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‘No Hip Muffs’: female ageing in Doris Lessing’s fiction and correspondence

But now start the delightful surprises. Time becomes fluid [...] And inside this fluidity a permanence, for the person who looks at the old face in the mirror is the same as the one who shares your earliest memories, when you were two, perhaps less: that child’s core is the same as the old woman’s. ‘Here I still am: I haven’t changed at all.’

Best of all, not ever predicted nor, I think, described, a fresh liveliness in experiencing. Is it as if some gauze or screen has been dissolved away from life, that was dulling it, and like Miranda you want to say, What a Brave New World!¹

‘Old’ was published in *Time Bites* when Doris Lessing was 85. In the essay, Lessing makes a distinction between ‘a fresh liveliness of experiencing’ and ‘some gauze or screen’ – the ‘dulling’ notions of ageing as decline or difference – that is ‘dissolved away’. The contrast Lessing draws between lived experience and conventional narratives of ageing is important for the present article. In particular, I focus on the idea that aspects of ageing are unexpected and untold – ‘not ever predicted nor, I think, described’ – and that these disrupt chronology, making new perceptions and perspectives possible. This raises questions that bear on literary representation: Lessing identifies a failure of representation and at the same time registers the need for different language and forms within which to communicate the ‘delightful surprises’ of ageing – a term both serious and playful. This ambivalence not only registers that irony is at work in Lessing’s writing of ageing; the desire to communicate unexpected aspects of lived experience can also be read in relation to wider impulses in Lessing’s work, which often employs realist modes of description and representation at the same time as experimental textual forms. A significant example of this is *The Golden Notebook*, where formal experimentation reveals the complicated subjective experiences of a woman approaching middle age.

The narrative of ageing as decline – a narrative that ‘Old’ interrogates – is articulated in texts such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse* (1970, translated as *The Coming of Age*) and has been confirmed and reinforced by subsequent stereotypes and tropes.² Diana Wallace summarises Beauvoir thus: ‘The old woman is doubly Othered by gender and age’.³ However, supposedly opposite ‘optimistic’ narratives of ageing can be equally problematic because, as Roberta Rubenstein points out, for women these are too often bound up with ‘romance’.⁴ This double bind means that while subsequent feminist responses to Beauvoir have moved discussions of female ageing on, ‘it is not yet clear whether contemporary feminist authors of fiction and theory have ‘named’ the problem in ways that might enable women to imagine alternatives to culturally embedded scripts’.⁵ Thus, while the wider challenge of age studies is to expose the inadequacy and paucity of such scripts, once these have been acknowledged, questions of gender and the possibility for alternative narratives come to the fore. The field of age studies, which includes scholars from a wide range of disciplines – social and natural sciences, cultural studies and philosophy – has often turned to literature for representations and narratives of ageing, as well as for thinking about alternative possibilities.⁶ Within this wide-ranging work, some attention has been paid to Lessing.⁷ Much of this, however, focus on content rather than form. In a comment reminiscent of her 1970 prologue to *The Golden Notebook* ‘Lessing herself remarked that ‘the immediate subject of *Love, Again*, love in old age, was surprising and shocking, and the fact that the novel has a rather complicated structure was hardly noticed’.⁸

This article attends to how Lessing utilises narrative structure and technique to challenge stereotypes of female ageing.⁹ I ask: what are the chronologies, forms, devices and narrative perspectives of Lessing’s writing of age in her novels? How does Lessing’s private correspondence complicate and add to our appreciation of ageing in her fiction? To answer these questions, I show how Lessing plays with structure, form and perspective in *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *Love, Again* (1995),¹⁰ as well as in her 1990s and 2000s correspondence with Muriel Spark, a collection of materials that includes lively and forthright discussion of ageing and that has so far received scant attention from critics.¹¹

Lessing’s ‘Late Style’

