgeist* of the era one is living through in the form of an after-the-fact construction.⁴²

Even in her early works, Lessing comments on autobiographical writing, yet these concerns appear to become particularly pressing from the 1990s onwards, precisely when she switched her focus to more traditional autobiographical writings, in works such as *African Laughter*, *Under My Skin*, *Walking in the Shade*, and *Alfred and Emily*. The decision to write her official autobiographies late in life have several, and diverse, implications. First, Lessing felt compelled to tell the true story of her life as an act of self-

³⁹ D. LESSING, *Writing Autobiography*, cit.

⁴⁰ S. WATKINS, *Doris Lessing*, cit., p. 29.

⁴¹ L. MARTES, *The Truth Criteria of Autobiography: Doris Lessing and Telling the Truth*, in «a/b: Auto/Biography Studies», XXIX, 2 (2014), p. 327.

⁴² CRISTINA GAMBERI, *Colonialism and Resistance: Problems of Perspectives in Doris Lessing's Autobiographical Writings*, in MARIA MICAELA COPPOLA, FRANCESCA DI BLASIO e SABRINA FRANCESCONI (a cura di), *Contact Zones. Cultural, linguistic and Literary Connections in English*, Trento, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2019.

defence against the inaccuracies and untruths disseminated by intrusive biographers raking over the author's past. Justifying her autobiographical project, Lessing writes in *Under My Skin*: «In the year just finished, 1992, I heard of five American biographers writing about me».43 More importantly, writing her official autobiography in two volumes implied a recasting of her sense of herself and the life she had led by assuming a retrospective posture to interpret her life and by opening up the possibility of reading her narrative as faithful. As George Gusdorf would put it, presenting the self provides a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity.44

Doris Lessing felt challenged by the genre of autobiography and her chronic dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by factual writing found expression in numerous meta-reflective passages about the status of autobiographical narrative. In *Under My Skin* – the first official volume of her autobiography, which also presents numerous meta-reflecting passages – the reader is immediately confronted, via the title of this autobiographical narrative, with the suggestion of a disclosure of the author's life. The epigraph, in fact, reminds us that *Under My Skin* refers to the Cole Porter song and alludes to the self-revelatory capacity of autobiography to disclose the real subjectivity of the author beneath the superficial appearance – the skin. The subtitle – *Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* – seems to privilege *Under My Skin* as the authentic and truthful piece of autobiography and old black-and-white photographs of the young writer and her relatives ostensibly seek to prove their existence at a given point in time. From this perspective, *Under My Skin* appears to fulfil the canonical tradition of the autobiographical pact: the assumption of a coherent subjectivity and the implicit conviction that autobiography is the best way to recount one's own identity. The first chapter opens with the narrator retracing in a linear process the genealogical maternal and paternal tree, the bourgeois life of her mother raised as an exemplary Victorian and then Edwardian girl, set in contrast to her father's enjoyment of a country childhood. Lessing seems to favour life narrative as a form of testimony or as a «narrative of responsibility», through which it is possible to retrace a collective consciousness, «a meditation on the errors of the past that triggers a process of personal development».45

One reason for writing this autobiography is that more and more I realize I was part of an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa, and the bit I was involved with was the occupation of a country that lasted exactly ninety years. People no longer know what that time was like, even those who live in Southern Rhodesia.46

As the following passage exemplifies, Lessing brings the private story of her family into the public sphere, while public history is reflected within the

43 D. LESSING, *Under My Skin*, cit., p. 32.

44 G. GUSDORF, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, cit., p. 35.

45 MAURIZIO ASCARI, *Literature of The Global Age. A Critical Study of Transcultural Narratives*, Jefferson and London, McFarland & Company, 2011, p. 33.

