



Sperlinger, T. (2016). Radical pedagogy in Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2016.1242473

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

License (if available):
CC BY-NC

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/00111619.2016.1242473](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1242473)

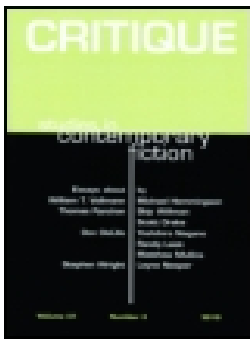
[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the final published version of the article (version of record). It first appeared online via Taylor & Francis at <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCopyRight?scroll=top&doi=10.1080%2F00111619.2016.1242473>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms.html>



Radical Pedagogy in Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann*

Tom Sperlinger

To cite this article: Tom Sperlinger (2016): Radical Pedagogy in Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1242473>



© 2016 Tom Sperlinger



Published online: 22 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Radical Pedagogy in Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann*

Tom Sperlinger

Department of English, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article considers pedagogy as a consistent theme in Doris Lessing's fiction. It draws on a deleted prefatory note in the typescript to *Mara and Dann*, which states that the heroine is "consumed with a passion to learn and go to school." The article explores how Mara learns in a reimagined Africa after a future ice age. In the absence of formal schooling, a game is used in which children are asked repeatedly, "What did you see?" This game is compared to Henry James's use of a child's perspective in *What Maisie Knew*, to strategies for unveiling and "naming" the world in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and to ideas about teaching in Idries Shah's *The Sufis* and *Learning How to Learn*. The article thus argues that radical and anticolonial approaches to learning are figured in Lessing's fiction, and in her Nobel lecture, as essential for human survival.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogy; learning; *Mara and Dann*; Doris Lessing; Paulo Freire; Sufism

Doris Lessing's fiction is often concerned with questions of pedagogy. Lessing left school at fourteen and describes herself in her autobiography *Under My Skin* as "a drop-out, long before the term had been invented" (154). Lessing was openly scornful of organized education, from which she noted in *The Golden Notebook* she had a "lucky escape" (17). Yet, partly as a result, her work is preoccupied with how an individual learns in the absence of trusted authorities or conventional structures. This is evident in the action of her novels. Many of her characters are involved in self-education, from Martha Quest in the early "Children of Violence" sequence (1952–69) to Ambien II in the later science fiction novel *The Sirian Experiments* (1980). It is also apparent in the style of her fiction. The word "didactic" has acquired almost entirely pejorative connotations when applied to a literary work, yet many oral traditions—of a kind Lessing increasingly imagined in her fiction—mix form and instruction with greater ease.¹ Lessing often seems to imagine a reader who might read for what Paulo Freire calls praxis, a combination of reflection and action (68).

One example of Lessing's didactic style is a tendency to explain her work to the reader, within a novel or story, or in one of the frequent prefaces or afterwords appended to them. In a preface added to *The Golden Notebook* in 1971, Lessing deconstructs the system that produces literary critics and reviewers, whose responses to this novel she disputes. This leads to a more general comment on education:

It may be that there is no other way of educating people. Possibly, but I don't believe it. In the meantime it would be a help at least to describe things properly, to call things by their right names. Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this: 'You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture [...] Those of you who are more robust and individual than others, will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself—educating your own judgement. Those that stay must remember, always and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society' (16).

This passage mixes a Marxist analysis of systems with something almost humorous: “We are sorry, but it is the best we can do.” Yet the limits to Lessing’s critique are striking. An effort to “call things by their right names” might alert a student to the dangers of the current system. But the word “ideally” is misleading: Lessing does not imagine an alternative, utopian or otherwise. The only options she can see are to be resilient within the system or to leave and educate yourself, which Lessing suggests (with a hint of self-flattery) will be the choice of those “who are more robust and individual.” If there are “other way[s] of educating people,” Lessing cannot picture them.

Lessing’s analysis has similarities to that offered in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published in 1970. There is no evidence that Freire influenced Lessing directly, but there is overlap in their theories of education and in the contexts from which they emerge. These two writers grew up in a postcolonial or colonial context, respectively, in Brazil and Southern Rhodesia. Each of them turned to Marxism, as they sought to critique the society and education system around them, although the versions of it they contrived were particular (and distinct from each other).² The anticolonial elements of their work have also been increasingly overlooked. Henry A. Giroux notes a tendency in the Western appropriation of Freire’s work to forget the “profound and radical nature of its theory and practice as an anticolonial and postcolonial discourse” (79). Susan Watkins demonstrates that Lessing was latterly seen as a *grande dame* of English letters and undervalued for a continued engagement with “colonialism, decolonisation, race, nation and empire” (165, 183). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire characterizes conventional education in stark terms:

Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (53).

Freire, like Lessing, sees organized education as primarily a site for the exercise of power and domination. Lessing sees the only possibility as being to “call things by their right names,” as if appealing to a verifiable realism. Freire is able to picture alternatives. He writes: “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*” (69). The appeal to names is, in both cases, a materialist account of the relationship of consciousness to the world, but, for Freire, naming might be a creative act. Freire, like Lessing, sees critical thinking or “educating your own judgement” as essential, but it must act in concert with dialogue, so that the world that is seen might also transform the viewer. As Giroux has written, Freire thus combines “the language of critique with the language of possibility” (qtd. in Mayo 59); he wishes to show how the system itself can be transformed.

