

DISPLACEMENT IN DORIS LESSING'S "THE OLD CHIEF MSHLANGA": A SETTLER POSTCOLONIAL *BILDUNG*

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- **ABSTRACT:** “The Old Chief Mshlanga” is one of the best-known and most frequently anthologized narratives from Doris Lessing’s 1965 *African Stories*, a collection that explores, among other themes, the small and large cruelties of racism and segregation on white-settler Southern Rhodesian farms, where the author spent her childhood and part of her adolescence. The plot of “The Old Chief Mshlanga” can be associated with two well-known literary cornerstones: the long-established tradition of the *bildung*, and the highly politicized critical approach to a particular type of colonialism that has been termed “settler postcolonialism”. This article explores the fact that this blend of “coming of age” story and denunciation of the injustices of white-settler hegemony provides fruitful ground for the exploration of several topics of concern for settler postcolonial studies, particularly different implications of the crucial issues of place and displacement, both for the white-settler protagonist and the African characters in the story.
- **KEYWORDS:** Settler postcolonialism; *Bildung*; Displacement; “The Old Chief Mshlanga”.

A *bildung* in the contact zone

Doris Lessing’s dissent and fierce commitment to her principles were the hallmarks of her prolific life and career. Lessing – who died in 2013 at the age of 94, leaving more than thirty published books – was a child of British colonial diaspora, having spent her life in Iran, Southern Rhodesia (from 1979 on called Zimbabwe), South Africa (if only for a short time) and England. The first volume of her autobiography *Under My Skin* reveals her constant determination for independent thought and action, a movement that started in her childhood.

An avid reader and feeling “homesick”, “miserable” and an “exile” (LESSING, 2013, p. 128 and p. 165) at boarding school in Salisbury (today Harare), the fourteen-year-old dropped out of school to be able to work on her self-education, which she did for the rest of her life. Not too long after that, critical of her mother’s oppression and racist principles, or “the desperation of the white missus, whose idea of herself, her family, depended on

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[British] middle-class standards” (LESSING, 2013, p. 108), she left her parents’ Southern Rhodesian maize farm to fend for herself as a governess and a secretary. She was only 15 when she had her first story accepted for publication and, eventually, after moving to London, she would manage to make a living mostly from writing.

She became a defender of communism and a celebrated member of the communist movement, as well as, later in life, an infamous dissident of the cause. For her anti-apartheid and harsh criticism of racism and segregation, she was, at certain stage, declared *persona non grata* both in South Africa and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. In 2007 Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature, for being “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny” (WOREK, 2013, p. 730). Until the moment of her death Lessing made a point of sustaining her own opinions, notwithstanding how unexpected and out of the well-trodden paths they were, and often casting disparaging remarks towards critics and journalists who attempted to comment on and interpret her work and ideas.

In her characteristic dismissive (and often angry) tone, Lessing (2013, p. 166) affirmed that *Under My Skin* does not “propose to elaborate on white settler attitudes” as “there’s nothing new to say about them”. However, the critique of the particular type of racism, segregation, alienation and displacement caused by settler colonialism is clearly visible, if dispersed, along her autobiography. A parallel reading of *Under My skin* and *African Stories* reveals, in several instances, the presence of biographical details in Lessing’s short fiction.

Significantly for this article, several details found in Lessing’s own accounts of her childhood and teenage years touch on the trajectory of the main character in “The Old Chief Mshlanga”. The protagonist of the story is also a white girl growing up on her family’s Rhodesian farm, who, as a teenager, starts to dwell on the legitimacy of her own privileges, based both on her own experiences and on her readings. In literary circles, this type of story depicting the character’s growth from naivety to awareness is known as *bildung*. Derived from the German term for “education”, and highly influenced by the German enlightenment era, the theories around the *bildung* discuss the transformative processes that an individual must go through in order to develop his/her own sense of humanity, social responsibility, ethics or justice.

In his influential work on the *bildungsroman*, Franco Moretti (1987) calls attention to the rise of the novel at the end of the 18th century as the moment in which literary heroes cease to be exclusively adult and mature figures, although they continue being predominantly male. This is the occasion in the history of literature in which youth transitions from a mere biological stage of life to a new symbolic paradigm. Moretti identifies in this plot shift two main characteristics that would be desirable in a Modern, capitalistic setting: “mobility” – the young protagonist’s resolute movement away from parental ways (before that, sons were expected to follow their father’s path in life, including his professional call) – and “interiority”, which translates into the protagonist’s emotional restlessness and dissatisfaction (MORETTI, 1987, p. 3-4). *Bildung* fiction reflects the instability and revolutionary status of Modernity, with its “great expectations and lost illusions” (MORETTI, 1987, p. 5).

