



Moments of realization: extending Homeworld in British-African Novelist Doris Lessing's *Four-Gated City*

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Abstract

For Husserl, the *homeworld* is the tacit, taken-for-granted sphere of experiences, understanding, and situations marking out a world that is comfortable, usual, and “the way things are and should be.” Always, according to Husserl, the homeworld is in some mode of lived mutuality with an *alienworld*—a world as seen as a realm of difference, atypicality, and otherness. In this article, I draw on British-African novelist Doris Lessing’s 1969 novel, *The Four-Gated City*, to consider the shifting homeworld of protagonist Martha Quest, a young white African woman emigrating to battle-scarred London immediately after World War II. Throughout the novel, Quest finds herself in unfamiliar or challenging situations where the world she takes for granted is called into question. Lessing draws on these life-testing experiences to portray Quest’s shifting understandings of other individuals’ homeworlds that at first she sees as atypical, abnormal, or unreal.

Keywords Doris Lessing · Edmund Husserl · *The Four-Gated City* · Homeworld · Lifeworld · Mental illness · Natural attitude · Phenomenology.

1 Introduction

Of all of philosopher Edmund Husserl’s many phenomenological insights, *lifeworld*, *natural attitude*, *homeworld*, and *alienworld* are especially important because they describe phenomena typically out of sight in everyday experience yet integral to a self-conscious knowledge of human being and becoming. In attempting to better characterize the natural attitude and lifeworld, Husserl identified a lived reciprocity between what he called the *homeworld* and *alienworld*. One’s homeworld is the tacit,

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taken-for-granted sphere of experiences, understanding, and situations marking out a world that is comfortable, usual, and “the way things are and should be.” Always, the homeworld is in some mode of lived mutuality with an *alienworld*—a world as seen as a realm of difference, atypicality, and otherness provided awareness only because of the always-already givenness of the homeworld.¹

In this article, I draw on British-African novelist Doris Lessing’s 1969 novel, *The Four-Gated City*, to consider the shifting homeworld of protagonist Martha Quest, a young white African woman emigrating to battle-scarred London immediately after World War II.² Throughout the novel, Quest finds herself in unfamiliar or challenging situations where the world she takes for granted is called into question. Lessing draws on these life-testing experiences to portray Quest’s shifting understandings of people and events that at first she sees as atypical, abnormal, unreal, or impossible—for example, her changing sensibilities toward family, politics, mental illness, and transpersonal experiences.³

As a novelist rather than a phenomenologist, Lessing (1919–2013) presents these shifts narratively, but one can draw on her account to illustrate how a changing, more encompassing homeworld unfolds via a progressive realization that the ambit of human worlds and human experience is vastly beyond the lifeworld and natural attitude of one person herself. Crucially, in Lessing’s account of Martha Quest’s broadening homeworld, there are sometimes sudden experiences of more intense awareness that I call here *moments of realization*, whereby one’s earlier, taken-for-granted, unquestioned knowledge falls away and one sees the world in a new way that transforms homeworld understanding by accepting aspects of human experience before seen as unreal, impossible, unbelievable, or entirely at odds with how one has assumed the world to be.⁴

¹ Critical discussions of lifeworld, natural attitude, homeworld, and alienworld include Carr (1970), Donohoe (2011, 2017), Dorfman (2009), Held (1986), Jacobs (2013), Landgrebe (1940), Luft (2011), Moran (2012, 2013, 2018), Seamon (2013, 2018, 2023 forthcoming), Steinbock (1994a, 1994b, 1995), Tani (1986), Waldenfels (1998), Walton (1997).

² Lessing (1969).