In this article, I consider how Lessing’s critique of formal education was combined, in a much later novel, with a more optimistic view of the alternatives. Freire’s work is useful as context. However, Idries Shah’s Sufi teaching was a more direct influence on Lessing’s later pedagogy. Just as Freire distrusted the “traditionalist church” as “intensely colonialist” (qtd. in Mayo 61), Lessing notes in *Time Bites* that she found it hard “to see in religions anything more than systems of indoctrination with perennial tendencies toward the persecution of differently-thinking people” (360). For Lessing, as for Freire, both church and (state) education were associated with what Spivak calls the “epistemic violence” of colonialism (271). Lessing’s remarks preface an essay on the influence of the Sufis on her attitude to spiritual questions from the mid-1960s onward. Perhaps less well understood is Shah’s influence—as perhaps the first teacher she trusted—on Lessing’s attitudes toward education, which she also came to “see” as something other than a “system of indoctrination.” Freire wrote: “I believe that many people under the Marxist banner subscribe to purely mechanistic explanations by depending on a fatalism that I sometimes, humorously, call liberating fatalism” (qtd. in Mayo 62). One element in Freire’s apparent optimism was an alternative reading of Marx, but another was a form of Christianity that has been called “liberation theology,” which Peter Mayo describes as “a theology from the margins dealing with concerns of the margins”

(62). The relationship between Lessing's earlier political commitments and her later turn to Sufism is complex, as Shadia S. Fahim has shown (1–18), but Sufi thought is vital in providing Lessing with a language of possibility.

What Mara Knew

Lessing's novel *Mara and Dann* is set after an ice age many years in the future and tells the story of a brother and sister who travel across Africa, which is renamed Ifrik. The reader follows Mara growing up, from her earliest memories (barely recalled) to young adulthood. The reader is witness to the world through the heroine's consciousness. As Watkins notes, "Despite the title, the point of view of *Mara and Dann* is exclusively [Mara's]," thus challenging the "patriarchal focus of much speculative fiction and post-apocalyptic narrative" (133). Perhaps the most intensely felt sections of the book are those focused on Mara's childhood. The fact that the novel is narrated initially from close to a child's perspective is itself significant. Children are normally observed in Lessing's fiction, or their childhood is dealt with relatively briskly.³ This novel, written late in her career, is Lessing's first sustained attempt to write fiction from a child's point of view.

The technical challenges Lessing faced in the novel appear similar to those in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, which is also told through the consciousness of a young girl. There is no evidence that James influenced Lessing, but, like him, she was conducting an experiment. This is how James framed the questions:

I recall that my first view was as [...] to what the child might be conceived to have *understood*—to have been able to interpret and appreciate. Further reflexion and experiment showed me my subject strangled in that extreme of rigour. The infant mind would at the best leave great gaps and voids [...] I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably *saw*; a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand at all or would quite misunderstand [...] so that we fellow witnesses, we not more invited but only more expert critics, should feel in strong possession of it [...] Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary (7).

A similar use of "the infant mind" allows for a central mystery in Lessing's novel, about the exact circumstances in which Mara and Dann are separated from their parents, which the heroine recalls fleetingly and without comprehension. However, the "gaps and voids" in what Mara understands are otherwise of a different kind. James's heroine is witness to adults' emotional and sexual conflicts, which she can see but cannot read. In contrast, Mara has a growing awareness of forms of knowledge that have been lost or partially obscured as society has broken down. The gaps in Mara's understanding are thus indicative of the pockets that have opened up in the fabric of the wider culture around her. The reader sometimes understands something that Mara only sees or that she misunderstands. However, this is not because of a split between an adult and child perspective, but because the reader (for now) inhabits Mara's past, which has been partially obscured within the novel. Mara's vocabulary is thus shaped by different pressures than Maisie's. A recurrent feature of the novel is that the characters live amid the relics of a technology for which the means of production no longer exist. Mara's language is in much the same predicament. Her mind sometimes produces words for which she cannot recover a meaning. At other times, her apprehensions are stronger than the vocabulary available, so that what Freire calls a "new naming" of the world is required (69).

The question of what Mara knows and how she knows it is a central concern in the novel. The phrase "Mara knew" echoes like a litany, especially in the first hundred pages that describe Mara's childhood. To take three examples: "[Mara] knew a lot about this stuff the tunics were made of" (*Mara and Dann* 21); "And then she knew it was Dann and, moreover, had known from the first" (75); and "Mara knew, because she had gone through the process herself, that all present were wrestling in their minds with immensities" (199). Each of these implies a different form of curiosity. In the first example, the tunics described are made from a peculiarly resilient form of fabric that is no longer produced and that implies an obsolete method of production. Mara knows "about" the

“stuff” the tunics are made of, but not what it is called or how it was produced. The second example is about recognition of others and of a particular other. Dann has been absent for a long time, and Mara slowly recognizes him in the more adult form in which he returns. For Mara and Dann, this concern for one another is crucial to their survival. It also carries undertones of sexual knowledge, a theme that is made explicit at the close, when the siblings kiss. In the third example, we see a convergence of different types of knowledge. Mara is able to utilize her experience to understand what others are feeling. The immensities with which they are wrestling are provoked by something particular. Mara has just suggested, against the prevailing assumption, that the world is globe-shaped. It is as if this moment is a fictional embodiment of Freire’s claim that “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (68).