The transition from the biological to the symbolic is also the realm of psychology and cultural anthropology: “The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult”, claims Eric Erikson (1993, p. 263), whose theories on the psychosocial aspects of human development are a reference in the field. He calls attention to the special appeal that ethics has to the adolescent, whose “ideological mind” is constantly attempting to determine “what is evil, uncanny, and inimical.” In ideological terms, adolescence can consist of a conflict between the passivity and indifference that can overcome young people and being able to believe “that those who succeed in their anticipated adult world thereby shoulder the obligation of being the best” (ERIKSON, 1993, p. 263). One of the challenges of navigating adolescence would consist in finding a middle-ground between cynicism and idealism.

In a 20th century postcolonial and gender-conscious setting, it is relevant that Lessing’s *bildung* should follow the trajectory of a female protagonist from childhood to adolescence, moving away from alienation and towards accountability and that this should happen in the “contact zone” between British settlers and indigenous people in Southern Rhodesia. “Contact zone” is a useful postcolonial concept to be considered for the analysis of “The Old Chief Mshlanga”. According to Mary Louise Pratt (1992), who created the term in the 1990s, contact zones are spaces where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths, as they are lived out across the globe today” (PRATT, 1992, p. 4).

Such asymmetrical power relations are implicit in the characterization of the protagonist along the story in her relationship with the Rhodesian servants: “The child was taught to take [the African people] for granted: the servants in the house would come running a hundred yards to pick up a book if she dropped it. She was called “Nkosikaas” – Chieftainess, even by the black children her own age” (LESSING, 2014, p. 48). There is no mention of the protagonist’s name. However, she is repeatedly referred to by combinations of expressions that indicate her high-power status on the farm, despite her petite stature: “little nkosikaas” (LESSING, 2014, p. 50 and p. 56); “small white nkosikaas” (LESSING, 2014, p. 55); “the child of Nkosi Jordan” (LESSING, 2014, p. 55).

Lessing’s plot displays the “clashing and grappling” of cultures in the contact zone that correspond, in historical terms, to the regulatory period for racial segregation in Southern Rhodesia. Although the Afrikaans denomination *apartheid* (meaning “separateness”) was not officially adopted to refer to discriminatory practices in Rhodesia, many critics consider that an *apartheid* set of values was effective in the country (AUSTIN, 1975, p.10). In Carole Klein’s summary of the period, the white settlers’ aim at economic and social supremacy in Southern Rhodesia at the time was

[...] to establish the optimal amount of racial segregation between black workers and white employers, and to have each race restricted to a specific geographic area. Of course, from the country’s beginnings under Cecil Rhodes, there had

always been a geographic separation between white and black. But it was not enforced by law until the Land Apportionment Act, celebrated as the “White Man’s *Magna Carta*”, was issued in 1930. Despite the fact that whites constituted only about 5% of the population, they dominated the country. The right to vote was related to property ownership and consequently nearly all the Africans were locked out of any chance to use voting as a way of changing their lives for the better. They were also blocked from most union jobs, commercial transactions or access to public places like restaurants or hotels. Many restrictions against black Africans were characterized by a single term: “the colour bar”. In 1939 when Doris Lessing was 20 years old and becoming politically active in Salisbury, trying to eliminate the colour bar, 70 blacks had a vote, contrasted with 28,000 whites. (KLEIN, 2000, p. 44).

While the story’s point of view is that of a young girl and there is no direct portrayal of bloodshed or physical aggression, “The Old Chief Mshlanga” is permeated with the sadistic violence that characterizes this contact zone. In the opening lines, the reader follows the little girl “ranging the bush over her father’s farm” (LESSING, 2014, p. 47), a routine that persists for years. As she grows up, the protagonist’s loneliness and fear are counteracted by the presence of “a gun in the crook of her arm” (LESSING, 2014, p. 48) and two dogs:

If a native came into sight along the kaffir paths half a mile away, the dogs would flush him up a tree as if he were a bird. If he expostulated (in his uncouth language which was by itself ridiculous) that was cheek. If one was in a good mood, it could be a matter for laughter. Other- wise one passed on, hardly glancing at the angry man in the tree.

On the rare occasions when white children met together they could amuse themselves by hailing a passing native in order to make a buffoon of him; they could set the dogs on him and watch him run; they could tease a small black child as if he were a puppy—save that they would not throw stones and sticks at a dog without a sense of guilt. (LESSING, 2014, p. 48).