³ Critical discussions of Lessing’s work include Bloom (2003), Brazil et al. (2018), Greene (1994), Knapp (1984), Maslen (2014), Moan Rowe (1994), Pratt et al. (1993), Rascheke et al. (2010), Ridout and Watkins (2009), Seamon (1993, 2019), Sprague (1987), Sternberg Perrakis (1999), Topping Bazin (1980), Watkins (2010). Greene (1994, p. 1) declares that Lessing “is quite simply the most extraordinary woman writer of our time, and one of the most controversial.” Greene quotes British novelist Margaret Drabble who says that Lessing is “one of the very few novelists who have refused to believe that the contemporary world is too complicated to understand” (ibid.).

⁴ The only thinker I’m aware of who has made links between Lessing’s point of view and phenomenology is English-literature scholar Sergeant (2018, p. 115), who emphasized her concern for a dynamic seeing whereby “each step arises from but transforms the one before it.” He also highlighted her interest in wholeness as understood as “a dynamic concordance between the one and the many” (ibid.). Also see Seamon (2019).

2 Lifeworlds and Natural Attitudes

A central aim of phenomenology is understanding the taken-for-granted givenness of the world as it is lived in an everyday manner. To know and register this unquestioned, lived-in-the-background stratum of human experience, one of the most important phenomenological contributions is Husserl's articulation of *lifeworld* and *natural attitude*—inescapable but unrecognized features of human life that no earlier Western philosophical tradition had fully located or articulated. For sure, lifeworld and natural attitude are integral to all manner of human life, whether past or present; Western or non-Western; wealthy or poor; simple or sophisticated. In the Western philosophical tradition, however, lifeworld and natural attitude had not been explicitly identified, probed, or valued. This fact allows for the claim that Husserl “discovered” lifeworld and natural attitude. As Moran explained, Husserl's central focus was “the pregiven, always-taken-for-granted ‘lifeworld,’ which had never before become a topic of enquiry.”⁵

The concepts of lifeworld and natural attitude are remarkably valuable. They identify aspects of human life difficult to articulate because they are taken-for-granted and thus typically out of sight. Moran defined the lifeworld as “the world of the pre-given, familiar, present available, surrounding world ... that envelops us and is always there as taken for granted.”⁶ The lifeworld is the unquestioned, usual unfolding of human life—the lived fact that, most of the time, one's life simply happens in the usual way it happens and is rarely called into question, except when it becomes unusual or atypical in some way. One current example is the COVID 19 pandemic crisis in which unquestioned everyday behaviors like face-to-face interactions are replaced by “out-of-the-ordinary” actions like social distancing, wearing face masks, and living in voluntary isolation. Because the virus demands shifts in taken-for-granted understandings and actions, one realizes the unquestioned “normality” of one's usual world, though this “realization” remains within a lifeworld awareness. Suddenly, things dramatically change, and one recognizes that the world as one knows it, could be otherwise.

If the lifeworld describes the taken-for-granted structure of the typical, everyday world, the natural attitude is its correlate and refers to the taken-for-granted perceptual and attitudinal field via which individuals assume that their everyday worlds are what they are and not pictured or expected to be otherwise. The natural attitude is “the unquestioned manner of accepting the existence and givenness of the world” and an attitude that is, in its very naïveté, “unknown to itself.”⁷ As Luft explains, “being in the natural attitude, I am unaware *of* being in this attitude. Hence this is exactly the reason this attitude is called *natural*. The natural attitude is hidden to itself ...”⁸ Or again: “I do not know of being in [the natural attitude], but also ..., since I do not know if it as an attitude, I live in the belief that it is the only possible ‘way of life.’”⁹

⁵ Moran (2012, p. 44).

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷ Moran (2013, p. 25, p. 60).

⁸ Luft (2011, p. 39).

⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

In this sense, the natural attitude automatically undergirds the everyday, straight-forward givenness of the world in which we find ourselves, though as with the life-world, we are almost always unaware of this unquestioned attitudinal presence:

To call this situation “natural” would be absurd for someone living in the natural attitude, yet making this mode of daily life explicit and thematic requires that we are no longer in it. The term “natural” thus gives a thematic description of our life as it is carried out “naturally,” but the fact that this is so can only become explicit in *another attitude* [i.e., the phenomenological attitude].¹⁰

3 Homeworlds and Alienworlds

Over time, Husserl recognized that human lifeworlds can be specified more exactly. He realized that the portion of lifeworld most significant for human beings is the everyday world in which they live. He identified this portion of lifeworld as the *homeworld*, which refers to “the sphere in which we feel ‘just natural,’ at home and at ease.”¹¹ Also called by Husserl the “familiar world” or “near-world,” the homeworld is an intersubjective world that incorporates culture, tradition, and collective values. The homeworld is a typical way of living that is “accepted and familiar” and “something shared with others and, especially, with those who live in our vicinity.”¹² As Luft explains, the homeworld “is the world of a certain family, society, people, nation with their historical tradition ...”¹³ Luft emphasizes that homeworlds are naïve in the sense that they see themselves as absolute:

This does not mean that one home attitude perceives itself as the only existing attitude, but as the only *home* attitude for itself. All other forms of life it will view as naïve or as primitive or as simply *alien*, that is, incomprehensible. To set the home attitude as absolute means that no other attitude will become understandable as a *home* attitude, but only as an alien attitude correlating to an alienworld.”¹⁴

Steinbock points out that the homeworld is privileged because “it is that through which our experiences coalesce as our own and in such a way that our world structures our experience itself.”¹⁵ We always “carry with us the structure of our [homeworld] in the structure of our lived-bodies, in our typical comportment, and in our practices”; we realize the presence of the homeworld when we find ourselves in worlds different

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹² Moran (2012, p. 211).

¹³ Luft (2011, p. 43).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁵ Steinbock (1995, p. 232).

from that typicality and normativity.¹⁶ In this sense, the homeworld and alienworld are “*co-relative* and *co-constitutive* ... [N]either homeworld nor alienworld can be regarded as the ‘original sphere,’ since they are in a continual historical becoming as delimited from one another. This is the sense in which home and alien are co-generative.”¹⁷ Most broadly, the homeworld is a realm of usualness, typicality, and normality, though obviously what these taken-for-granted qualities entail vary for different homeworlds and sometimes collide in that the lived extent of any homeworld is marked by a “dark outer horizon” that points to *alienworlds* beyond.¹⁸

These worlds beyond the homeworld are different in some way—perhaps unusual, puzzling, shocking, or even threatening. Though these alienworlds may vary widely from one another, they are similar in that each has “its own alien normality with its own concordance.”¹⁹ Donohoe points out that the alienworld “reveals to me things about my homeworld that I had taken for granted as simply being the way things are.”²⁰ The homeworld is “a unity of sense that is manifest in a pre-giveness of the things of the world that constitute the norm by which we judge other worlds.”²¹ Importantly, these norms are not some arbitrary system of right and wrong but, rather, “a foundational standard” to which the worlds of others are compared. In relation to the broader lifeworld, Moran explains that

Every lifeworld has dimensions of homeworld and alienworld; everyone lives within horizons that lay out structures of normality and abnormality, harmony and surprise, yet these structural dimensions of experience rarely are foregrounded in intentional explication.²²

In *The Four-Gated City*, Martha Quest encounters many unusual situations because she seeks a new place in the unfamiliar worlds of England and London. Drawing on Martha’s experiences, I illustrate how moments of realization provoke questionings and revisionings of the homeworld in which Quest grew up and thought she had left behind when she emigrated to England. Already in that earlier homeworld, she encountered moments of realization that provoked her recognition of possibilities beyond the homeworld she was given by birth and upbringing. Her growing up in white Africa needs discussion before consideration of her London experience.²³

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 179, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Luft (2011, p. 49).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Donohoe (2017, p. 430).

²¹ Donohoe (2011, p. 30).

²² Moran (2018, p. 74); for one study explicating real-world homeworlds and alienworlds, see Seamon (2013).