Mara’s education as a child is conducted largely in the form of a game:

At home there was a game that all the parents played with their children. It was called, What Did You See? Mara was about Dann’s age when she was first called into her father’s room one evening, where he sat in his big carved and coloured chair [...] And by the time the game ended she knew why some stones were smooth and some sharp and why they were different colours, some cracked, some so small they were almost sand. She knew how rivers rolled stones along and how some of them came from far away. She knew that the river had once been twice as wide as it was now. There seemed no end to what she knew, and yet her father had not told her much but kept asking questions so she found the answers in herself. Like, ‘Why do you think some stones are smooth and round and some still sharp?’ (*Mara and Dann* 23–24)

For Maisie, the adult world is veiled and impenetrable. The adults around her both encourage and manipulate her innocence in order to pursue their own relationships. James delineates Maisie’s sensitivity with care, and she is presented sympathetically but also patronized. Mara, in contrast, never appears innocent. She is presented, for example, as experiencing near-starvation as a child, and she witnesses death on a devastating scale. These dangers require that she can move quickly from seeing to understanding, partly in order that she can become self-reliant after her parents’ disappearance. Thus the work of understanding—moving from what one sees to a capacity to interpret it—is an explicit aspect of how Mara is taught.

The differences in the heroine’s position in each novel points to a related difference in how James and Lessing write. Harold Bloom has claimed Lessing’s language can be a “drab shrug” (6), and that might seem evident when Mara recalls her father’s chair as “carved” and “coloured,” each a word that obscures the object described even as it is remembered. On a first reading, it appears as though Lessing’s novel recommends an attention to detail that its own narrative cannot match; it gives no sense of the particular colors or the shape of the carving. Yet Mara’s game points toward a different kind of attention: what Mara recollects about her father’s chair is its ornate and decorative nature, which marks this as a memory of earlier privilege and relative wealth. Similarly, her father’s questions ask her to attend to the shapes of stones not for aesthetic reasons, but because of what this reveals about the workings of geological processes and change. If Lessing’s prose is brisk about some of the minutiae that James dwells on, this is partly because she has an urgent sense of temporal realities that the present may obscure. Her work thus also provokes the reader to “see” on a different scale.⁴

Critical pedagogy

Mara does not have a teacher after her father’s disappearance, nor does she consistently have other forms of authority she can trust, for different reasons to Maisie. But the mode of education that Mara’s father engages her in is nonetheless dialogic and collaborative. Mara is encouraged to learn from others. For example, her understanding of the game develops when she sees it being played with other children. Mara realizes that the questions she is asked are becoming more complex: “now it was not just What Did You See? but: What were you thinking? What made you think that? Are you sure that thought is true?” (*Mara and Dann* 24). Mara also begins to appreciate that each child sees something different so that “it sometimes [needed] several children to see everything about a

stone or a bird or a person” (24). A similar attitude is evident in the adult Mara, perhaps especially in her relationship with General Shabis. “The trouble,” he laments after one session where they have shared what they know, “is that we all know a little but not how it fits together” (260). This lack of a system or background means that what they know may emerge inadvertently: “Sometimes it was by accident that they found out what the other knew. For instance, Shabis remarked that in those long ago times there was a period when people lived to be quite old, even a hundred years or more” (260). Since so much is unknown, Shabis and Mara develop a model of conversation that allows such hidden knowledge to emerge, in the words of the speaker or in the interstices between what each person knows.

Mara and Shabis are searching for what Freire calls “a correct method of approaching reality in order to unveil it” (92). The relationship between them echoes what Freire calls critical pedagogy, in which dialogue is central. Freire seeks to find a mode of teaching that does not suggest the world is “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (52). For him, the alternative is “problem-posing” education, which allows “the teacher-student and the students-teachers [to] reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world,” and thus remake their understanding of it (64). For Freire, this is a means to escape forms of knowledge that perpetuate oppression. For Mara, it is liberating for other reasons. She and Shabis need to improvise a structure out of the fragments of an earlier society, partly because of an absence of other tools, whether physical or psychological. They can thus anticipate the continual, and often devastating, changes through which they live.

Mara is painfully aware of the limits to her education. She reflects in a conversation with Shabis on the contrast between her and the others in Chelops, a city in the center of the continent in which a more orderly society has been sustained:

You don't know what it's like, knowing you're so ignorant, not knowing anything [...] And I did know more [than the others in Chelops]—but what I really knew more about was not the kind of thing I want to learn. I know about how to stay alive. And they don't (*Mara and Dann* 248).

