FOREWORD

“The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there.”

—L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

In the famous opening line of *The Go-Between* (1953), L. P. Hartley captures the distance between the optimism at the beginning of the twentieth century and the sense of loss occasioned by two World Wars. Hartley’s vivid metaphor offers one way of looking at another dramatic change, the change between the optimism at the end of the twentieth century and the anxiety that permeates these first years of the twenty-first century. Midway through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the optimism and anticipation of the waning days of the last century seem sweet and sentimental.

My recollection of the weeks before the millennium reminds me of a response to an old snapshot: it must have been a simpler time, and it was. The major public concern in the United States was with computers and whether or not they might crash at the stroke of midnight in the year 2000. Less than ten years later, the definition of crash has taken on more ominous meanings across the world. The Triumphalism that
Foreword

greeted the end of the Cold War has led to the triumphalisms of hot conflicts in skyscrapers, subways, and sandy battlefields. The one has given way to the many—and with a vengeance.

Hartley emphasizes a poignant disconnect between the past and the present, an emphasis that is tempting to many in our “age of anxiety.” Doris Lessing, however, would look at the same ending and beginning and offer a very different interpretation. Rather than stressing differences, Lessing would underscore continuities and connections. Rather than describing borders, Lessing would raise questions about those borders. Like Robert Frost in “Mending Wall,” Lessing is keen on wondering: “What I was walling in and walling out.” That wondering and questioning of the given is particularly evident in her “space fiction” (her term for what is commonly called science fiction) concerned as it is with the destructive historical patterns and cycles that imprison humanity and keep it from intellectual and spiritual evolution.

In The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing (1985), Katherine Fishburn was the first critic to give Lessing’s “space fiction” a fully focused reading; she rightly regards the “space fiction” as a concerted attempt “to critique modern social and political structures” (3). Fishburn approaches the texts through narrative structure and offers a fairly traditional analysis of Lessing’s quite untraditional fiction. Some twenty years later in Identity in Doris Lessing’s Space Fiction, David Waterman utilizes diverse scholarly approaches to examine the complicated issue of identity in the seven novels and one novella that make up Lessing’s “space fiction.” Like Fishburn, Waterman includes Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971) and The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974) along with the five novels that comprise Lessing’s Canopus in Argos series (1979–1983). Waterman adds the novella The Reason for It, published in 2003 and shows that Lessing’s interest in identity has not waned.

But interest in identity predates the “space fiction” and its cosmic scope. Lessing wrote seven novels before Briefing for a Descent into Hell, most in what can be described as the realistic mode, which
she championed in “The Small Personal Voice” (originally published in 1957). Therein, she argued for a novel based on nineteenth-century humanism and its celebration of the individual; her literary measure is “the warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the love of people which illuminates the literature of the nineteenth century and which makes all these novels [Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, and Turgenev] a statement of faith in man himself” (SPV, 6). Yet even as she looks back to the nineteenth century, Lessing looks forward to the “new man about to be born” (SPV, 8). It is that sense of anticipation (a sense present even as Lessing, nearing 87 writes, of aging) that prompts Lessing to explore beyond the conventional realism that shapes her first novels and to journey into “space fiction.” That journey begins in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) book five of her first quintet of novels, *Children of Violence*.

Her willingness to try new models is not surprising because Lessing is a boundary crosser; for Lessing, change is at the heart of writing (and everything else). Thirty years after publishing “A Small Personal Voice,” Lessing wrote the essays in *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* (1987) and, once again, championed the role of writers in society. But in “When in the Future They Look Back on Us,” she moves beyond the pantheon of individual writers in “A Small Personal Voice”; rather she sees writers, generally, in every country, as a unity, almost like an organism which has been evolved by society, as a means of examining itself. This “organism” is different in different epochs and always changing. Its most recent evolution has been into space and science fiction, predictably, because humanity is “into” studying space, and has only recently (historically speaking) acquired science as an aptitude. The organism must be expected to develop, to change, as society does. (*Prisons*, 7–8)

In “The Small Personal Voice” and “When in the Future They Look Back on Us,” essays separated by thirty years, I see evidence of the
ongoing tension between Lessing’s allegiance to the individual identity so valued in nineteenth century fiction and humanism and her attraction to a positive group identity. I underscore positive because of Lessing’s well-earned wariness of group domination. In “Group Minds,” she shows that wariness when she describes the “free” individual in Western societies and goes on to note:

People in the West therefore may go through their entire lives never thinking to analyze this very flattering picture, and as a result are helpless against all kinds of pressures on them to conform in many kinds of ways. (Prisons, 47)

Lessing’s examination of the relationship between individual identity and group identity produces a productive tension that accounts for so much of interest in her work over many years.