If the feelings of gratification derived from ridiculing and inflicting fear characterize the white children’s attitude towards their African servants in Lessing’s fictional plot, historically, similar modes of daily oppression and violence were central to the “experiment” of settler colonialism in Southern Rhodesia, as Enocent Msindo elucidates. Settler colonialism lasted officially for 89 years in Rhodesia, as part of what came to be known as Europe’s “scramble for Africa” (MSINDO, 2017, p. 247). For Msindo, the white settler administration of Rhodesia was a challenge because of the settlers’ lack of political will to include Africans in the management of the country and their reliance on various forms of violence to sustain white privilege and to resist political change. Such forms of colonial violence happened directly or indirectly, through a series of colonial mechanisms, such as imposing external European forms of administration and government on Southern Rhodesians (combining private initiative and British governmental authority), pillaging precious minerals, stealing livestock, stigmatising local customs, shifting the boundaries

of tribal lands, interfering with chieftaincy organization and succession, throwing chiefs and ethnicities against each other, promoting low-paid indentured labor and pushing local peoples towards “reservation” areas... all of that aiming at native land dispossession, the ultimate goal of settler colonialism (MSINDO, 2017). Lessing’s narrative is politically and historically significant because several of these mechanisms appear, either as part of the main plot or, indirectly, as background detail along the story.

This article will investigate how “The Old Chief Mshlanga” operates as a *bildung*, centring our analysis around the particular settler postcolonial notions of place and displacement. After an examination of some of the complexities of settler postcolonialism, three aspects of displacement will be examined: (i) white settler displacement, operating both on the identity and linguistic levels, (ii) Chief Mshlanga’s people’s cultural displacement, which culminates in their (iii) physical displacement and the effacement of their village.

Settler postcolonialism

Although categorizing colonies is not as simple as it might look at first sight, the traditional division involves two main groups of colonies:

Nigeria and India are examples of *colonies of occupation*, where indigenous people remained in the majority but were administered by a foreign power. Examples of *settler colonies* where, over time, the invading Europeans (or their descendants) annihilated, displaced and/or marginalized the indigenes to become a majority non-indigenous population, include Argentina, Australia, Canada and the United States (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007, p. 193, our emphasis).

Temporal distinctions seem to be a determining factor for that classification and the general idea has been that “colonies of occupation” fit more accurately the concept of what is commonly thought as “colonialism”: a practice in which the colonizer occupies a territory and exploits colonized labor and commodities, to, later, go back to Europe, allowing, thus, a larger or lesser degree of decolonization, or the “the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007, p. 56).

Settler colonialism, on the other hand, as the expression “settler” indicates, involves the permanence of the colonizer in the colonies. As Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson (2000) observe, with time, these white elites overseas stop seeing themselves as colonizers and, on acquiring political agency, which is another of the characteristics of settler societies, become more and more “nationalistic”. The settler mode of nationalism involves two apparently antagonistic movements. The first movement is the settler’s aspiration for indigenous legitimacy to justify the dispossession of the indigenous people’s land. This is achieved discursively, through “narratives of arrival, hardship and settlement [that] have been integral to their self-definition” (JOHNSTON; LAWSON, 2000, p. 361). The other movement, conversely, advocates for settlers the authority of “potential heirs to European political systems and models of culture” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007,

p. 56). In cultural terms, settlers tend to privilege “colonial languages over local languages; writing over orality and linguistic culture over inscriptive cultures of other kinds (dance, graphic arts, which had often been designated ‘folk culture’” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007, p. 57). The result is the gradual effacement or the disavowing of the cultures of the original peoples. In comparison to other types of colonies, in settler societies decolonization becomes much harder to achieve.

The binary division into “occupation” and “settler” colonies, however, does not accommodate well places such as Caribbean countries, Kenya, Ireland, South Africa, Mozambique – or Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. In fact, rather than two pre-defined poles, a more suitable categorisation system for those places should be that of a “continuum”, in which colonies (or even regions within a colony), according to “patterns of settlement and cultural and racial legacies”, could fall closer or further to the “settler” or the “occupation” paradigm (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007, p. 193). Southern Rhodesia (like South Africa), is a special case of settler colonialism because, although the African population remained statistically preponderant in relation to that of European settlers and provided inexpensive labor, the land in Rhodesia, as Austin puts it, was the “first prize” of the British colonial enterprise. After the Rhodesian land was declared British Crown property, early in the colonization process, white settlers made it a point of taking full control of the government of the country. With that, African people were banned to reserves and while such reserves were “seen by some as a minimal protection of African land rights”, they “merely provided the legitimation of the process of removing Africans forcibly from good to poor land” (AUSTIN, 1975, p. 31).

The fact that the settlers must try to constantly efface the traces of this immoral land appropriation conduct and substitute the actual narratives of violence towards the original inhabitants with their own narratives of legitimation, adds different investigative issues, as well as layers of complexity to what Johnston and Lawson have termed “settler postcolonial studies”. Among these complexities is the correct designation for these societies, that should be more accurately termed “settler-invader” colonies (JOHNSTON; LAWSON, 2000, p. 362), as they ultimately depend on the “removal”, both physical and metaphorical, of the original populations and their substitution for the European settler invaders. The avoidance of the adjective “invader” serves euphemistic purposes, transforming immoral land appropriation and violent and genocidal practices into much more “benign” events. Therefore, Johnston and Lawson maintain that even when the adjective “invader” is omitted for the sake of brevity, “the ‘invader’ rider should always be kept in mind, as it is in the theory” (JOHNSTON; LAWSON, 2000, p. 362).