Mara knows “how to stay alive,” but her ability to think critically also makes her aware of her ignorance. This ignorance is in part an awareness of “not knowing,” which is essential in any educational process. Mara has to become aware of the limitations of what she knows in order to want to learn. On the other hand, if one only knows by experience, this might deny other possibilities. The central characters in *Mara and Dann* are acutely aware of forms of knowledge that they are denied. Mara is illiterate for most of the novel, for example: “How should I know? I know nothing. I have been taught nothing. I don't know how to read or write” (*Mara and Dann* 243). Similarly, Dann recounts to Mara how he saw “some pages from an old book [...] they were crumbling” (88–89). These themes are developed in the sequel *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog*, in which whole libraries disappear. Both characters lament that “nothing is invented now” (37). Dann is aware, early on, of technologies that have died out: “they could talk to each other through the air, miles away” (88). He is nostalgic for that past: “There were people once—they knew everything” (88). The siblings also witness knowledge dying out. When they encounter what appear to be solar panels, Mara remembers a woman they had met: “Do you realise, if Han were still alive, she could probably make these sun traps work again?” (367).

Yet change (and deterioration) is inevitable, the novel suggests, and through the depiction of Chelops, Lessing dramatizes the dangers of an education that suggests the world is “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable.” This is evident in the (relatively brief) period of domestic tranquility that Mara enjoys with Meryx in Chelops:

Mara often did not sleep, not wanting to lose a moment of this delight, or she half-slept, or dreamed, and more than once she dreamed that it was Dann in her arms and this startled her awake and into grief. She knew that sometimes when she held Meryx she felt that he was part-child, and wondered if this was because of Dann; for Meryx was not childish at all. Except in this one thing: that he did not know life was so like a cactus flower, and could disappear in a breath. And this was really what separated them. Strange that no one, even the cleverest, could know anything except by direct experience. All his life Meryx had

been sheltered in the Kin, been safe, and that was why he could not hear when she whispered, “Meryx, it is not going to last. Let’s go now, while we can” (*Mara and Dann* 172).

Mara’s relationship with Dann prepares her for the possibility of a relationship with Meryx, involving intimacy and mutual protection. Yet her love for her brother also has potential to overshadow subsequent feelings. The assertion that “no one [...] could know anything except by direct experience” sounds like an overstatement, since it precludes empathy or imagination. Yet Mara is referring to very particular knowledge of the fragility of life and the speed or banality of death. Lessing’s prose briefly diverts into simile (“life was so like a cactus flower”) before returning to language that is more literal than it appears: that life can disappear “in a breath.” Meryx cannot anticipate how constantly the world is likely to change, because he has always lived comfortably. As a consequence, he is unable to learn about death in more than an abstract sense; he cannot imagine that his own life will end. It is this knowledge that binds Mara and Dann together and limits their potential to “know” others with the same degree of intimacy.

Naming the world

One of the ways in which a deterioration of knowledge is enacted in the novel is through a loss of names. The “sun traps” are one example: they would have presumably once been called solar panels, but they have acquired a name that is a more literal rendering of their function. Freire sees “naming the world” as a means of reclaiming one’s humanity. However, he goes on to emphasize that there are “two dimensions” to this, “reflection and action”: “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (68). Mayo has noted that, for Freire, this process may be applied both in the context of those who are illiterate and to those who are literate in “the conventional sense of the term” but who need to acquire “political literacy, the means of reading the world” (72). Both senses are applicable to Mara. She acquires the skills to read and write during the novel, but before that the game has taught her a means of reading the world. It is a vital element of Mara’s education that she starts “naming the world” as a child and thus transforming it. She begins to understand the relationship between what she sees and, for example, an ancient earthquake. Thus what one “sees” in the world includes an understanding of its relationships and of change. There are particular dangers in receiving the world as a static entity. Later in the novel, Mara realizes that General Shabis has set a trap for Izrak, with whom she is imprisoned: “Already the truth was in her mind and she was wondering why General Izrak could not see it” (*Mara and Dann* 278). Izrak has not been taught to “see” the world beyond the way in which it immediately presents itself to him, or his own desire to dominate it.

Mara is preoccupied by the language she has inherited, which includes concepts she does not understand. For example:

Stumbling there in her half-sleep [...] she thought, What a little life I’ve been leading. I wasn’t curious enough even to cross over the rivers to the western plain... And there it was again, a word in her mind and she had no idea where it had come from: west, western. Like north, which everyone used. What was North, where was it? (*Mara and Dann* 85)

Mara sat listening. Into her mind came the words, I am listening with every cell in my body—and was at once jerked full awake. Cell. All these words that she knew, but did not know why [...] Again Mara was seized with the hunger to know more, to understand: *she wanted to know* [...] She was thinking that this hunger was like the need for water or for food, and as strong, and always stronger (*Mara and Dann* 118).