Nowhere is that tension more obvious or more interesting than in the “space fiction” that David Waterman so ably explores. Waterman writes convincingly of Lessing’s desire “to cut through the performance, the received ideas, and the habits and customs of our daily lives.” Drawing on a wide range of sources, he provides an interdisciplinary reading of the “space fiction” and maps Lessing’s brave exploration of the hierarchical landscapes that so often imprison us. Waterman offers a timely reading of Lessing for contemporary readers living in the landscape of globalization. He raises important questions about the human cost of order and progress—of what we are “walling in and walling out.”

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Some time ago, I finished a project on representations of institutional violence, a study which included Doris Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Shikasta, re: Colonised Planet 5*. Although I had read *The Golden Notebook* as a rite of passage at university, this was really the first time that I had examined Lessing’s work closely, and I knew it was not to be the last. The current volume is the result of my continuing interest in Doris Lessing’s work and in her position as a social critic and engaged intellectual. Like Lessing herself, the space fiction series *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, calls for a transformational, humanitarian politics of inclusion, but does so in a way that underscores the disillusion and frustration which must always accompany an ideal when it collides with reality, or at least what we accept as reality. It is not surprising if we have lost faith in society’s capacity to evolve: the history of governments and political parties, religious affiliations of all sorts, and scientific “progress” is more frightening that reassuring, showing very clearly that we have not yet escaped the infernal cycle of violence which results from our division into competitive, predatory groups. Yet throughout *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, there is hope,
a promise for the future brought to us by messengers from the stars, those Link people who risk ostracism, incarceration, even death to remind us of what should be obvious: there is a better way. Doris Lessing is one of those Link people to whom we should listen.
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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Doris Lessing makes clear her aim to present “reality” from another angle, to encourage us to look at our individual and collective identities more objectively: “[...] we are taught all the time in this culture that we are not conditioned, that we are free, that we have made up our own minds all through our lives about what we believe [...]” (The Shah) will simply say, “I am sorry but this is not so [...]” (Doris Lessing: Conversations, 80). The ultimate goal of such insight is to cut through the performance, the received ideas, the habits and customs of our daily lives and be able to interpret our situation in a manner freed, at least to a degree, from the effects of manipulation and conditioning. Critical thought is exactly to question the status quo, the rhetoric of governors, the benevolence of the rich, and to question the foundation of a society based on systemic violence and our implication within that structure. Lessing insists that we pose such questions, still relevant since we have not created the peaceful, equitable stability which will spare us the necessity of asking critical questions. Included in this study of identity, of our role as a member of a society based on group affiliation,
are works which can be considered under the rubric of what Lessing calls “space fiction”: the five novels of *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, as well as *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Memoirs of a Survivor*, all of which have more to do with their effects on inner rather than outer space, at least in terms of our interest in identity construction. Nevertheless, “space” fiction is also important in a geographic sense, as we human beings are often defined in terms of our “place”; our relationship to others, our position within a network of power, a logic of classification based on binary opposition which defines and constructs our socioeconomic class, our gender, our nationality, our race, or other abstractions. Our insertion in this network happens automatically, and seemingly with our cooperation, from the very beginning; we are born into the “game.” We are defined, and our sense of self is determined by our membership in certain groups, or by our “coordinates,” in other words by the space which we occupy. A geographic vocabulary is in order: center/margin, right/left, inside/outside, without forgetting that certain positions are favored in relation to others. These reference points which seem fixed, natural and universal, reveal their illusion of stability in the critical representations offered by Lessing, an instability which in turn calls into question the “common sense” of our societies, especially the frontier which separates “us” from “them.”

Our identity is also defined ideologically, because the goal of a network of formative power is a subtle conditioning of its members through a body of received ideas which are the “rules of the game” just mentioned (Bourdieu, 111–113), and which ensure the integration of those who play by the rules. It is important to believe in the game, because such cultural baggage is in fact a falsehood, what Kathleen Kirby calls a “functional fiction,” which nevertheless has profound effects and very real consequences in the daily lives of subjects (39). These practices, habits, rituals, and performances become a social text, the product as well as the producer of meaning, knowledge, and ultimately reality for all of us; they define the norm among and between groups, and our
Introduction