Settler colonialism relies heavily on the adoption of narrative strategies to try to efface the violent and immoral facts of the origins and maintenance of the nation:

It is in the translation from experience to its textual representation that the settler subject can be seen working out a complicated politics of representation, working throughout the settler’s anxieties and obsession in textual form. Increasingly, the white settlers referred to themselves and their culture as indigenous: they cultivated

native attributes and skills (the Mounties, cowboys, range-riders, gauchos, backwoodsman), and in this way cemented their legitimacy, their own increasingly secure sense of moral, spiritual and cultural belonging in the place they commonly (and revealingly) described as “new”. They also began to tell stories and devise images that emphasized the disappearance of native peoples: the las to his tribe, the dying race, even tales of genocide. (JOHNSTON; LAWSON, 2000, p. 363).

Although settler postcolonial authors tend not to openly acknowledge their inner conflicts regarding invasion and belonging, or the “double bind” of being both colonizing and colonized, let alone the shameful facts of violence, dispossession and genocide, these themes are often reflected in their writings. The anxiety and culpability of the settler condition remains constantly in the background of the text and manifest themselves in between the lines, or as ambivalence. The next sections show that this is not the case with “The Old Chief Mshlanga”, as Lessing attempts to bring ambivalence and white settler culpability to the foreground. As a settler postcolonial *bildung*, Lessing’s story consists of the protagonist’s journey from almost complete alienation in relation to the African land itself, to her realization of her “invader” status and need to compose a narrative of auto-legitimation. This leads to the stage of disillusion in relation to the possibilities of peaceful and ethical cohabitation between white settlers and native Rhodesians and a clear insight of the catastrophic consequences of colonialism for the original peoples of southern Africa.

White settler displacement

“The Old Chief Mshlanga” opens emphasising the discrepancies between the southern African physical environment and the white protagonist’s inner apprehension of her surroundings. In the first four paragraphs of the story the narrative voice explores the stark dichotomy between the immensity and rough ancientness of the space – “a jutting piece of rock which had been thrust up from the warm soil of Africa unimaginable eras of time ago, washed into hollows and whorls by sun and wind that had travelled so many thousands of space and bush” (LESSING, 2014, p. 47) – and the daintiness and youth of the “small girl” who wanders through it.

Most revealing from a settler postcolonial perspective, though, is the fact that the white girl looks at the environment through the prism of European narratives and does not respond to the African environment itself. Her eyes are “sightless” to the particularities of the local trees, grass, thorn, cactus, gully and maze crops that surround her. Instead, what she visualizes are clear rivers shaded by willow trees, a medieval castle, the Northern witch in a snowy landscape with oaks and a woodcutter’s fire:

This child could not see a msasa tree, or the thorn, for what they were. Her books held tales of alien fairies, her rivers ran slow and peaceful, and she knew the shape of the leaves of an ash or an oak, the names of the little creatures that lived in English streams, when the words “the veld” meant strangeness, though she could remember nothing else.

Because of this, for many years, it was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language. (LESSING, 2014, p. 48).

This split between physical and psychocultural spaces which highlights the strength of the girl's European education and the narratives she has inherited, is reinforced by the fact that, in her lonely ramblings in the *veld*, an ecosystem constituted mostly of open extensions of grasslands, with shrubs and very few trees, Nkosikaas hums Alfred Lord Tennyson's popular 1832 ballad "The Lady of Shallot". Tennyson's Romantic tribute to Arthurian times could not be further distanced from the subequatorial and tropical African environment that "inspires" it. And yet, the implications of a young woman stranded in a tower and unable to interact directly with the world below resonates with Nkosikaas's status, revealing Lessing's sharp sense of irony and her awareness of the strength of settler colonial alienation.

In cultural and linguistic terms, settler colonial alienation is the result of a combination of factors, including imported traditions, Eurocentric attitudes towards education, a nostalgia for "Home", as Britain was known among the settlers, as well as linguistic prejudice. In "the Old Chief Mshlanga" English, although inadequate to the tasks of apprehending the environment and communicating with the local people, is favored over local languages, as white farmers do not bother to learn "dialect, but only kitchen kaffir" (LESSING, 2014, p. 56). This, once again, appears to be in conformity with Lessing's autobiographical writings. In *Under My Skin* she emphasises the settlers' contempt for the Rhodesian servants' original languages and the very pragmatic reasons behind the sporadic use of local languages by the white "elite": The African servants' native language, Shona, "was largely ignored" (LESSING, 2013, p. 166) and when white settlers dignified themselves to communicate in native language it was in "kitchen kaffir, the disgraceful lingo used by all the whites at that time, a mixture of Afrikaans, Shona and Ndebele, everything in the imperative, Do this, Bring this, Go there" (LESSING, 2013, p. 167). Although despised by the white elite when manifested in the Africans' English, language hybridization is welcome when it aids Europeans administer indentured labor, a labor system that is often a "side benefit" to settler colonialism's main objective of land appropriation, as we shall see further down.