In both instances, Mara is half-asleep, and these words emerge out of her unconscious. The two words she remembers—“west” and “cell”—operate on vastly different scales. The reliance on “west” or “north” without knowing the meaning of the words is a reminder that the world itself is pictured differently in the novel. Dann later draws “a big shape” and says, “That’s the world.” Mara contradicts him: “‘The world’ floated up easily into Mara’s mind from long-ago lessons with her parents. ‘The world is bigger than that,’ she said. ‘The world has a lot of pieces of land with water between

them” (*Mara and Dann* 95). It sounds as if Dann has drawn Africa, and Mara has corrected him in some form. In contrast, “cell” is a word that Mara in particular remembers, without being able to place it in context. Both “west” and “cell” are “scientific” terms (in a general sense) that have been used to name how the world functions and thus transform our understanding of it. Mara looks into shadows at the end of this episode and sees other people, like her, who are struggling; she sees a child, whom she is sure will not live. To want to know is equivalent to wanting to eat or drink for Mara: it is to want to continue and survive.

The difficulty of names finds its expression also in the question of Mara’s name. Mara knows that this is not her “real name,” which she has forgotten or suppressed. This is partly a plot device. Mara and Dann’s true identities are hidden for much of the novel, before they are finally revealed as royalty. This aspect of the book feels contrived. Lessing uses the subtitle “an adventure,” and she is writing in a tradition of fiction for children in which it is a common trope for an “ordinary” child to have extraordinary origins. Yet her “real name” and identity are a disappointment to Mara:

Meanwhile Mara was thinking that for years she had secretly wondered about her name, her real name, the one she had been so effectively ordered to forget, and had believed, or half believed, that when she heard it a truth about herself would be revealed and she would have to cry out, Yes, that’s it, at last, that’s who I am. But now Shahana, and Princess, did not fit her, she could not pull the words over her (*Mara and Dann* 369–70).

In an earlier section of the novel cited above, Mara does not know the name for the “stuff” her clothing is made from. Her name is now thought of metaphorically as clothing, which she cannot “pull” over her. The phrasing might also carry an echo of a common phrase: to “pull the wool over” someone’s eyes. After all, Mara’s real name—now she has discovered it—“does not fit her,” as if it conceals the person she has become. Mara had hoped that her real name would be revelatory, but now concedes: “She was Mara. That was her name” (*Mara and Dann* 370). This is a Freirian model of how the world is named, since implicitly Mara sees that there is not a “right” or original name (for anything) that can be recovered, but that the world is named in the process of uncovering it, as she has been shaped by her experiences.

Writing (in) *Mara and Dann*

Among Lessing’s late novels, *Mara and Dann* has received a relatively high level of critical attention. There have been questions about its limitations. Fiona Becket, for example, suggests that the novel fails as a post-human fable because it is incapable of “(necessary) interrogation of human centrality,” and that its radical potential is undermined by how it is drawn into a “happily ever after” narrative (135). In contrast, Watkins notes how many texts are destroyed in the novel, thus subverting the attitude to writing as a means of recovery in much post-apocalyptic fiction (131). In the two *Mara* novels, Watkins argues: “The idea of culture as the work of preservation, recovery and homogeneity is juxtaposed [...] with an understanding of it as provisional, oral and local” (135, 136). Another way of framing these ideas is offered in Raymond Williams’s “Culture Is Ordinary.” He notes that culture is “always both traditional and creative,” indicating “a whole way of life” and “the special processes of discovery and effort” (4). *Mara and Dann* mourn a “whole” way of life of which they have only fragments, which places greater emphasis on their efforts of discovery.

There is some evidence that Lessing herself saw *Mara and Dann* as concerned with these questions. In a draft typescript there is a short prefatory note, which does not appear in the published novel:

Having read through this with I hope a dispassionate eye I am wondering if I have written a tale for adolescents? Possibly even black adolescents in the Third World. My heroine is consumed with a passion to learn and go to school. This would be understood by anyone, child or adult, anywhere in the Third World but by ~~no one~~ ^few^ in our world.⁵

The prefatory note is crude and overstates themes that are explicit in the action of the novel: “I wish I could go to school,” Mara says “passionately” to her friend Ida in *Chelops* (*Mara and Dann* 145).

The note also makes revealing assumptions about the reader. Although Lessing states that she has written a tale “for [...] black adolescents in the Third World,” she does not include them in “our” world; the “black adolescent” is not the imagined reader of this note, at least. The revision from “no one” to “few” in the final sentence signals hesitation about the absolute nature of the claim that nobody in “our world” would understand Mara’s passion to go to school, but the passage relies on similar language about the Third World (“anyone, anywhere”) and on a simplistic dichotomy. Williams notes in *Culture and Materialism* that in utopian or dystopian fiction one needs to look not only for the “presentation of *otherness*” but also for “the implied connection” with current reality (198; italics in original). The crudeness of Lessing’s analysis of the “First” and “Third” worlds nearly obscures another relationship: the implied connection between the fictional Mara in the future and an imagined adolescent in the present.