²³ The significance of revelatory experience in modernist literature has been discussed by English scholar Beja (1971), who calls it *epiphany*, which he defines as a sudden illumination “produced by apparently trivial, even seemingly arbitrary, causes” (p. 13). In focusing on Lessing’s early writings, literature scholar Topping Bazin (1980) points to the importance of *moments of revelation*, which she describes as “a sudden, unforgettable revelation of truth through something comparable to a mystical experience” (p. 87). Topping Bazin points out that, for Lessing, these moments are crucial because they contribute to the

4 A Process of Self-Discovery

The Four-Gated City is the fifth and final volume in Lessing's semi-autobiographical "Children of Violence" series that includes *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple in the Storm* (1958), and *Landlocked* (1965).²⁴ In her "author's notes" at the end of *Four-Gated City*, Lessing explains that this series of novels is a *Bildungsroman*, by which she means the story of a young person who experiences life, grows up, matures, and becomes a responsible adult contributing to society.²⁵ In these five novels, the person who finds her way toward maturity is Martha Quest, a woman who grows up between World War I and World War II on a remote African farm in Zambesia—a fictitious country in white-colonial Africa. Lessing calls the five-novel series "Children of Violence" because she argues that the physical and human destruction of the two world wars has been the primary historical event shaping human experience in the twentieth century.²⁶

Throughout her writings, a prime concern for Lessing is the search for a fully realized self—a possibility directly intimated by the name Martha Quest. The first four novels of the series chronicle the first half of Martha's life in Zambesia and her attempts at broadening self-awareness and engaged societal responsibility. She grapples with finding an authentic sense of self in a white-controlled colonial culture that insists she play circumscribed roles—dutiful daughter, traditional wife, selfless mother, suspect communist, or proud white African colonialist. In the first novel of the series, *Martha Quest*, Lessing describes the young woman's growing up, opposing parental concerns, and experiencing a mindless social life that ends with an ill-considered marriage. *A Proper Marriage* depicts Martha's growing frustration with marriage and motherhood, which end with divorce and Martha's abandoning her young daughter to her ex-husband. In *A Ripple in the Storm*, Martha looks for self-realization by becoming politically active in a nascent Communist party, but this hopeful possibility is largely destroyed in *Landlocked*, which ends with Martha's impatient waiting to emigrate to England. Her London arrival in 1950 marks the start of the thirty-year-old Martha's uncertain efforts to secure her place as a mature human being, which is the central narrative of *The Four-Gated City*. This novel offers

"potential for transforming human behavior" (p. 94). More so, these experiences become "the standard by which other experiences are tested" (*ibid.*) and "the means by which one learns what is absolutely and unquestionably right" (p. 95). Significantly, these experiences cannot be "described in words" (p. 96), and one of Lessing's remarkable achievements is her perspicacious ability to portray the ineffable and inexpressible in powerful written descriptions that involve readers vicariously. Topping Bazin's interpretation of Lessing's work dovetails with Edmund Husserl's notion of "renewal," which I discuss in the concluding section of this article.

²⁴ Lessing (1952, 1954, 1958, 1965, 1969). All page numbers refer to the Harper Perennial reprint editions of the five volumes.

²⁵ Lessing (1969, p. 667).

²⁶ In many ways, the series' first four novels are autobiographical; the fifth novel, *The Four-Gated City*, less so. Lessing grew up on a remote veld farm in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. In the series, however, Lessing gives the country the fictitious name of Zambesia to suggest that the white African experience she pictures was similar in all the colonial African states. She writes: "My Zambesia is a composite of various white-dominated parts of Africa and, as I've since discovered, some of the characteristics of white people are those of any ruling minority whatever their colour" (*ibid.*).

a complex, fine-grained picture of shifts in Martha's homeworld as she strives to make a life that she can accept as authentic and real.