A shift of point of view from third to first person in the fourteenth paragraph conspicuously marks the beginning of the *bildung*. Nkosikaas is now 14 (the fact that in *Under My Skin* Lessing reports leaving school at that exact age might not be a mere coincidence here), taking her usual walk, gun at hand and dogs at her heel. Three African men cross her path but, surprisingly, do not move off the way in respect for a white person, as colonial etiquette dictates. The girl is thrown aback by their "air of dignity" and finds out that the oldest man in the group is a Chief: "A Chief! I thought, understanding the pride that made the old man stand before me like an equal—more than an equal, for he showed courtesy, and I showed none" (LESSING, 2014, p. 50).

If the shift into first person had announced change at a structural level, thematically, the first sign of effective character transformation and a pivotal moment for the narrative occurs in the acknowledgment of the Chief's civility and better manners. While Nkosikaas

finds “politeness difficult, from lack of use”, the old man wears “dignity like an inherited garment” (LESSING, 2014, p. 50). The turning point for the narrative happens when Nkosikaas sees beyond the stereotyped view of the African other, a behavior condoned by her settler community. This realization is reinforced in subsequent meetings with the Chief and research in books, through which she finds out that, in the past, white people needed to “ask [the Chief’s] permission to prospect for gold in his territory” (LESSING, 2014, p. 50). The confirmation of colonial invasion and dispossession revives some “questions which could not be suppressed” and “fermented” in Nkosikaas’s mind. Besides being a sign of teenage rebellion against her family, this is Lessing’s way to fictionally convey the anxiety of the settler position and the narrative strategies adopted by the settler towards their own auto-legitimation, as seen above.

Along with the teenage girl’s new perceptions, her body language changes:

Soon I carried a gun in a different spirit; I used it for shooting food and not to give me confidence. And now the dogs learned better manners. When I saw a native approaching, we offered and took greetings; and slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil, and I saw the shapes of tree and hill clearly, and the black people moved back, as it were, out of my life: it was as if I stood aside to watch a slow intimate dance of landscape and men, a very old dance, whose steps I could not learn. (LESSING, 2014, p. 51).

Going against the local settler community’s attitudes and even her family’s interdictions, the protagonist develops empathy and compassion for the African other, and even becomes obsessed with the figure of the Chief, making an effort to meet him whenever possible. This development triggers some new cover-up narratives of settler indigenization and authenticity that are a characteristic of the settler psyche, as the girl ponders: “this is my heritage, too; I was bred here; it is my country as well as the black man’s country” (LESSING, 2014, p. 51). In terms of the settler postcolonial *bildung*, this new view of the other as noble and dignified is in accordance with the psychosocial stage of adolescent idealism. The girl envisions a utopian world, a world in which kindness and fairness should be able to overcome all obstacles:

[...]there is plenty of room for all of us, without elbowing each other off the pavements and roads.

It seemed it was only necessary to let free that respect I felt when I was talking with old Chief Mshlanga, to let both black and white people meet gently, with tolerance for each other’s differences: it seemed quite easy. (LESSING, 2014, p. 51).

Nevertheless, this ideal is short lived. Nkosikaas only has to wander outside the boundaries of the deforested and eroded soil of her father’s farm to once again feel the strength of her white settler displacement. Unfamiliar emotions materialise as, in search for the Chief’s village, she comes in contact with the wilderness:

I was listening to the quick regular tapping of a woodpecker when slowly a chill feeling seemed to grow up from the small of my back to my shoulders, in a constricting spasm like a shudder, and at the roots of my hair a tingling sensation began and ran down over the surface of my flesh, leaving me goosefleshed and cold, though I was damp with sweat. Fever? I thought; then uneasily, turned to look over my shoulder; and realized suddenly that this was fear. It was extraordinary, even humiliating. It was a new fear. For all the years I had walked by myself over this country I had never known a moment's uneasiness; in the beginning because I had been supported by a gun and the dogs, then because I had learnt an easy friendliness for the Africans I might encounter. (LESSING, 2014, p. 53).

In contrast to her reveries when ranging the familiar territory of the farm as a child years before, in nature “untouched” by settlers’ hands and “seen from a different angle”, the images that now come to her adolescent mind are wild and menacing: those of the deer coming to drink at the river “and the crocodiles [that] rise and drag them by their soft noses into underwater caves” (LESSING, 2014, p. 53). No longer benign, like at the opening of the story, nor idealized by the false sense of indigenization, now the girl’s inner apprehension of the African environment is set against a background of loneliness and “a terror of isolation” (54) she knew secondhandedly described in books by European explorers, but had never personally experienced before.