There is another movement or hesitation in the note that is revealing. Lessing starts by suggesting that her novel is specifically for “adolescents,” and some of the most original and startling episodes in the novel feature Mara at that age. But by the end of the note, Lessing is suggesting that either a “child or [an] adult” could understand Mara’s passion; similarly, at the end of the novel Mara is established as a young woman. To put this another way, *Mara and Dann* is about how a woman is affected, at the time and in later adulthood, by the experience of not going to school. It is thus a novel, in part, about adult education of a particular kind, pursued in the absence of earlier formal schooling. It is in that light—as radical pedagogy—that Lessing’s concern to link her fictional protagonist with the present is most coherent.⁶

The themes of the deleted prefatory note are echoed in Lessing’s later Nobel lecture. Lessing asks her listeners to imagine “Southern Africa [...] an Indian store, in a poor area, in a time of drought.” Lessing places in the store a young woman with two children, who is reading a page torn from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877). This sounds like a lost sketch from *The Story of General Dann*, in which individual pages torn from books have been preserved in an obsolete substance that is referred to as “not-glass” (174). The young woman’s desire for education in the Nobel lecture, in a period of drought and hunger, also echoes the *Mara* novels; an early working title or subtitle in the typescript of *Mara and Dann* is “Memories of Water.” In the lecture, Lessing notes:

That poor girl trudging through the dust, dreaming of an education for her children, do we think that we are better than she is—we, stuffed full of food, our cupboards full of clothes, stifling in our superfluities? I think it is that girl, and the women who were talking about books and an education when they had not eaten for three days, that may yet define us (par. 96–97).

Lessing again overstates, including in the potentially coercive use of “we.” It is assumed that this girl (who is literate) could not be one of her readers. Yet, beneath the problematic construction of global dialectics, there is again an implied relationship between what a “poor girl” in the present knows, her responsiveness to a text, and the future (“may yet define us”). In both the Nobel lecture and the *Mara* novels, the desire for knowledge is figured not as a means for material advancement or a pastime, but as a necessity. Those who are marginalized in the present thus anticipate a central human experience in the future.⁷

Immediately before this in the Nobel lecture, Lessing writes about a “space,” which she claims an imaginative writer requires: “Into that space, which is like a form of listening, of attention, will come the words, [...] ideas—inspiration.” In Lessing’s “space,” there is one particular inspiration:

My mind is full of splendid memories of Africa which I can revive and look at whenever I want. How about those sunsets, gold and purple and orange, spreading across the sky at evening. How about butterflies and moths and bees on the aromatic bushes of the Kalahari? Or, sitting on the pale grassy banks of the Zambesi, the water dark and glossy, with all the birds of Africa darting about. Yes, elephants, giraffes, lions and the rest, there were plenty of those, but how about the sky at night, still unpolluted, black and wonderful, full of restless stars (par. 54).

The human is (almost) absent in this passage, which documents the sunset, insects, birds, animals, and, finally, the stars. Only in the small and depersonalized verb “sitting” is there an implication of

human presence. This imaginative space operates in part like Mara's game; what Lessing saw as a child shapes her later (imaginative) understanding. It also places Africa at the center of Lessing's imagination and attention. There is a richness to what Lessing saw, and a specificity to its colors and abundance, which forms a contrast to the dry riverbed that dominates the scene in which Mara is taught and the form of her later recollections—for example, of her father's "carved" and "coloured" chair. Yet here there is also evidence of process and decay, both in the memory of an unpolluted sky and in the slightly enigmatic reference to the stars as "restless." It is an adjective that seems as if it might be a form of projection, indicating the author's restlessness as a child. But it is also a reminder of a timescale and scale of change vastly beyond the detail evident in the foreground of the sketch.

Mara and Dann makes radical use of an imagined future. Yet Dennis Walder sees the novel as being more about African history than might be assumed:

The remorseless socio-historical texture of, say, *Martha Quest* (1952), has been thinned-out into a lengthy, picaresque narrative [...] Yet everywhere Mara and Dann go, they find evidence—the coins, stones and towers, of previous empires—suggestive of the Zimbabwe ruins near Mutare, where stand the haunting stone walls and courtyards of a vanished civilization that, when I visited in the late 1960s, the white regime still refused to believe could have been built by the indigenous Shona [...] In that respect, the narrative could well be situated in the present or even the past, as much as in the future (103–04).

Walder reads the novel as "nostalgic" for the future, and he establishes a further link between what Lessing imagines later in life and what she saw as a child. He demonstrates that the novel includes a critique of a contemporary white perspective, which refused to acknowledge indigenous history. It was this kind of epistemic violence that Lessing refused when she rejected the society of Southern Rhodesia. In this late novel, Lessing shows the colonial regimes of Africa themselves reduced to ruins, with the continent represented at the center not only of Lessing's imagination but also—with the north under ice—of all that can be known.