46 D. LESSING, *Under My Skin*, cit., p. 160.

nuclear familial domain and in her own birth. Her life accounts are thus constructed *explicitly* as a politically charged site at which to deal with the trauma of the First World War and the impact of colonisation and empire:

In 1919, all over a Europe filled with graves, hung miasmas and miseries, and over the whole world too, because of the flu and its nearly thirty million deaths. I used to joke that it was that has given birth to me, as a defence when weary with the talk about the war that went on – and on – and on. But it was no joke. I used to feel there was something like a dark grey cloud, like poison gas, over my early childhood. Later I found people who have the same experience. Perhaps it was from that war that I first felt the struggling panicky need to escape.⁴⁷

Throughout *Under My Skin*, the narrator highlights the importance of the social climate and political forces that influence her and other people's lives, frequently using the term *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of a generation. This is to be found not only in her autobiography but, as many critics have pointed out, the whole of her literary career intersects with her commitment to political issues, fighting those mechanisms of discrimination – in terms of race, gender and class – which were part of the colonial practices of the British Empire in Africa.

Combined with this attraction to autobiography there is a paradoxical – and hence parallel – radical critique of life writing. The second chapter of *Under My Skin* is entirely devoted to questioning the trustworthiness of her own account and it reveals the extent of Lessing's preoccupation with the problem of how autobiography is to be understood, how to narrate the facts and events of her life, how to convey the truth of a certain time and how to give a sense of the real. She begins the chapter by stating: «You cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our old friend, the Truth, is first».⁴⁸ She addresses the shortcomings of memory and speaks of changing perspectives. Thus, «Why do you remember that and not that? [...] Memory is a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one».⁴⁹ And «Telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the landscape changes with every turn in the path».⁵⁰

That Lessing could not settle comfortably into autobiography is also evident in other essays and articles. In her 1993 preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she wrote: «Currently I am writing volume one of my autobiography, and [...] I have to conclude that fiction is better at 'the truth' than a factual record. Why this should be so is a very large subject and one I don't begin to understand».⁵¹ In the essay "Writing Autobiography", published in 2004 in *Time Bites*, in the middle of a passage that may well

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 12.

⁵¹ EAD., *The Golden Notebook*, New York, Harper, 1999, p. ix.

refer to the period when she was writing *Under My Skin*, Lessing acknowledges how, at the very moment when she was beginning seriously to think about it, the issue started to bristle with difficulties. The first problem she faced was with memory, which Lessing experienced as elusive, fluid, for «[M]emory isn't fixed: it slips and slides about. It is hard to match one's memories of one's life with the solid fixed account of it that is written down». ⁵² According to Roberta Rubenstein, «[m]ore than Woolf, Lessing consciously acknowledges that memory itself is an elusive, fluid, and often undesirable component of consciousness, whose manifestations depend on the relationship between any present moment and an always receding past». ⁵³ Memory is not only linked with forgetting, but also with rhetorical strategies that shape our recollections. Making explicit references to Olive Schreiner and Virginia Woolf among others, Lessing retraces her childhood using literary and rhetorical strategies to convey the psycho-sensory imaginary of her first memories – identifying multiple kinds of memories: 'hallmarked memories', 'invited memories', 'deduced memories'. ⁵⁴

The second problem lies in the precarious nature of life writing: autobiography, Lessing states, is only «an interim report» where the author seems to agonize over the concept of truth as inevitably temporary and multiple. ⁵⁵ History is never definitive, but is capable of constant alteration as more is remembered or released into consciousness, causing the subject to think both the past and the present differently:

Our own views of our lives change all the time, different at different ages. If I had written an account of myself aged 20 it would have been a belligerent and combative document. At 30 – confident and optimistic. At 40 – full of guilt and self-justification. At 50 – confused, self-doubting. But at 60 and after something else has appeared: you begin to see your early self at a great distance.[...] You float away from the personal. You have received that great gift of getting older – detachment, impersonality. ⁵⁶

She then faces the problem of style and more importantly that of the desire for identification, which is one of the demands and hopes that the autobiographer must negotiate with the reader.

There is another problem, a major one. It is a question of the first person, and the third person – when to use what. The first person, autobiography, the 'I', in fact holds the reader at a distance, and this is strange, since on the face of it 'I' should be – surely – an invitation to the reader: 'Come on, nothing is being held back, here I am, no

⁵² EAD., *Writing Autobiography*, cit., p. 92.

⁵³ ROBERTA RUBENSTEIN, *Fixing the Past: Yearning and Nostalgia in Woolf and Lessing*, in RUTH SAXTON and JEAN TOBIN (eds.), *Woolf and Lessing: Breaking the Mold*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p. 16.