The combination of estrangement and disillusionment achieves its apex when she arrives at the Chief’s village. Nkosikaas’s first impression of the *kraal* is that of surprise at the fact that the African people have their own lifestyle, independent of the one imposed by the Europeans, and that this way of life is time-honored, culturally significant, and prosperous. The ideas that settlers readily associate with “the natives” – they underutilize the land, they are indolent workers, they do not care for the physical appearance of their spaces – are not at all confirmed by her personal contact with the *kraal*:

There were neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and millet, and cattle grazed under some trees at a distance. Fowls scratched among the huts, dogs lay sleeping on the grass, and goats friezed a kopje that jutted up beyond a tributary of the river lying like an enclosing arm round the village.

As I came close I saw the huts were lovingly decorated with patterns of yellow and red and ochre mud on the walls; and the thatch was tied in place with plaits of straw.

This was not at all like our farm compound, a dirty and neglected place, a temporary home for migrants who had no roots in it. (LESSING, 2014, p. 54).

An anticlimactic moment, however, succeeds this pleasant discovery, in the form of the negative reception from the villagers: the local children look at her with perplexity and make no effort to find out what she wants, the women chat curiously behind her back, the elderly men show indifference, but most disconcertingly, Chief Mshlanga is uncomfortable with her presence:

When he saw me, not a muscle of his face moved, and I could see he was not pleased: perhaps he was afflicted with my own shyness, due to being unable to find the right forms of courtesy for the occasion. To meet me, on our own farm, was one thing; but I should not have come here. What had I expected? I could not join them socially: the thing was unheard of. Bad enough that I, a white girl, should be walking the veld alone as a white man might: and in this part of the bush where only Government officials had the right to move. (LESSING, 2014, p. 55).

This new, distressing manifestation of displacement defeats Nkosikaas's utopian aspirations and, as the girl goes back to the farm, feeling the full weight of her settler-invader condition, the sensation of "loneliness" and the "terror of isolation" return, bringing back the old fear, a dread instigated by the white settlers' statistical inferiority that underlies the Europeans' day-to-day life as a minority in Rhodesia and that had been well-hidden behind the cruel treatment of "the natives" (LESSING, 2014, p. 49). Now the strangeness of the landscape materializes into a new "hostility": "a cold, hard, sullen indomitability that walked with me, as strong as a wall, as intangible as smoke; it seemed to say to me: you walk here as a destroyer" (LESSING, 2014, p. 56). Her previous idealism, the beliefs in being in control of change and in being able to construct a fairer world through goodwill and kindness, now seems untannable. Most importantly, the settler's masks – the carefully-built benign narratives of legitimization that cover up the "invader" epithet – have to be put down. The episode triggers a moment of epiphany: "I went slowly homewards, with an empty heart: I had learned that if one cannot call a country to heel like a dog, neither can one dismiss the past with a smile in an easy gush of feeling, saying: I could not help it, I am also a victim" (LESSING, 2014, p. 56).

White-settler displacement takes different shapes in the narrative and is directly related to the *bildung* process. As the girl grows up, the displacement created by the gap between language and place that can be labelled as alienation gives way, in adolescence, to a short-lived period of utopian beliefs in a peaceful solution that would allow colonizer and colonized to live in harmony. Penetrating the wilderness outside her familiar surroundings disrupts this illusion and brings back the feeling of settler displacement. It is, however, the contact with Chief Mshlanga's people in their own territory and the realization that she is tolerated but unwelcome that bring forth the consciousness of her own invader status and the falseness of the narratives that had attempted to camouflage that ugly truth. In a settler postcolonial context, Nkosikaas's trajectory shows both the movement towards self-searching and away from the family and community mores that are pointed out by Moretti as characteristics of the *bildung*.

Cultural and Physical Displacements

In addition to portraying the feelings of displacement that affect the white settler protagonist personally, "The Old Chief Mshlanga" also reveals different types of displacement techniques adopted by the British to physically push African people away

from the parts of the Rhodesian land they want to settle in, and, metaphorically, to distance African people from their traditional lifestyles.