Sufi teaching

Idries Shah's *The Sufis* had a profound impact on Lessing when it was published in 1964. The book opens with a fable about the human situation ("The Islanders"), the structure of which has a number of similarities to *Mara and Dann*. The fable describes how "once upon a time" there was an "ideal community" whose members "had no fears as we now know them [...] Theirs, therefore, was a slightly different mode of existence. We could almost say that our present perceptions are a crude, makeshift version of the real ones which this community possessed" (1). This is similar to the idealized version Mara and Dann construct of an earlier civilization. In "The Islanders," people are forced into a temporary but long-lasting exile: "In order to reduce the pain which a comparison between the old and new states would bring, they were made to forget the past almost entirely" (2). A small number of individuals are capable of remembering the "real" past and can develop the skills needed to transcend their perspective and escape, which Shah presents allegorically as the craft of boatbuilding. This, too, has its echo in how hard it is for characters in *Mara and Dann* to hold on to a collective memory of the skills their society once possessed. Shah's emphasis on a few who can retain and pass on what is known runs in parallel to the "Memories" in the novel, whose work Mara admires and wishes to emulate. Candace describes their work to Mara, after the latter has begged to go to school:

Yes, you will—but first, your story. We need to know. It isn't often we have someone here who has seen all the changes down there in the south. You see, we make up a history of what has happened as far as we can hear about it. And we have people who learn it all and they preserve it, and make sure it is handed on down to someone younger, and we teach it to the young people. We call these people Memories (148).

The difficulty for Mara of seeing beyond her own situation and the contrasting perspectives of many of those she encounters also has an echo in Shah's fable. "The island was not a prison," he notes. "But it was a cage with invisible bars, more effective than obvious ones ever could be" (6). Within

that context: “It was not very difficult to be rational. One had only to adhere to the values of society” (4). There are numerous examples in the novel in which a character adheres to the values of society and fails to see what is happening as a consequence, including those already cited involving Meryx and Izrak. The work of “seeing” is thus similar in Shah as in Freire, albeit it for different ends. It is an effort to reveal a truer version of reality that is concealed by society’s conditioning. This version of Sufism also challenges human centrality and arrogance. Indeed, it suggests that “the human” is in a diminished state compared to its origins, which complicates Becket’s critique.

These echoes suggest that, by the time she wrote *Mara and Dann*, Sufi modes of storytelling and of knowing were imprinted in the template of Lessing’s writing. Certainly, she turned increasingly toward allegory and suggestion from the 1980s onward. In an introduction to Shah’s *Learning How to Learn*, Lessing writes:

We tell ourselves about our infinitely various and rich language. But the fact is that English is impoverished; it lacks words and concepts we need. Any writer who has tried to describe certain processes and experiences has come up against it: the absence of words. There are ways around it—analogy is one—but the problem remains (9).

Thus the difficulty of “naming the world” in *Mara and Dann* might operate as an allegory for a larger dilemma. Mara and Dann’s situation is particular but also representative of the human condition, as articulated by the Sufis. Humans are exiles from their past and a true understanding of their world. In this context, storytelling—especially in allegorical modes—is vital in order to name a world that defies literal description. The game Mara is taught also takes on particular significance. Toward the end of *Learning How to Learn*, Shah writes:

The bitter truth is that before man can know his own inadequacy, or the competence of another man or institution, he must first learn something which will enable him to perceive both. Note well that his perception itself is the product of right study; not of instinct or emotional attraction to an individual, nor yet of desiring to “go it alone”. This is “learning how to learn” (287).

It is central to Sufi teaching that individuals must learn to “see” differently. Mara wishes to enter a particular institution—a school—all the way through the novel, and she searches constantly for others who might teach her. Yet the novel emphasizes that neither formal education nor self-education (“go[ing] it alone”) is adequate without an ability to learn. This is why the game used to teach Mara as a child is emphasized: her “perception” itself is the product of strenuous study.

Shah writes in *Learning How to Learn* that Sufi stories “are literature incidentally, but teaching-materials primarily” (197). It sometimes appears as though Lessing thinks of her novels in a similar way. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she has sometimes been criticized as overly didactic, including in a recent critical overview by Roberta Rubenstein (15). This is to miss that pedagogy is intrinsic to Lessing’s writing, rather than an occasional theme. Lessing’s self-education was conducted primarily through reading, and she writes with an awareness that others, too, may need books as “teaching-materials,” including to resist colonial or oppressive regimes. Lessing notes in *Time Bites* that one “always learns when writing a book,” but she laments “what a long time it sometimes takes to learn things,” citing as an example that, “[a]t the very end of his life Goethe said that he had only just learned how to read” (90). Lessing’s work is always about *how* we know the world, including the difficulty of learning to “read” it. Her fiction thus develops in how it “teaches” as well: *The Golden Notebook* asks to be read in a different way than *Mara and Dann*.

Walder suggests that there are only “a few uplifting, even comic moments in the grim vision” presented in *Mara and Dann* (104). But the novel shows faith in humanity’s capacity to survive and to pursue what Freire calls the “vocation” of becoming “more fully human” (71), even as (or because) much of society has broken down. In that sense, the book achieves the “warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the love of people” that Lessing had seen as a vital aspect of the nineteenth-century novel in “The Small Personal Voice” (10). Although *Mara and Dann* is told principally from Mara’s perspective, the dialogue implicit in the title is important. Freire writes that dialogue is an “existential necessity,” but that it cannot exist “in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people.”