⁵⁴ D. LESSING, *Under My Skin*, cit., pp. 72-73.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

disguises.’ But really it is much harder to identify with an ‘I’ than with ‘he’, or ‘she’.⁵⁷

It should not therefore surprise us that Lessing attributes a superior truth to her novels, based on the fact that she was then younger and closer to events, and also on the fictional genre itself, which granted her more leeway to create the atmosphere of a particular time.

All that is in *Martha Quest*, the manners and mores of the time, and it is ‘true’, well, more or less – the atmosphere yes, taste and texture and flavour, yes, but sometimes several people have been put together to make one, and of course the story has been tidied up. Every novel is a story, but life isn’t one, more a sprawl of incidents.⁵⁸

Thus, she concludes that «There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth».⁵⁹

This ambivalence towards life writing is embedded not only within the structural limitations of the techniques of autobiography as a literary genre but also within the socially accepted and authorized rhetorical paradigms that govern the process of self-representation (and self-effacement). In particular, the ambivalence lies in the agency of the autobiographer to transform conflicting discourses on womanhood through which she can recognize, accept or reject processes of (gendered) subjectification. Her dissatisfaction lies also in being caught in a system that polices the limits of female truth-telling and ties women’s “truth” to the production of an appropriate female identity.

In fact, while Lessing’s life accounts are constructed *explicitly* as a politically charged site at which to deal with the trauma of the First World War and the impact of colonisation and empire, they are nevertheless *implicitly* politically charged in the way they address women’s life experiences. By writing autobiographically at the frontiers of the public-private divide – a powerful and enduring paradigm for defining dominant gender female roles – Lessing’s life narratives simultaneously unveil and hide certain intensely private aspects of her life that are susceptible only to partial exposure in the public realm. This is clear from her refusal to adopt a confessional mode and tone. In order to protect her privacy, Lessing re-visioned her own autobiographical pact and resisted the persistent confessional technologies of autobiography, stating in the second chapter of *Under My Skin* that she would follow «the example of Simone de Beauvoir who said that about some things she has no intention of telling the truth».⁶⁰ This passage can be read as symptomatic of Lessing’s refusal to disclose intimate details, but perhaps it should also be read as an attempt to negotiate the porous boundaries between private and public, which are so remarkably fluid in the case of women’s lives. In other words, she resists the terms of the

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 101.

⁵⁸ Ivi, pp. 201-202.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 314.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 11.

autobiographical pact, refusing to submit to those autobiographical technologies that demand the “truth”.

One of the central issues at stake here is Lessing’s family life and her decision to abandon John and Jean, the two children from her first marriage to Frank Wisdom. As she was banned by the Rhodesian authorities from visiting her former homeland from 1957 until after the white-minority regime ended in 1980, it is possible to assume that she had been unable to visit her two children for more than two decades. In *Under My Skin* she briefly refers to the decision of leaving her two older children as «committing the unforgivable».⁶¹ In particular, in the XIII chapter of the volume she tried to reconstruct her complex emotional condition in which she found herself living and in which the decision was taken, almost as if it were necessary. Lessing recalls how she found herself switched off, frozen, incapable of loving her children, divided between the love for them and her desire to build a committed life:

Now comes a puzzle. I had spent a good part of my childhood adoring some infant or small child. I had been waiting for the same with John, who for some reason had to fight away from cuddles, with anyone, not only me. [...] But I had switched off. This person in me, the lover of babies and tiny children, would revive later. I was protecting myself, because I knew I was going to leave. Yet I did not know it, could not say, I am going to commit the unforgivable and leave two small children.⁶²

In order to justify her decision and to explain it also to her children, she writes how she was committed to change the world: «I was going to change this ugly world, they would live in a beautiful world where there would be no race hatred, injustice and so forth... I was absolutely sincere» adding: «There isn’t much to be said for sincerity in itself».⁶³ It is a laconic sentence, but perhaps precisely for this very reason, particularly significant. Lessing calls into question sincerity, which here seems to be understood as synonymous with authenticity with respect to her own deepest desires and aspirations. Moreover, the fact of not wanting to add anything and of not wanting to elaborate on the implications of sincerity, seems more than anything else a strenuous defence of and protection for that part of herself, young and combative, that felt trapped in marriage life, emotionally frozen and felt the need to get out of the marriage.