Settler colonialism has, as its main tenet, the physical dislocation of native people and, to that end, demarcating space according to the settlers' interests and controlling access to those spaces become major preoccupations. Bill Ashcroft (2001), in his assessment of the deep transformations that colonialism has operated in the world, examines how colonial mechanisms such as mapping and surveying contributed to indigenous displacement by, among other actions, promoting a split between the notions of space and place, a division that did not exist in many non-westernized cultures. If, in pre-colonial times, in several societies "a sense of place may be embedded in cultural history, in legend and language, in art and dance" (ASHCROFT, 2001, p. 125), colonialism, especially in its settler version, acted to break that link to create an impression of *terra nullius* and "empty space", as well as the idea of alleged unproductive land that appeared available to be taken by the Europeans. "The Old Chief Mshlanga" re-enacts this surveillance in Nkosikaas's habitual and fierce "ranging the bush" to (even if unconsciously) claim ownership of what was once part of the traditional migratory routes of Chief Mshlanga's people. Farm boundaries as well as country borders were set by the Europeans to better manage their possessions regardless if these frontiers interfered with the relationship between different local ethnicities and interrupted or diverted migratory routes. Several details in Lessing's story point out such interferences, as well as the cultural displacement they generate. One of the white settler strategies to generate cultural displacement is to conveniently misconstrue the African ways to adapt to British impositions:

The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks. They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, faceless, who existed merely to serve, to say "Yes, Baas," take their money and go. They changed season by season, moving from one farm to the next, according to their outlandish needs, which one did not have to understand, coming from perhaps hundreds of miles North or East, passing on after a few months—where? Perhaps even as far away as the fabled gold mines of Johannesburg, where the pay was so much better than the few shillings a month and the double handful of mealie meal twice a day which they earned in that part of Africa (LESSING, 2014, p. 48).

Cultural displacement, in the excerpt above, is also realized through the effacement of the servants' individualities. Colonialism promoted the cultural displacement of original populations as a necessary pre-emptive measure to guarantee cheap labor exploitation. The system of indentured labor barely kept a façade of voluntariness, while maintaining its forceful and controlled intent (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2007). Austin observes that control over indigenous people's labor in Rhodesia was officially regulated by the Master and Servants Act (1901), which covered

[...] 'bodily labour' in domestic service, mining, agriculture, husbandry, trade, manufacture and handicrafts. The 'servant who absents himself without leave from

his master's house or premises. . . is intoxicated, refuses to obey any command of his master' ... is abusive or insulting, either by language or conduct to his master or his master's wife or children' is liable to criminal prosecution. (AUSTIN, 1975, p. 63).

Lessing's narrative echoes the domestic implications of such laws in the relationship between the Jordans and their servants. As we have seen, the African servants are either "taken for granted" (only as long as they do not disrespect the law or colonial etiquette), or highly criticized for their "incompetence". Labor exploitation also rests on their classification into stereotypical categories:

Working in our house as servants were always three natives: cook, houseboy, garden boy. They used to change as the farm natives changed: staying for a few months, then moving on to a new job, or back home to their kraals. They were thought of as "good" or "bad" natives; which meant: how did they behave as servants? Were they lazy, efficient, obedient, or disrespectful? If the family felt good-humoured, the phrase was: "What can you expect from raw black savages?" If we were angry, we said: "These damned niggers, we would be much better off without them." (LESSING, 2014, p. 51).

The girl observes how "[i]t was even impossible to think of the black people who worked about the house as friends, for if she talked to one of them, her mother would come running anxiously: "Come away; you mustn't talk to natives" (LESSING, 2014, p. 49). There is no interest in the servants' individuality or cultural background and personal life outside the farm. Linguistically, servants are ridiculed whether they use their native languages or attempt to speak English. When a white policeman points out that the farm's cook is "an important man" (LESSING, 2014, p. 49) – actually Chief Mshlanga's successor – mechanisms of control are immediately set into motion to offset his distinctiveness:

"He'd better not put on a Chiefs son act with me," said my mother.

When the policeman left, we looked with different eyes at our cook: he was a good worker, but he drank too much at week-ends—that was how we knew him. [...] My mother became strict with him now she knew about his birth and prospects. Sometimes, when she lost her temper, she would say: "You aren't the Chief yet, you know." And he would answer her very quietly, his eyes on the ground: "Yes, Nkosikaas." (LESSING, 2014, p. 49).

While local labor is either a "necessary evil" or something white Europeans can do without in some colonial contexts, the last paragraphs of the story are paradigmatic of the main end-objective of settler colonialism – the physical displacement of local populations. The story ends with Nkosikaas's narration of the conflict that triggers the final banishment of Chief Mshlanga's people, showing the settler colonial particularities of this contact zone. The dispute was prompted by the fact that the farm was "trampled

down by small sharp hooves, and it was discovered that the culprits were goats from Chief Mshlanga's kraal" (LESSING, 2014, p. 56). The goats were confiscated and a fee was set for their retrieval:

From my father's point of view, at least two hundred pounds' worth of damage had been done to the crop. He knew he could not get the money from the old man. He felt he was entitled to keep the goats. As for the old Chief, he kept repeating angrily: "Twenty goats! My people cannot lose twenty goats! We are not rich, like the Nkosi Jordan, to lose twenty goats at once."