He adds: “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (69–70). The siblings offer a rare example of such commitment in the novel.⁸ Dann risks his own life, for example, when he returns to look for Mara when they are children. Similarly, the story ends with Mara agreeing with Dann that the first thing she thinks about each morning is him and the next bit of their journey (407). By this point each of them has a partner, and they have settled in one place, but they do not expect these comforts to last. Amid such loss, which is enacted dramatically in the novel’s sequel, Mara and Dann’s love for one another is itself an act of courage.

Notes

1. For example, in addition to *Mara and Dann* and its sequel, oral traditions are imagined in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980) and “The Reason for It,” a story in *The Grandmothers* (2003).
2. Lessing gives an overview of her early involvement with the Communist Party in Southern Rhodesia in *Under My Skin* (258–92). Wayne Au claims that Freire’s work is “grounded in a thoroughly Marxist, or dialectic materialist, theory of knowledge” and that it is “difficult to grasp Freire’s pedagogy without understanding its Marxism” (175).
3. In contrast, Lessing’s early autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* (1952) begins with the heroine as an adolescent and focuses on her early adulthood. The later *The Fifth Child* (1988) narrates Ben Lovatt’s childhood from his mother’s point of view; only in the sequel, *Ben, in the World* (2000) is his perspective considered, by which time he is an adult.
4. I am indebted here to David Sergeant’s discussion of scale and environmental crisis in Lessing’s work.
5. The quotations from the unpublished typescripts for *Mara and Dann* are from folder 23.1 of Lessing’s typescripts held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin and are © 1999 by Doris Lessing. They are reproduced by kind permission of the Harry Ransom Center and Jonathan Clowes, Ltd., on behalf of the estate of Doris Lessing.
6. Lessing replaced this note with a more playful preface in the published novel, which recounts how just before she completed *Mara and Dann*, her son, Peter Lessing, suggested a similar idea for a book: “This kind of thing happens in families, but perhaps not so often in laboratories” (vii).
7. This is an idea that Lessing experimented with in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, which describes the Ryan family who “opted out” of what “our old society aimed at” (in the 1970s) and who were a cause of despair to social workers. When the “bad times” start in the future imagined in the novel, the Ryans survive “capably and with enjoyment,” whereas their middle-class peers are incapable of learning how to survive (106).
8. Lessing had earlier pondered the question of commitment in “The Small Personal Voice,” seeing it as linked to the qualities she noted in the nineteenth-century novel (10).

Note on Contributor

Tom Sperlinger is a Reader in English Literature and Community Engagement at the University of Bristol, UK. He has published a memoir, *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine: Teaching Under Occupation* (Zero Books, 2015), and is co-editor of *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Works Cited

- Au, Wayne. “Epistemology of the Oppressed: The Dialectics of Paulo Freire’s Theory of Knowledge.” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 5.2 (2007): 175–89. 25 March 2016.
- Becket, Fiona. “Environmental Fables? The Eco-Politics of Doris Lessing’s ‘Ifrik’ Novels.” *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*. Ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins. London: Continuum, 2009. 129–41.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Doris Lessing*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. Bloom’s Modern Critical Views.
- Fahim, Shadia S. *Doris Lessing and Sufi Equilibrium: The Evolving Form of the Novel*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Giroux, Henry A. “Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism.” *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the U.S. and Canada*. Ed. Arlo Kempf. New York: Springer, 2009. 79–89.
- James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2002.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. London: Flamingo, 1993.
- . *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*. London: Flamingo, 1999.
- . *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. London: Octagon P, 1974.

- . “Nobel Lecture: On not Winning the Nobel Prize.” Nobelprize.org, 2007. 25 March 2016. <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture_en.html>.
- . “The Small Personal Voice.” *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Ed. Paul Schlueter. New York: Knopf, 1974. 3–21.
- . *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog*. London: Fourth Estate, 2005.
- . *Time Bites: Views and Reviews*. London: Fourth Estate, 2005.
- . *Under My Skin: Volume 1 of My Autobiography, to 1949*. London: Flamingo, 1994.
- Mayo, Peter. *Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action*. London: Zed Books, 1999.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. “Notes for Proteus: Doris Lessing Reads the *Zeitgeist*.” *Doris Lessing: Interrogating the Times*. Ed. Debra Raschke, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, and Sandra Singer. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2010. 11–31.
- Sergeant, David. “Lessing and the Scale of Environmental Crisis.” *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*. Ed. Kevin Brazil, David Sergeant, and Tom Sperlinger. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 111–27.
- Shah, Idries. *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- . *The Sufis*. London: Octagon P, 1964.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271–313.
- Walder, Dennis. “‘Alone in a Landscape’: Lessing’s African Stories Remembered.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43.2 (2008): 99–115. 25 March 2016.
- Watkins, Susan. *Doris Lessing*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Materialism*. London: Verso, 2005.
- . “Culture Is Ordinary.” *Resources of Hope: Culture: Democracy, Socialism*. London: Verso, 1989. 3–14.