Certainly, by the time of the publication of *The Diary* in 1983 (originally published under the pseudonym of Jane Somers), if not before, Lessing was highly aware and critical of ageism in the publishing industry and

beyond. *The Diary* is written from the perspective of middle-aged glossy magazine editor Janna and her unlikely friendship with a woman in her 90s, Maudie Fowler, who lives in poverty in a basement bedsit in London. While there has been much focus on the book's 'provocative treatment of aging, gender and the body', less attention has been given to how the 'hoax' of the pseudonymous publication raised specific questions about connections between the insidious presence of ageism and sexism in the publishing industry, the subject matter of the book, and Lessing's own position by that time as a writer in her 60s.¹² Several critics note that publishers rejected the book because it was 'too depressing' to publish: the book focuses on ageing, the experiences of the very aged and Maudie's poverty, illness and death. As with *Love, Again*, the subject matter of *The Diary* left the 'generic and formal complexity that masquerades as naïve realism' much overlooked.¹³ In fact, as I argue below, the generic and formal complexity of *The Summer*, *The Diary* and *Love, Again* is absolutely key to Lessing's critique of (gendered) ageism. Thus, I consider the novels' textual forms, motifs, structures and narrative perspectives to show how Lessing uses these both to invoke and to resist dominant narratives of women's ageing.

Both *The Summer* and *Love, Again* are written from a third-person perspective, but in both this is limited and disrupted, and narrative distance shifts and varies. Here, Lessing's 'purposeful fluctuations in narrative mode dramatize issues of focus and perception and force the reader to engage with the question of how things are seen and told'.¹⁴ This is in evidence from the first page of *The Summer* which begins with a distanced view of its protagonist, Kate, who is as yet unnamed:

A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting. Thinking? She would not have said so. She was trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time now she had been 'trying on' ideas like so many dresses off a rack. She was letting words and phrases as worn as nursery rhymes slide around her tongue: for towards the crucial experiences custom allots certain attitudes, and they are pretty stereotyped. *Ah yes, first love! ... Growing up is bound to be painful! ... My first child, you know ... But I was in love! ... Marriage is a compromise ... I am not as young as I once was.*¹⁵

Towards the bottom of the same page we have again, 'A woman stood on her back doorstep, arms folded, waiting for a kettle to boil'.¹⁶ This indefinite, distanced, exterior and 'objective' narrative perspective is used frequently throughout the first five to six pages, reappears many times

throughout the book, shifting and interrupting a perspective which otherwise tracks very closely to Kate's, and is often partial and limited by free indirect style. Indeed, even in the opening passage above it is not clear who the "Thinking?" question belongs to, whether the woman/Kate, or the narrator; or who thinks or says "trying on' ideas like so many dresses off a rack'. The ironic position of the distanced narrator is mirrored by an ironic downplaying of the book's plot and narrative trajectory – 'simply, she grew old'.¹⁷ The phrases (quoted above) in italics are clichés around love and marriage of which Kate is becoming ironically sceptical: later in the novel Kate Brown will 'try on' and perform different ages and versions of femininity.¹⁸ Kate's 'trying to catch hold of something' with the desire to 'lay it bare', to 'look and define', is similar to the ideas from 'Old' discussed above, where Lessing expresses an intention to dissolve away the 'screen or gauze' around ageing. In both *The Summer* and 'Old' there is a focus on, first, the deceptive and highly conventionalised language used to describe female ageing, and second, the desire to inhabit and move beyond existing clichéd phrases.

The opening to *Love, Again* – Lessing's exploration of love in old age – evidences similar techniques. We first encounter the novel's protagonist, Sarah, as a nameless 'woman':

The woman next door was energetically attending to something: objects were being moved about. Then she reappeared and stood looking in at the room.

Not a young woman, as it had been easy to imagine from the vigour of her movements when still half seen in the shadows. A woman of a certain age, as the French put it, or even a bit older, and not dressed to present herself, but wearing old trousers and shirt.¹⁹

Unlike Kate Brown, who begins *The Summer* as a housewife waiting for the kettle to boil, this woman, Sarah Durham, is a producer and playwright, a working, 'modern woman' who sits down to a word processor in her own flat.²⁰ However, Sarah is similarly introduced from a distanced perspective – first described as 'someone [...] It was a woman' only 'half seen in the shadows' – and in the opening sentence of the quotation above she is out of sight, in another room.²¹ Similarly too, *Love, Again* begins with the explicit inclusion of stereotypes of women's ageing: here a memoir of 'a society woman once known for her beauty, written in old age and published when she was nearly a hundred' lies open next to the word processor. The passage from the memoir which catches Sarah's eye begins 'Growing old gracefully'; 'the way has been