For most human beings, their homeworld is shaped by the parents, family, place, and historical moment into which one is born. Martha grows up on her British-immigrant parents' small veld farm some seventy miles from the nearest town, "which was itself a backwater."²⁷ Early on, Martha questions the division of human beings into age, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class: "[S]he could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations, or colour of skin first, and as people afterwards [E]ach group, community, clan, colour strove and fought away from the other, in a sickness of dissolution; it was as if the principle of separateness was bred from the very soil, the sky, the driving sun."²⁸ At the same time, however, Martha yearns for some way whereby there might be individual and societal wholeness. While still a young girl on the African farm, she envisions an ideal city that becomes a central theme in Martha's life, especially in *The Four-Gated City*:

There arose, glimmering whitely over the harsh scrub and stunted trees, a noble city, set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces. There were splashing fountains and the sounds of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together; and these groups of elders paused and smiled with pleasure at the sight of the children—the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand and hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South.²⁹

This question of how Martha incorporates differences into her homeworld so that, whereas before there was separation but now there is togetherness, is a central theme in the five novels. As a spur for facilitating this integration, Martha experiences moments of realization that allow her to see and understand her world and herself in a deeper, more comprehensive way. These moments recur and offer a potent means for Martha's integrating worlds of difference and absorbing them into an expanded homeworld. Martha first experience happens early on in *Martha Quest* as she's walking alone in the veld and senses, in the lush vitality of the natural world, a force greater than herself yet integrating her presence with some larger whole and provoking her to see "her smallness, the unimportance of humanity"³⁰:

It was evening, and very beautiful; a rich watery gold was lighting the dark greens of the foliage, the dark red of the soil, the pale blonde of the grass She noted a single white-stemmed tree with its light cloud of glinting leaf rising abruptly from the solid-packed red earth of an anthill, all bathed in a magical sky-reflected light, and her heart moved painfully in exquisite sadness There was a slow integration, during which she, and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sun-warmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery

²⁷ Lessing (1952, p. 6).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 56.

mealies, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms.³¹

These moments of realization are especially prominent in *The Four-Gated City* and mark a central means whereby Martha's homeworld shifts; what was "other" is assimilated into her sense of acceptability and becomes a standard whereby she verifies reality: "[T]he measure was that experience ... which was the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld: that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed but flowing. It was a sense of movement, of separate things interacting and finally becoming one but greater—it was this which was her lodestone, even her conscience."³² This direct experience of a lived wholeness integrating differences contrasts sharply with Martha's childhood homeworld's rigid divisions between men and women, blacks and whites, English and Afrikaners, Jews and non-Jews, and so forth. In this sense, moments of realization are subversive in that they call taken-for-granted divisions into question and provoke Martha to see that they are not necessarily normal, ethically right, or accurate renderings of human life.³³

5 Finding One's Place

When she arrives in England, Martha is single and unattached. She has left Zambezia to find out who she is and, at least for a time, to be different from the Martha Quest of the past. When she encounters a stranger and he asks her name, Martha responds "Phyllis Jones," and "for an afternoon and evening she had been Phyllis Jones, with an imaginary history of wartime work in Bristol."³⁴ Martha has a moment of realization when she sees that people "filled in for you, out of what they wanted, needed, from—not you, not you at all—but from their own needs."³⁵ As a newcomer to a large city like London, Martha has a freedom to make herself anew: "For a few weeks she had been anonymous, unnoticed—free. Never before in her life had she known this freedom ... without boundaries, without definition, like a balloon drifting and bobbing, nothing had been expected of her."³⁶

One of the first Londoners Martha gets to know is Stella, a working-class woman living in the river docks of London's South Bank. By chance, Stella spots the foreign-looking Martha on the wharves one day and asks her to tea. Martha ends up living with her for a month because Stella has "an unfed longing for travel and experience which was titillated every minute by the river, by the ships that swung past her win-

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66–67.

³² Ibid., p. 260.