individual and collective identity as a result. It must be remembered that this social text is interactive; the practices, habits, rituals, and performances are the backdrop of an exhibition, played by the participating actors, with their bodies and their minds, creating a kind of theatrical reality. Belief in the display is absolutely necessary, otherwise “reality” itself would no longer exist. We believe in this game, in this performance, because it gives us a sense of sociohistorical belonging, thus we avoid the worry of alienation and displacement, especially if we do not look too closely at the contradictions inherent in any social system based on violence, inequality, and domination. Such a system reproduces itself relatively easily, and the status quo is maintained, each one in his/her place, each one playing his/her part. Lessing, however, encourages us to abandon our loyalty to a predefined universe, to ask critical questions (of ourselves and others) regarding the foundation of this network of power, and to resist the quasi-obligation to participate in a society which assigns us our place all the while threatening our very existence. To improve our condition, we must resist these ideologies of fracture, and become infidels toward the logic of predatory groups, which have defined our position, and ultimately we must adhere to a philosophy of “us” in a truly universal sense.

Throughout her work, Lessing exposes the strategies employed by the dominants to divide a society into competitive and predatory groups, with the seemingly willing mutual collaboration of those who become the victims of such division. In Doris Lessing’s Briefing for a Descent into Hell, for example, even a messenger from the gods will not be taken seriously if he gets too far away from accepted social norms; his difference will earn him the label of “insane.” The medical-legal institution of psychiatry is used to isolate and reorient marginal voices like Charles’s, who criticize the dominant regime, ultimately reducing him to silence. His “identity,” his proper place in society, will be imposed on him, from the simple starting point of some papers found in his wallet and a handful of testimonies from his family
and colleagues. After having suffered the torture of electroshock therapy and psychotropic drug treatment, Charles, to all appearances, seems “cured,” at least to those who never suspected that his “real” identity might be based on a different standard. The institution of psychiatry, as a tool of the dominant power, has become the filter through which eccentric voices must pass in a society where difference is synonymous with violence. Lessing, as a means of social critique, dislocates the reference points which support the dominant ideology, and in such a destabilized society, the madman becomes the voice of reason within an insane community.

In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, civilized society has broken down into general anarchy, and with it people’s certitude regarding their place; as a solution, they form themselves into tribes, thus proving that social evolution, though very slow to progress, can be reversed overnight when people feel threatened. The pillars which support “civilized” society, being largely cultural constructions, even outright lies, have revealed their fragility. Those who never believed in “civilization” in the first place, like the Ryan family, are much better equipped to survive in a society which has suddenly lost much of its façade. The genuine solution offered in the novel is to find a space outside the status quo, outside the “common sense” of predatory groups in search of an identity, not at the level of tribes but in a truly universal sense.

In *Shikasta*, a formerly utopian society has fallen away from its ideal, and has now divided itself into groups based on race, gender, nationality and such, against a backdrop of perpetual violence. As in *Briefing*, the “Link people” are meant to guide the populations, but their message is not understood by most, hence the status quo is assured by marginalizing any criticism of the way things are, as we have already seen in the case of Charles. Those who resist the dominant ideology on Shikasta are those who seek a state of mind and a way of thinking that go beyond current limits, and especially by refusing to participate in the competitive division of society. The “normal” people are in fact ill, having
adapted to a dysfunctional society, and they are not able to understand their degenerative illness; as a result have lost the ability to conceive of themselves in a universal sense. Canopus’s envoys, with their utopian message, are not understood by the population, and further, the residents of Shikasta cannot accept the idea that other conceptual frameworks are possible, even though all the evidence shows their current path leads only to mutual destruction.

The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five also questions the basis of an identity which is defined in spatial and geographic terms, in other words by group formation; the forced mixing of diverse cultures is commanded by the Providers as a means of healing the current social fractures. The organization of space is a very important tool in subject formation, since we find our place in relation to others on a geographic map, which has, apparently, all the characteristics of a natural space in the real world. Each zone seems independent, and as long as each subject stays in his/her assigned place, everything seems fine. Those who approach too closely one of the borders of a zone become uneasy, even physically ill, which discourages curiosity regarding the residents of other Zones. The boundaries between the Zones are, in fact, much more permeable than the residents would have believed. As the novel progresses, Lessing exposes the lie of impenetrable borders, an idea constructed in service of the dominant power as a way of achieving its political objectives. Borders are thus fictions, but with very real effects, which define “us” in relation to “them” and at the same time give a sense of protection and security, which comes at the price of isolation. Movement is limited, not only in a geographic sense but also in the sense of social evolution, since for Lessing social problems like war and imperialism are only symptoms of a deeper and more troubling illness, that of division into competitive and predatory groups. The principal characters, Al Ith and Ben-Ata, are involved in a mandatory social experiment; the two are disoriented by their movement, both geographic and ideological, which leaves them with a feeling
of alienation regarding not only the Zone that they move to, but their original Zone that they move from as well. They can no longer claim group membership, since their frame of reference has been displaced. This destabilizing movement must continue, not only for the king and queen but for their subjects as well, otherwise their social evolution will once again stall.