signposted' thinks Sarah, 'One might say the instructions are in an invisible script'.²² Some readers of *Love, Again*, such as Lynne Segal in her memoir *Out of Time*, read the novel as a realist, chronological text which reinforces cultural narratives of ageing as decline; a pessimistic warning against sexual passion in later life.²³ I argue, however, that *Love, Again* is not linear or realist but anachronistic, self-conscious and metafictional. In addition, the ironic effects of the distanced narrative perspective and inclusion of cultural stereotypes, together with the novel's play with form and perspective – including diary entries, letters, songs and lines from the play – in fact works to resist, and to offer possibilities for, reimagining and rewriting, cultural scripts.²⁴ Such a reading is corroborated by Lessing's play with narrative mode and perspective, which not only has the effect of distancing the reader from narrative events but also of creating an ironic perspective from which Sarah (and Kate in *The Summer*, for that matter) is able to view herself.

A further distancing and framing device, used in all three novels, is that of the mirror: 'a leitmotif in fictions of ageing'.²⁵ Segal's reading of *Love, Again* (and of what she claims as Lessing's wider feelings about ageing) focuses on pessimism and decline in terms of a clash – a 'problem' – between the sense of an 'unchanging inner core' and the outer evidence of the ageing body in the mirror.²⁶ However, what Segal misses is the deliberately ambivalent function of the mirror in Lessing's writing of ageing women. We might similarly misread 'Old' when Lessing remarks: 'Is it not a surprise to look in the mirrors and think: Who's that old woman?'²⁷ This could be read to suggest feelings of alienation and tension – an unpleasant 'surprise' similar to the supposedly 'surprising and shocking', 'depressing' subject matter of *Love, Again* and *The Diary* – between the ageing outer self reflected in the mirror and an unchanging inner self. Indeed, as cited in my epigraph, Lessing also writes that 'inside this fluidity a permanence, for the person who looks at the old face in the mirror is the same as the one who shares your earliest memories [...] 'Here I still am: I haven't changed at all''.²⁸ What interests me here is the shift in perspective from the distancing (and ironic?) effect of 'the person' and 'the old face' in the mirror, to the first-person declaration of continuity. In my reading, Lessing is not so much claiming that either is the 'true' self, but she is instead expressing 'delightful surprise' at the incongruous copresence of the two as an example of how 'Time becomes fluid'.²⁹ In this way, Lessing's use of the mirror in 'Old' works to disrupt chronology and refuse synthesis: similarly, in Lessing's fictions of ageing, the mirror functions as an ambivalent device which, precisely because of the several selves the mirror holds in play at once, works to create ironic distance and to refuse a chronology of decline.

This effect can be seen by comparing how the mirror is used at the end of both *The Summer* and *Love, Again*. In *The Summer*, Kate's changing perception of her outer body, and her growing awareness of how this is bound up with ageist and gendered expectations of the maintenance of that body, is bound up with her hair. Early in the novel the narrator remarks: 'Her hair – and now we reach the place where most energy had gone into choice – was done in soft waves around a face where a few freckles had been allowed to remain [...] The hair was reddish – not dramatically so'.³⁰ Every aspect of Kate's appearance is carefully and discreetly managed and controlled, but her hair in particular signifies this. At the end of the novel, it is Kate's hair that demonstrates the significance and extent of her transformation – a transformation deliberately and brilliantly underplayed at the start with the phrase 'simply, she grew old'.³¹ Just before she returns to her family home, Kate sees herself reflected in shop windows, 'her body was back in recognizable shape. Her face had aged. Noticeably [...] Her hair – well, no one could overlook that!'³² Kate's decision to return 'with her hair undressed, with her hair tied straight back for utility; rough and streaky, and the widening grey band showing like a statement of intent' is the outward sign of her rebellion against the cultural expectations that, as a woman, she will manage and cover up signs of ageing.³³

Here, Lessing rejects the notion of the shock or upset of the ageing outer body reflected in the mirror (or window) compared to an unchanging inner core: Kate deliberately changes her outward appearance to signify her inner change. She is not alienated from her ageing body but instead accepts and realises its signifying power. It is significant that, in this novel, Lessing uses the distancing effect of Kate's reflection as the moment that the insidiously ageist and gendered cultural scripts that she has been caught up in – those stereotypes playfully reeled off on the novel's opening page – are most starkly revealed.