³³ In a 1984 interview, Lessing explains: "What interests me in people is not what makes them like everyone else, and what you can expect because they had this and that upbringing, but something else that can fight them out of it or make them different" (Bertelsen 1994, p. 132).

³⁴ Lessing (1969, p. 26).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

dows, by the talk of foreign countries.”³⁷ Stella’s curiosity is fed by outsider Martha’s stories of home, and Martha has a moment of realization:

Stella wanted Martha to talk about foreignness; and Martha, feeling that nothing in her experience could match up to such an appetite for the marvelous, made a discovery: that it was enough to say, the sun shines so, the moon does thus, people get up at such an hour, eat so and so, believe such and such—and it was enough. Because it was different.³⁸

Eventually, Martha must decide how she is to find her place in London. This process begins with becoming a temporary barmaid and café waitress, and considering employment offers via London contacts procured through her white African friends. She turns down these reasonable job possibilities because she recognizes how quickly they would straight-jacket her life as “legal secretary” or “administrator dealing with African affairs.” She has a moment of realization when, after having dinner with an attorney who wants her to work for his law firm as a liaison with African clients, she understands that “The trouble is, you have to choose a slot to fit yourself to, you have to narrow yourself down for this stratum or that.”³⁹

Because of her unwillingness to decide on her place in London’s occupational and social structure, Martha is uncertain and confused in her first several months in England and realizes how much there is to learn about this new country she has chosen: “so many invisible rules there are to break, rules invisible to those who lived them”—that aspect of homeworld whereby everything is as it is and not imagined otherwise.⁴⁰ Because of her unfamiliarity with the place, she has the unexpected realization that she is alone and recognizes that she has “never been anything else in her life.”⁴¹ In her solitude, she walks the London streets for hours, “not knowing where she was unless she walked beside the river,” with “her head cool, watchful, alert,” her heart “quietened and stilled.”⁴² Often on these walks, she experiences “a state of quiet and distance” far removed from “the humdrum of ordinary life.”⁴³ She realizes that if she walks long enough, eats irregularly, and sleeps minimally, then “her whole self cleared, lightened, [and] she became alive and light and aware.”⁴⁴ As the novel proceeds, moments of recognition like these contribute to Martha’s forging a home-world partly shaped by her London experiences but made unique by her psychological disposition, her African-homeworld background, and her intellectual, emotional, and intuitive sensibilities.

Through the contact of an African friend, Martha eventually finds a home in London when she goes to work as a live-in secretary for Mark Coldridge, a part-time

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

novelist and prosperous entrepreneur living in a large Georgian townhouse in the elite London neighborhood of Bloomsbury. Ultimately, Martha remains as Mark's employer for much of her adult life; the major portions of *The Four-Gated City* describe the shifting fortunes of the Coldridge family as largely seen through Martha's eyes. Eventually, she becomes housekeeper and surrogate mother for Mark's son, Francis, and Mark's nephew, Paul, whose mother committed suicide when Collin, her physicist-husband and Mark's younger brother, fled to the Soviet Union as a Russian spy.

Other than Martha, the most central character in *The Four-Gated City* is Mark's mentally ill wife, Lynda, diagnosed as schizophrenic with a history of long-term stays in mental hospitals. A few years after Martha begins working for Mark, Lynda makes the decision to return home to live in a basement apartment set up by Martha. Lynda's experiences play a pivotal role in determining Martha's future and in widening her homeworld in unimagined directions. Philosopher Anthony Steinbock points out that shifts in one's homeworld "may entail rejecting certain presuppositions of a homeworld, its values and demands; it may entail the renewal of a homeworld's norms, revitalizing and renewing its internal sense: it may even demand going against the prevalent normality, replacing old norms with a new ethical normality in an attempt to realize the homeworld more fully."⁴⁵ Martha's growing involvement with Lynda's situation radically shifts Martha's homeworld and draws her into experiences and possibilities she would never have encountered otherwise.