At last my father stated finally: "I'm not going to argue about it. I am keeping the goats." The old Chief flashed back in his own language: "That means that my people will go hungry when the dry season comes."

"Go to the police, then," said my father, and looked triumphant. There was, of course, no more to be said. (LESSING, 2014, p. 56).

Referring once more to the history of Rhodesia, it is possible to observe that this white arbitration facilitates what Msindo (2017, p. 255) calls "economic alienation" or "governing by poverty". The episode above suggests that this particular type of cultural displacement by economic alienation consists of undermining the important role that livestock had for Rhodesians, both in pre and postcolonial times. Before the arrival of the British, livestock had different uses "as a sign of prestige and status, as dowry payment, as sacrificial offerings to the deities, as a form of currency in a barter-system economy" (MSINDO, 2017, p. 256). And, as the story suggests, livestock remained an important source of income for native Rhodesians even after the British instituted a European currency system.

Crushed by the impoverishment imposed by white settlers and their biased justice system, Chief Mshlanga's people are moved to a reserve so that their land is officially made available for white settlement. The story ends with Nkosikaas's account of a visit to Chief Mshlanga's dilapidated *kraal* one year later:

There was nothing there. Mounds of red mud, where the huts had been, had long swathes of rotting thatch over them, veined with the red galleries of the white ants. The pumpkin vines rioted everywhere, over the bushes, up the lower branches of trees so that the great golden balls rolled underfoot and dangled overhead: it was a festival of pumpkins. The bushes were crowding up, the new grass sprang vivid green.

The settler lucky enough to be allotted the lush warm valley (if he chose to cultivate this particular section) would find, suddenly, in the middle of a mealie field, the plants were growing fifteen feet tall, the weight of the cobs dragging at the stalks, and wonder what unsuspected vein of richness he had struck. (LESSING, 2014, p. 57).

Despite Nkosikaas's melancholy tone in the first paragraph above, the fact that, as a white settler, she has been assigned the role of narrator to describe the annihilation

of an African village retrospectively is paradigmatic of which part is bound to win and prosper – and, significantly, tell the story – in a settler postcolonial backdrop. In her characteristic critical vein, the narrator’s tone in the last paragraph shifts to an ironic one, as she envisions the recklessness with which the next white owners might treat the Other’s land, a land that might not be cultivated after all, due to lack of knowledge or persistence. An alternative scenario to this implies that the next owner might discover that the land is especially fertile by sheer good luck. In both cases the loss of a community (only one more African “tribe”) and everything that disappears with it will be minimized and hidden behind settler narratives of conquest and indigenization. The story’s final message points to the European interest in the effacement of African history to serve the necropolitical purposes of settler colonialism.

A settler postcolonial *bildung*

Although fictional, Lessing’s story is set against a historically verifiable background and reflects remarkably well some of the complexities of settler postcolonialism in Southern Rhodesia, a paradoxical “white man’s country” (KLEIN, 2000, p. 33) where white people constituted only 5% of the population, at the time of narration. This article attempted to show how the presence of displacement in the story, in different guises – linguistic, metaphorical, cultural and physical –, has a crucial role in the maintenance of white settler hegemony and in the protagonist’s trajectory towards self-knowledge, a process that, nevertheless, has a bitter outcome. By breaking the social and familial rules of non-involvement with the natives, Nkosikaas achieves not a solution to the conflicting relationship between colonizer and colonized (as at a certain stage her adolescent idealism had envisaged), but a new perception of her own accountability as invader and cultural eradicator. With “The Old Chief Mshlanga”, Lessing renovates the *bildung* formula by associating her female protagonist’s coming of age process with the covert agenda of settler postcolonialism.

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- **RESUMO:** “O Velho Chefe Mshlanga” é um dos contos mais conhecidos e antologados da coleção *Histórias Africanas*, publicada por Doris Lessing em 1965. A obra explora, entre outros temas, as grandes e pequenas crueldades do racismo e da segregação em fazendas de povoadores brancos na Rodésia do Sul, onde a autora passou a infância e parte da adolescência. O enredo de “O Velho Chefe Mshlanga” pode ser associado a duas práticas literárias bem conhecidas: a tradicional modalidade do *bildung* e a abordagem crítica a um tipo de colonialismo denominada “pós-colonialismo de povoamento”. Este artigo explora o fato de que esta mistura de enredo de amadurecimento e denúncia

da hegemonia dos povoadores brancos proporciona solo fértil para a análise de vários objetos de pesquisa dos estudos sobre pós-colonialismo de povoamento, particularmente, as diferentes implicações das questões de lugar e deslocamento/desenraizamento, tanto para a protagonista branca quanto para as personagens africanas da narrativa.

- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pós-colonialismo de povoamento; Bildung; Deslocamento/Desenraizamento; “O Velho Chefe Mshlanga”.

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