Kate stood in front of the long mirror looking at the slim decorative woman [...] and flung off the dress, put on one of those that folded and sagged, shook her hair out, and walked out into the evening. And again she might have been invisible.³⁴

Lessing stages the moment when Kate becomes insistently aware of what effects the difference between her cultural visibility and invisibility as one that unfolds in front of the mirror. Indeed, throughout that afternoon, Kate changes into 'Mrs Brown' and back again, seeing herself from the outside and observing how others see her. This works to refuse the notion that the mirror shows an essential 'true' self, or an outer body

that is incongruous with the inner; instead the mirror enables Lessing to stage and make explicit the performativity of the self.³⁵

In *Love, Again* it is also a mirror which shows Sarah and the reader that, across the course of this novel (as in *The Summer*), its protagonist has aged:

Sarah is looking into her mirror, just as on the evening when we first saw her. At first glance she has not much changed, but a closer look says otherwise. She has aged by ten years. For one thing her hair, which for so long remained like a smooth dulled metal, now has grey bands across the front. She has acquired that slow cautious look of the elderly, as if afraid of what they will see around the next corner.³⁶

My suggestion is that what might seem a rather bleak image of ageing – and the description of Sarah's hair here is notable, which unlike Kate's mark of defiance and refusal instead reveals a more unconscious ageing process – is characteristically made ambivalent by remarks further on in the same paragraph: 'Sarah has changed, and so have the rooms she lives in [...] What had seemed so difficult for years became easy. In came the painters, and soon her walls blazed white.'³⁷ Despite the pessimistic description of ageing offered by the mirror image, Sarah's ageing energises as much as constricts her – like Lessing's 'fresh liveliness of experiencing' – enabling a clearing of the material clutter and accumulations of her past and a transformation of her living space which seemed impossible at the novel's start, despite the 'vitality' of the 'handsome apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body' that Sarah's two mirrors seemed to reveal.³⁸ Thus in both *The Summer* and *Love, Again*, ageing in some ways liberates Kate and Sarah, and my suggestion is that Lessing uses the device of the mirror to reveal this.

The disruptive effects of Lessing's use of ironic narrative perspective and the mirror are also present in *The Diary*. For much of this novel, Janna is like the early version of Kate in *The Summer*. Her bathing and self-care routine, her beautiful, expensive and bespoke clothing, are seen by Janna as necessary – in the face of Maudie's dying she realises that these act as 'my medicine and my oblivion'.³⁹ While still working full time and regularly visiting Maudie (first at home and then in hospital), however, Janna finds herself less and less able to attend to her clothing and appearance. When she goes part time, Janna 'looked forward, now I have more time, to getting my clothes up to the mark'; however when she 'stood in front of the glass in my best suit', Janna realises that 'the problem is, if I have the time now for my style, I do

not have the inclination.⁴⁰ Despite her horror of the ‘trap’ and ‘tired slovenliness’ of old age – ‘after all, I am in my fifties, hardly time to abdicate’, she quips – Janna increasingly neglects her previous immersion in and care for immaculate style and appearance.⁴¹

The textual form of *The Diary* particularly reveals how Lessing uses narrative forms and techniques to create new perspectives and perceptions and resist cultural narratives of ageing. As the examples above demonstrate, Janna’s first-person diary charts her changing and ambivalent attitudes towards ageing. Janna’s depiction of her own experience of ageing, which moves between intimacy and distance, is always, however, in dialogue with her observations of, increasing entanglement with and imaginative inhabiting of, Maudie’s agedness. This creates a continual interplay between intimacy and distance, and the effect is that in *The Diary* Janna’s narration of ageing is always *relational*; Janna’s narrative perspective and experiences of ageing are always outside of Maudie’s experience of agedness and dying and yet in relation to it. This relational aspect of *The Diary* – the play with distance and intimacy that this creates, and the resulting ambivalence of the relationship between Janna and Maudie – is central for thinking about the complexity of Lessing’s writing of ageing in this novel. Details such as Janna’s frank descriptions of her repulsion at Maudie’s living conditions, her initial description of Maudie as ‘an old witch’, ‘a tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin’, can make it hard for the reader to ascertain whether the text is resisting or perpetuating problematic and ageist stereotypes.⁴² While some critics offer a generous reading of Janna’s commitment to Maudie, others read their relationship with far more caution, contending that Janna uses Maudie to deflect focus away from her own ageing body.⁴³ It is certainly significant that Maudie is only ever ‘described’ from Janna’s perspective. In this, Janna’s (and the reader’s) simultaneous attempt and failure to ‘imaginatively inhabit’ Maudie’s perspective interrogates the very possibility of describing ageing from the outside – as Lessing puts it, ‘not ever predicted nor, I think, described’ – and reinforces the central role of form in Lessing’s novels on ageing.⁴⁴