6 Encountering an Alienworld

In many ways, Martha's getting to know Lynda and coming to realize that Lynda is not really mentally ill but "different" from most "normal" people is one central message of *The Four-Gated City*: that human experience offers vastly more possibilities than human beings typically realize; that if one makes a sincere effort to understand others, he or she might discover aspects of human life and experience unsuspected before. Through moments of realization, Martha comes to understand Lynda's homeworld and to use that understanding to extend her own homeworld in ways that at first she cannot imagine.

One important conceptual clarification of Martha's progressive understanding and shifting homeworld is Anthony Steinbock's argument that human beings extend their homeworld via two sorts of lived exchanges between homeworld and alienworld—what he calls *appropriation* and *transgression*.⁴⁶ In *appropriation*, the person involves herself in situations of "the co-constitution of the alien through appropriate experience of the home."⁴⁷ In other words, the person realizes valuable but unnoticed qualities of her homeworld only because exposure to an alienworld helps her to see these qualities. In contrast, *transgression* involves the person in situations of "the

⁴⁵ Steinbock (1994a, p. 214).

⁴⁶ Steinbock (1995, p. 179).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

co-constitution of the home through the transgressive experience of the alien.”⁴⁸ In transgression, the person moves beyond the taken-for-granted comfort of her homeworld to an alienworld that offers unexpected experiences and understandings that the person may find of value and integrate into an expanded homeworld.

There are many situations in *The Four-Gated City* where Martha, in her dealings with the Coldridge family, draws on appropriation to clarify and strengthen her London homeworld—for example, editing Mark’s writings, becoming a surrogate mother for Francis and Paul, dealing with journalists who aim to sensationalize Mark’s “communist” connections, or becoming for a short time Mark’s lover (since Lynda refuses in any way to be his wife). In relation to Lynda, however, Martha’s homeworld shifts primarily because she has a series of realizations as to what “mental illness” *really is* through transgressive understandings of Lynda’s homeworld that Martha integrates into her own. Martha gradually realizes who Lynda is and why her behaviors, though seemingly atypical and “crazy,” are in fact reasonable and “sane,” once one *really* gets to know them.

Here, I overview Martha’s growing understanding of Lynda’s situation because her process of discovery demonstrates, two important points: first, that moments of realization are often pivotal for transforming, via transgression, our sense of who we are and for revising our homeworld; and, second, that “alienworlds” of people seemingly different from ourselves are sometimes a gateway for self-understanding and for a radical reconfiguration of our homeworld, provided we can set aside taken-for-granted points of view and come to see firsthand the homeworld of the other.

7 Realizing Another’s Experience

Several times during the years that Martha works for Mark and Lynda lives in the basement, she has a breakdown that returns her to a mental hospital or becomes a time when Mark takes care of her at home. Marking an event that becomes central for her shifting homeworld, Martha decides to attend to Lynda when she has another mental relapse, during which some days Lynda is relatively sensible and during other days when she “might be out of reach and did not hear or heard only what she chose”⁴⁹ Martha encounters “wide, strained eyes that Lynda held before Martha like a shield on which was written: *No, no, I’m not to be reached! Even, No, there’s no one here at all!*”⁵⁰ Though at first Martha does not understand their significance, there are features of Lynda’s apartment that disclose aspects of her illness, once Martha is more attuned to Linda’s actions. For example, all furniture in the living room is placed some three feet away from the walls to create a kind of runway space that extends along all four walls, on which to a height of about five feet are irregular rusty smudges—bloodstains from Lynda’s bitten finger ends.