*The Sirian Experiments* is the report of Ambien, a senior administrator, regarding the colonial project of the Sirian empire, a colonialism which is inter-galactic in nature. Whereas initially Sirius fixes its identity between the poles of the indigenous natives and the planet Canopus, Ambien’s continual questioning of her relation to the Other results in the realization that, first, the colonial experiments are unnecessary and second, that Sirian identity is interdependent with the Other in the largest sense, not something apart to be defined in dialectical fashion. Ambien’s insight does not come quickly; she must start at the beginning, as a member of the ruling elite with all of its preconceptions, and go all the way through her formation as a social critic, struggling at times with ideas that she only partly understands. While she is rewarded with greater insight regarding concepts like “necessity” and “wholeness,” she is ostracized by her Sirian peers as no longer one of the Five, and sent away to corrective exile, much like Charles in *Briefing*.

Like Ambien and the Link people, or the narrator of *Memoirs* or the king and queen of *Zones*, the representative of the title of *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* must look beyond the current situation, in this case the physical extinction of the entire population of a dying planet. The residents of this formerly peaceful planet fall away from the utopian ideal as soon as their conditions begin to deteriorate, much like the situation in *Memoirs*. Fear is predominant, competition for ever-scarcer resources begins, defensive groups form and violence rises. While waiting to die, the key characters literally change their identities as necessary, as a function of the group’s needs. While it is difficult, these people try to understand why they must resist the idea
of a closed identity. Identity must always be understood as relational
and representative in the largest possible context, and as the residents of
Planet 8 die one by one, those who remain, those who go furthest in
their understanding, come to recognize their errors of perception from
their ordinary senses; they will see more clearly with their “new eyes” and
will radically change their way of thinking as a result. The collective
identity of these residents has been recovered, freed from any material
anchors in a body or a geographic zone, to become an identity ultimately
understood as both plural and one, but never fixed. Even death does
not interrupt the evolution of identity, since the death of a person or
even an entire planet is, after all, perfectly normal in a universe which
is constantly changing.

Group affiliation is a key concept throughout Lessing’s space
fiction, and in *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* rhetoric is the tool
which accomplishes this herd mentality which becomes the basis for
identity, a way of conditioning people to need a tyranny, ultimately
restricting freedom. Such rhetoric makes reference to the human specie’s
past, in other words the animal-past when the formation of packs was
necessary as a means of survival. In theory, pack behavior is no longer
vital for humans, but the rhetoric of group division is still current;
the elite of society attend special schools to become adept in its use.
Like the Link people, the sentimental agents of the title play the role
of yeast within the society, in other words, the ingredient which will
encourage the evolution of a population immobilized in the status quo.
Instead of geographic zones, groups are formed by means of rhetoric,
which the agents target as their principal obstacle to positive change.
In the novel, the court trial becomes a way to oppose lassitude, the force
of tradition and insularity; the Peers intend, before reaching a verdict,
to inform themselves (thanks to books on the subject) about group
dynamics. Although in the minority, those who refuse the rhetoric
of group minds succeed, at least for a short time, in their effort to
see humanity in a more universal manner.
This capacity for extra perception is, however, a handicap in a society which cannot understand that alternative ways of thinking, of self-definition, are possible. Society’s resistance to such alternatives is not surprising when one realizes how perception can be distorted as a result of ideological inculcation, generally in the service of the dominants; in fact, what is surprising is how quickly subjects adapt to a dysfunctional society rather than risk losing their place. Identity and social relations are the effects of structures, institutions, and networks which limit and define social beings (Lee 88, 92). These structures are of course cultural creations, and if they can be controlled they can also be changed. From time to time change does occur, if only for the short term, as a result of resistance which puts what Lee calls “destabilizing pressures” which force change and offer the possibility of “transformational choice” (213–214). Lessing, as a writer who takes seriously the task of exposing contradictions inherent in our present notions of “who we are,” encourages us to refuse membership in a society where identity is a closed subject.
When I joined the John Lewis Partnership in 1982 things were very different at Waitrose: we closed on Sundays, Monday mornings and at four o’clock on Saturday afternoons; we stocked only 20 per cent of what you see today; we didn’t take credit cards. Looking back, it was as if retailers believed they knew what was best for customers — a particularly British version of Henry Ford’s famous “People can have the Model T in any colour — so long as it’s black”. Today the boot is firmly on the other foot: customers are in charge. And rightly so. Supermarkets in this country have long been regarded as