Although the day-by-day aspect of a diary could result in a reinforcement of linear chronology, the episodic sections of Janna’s diary instead work to resist a clear sense of time and progression. In particular, when Janna records Maudie’s memory narratives with titles such as ‘A Happiness’ or ‘Maudie’s Very Bad Time’, the effect enables time to ‘become fluid’ because the episodes are narrated in such a way that disrupts – is disinterested in, even – the chronology and timing of the events that are recounted. This is especially the case with Maudie’s narration of

her childhood and earlier life. Janna's initial response to such memories is to try to ascertain where and when the events happened, until she realises that this is not the point at all:

'How old were you, on the swing, Mrs Fowler?'

'Oh, I must have been five, six. ... '

None of it adds up [...] I ask, but she doesn't like to have a progression made, her mind has bright pictures in it that she has painted for herself and has been dwelling on for all those decades.⁴⁵

Maudie's narratives refuse linear time: Janna cannot insert Maudie into linearity, not only because the fragments and inconsistencies in her memory narratives contradict attempts to build a chronology, but because 'progression' is not the point. The slippery and disruptive effects of this, in terms of attempts to tell a life, perhaps explains why Janna later writes 'Maudie's relentless life' up as a 'gallantly light-hearted' escapist historical fiction titled *Milliners* rather than as serious biography or history.⁴⁶ So, one way that ageing can transform narrative structure – and this is certainly evidenced in the episodic form of Maudie's memory narratives – is in terms of a perception of time that is 'fluid': 'simultaneous rather than sequential and [...] antilinear'.⁴⁷ Despite the unflinching depiction of Maudie's poverty and ailing physical body in the descriptive content of the novel, the simultaneity of the episodic diary form works to resist linear narratives of decline. Thus, Lessing's late style, as deliberately anachronistic and as working to refuse synthesis, is a good illustration of where the so-called 'depressing' content of Lessing's writing of ageing is juxtaposed with, and therefore disrupted by, a complex narrative perspective and playful structure.⁴⁸

'No Hip Muffs'

In Lessing's correspondence with Muriel Spark (mostly written between 1996 and 2006), the two novelists negotiate and construct their identities as ageing women writers by using similar techniques to those used in Lessing's fiction, such as ironic distance and episodic form. Unlike the ambivalent dialogue created in *The Diary*, between Janna's perspective and Maudie's agedness, the correspondence between Lessing and Spark constructs a dialogue born out of shared experience. Given this, we might expect the correspondence to communicate what ageing *feels* like, whereas *The Diary* – as well as in *The Summer* and *Love, Again*, as demonstrated by the significance of the mirror device – is primarily

concerned with what ageing *looks* like. However, the correspondence between Lessing and Spark remains preoccupied with what ageing looks like, focussing on how the female experience of ageing involves a tension between the demands of the ageing body, at the same time as the continuing demands on women of the external gaze – the expectation to look good on television, and to maintain a slim figure, for example. In this way, Lessing's correspondence with Spark is a particularly historically charged and gendered one, in terms of how it exposes women's experience of being simultaneously – and especially so where the question of ageing is concerned – both physical body and spectacle.

In their correspondence – as with Lessing's novels – Lessing and Spark are preoccupied by their ageing bodies, and they employ ironic distance to imagine and critique how ageing female bodies are stereotyped and viewed. The correspondence contains a litany of ailments: Lessing is diagnosed with osteoporosis; Spark has shingles; Lessing has a fall; Spark fractures her spine; Lessing has lumbago; Spark has pleurisy; Lessing suffers from a mini-stroke; Spark's sight is failing; Lessing has pneumonia; Spark has a fallen bladder; Lessing has, as she puts it, 'what they called gastroenteritis but what we call the shits'.⁴⁹ 'Everyone I know seems to be ill', Lessing writes. 'Is that a definition of being old? I simply cannot believe that once so long ago I was so carelessly healthy.'⁵⁰ In another: 'I hope you are well, Muriel', Lessing writes, 'That is really the only question. [...] I am experiencing various symptoms of old age. Like – but how boring it all is, the carcass.'⁵¹ The cumulative effect of their correspondence is to insist that the ageing and ailing body demands attention and cannot be ignored. Given this, we might be tempted to read the correspondence as reinforcing cultural narratives of ageing as decline. However, Lessing and Spark are keenly aware of how the ageing body is constructed as a problem, and the cumulative effect of the dialogic form and ironic tone of their writing resists more than reiterates such a position. Of course, the reality of the difficulties of the ageing body is significant – and we might be reminded of the relentless demands of the soiled and abject body in Janna's imagining of 'Maudie's day' here⁵² – but so too is the humour which disrupts and critiques the reductive focus on ageing solely as decline. In this way, the distanced ironic tone – and indeed the fragmented and episodic form – of the correspondence works in a similar way to the episodic form in *The Diary* in the desire to disrupt chronology and to utilise the mode of the writing in order to disrupt chronology and create a complex and ambivalent picture of ageing.