The death of her first child, John Wisdom, in 1992, may be one of the reasons Lessing eventually decided to publish her autobiography: John’s death spared her details she would perhaps not have wanted him to know. For example, in Chapter Eleven of *Under My Skin*, Lessing writes how she sought an abortion when she was pregnant with her first child, but decided to keep the baby only when she was told the pregnancy was too far advanced:

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 262.

⁶² Ivi, p. 261.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 262.

«now it seems to me obvious I knew all the time I was pregnant, was in alliance with nature against myself».⁶⁴

Those conflicting aspects might have been what lay behind her public ambivalence towards motherhood and, apart from a very few passages, Lessing did not openly talk about her private life nor about the relationship with her children, keeping a distance between what was happening in her real life and the representation of her persona in her autobiographical writings. It was probably to protect herself and the lives of her children (and grandchildren) that in *Under My Skin* she declares the untrustworthiness of her authorial persona by unveiling the self-censorship of her life writing, stating: «the older I get the more secrets I have», confessing that she wanted to follow the example of Simone de Beauvoir «who said that about some things she had no intention of telling the truth».⁶⁵

To be read as closely related to this function is the passage in *Impertinent Daughters* when she describes the moment in which the impertinent daughter reveals to her mother the decision to leave her two small children: the rhetorical strategy adopted is to use the third-person singular to describe (and distance) herself: «It had seemed that things could hardly be worse. Then, suddenly, [Emily Maude's] daughter announced she was going to leave her husband and children. This was of course not possible. Such things were not done».⁶⁶

The need for anonymity, to exercise caution, and to conceal aspects of her private life seems to guide Lessing's writing in an effort to protect her children and family and, more importantly, herself. As Nancy Miller put it, sincerity itself and trustworthiness imply a masculine subject, for there exists a 'gender of sincerity' which is strictly linked to what de Beauvoir has called *féminitude*, a culturally determined status of difference and oppression that leads women writers to be particularly charged when they decide to go public and write autobiographically: «[t]he autobiographies of these women [Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Daniel Stern, George Sand] are a defence and illustration, at once a treatise on overcoming received notions of femininity and a poetics calling for another, freer text».⁶⁷ As with the autobiographical texts of other women writers, Lessing's peculiar "autobiographical pact" shows the limits of the cultural scripts through which a woman writer can write and represent her female embodiment and sexuality, her pregnancy and maternity, as a site where tension between the written, the unspoken, and the unspeakable meet, clash and grapple with one another.

The three texts analysed here show how Lessing's rare statements on being a mother unveil her critique of motherhood and the false aura of romanticism with which motherhood was still endowed. More interestingly, these texts expose how much she struggled to cover and uncover, silence and censure her difficult position of neglectful mother, so challenging for the cultural and moral climate of her times, and perhaps still today. This attempt to intertwine personal writing with political histories and motherhood, and

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 210.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 11.

⁶⁶ EAD., *Impertinent Daughters* [1984], in EAD., *A Small Personal Voice*, London, HarperCollins, 1994, p. 148.

⁶⁷ N.K. MILLER, *Subject to Change*, cit., pp. 51-52.

to make connections between personal and national identity is particularly crucial in *Alfred and Emily*.

4 ALFRED AND EMILY

More strongly than in other narratives, the hybrid and fragmentary structure of *Alfred and Emily* highlights the fundamental bifurcation between life-writing and fiction that I have tried to delineate so far. However, the publication of *Alfred and Emily* is an unexpected turning point in both Lessing's analysis of her past and in her self-positioning in life writing. As the following analysis intends to show, the mechanisms at work in merging life writing and auto-fiction can be read as an attempt at reparative justice towards her parents' lives and simultaneously as an act of reconciliation with the British Imperial legacy.⁶⁸

Published in 2008, the year after Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, *Alfred and Emily*, written at the age of eighty-nine, was her last book. For those readers familiar with Lessing's life and works, its title unmistakably recalls the names of her well-known parents, Emily Maude McVeagh and Alfred Tayler, at the centre of Lessing's memoirs "My Father" and "Impertinent Daughters", both of which were published in 1986 in the British edition of *A Small Personal Voice*, and later in her autobiographies. The cover image of both the first edition and the Italian edition shows the title, the author's name and, centered in the page, two sepia black and white photos representing a man and a woman from the first decades of twentieth century. These authenticating elements, along with some other photos that also appear in *Under My Skin* and in other previous texts, signal the autobiographical intent of the book.