In particular, the correspondence focuses on the gendered nature of ageist scripts and the continuing demands on women of the external gaze. In the examples below, the interplay of dialogic sympathy and ironic distancing has the effect of expressing both humour and ambivalence about the ageing female body. The complexity of how ageing is written in terms of form, perspective and content works to complicate and refuse notions of ageing as decline:

I have been diagnosed with 'advanced' osteoporosis. When you see that written down, it strikes fear into the heart. But then appears the comedy. The specialist, without any sense that she remembers she is a woman, says we should wear hip muffs. Rather like a Vivienne Westwood fantasy I suppose. I said to her, But you know no woman would ever wear hip muffs. She then. 'But my dear ... 'At your age ...' No hip muffs.⁵³

Humour, critique and pathos are at play here: the 'comedy' of the situation is overtly named as such. Lessing's mention of Vivienne Westwood wittily frames the 'hip muffs' as a fashionable, desirable 'feminine' accessory. The 'specialist', in Lessing's terms, has no sense 'that she remembers she is a woman', and Lessing herself is seen as having outlived her feminine identity; she is instead a thing, a 'carcass' with hip muffs. The shock of the diagnosis is enhanced by the absence of empathy: at the same time, the 'humour' of the situation comes from the distanced perspective as well as the notion of femininity as a performance, bound up with clothes and fashion. In a later fax Lessing writes:

You do have the most diabolical luck. If you had a cancer then you should be thin, like Bette Davis when clearly she had a twenty inch waist. Perhaps that is another myth. All last summer I was afflicted with various bugs and beasties, there was a doctor, who I maintain was hysterical, and obsessed, was sure I had cancer because I had lost weight. The reason for that was that I hadn't eaten anything due to one of the bugs removing my ordinary sense of taste, so that every mouthful was so strong I couldn't bear to put anything in my mouth. This particular symptom is not in their list of symptoms and no doctor believed me.⁵⁴

The notion of a female desire for film-star thinness is darkly ironic here – that cancer might be OK if it means the body of Bette Davis. Playfulness is also present in the inversion whereby Lessing says that the doctor was hysterical, deploying a gendered trope in order to mock the

doctor's inadequacy. The fact that Lessing's own sense of the reason for her thinness is actually correct but dismissed because it is not in 'their list of symptoms', shores up the suspicion that one's authority and sense of what's going on might no longer be seen as useful or valid and might be questioned and dismissed because of age: at the same time, the wit, confidence and complexity of the writing rejects and refuses such assumptions. In addition, Lessing again articulates femininity as a performance, as something tried on or worn 'like so many dresses of a rack', to borrow the term from the opening passage of *The Summer*.⁵⁵ This calls into question the extent to which, in their correspondence, Lessing and Spark are themselves knowingly 'performing' their identities as old ladies. There is a sort of performative naughtiness here, alongside a rebellion against that fact that their bodies are increasingly being exposed both on television and to doctors, for example: their humorous and ironic exchange is more politically charged than it perhaps at first appears.

The correspondence between Lessing and Spark thus significantly adds to our appreciation of the complex and multiple view of ageing put forward in Lessing's late style in her fiction. Reading these texts together, as I have shown, facilitates a sustained consideration of how, when imagining as well as experiencing ageing and old age, Lessing uses ironic distance, humour and play – with form, structure, perspective and technique – as a mode through which to complicate and resist cultural norms and clichés. In particular, the gendered nature of ageing in both the novels and correspondence, and in Lessing's essay 'Old', lies in the extent to which ageing women continue to be subjected to the gaze or the mirror. The particular dialogic form of the correspondence, however, is distinct from the range of forms and structures that Lessing uses to resist stereotypes of ageing in her novels. Archive correspondence – and the letters and faxes between Lessing and Spark are no exception – is often partial and incomplete because of how correspondence materials are separately housed in each recipients' archive, and reading between items of correspondence is always a process of negotiation and ambivalence.⁵⁶ And, although Lessing creates in some ways a similar ambivalence and instability in *The Diary*, for example, where the form is dialogic in terms of Janna's attempts to imagine Maudie's ageing, the correspondence between Lessing and Spark narrates a shared experience of ageing not found in the fiction. Lessing's free indirect-narrative perspectives in *The Summer* and *Love, Again*, and Janna's first person in *The Diary*, are all positioned sometimes close to but always outside of the experiences of ageing, particularly that of abject old age. In contrast, the cocreated text of Lessing and Spark's correspondence is located within shared experience, able to express the 'delightful surprises'

and 'liveliness of experiencing' of ageing in a manner which Lessing never quite predicts or describes in her fiction. Yes, like Lessing's fiction, the correspondence disrupts chronology, is episodic and ironically distanced; it is also, however, born out of mutual experience and sympathy and created through negotiation. In this way, I suggest, while Lessing's novels employ a range of fictional forms to interrogate and expose the inadequacy and paucity of gendered cultural scripts of ageing, the correspondence begins to offer an alternative and more constructive – although not always positive – and even more politically charged depiction and understanding of the ageing female body.

Notes

- 1 Doris Lessing, 'Old', *Time Bites* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p.216.
- 2 For Helen Small's useful summary of Beauvoir's pessimism, and her argument for the continuing relevance of *The Coming of Age*, see introduction to *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.11-15.
- 3 Diana Wallace, 'Women's Time': Women, Age, and Intergenerational Relations in Doris Lessing's The Diaries of Jane Somers', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Georgia State University, 39.2, Fall 2006, p.43.
- 4 Roberta Rubenstein, 'Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, University of Nebraska Press, Volume 22, Number 2, 2001, pp. 1-19, p.3.
- 5 Rubenstein, p.3. Similarly, Wallace remarks that 'Even within feminism ageism has proven difficult to confront.' 'Women's Time', p.43.
- 6 A prominent figure in the field, Margaret Gullette, has used the term 'age studies' since as early as 1993, as she notes in *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.202, n.21. Nick Hubble and Philip Tew's recent *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) considers life-narratives, memoir and fiction as a way of understanding and interrogating dominant narratives of ageing. This book and, for example, Gullette's *Aged by Culture* and Small's *The Long Life*, are both hopeful and cautious about the possibilities of literature for rethinking such stereotypes. Gullette points out the risks of the realist 'Bildungsroman' and articulates the need for different kinds of form and perspective for reimagining cultural narratives of ageing; see *Aged by Culture* pp.64-67 and p.157 in particular.
- 7 For example: Maricel Oró-Piqueras, 'Narrating ageing: Deconstructing negative conceptions of old age in four contemporary English novels', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27 (2013), pp. 47-51; see also Oró-Piqueras, 'The 'Dys-Appearing' Body in Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and Margaret Forster's *Have the Men Had Enough?*', *Societies* 2012, 2, pp.270-285; Sima Aghazadeh, 'Ageism and Gender Performativity in *The Summer Before the Dark*', *Doris Lessing Studies*, Vol.34, 2016. See also the 2004 special issue of *Doris Lessing Studies*, 'Coming to Age'. Literary scholarship considering Lessing's writing of ageing include books such as *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman*