However in the *Foreword* which opens the book, Lessing discloses the literary experiment she attempts to shape: «I have tried to give them lives as might have been if there had been no World War One».⁶⁹ The book is composed of two main parts, a novella and a memoir, that push at the boundaries of existing forms to mould them into something that better suits the writer's efforts at representation. This division between two apparently opposing halves, which on the contrary mirror one other in a sort of dialectical, though paradoxical, relationship, raises – or repropose – questions as to where autobiography ends and fiction begins and how the fictive and the autobiographical traverse each other. Every attempt to reach a synthesis is therefore doomed to failure. However, it is precisely those mechanisms that lie at the basis of the two different narrative techniques that should be placed at the center of critical analysis in order to capture the relationship of fact to fiction and the relations between the writing and written subject that are reconfigured in these texts.

In the first part, the novella, Lessing pushes to the extreme what she views as the crucial feature of the legacy of the First World War: «Unlived lives. Unborn children» and imagines the unlived lives her parents might have had if «the First World War hadn't intervened» and with an unborn Doris

⁶⁸ D. LESSING, *Alfred and Emily*, cit., p. 5.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. vii.

Lessing.⁷⁰ The fictional portrayal of her parents as mirror images of their real lives seems the result of a sort of reparative justice strategy: the way they might have been without the slaughter of the First World War, without their migration to Africa, without getting married, with their frustrations expunged, and their deepest desires and talents fulfilled, making her father a farmer and her mother a talented, energetic educator. As Virginia Tiger argues, «This life-writing [which] is also an attempt at life righting».⁷¹ By erasing World War I, the traumatic event that occasioned the marriage of her parents and that «squatted over» her childhood, Lessing's work on her past represents a lifelong case of «postmemory».⁷² Originally conceived to describe the residual traumas passed on by Holocaust survivors to their children, the concept of post-memory, according to Marianne Hirsch, concerns the relation of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.⁷³ By suggesting that postmemory has many more possible applications beyond the Holocaust if it is defined as the inter/transgenerational transmission of memory, the first experimental part of *Alfred and Emily* can be read in the light of postmemory fiction, where «[T]he desire to know the world as it looked and felt before our birth» drives the fictional imagination to achieve a sense of personal connection with the legacy of twentieth-century trauma.⁷⁴

As a case of postmemorial work, Lessing's novella takes the form of *auto-fiction* or, more specifically, constitutes a case of *auto-fiction fantastique*, enabling the author to imagine alternative lives or experiences for herself in fiction.⁷⁵ By making herself unborn, auto-fiction responds in particular to Lessing's need to be freer and to veer away from more conventional and established literary genres and historical settings thereby admitting the possibility of experimentation outside the parameters of literary schools. Lessing concludes: «If I could meet Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve the lives I have given them».⁷⁶

The first half of *Alfred and Emily* is followed by four pages of intermezzo titled *Explanation*, which offers not only a crucial key to excavating Lessing's imagination and affording an insight into how she invented her characters, but also to re-establishing the familiar and contested distinction between real lives and true lives:

⁷⁰ EAD., *Under My Skin*, cit., p. 9.

⁷¹ VIRGINIA TIGER, *Life Story. Doris, Alfred and Emily*, in «DLS», XXVIII, 1 (2009), p. 23.

⁷² D. LESSING, *Alfred and Emily*, cit., p. viii. Cfr. MOLLY PULDA, *War and Genre in Doris Lessing's Alfred and Emily*, in «DLS», XXIX, 2 (2010-2011), pp. 3-9.

⁷³ MARIANNE HIRSCH, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

⁷⁴ EAD., *Past Lives. Postmemories in Exile*, in «Poetics Today», XVII, 4 (1996), p. 661.

⁷⁵ VINCENT COLONNA, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, Auch, Tristram, 2004.

⁷⁶ D. LESSING, *Alfred and Emily*, cit., p. viii.

I look back at my mother and know that what she really was the real Emily, died in the breakdown she had soon after she landed on the farm. For a long time I knew I had never known my father, as he really was, before the war, but it took me years to see that I had not known my mother, as she really was, either. The real Emily was an educator who told stories and brought me books. That is how I want to remember her.⁷⁷

This passage proves particularly relevant inasmuch as it reveals the complex interplay between the auto-fictional account and the memoir, in which dimension of gender and the legacies of the British Empire interact profoundly. In particular, by focusing on the relationship with her mother, who is represented at the intersection between biological, political and cultural motherhood, Lessing speaks of the mother-daughter relationship and helps to make the maternal narrative one of the privileged sites from which she then investigates her own life, her political commitment, and also the story of her country.⁷⁸

The figure of Emily is in fact embedded in several of Lessing's life writings, where she returns to her own history while trying to understand the figure of her mother Emily. In *Under My Skin*, for example, Lessing states: «If you try and claim your own life by writing an autobiography, at once you have to ask, But is this the truth? There are aspects of my life I am always trying to understand better. One – what else? – my relation with my mother».⁷⁹ Likewise, “Impertinent Daughters”, the original title of the second part published in the autumn of 1985 under the title “Autobiography (Part Two): My Mother's Life” creates a short circuit between Lessing's autobiographical narrative and the maternal biographical narrative which reveals «how writing about her mother blurs into writing about herself», leaving open the question of who the essays are about.⁸⁰

However, far from romanticising the neglected bond between mother and daughter, in all Lessing's autobiographical pieces, interviews and memoirs Emily is recollected as the quintessential rejecting mother. In Lessing's recollection, her mother – having wished for a first son – was disappointed at having had a girl, and their relationship was marked ever after by conflict.

Better say, and be done with it: my memories of her are all of antagonism, and fighting and feeling shut out; of pain because the baby born two-and-a-half years after me was so much loved I was not [...] She didn't like me – that was the point. It was not her fault: I cannot think of a person less likely than myself to please her.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 192.

⁷⁸ CRISTINA GAMBERI, *Impertinent Daughters in Imperial Genealogies. Doris Lessing's Autobiographical Writings*, in LILLA MARIA CRISAFULLI and GILBERTA GOLINELLI (eds.), *Women's Voices and Genealogies in Literary Studies in English*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2019.

⁷⁹ D. LESSING, *Under My Skin*, cit., pp. 14-15. See also the review of the autobiography by JOHN MAXWELL COETZEE, *The Heart of Me*, in «New Yorker», 22 December 1994.

⁸⁰ ELLEN PEEL, *The Self Is Always an Other: Going the Long Way Home to Autobiography*, in «Twentieth Century Literature», XXXV, 1 (1989), p. 5.

⁸¹ D. LESSING, *Under My Skin*, cit., p. 113.

The representation of the maternal figure by her impertinent daughter is not only negative due to the generational struggle, it is also deeply charged with colonial references. The history of Southern Rhodesia, with its colonialism, segregation and exploitation, is inscribed in the life of her mother, who is positioned at the intersection of colonialism, middle-class ethos, and gender politics. Emily Maude is recollected as the quintessential rejecting mother embodying the 'colonial agent' within a post-colonial imaginary. Emily conformed to the cultural, political and racial colonial model, becoming a symbol of British middle-class respectability in the African *veld*. She is the prototype of the racist white colonial settler, who complains about the African servants in a «scolding, insistent, nagging voice full of dislike».⁸² She believed that:

[t]he British Empire was the greatest force for good in the world, and that God thought so too. That white people were superior to all nonwhite races, and that British white people were superior to other white people. That the white minority in the Colonies was there with God's approval to civilize and uplift the natives. They believed in Duty. In Patriotism. In doing a job well for the sake of doing it. In staying married. In family life.⁸³

This unexpected reciprocity of maternity and colonialism is epitomised in Emily's ambiguity, in that she is depicted as an overprotective, intrusive and claustrophobic mother and at the same time as deeply embedded within the colonial British imaginary: the product of «London, Britain, the British Empire» and of «being Victorian».⁸⁴ As Victoria Rosner has pointed out, in Lessing's autobiographies the relation between domesticity, domestic space, colonialism and the reproduction of mothering is particularly significant: «Wives of English settlers were confined to the house both for the performance of domestic duties and because of a pervasive sense that the bush represented a special threat for women».⁸⁵