- in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Writers*, ed. Phyllis Perrakis, and Zoe Brennan's *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*.
- 8 Susan Watkins, "Summoning Your Youth at Will': Memory, Time, and Aging in the Work of Penelope Lively, Margaret Atwood, and Doris Lessing', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, University of Nebraska Press, Volume 34, Number 2, 2013, pp. 222-244, p.238.
 - 9 In this, my comparative work across several of Lessing's texts extends Watkins's claim that in *Love, Again*, Lessing: 'takes the aging process as a challenge to be addressed in new narrative structures and techniques.' 'Summoning Your Youth at Will', p.225.
 - 10 Subsequently referred to as *The Summer*, *The Diary*, and *Love, Again*.
 - 11 Lessing's archive is held in the British Archive of Contemporary Writing at the University of East Anglia; Spark's archive is at the National Library of Scotland.
 - 12 For Wallace, both novels of *The Diaries of Jane Somers* were 'taboo breaking' in their depiction of old age, 'Women's Time', p.44.
 - 13 Watkins, 'Summoning Your Youth at Will', p.238; Watkins, *Doris Lessing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp.96-97, pp.109-110.
 - 14 Watkins, 'Summoning Your Youth at Will', p.231.
 - 15 Lessing, *The Summer Before the Dark* (London: Paladian Books, 1990), p.5.
 - 16 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.5.
 - 17 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.9.
 - 18 Aghazadeh's article, 'Ageism and Gender Performativity', excellently articulates how, in Kate's 'trying on', the novel subverts notions of the 'naturalness' of both ageing and gender.
 - 19 Lessing, *Love, Again* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.1.
 - 20 Lessing, *Love, Again*, p.2.
 - 21 Lessing, *Love, Again*, p.1.
 - 22 Lessing, *Love, Again*, pp.3-4. Rubenstein discusses how the narrative of *Love, Again* is haunted by literary 'scripts' such as 'shadows of *The Waste Land* and of the loveless, emotionally stranded J. Alfred Prufrock [which] insinuate a narrative of physical deterioration and decline', 'Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age', p.6.
 - 23 See Segal, *Out of Time*, pp.107-111.
 - 24 My reading chimes with Rubenstein's claim that the 'imaginative explorations of deeply imbedded, and conflicting, cultural scripts associated with desire and decline' in *Love, Again* 'enable[s] us to imagine women's capacity for emotional renewal and growth during and beyond midlife'. 'Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age', p.15.
 - 25 Brennan points out that, of course, the mirror image – the wrinkles and age spots of the outer body – neglects the fact that the inner body's health is key; Maudie's battle with cancer in *The Diary* is her example, *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*. see; p.202, p.82, p.119.
 - 26 Segal, *Out of Time*, pp.110-111
 - 27 Lessing, 'Old', p.215
 - 28 Lessing, 'Old', p.216
 - 29 Lessing, 'Old', p.216
 - 30 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.11
 - 31 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.9

- 32 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.232
- 33 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.233
- 34 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.178
- 35 For a fuller exposition of this, again see Aghazadeh's 'Ageism and Gender Performativity'.
- 36 Lessing, *Love, Again*, p.337
- 37 Lessing, *Love, Again*, p.337
- 38 Lessing, *Love, Again*, p.6
- 39 Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p.224.
- 40 Lessing, *The Diary*, p.217.
- 41 Lessing, *The Diary*, p.217.
- 42 Lessing, *The Diary*, p.12
- 43 See, for example, Oró-Piqueras, 'The 'Dys-Appearing' Body', and Kortney Stern Mills, 'Becoming Jane Somers: Constructing Authorship, Genre, and Age in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*' *Doris Lessing Studies*, Vol.34, 2016. Though Mills's caution is useful, there is a tendency to read Janna as if 'real', by critiquing her motivations and choice of narrative tense, for example.
- 44 Wallace, 'Women's Time', pp.56-57.
- 45 Lessing, *The Diary*, p.29
- 46 Lessing, *The Diary*, p.244; see also Wallace, p.57
- 47 Watkins, p.224
- 48 My discussion of Lessing's 'Late Style' extends Watkins' use of the term in 'Summoning Your Youth at Will' pp.223-227.
- 49 Lessing to Spark 24th August 2005. Accession 13,508 box 78. Please note: all references to the Spark accessions 11621, 11344, 11870, 12082, and 13508 held at the National Library of Scotland may be subject to change as these are currently in an interim arrangement while being listed.
- 50 Lessing to Spark, 3rd May 2003. Accession 13,508 box 78
- 51 Lessing to Spark 22nd Feb 2005. Accession 13,508 box 34
- 52 Lessing, *The Diary*, pp.113-122.
- 53 Lessing to Spark, dated by hand 20.11.01, possibly Accession 13,508 box 78
- 54 Lessing to Spark, 15th Jan 2006, Accession 13,508 box 78
- 55 Lessing, *The Summer*, p.5.
- 56 For example, the Lessing letters and faxes cited here are all held in Spark's archive.