In the second half of *Alfred and Emily*, we find the same essentially unaltered memories that Lessing has already written about, also in regards to her mother. What has changed is her attitude towards those memories. She is in fact finally able to recognise that although «It took me years – and years – and years – to see it: my mother had no visible scars, no wounds, but she was as much a victim of the war as my poor father».⁸⁶ The publication of *Alfred and Emily* is therefore an unexpected turning point in Lessing analysis of her past and of her positioning in life writing. While the author's attraction to life writing is apparent in the book's second section, where she narrates her

⁸² Ivi, p. 157.

⁸³ EAD., *Impertinent Daughters*, cit., p. 149.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 101. See also MARGARET J. DAYMOND, *Writing Autobiography and Writing Fiction: Interview with Doris Lessing*, London, 28 July 2000, in «Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa», XIII, 1 (2001), pp. 7-21.

⁸⁵ VICTORIA ROSNER, *Home Fires. Doris Lessing, Colonial Architecture, and the Reproduction of Mothering*, in «Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature», XVIII, 1 (1999), p. 72.

⁸⁶ D. LESSING, *Alfred and Emily*, cit., p. 172.

own past and the tormented history of her family under the impact of the First World War and colonialism as an attempt «to get out from under that monstrous legacy [...] to get free», in the first part the author's attempt to redeem her parents' lives seems in fact a symbolic act of reparation for what they did in fact live through and for all that they missed out on.⁸⁷

The fictionalised Emily Maude becomes in fact a formidable public figure who discovers a talent for telling stories to children, establishes a charity and opens a number of schools that quickly spread nationwide. And although this fictional Emily is often unhappy and does not have children, she fulfills ambitions that her real-life counterpart never could, living a sort of extended Edwardian life, without colonialism and without the failure represented by the migration to Africa: "I used to joke, as a girl, that if she were in England she would be running the Women's Institute", Lessing says in her foreword, «or, like Florence Nightingale, be an inspiration for the reorganisation of hospitals». ⁸⁸ As an act of redemption of her parents' lives, Lessing is able to return to her mother in a final act of compassion: «I had not known my mother, as she really was. The real Emily McVeagh was an educator, who told stories and brought me books. That is how I want to remember her». ⁸⁹ In this text, Lessing is finally able to come to terms with her mother by speaking with the voice of a disembodied and benevolent narrator. The novella performs an attempt at reparative justice in the form of reparation to the parents, and particularly to the mother, seen as a victim of colonialism. What all these passages from the three volumes seem to suggest is that motherhood can be implicated in power relations not only within the family, but also within the wider social and political context: demonstrating how maternal genealogy is to be understood also as a cultural and narrative representation. Initially characterised by matrophobia, the daughter's fear of becoming her mother, the daughter's speech might appear to be the result of the mother's silence and perhaps depends on that silence to come into existence. This revisioning of the mother-daughter relationship also seems to confirm «the author's need to confront the maternal figure and retrieve her female genealogy while coming to terms with her own self». ⁹⁰

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the books that have been analysed, the interplay between private and public stories, family and colonial history interface with gender and genre issues because the narrability of one's personal life should not be understood only as a private discourse. These autobiographical and life narratives by Doris Lessing struggle with the dominant rhetorical conditions and with the normative categories of femininity to which she was exposed and that were (and still are) available to narrate oneself. The autobiographical metaphor of

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. viii.

⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 192.

⁹⁰ PAOLA SPENDORE, *Bad Daughters and Unmotherly Mothers. The New Family Plot in the Contemporary English Novel*, in ADALGISA GIORGIO (ed.), *Writing Mothers and Daughters. Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books 2002, p. 187.

the ‘impertinent daughter’ is used by Lessing to represent herself and explore the mother-daughter relationship; and to bring to the fore maternity in its complicity with colonialism, unveiling how motherhood can be implicated in power relations not only within the family, but also in wider social and political contexts. These works shape also the more hidden, and surely more controversial, figure of the neglectful mother. These are powerful attempts of representing and sharing her colonial past and her controversial woman’s experience.

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