When Martha asks Mark for advice on how to behave during Lynda’s difficult times, He suggests that she “be as sensible as possible,” but after a few days watch-

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lessing (1969, p. 507).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

ing Lynda, on her hands and knees crawling round and round the walls and muttering jumbled phrases, Martha decides to forsake reasonableness and join Lynda in her puzzling behaviors.⁵¹ Eating and sleeping very little like Lynda, Martha notices that her seeing and hearing become much more acute. She has a pivotal moment of realization, suddenly understanding that Lynda is testing the basement walls for a thin place where she might break through and become free:

Now she understood very well what Lynda was doing. When she pressed, assessed, gauged those walls, it was the walls of her own mind that she was exploring. She was asking: Why can't I get out. What is this thing that holds me in? Why is it so strong when I can *imagine and, indeed, half remember what is outside*.⁵²

Over the several weeks that Lynda has her “breakdown,” Martha comes to two moments of realization: First, through firsthand experience, she understands that Lynda’s “madness” has its own validity; second, she realizes that the supposed “mentally ill” person may have atypical sensibilities and perceptions that could offer unusual and valuable insights to the so-called normal world of “sane” humanity. In this sense, Lynda symbolizes the mad, blind seer “who alone speaks the truth but is scorned by the world as a lunatic.”⁵³ For Martha, her encounter with the “ill” Lynda marks a life-changing moment of realization:

Suddenly she began to understand—she realized this was one of the moments in one’s life after a period of days, or hours, of months, of years, of handling in one’s mind, brooding about, wrestling with, material—then suddenly it all begins to click into place, to make sense Instead of passively idling, like an engine, while the current of Lynda’s talk went by, she became a part of it, and the clues or signals clicked in place: she understood what it was that poor Lynda was saying, what she had been saying, trying to say, poor Lynda, for years.⁵⁴

As Martha gains in her understanding of Lynda’s situation, she realizes that, for the many years that she has lived in the Coldridge house, “she had been a clod, and a lump, not understanding the first thing about Lynda, which was—that she never need have been ill at all.”⁵⁵ Growing up, Lynda had parents who did not get along, and she acquired, “before she could talk, that sharpness, the acuteness of the child with parents at loggerheads.”⁵⁶ She developed an “antenna for atmospheres and tensions

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 506. My account of Martha’s experience with Lynda’s mental breakdown is considerably truncated; I emphasize aspects of Martha’s experience that radically reshape her own understanding of what humanness is and dramatically reconfigure her own homeworld.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 516.

⁵³ Knapp (1984, p. 99).

⁵⁴ Lessing (1969, p. 542).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

and what was behind words.”⁵⁷ When she was eleven, her mother died, and her father married a woman who Lynda sensed did not like her with the result that her distress and upset—what psychiatrists called “hallucinations”—led to her being committed to the first of several mental institutions, where she was treated with, among other things, insulin and electric shocks. Eventually, she realized that the only way to escape her confinement was to pretend she was well: “She kept quiet, paid a great deal of attention to her clothes (for she noted that ‘they’ [the psychiatrists] took this as a good sign), was beautiful, and lived in a state of terror.”⁵⁸

8 Exploring Inner Terrain

Partly with Martha’s assistance, Lynda works to forego her medications, assist with the Coldridge household, and live a more or less normal family life (though there are setbacks). At the same time, Martha has discovered through her extrasensory encounters during Lynda’s mental breakdown, that there are realms of human experience of which she had no inkling. Finding a quiet apartment where she won’t be disturbed, she uses fasting and minimal sleep to reconnect with the unusual experiences she encountered during her time with Lynda. Her aim is “to challenge her own mind.”⁵⁹ Martha finds an unfurnished apartment and shuts “herself into a large room which ... had a thick carpet on the floor to deaden sound.”⁶⁰ She demands that the landlord “not summon doctors or psychiatrists, policemen.”⁶¹ She seeks “privacy to explore my own being.”⁶² She is not sure what might happen:

She knew there were areas she was likely to have to go through ... She was more than likely to become hysterical: she had in the past [working with Lynda]. There were rewards—oh, yes, she remembered there were, though not clearly at all, except as a fact. Looking back on the time she was first in London [her long walks], and then again on the recent time with Lynda, what she remembered was an intensity of packed experience—which she longed to have again. But there was nothing in particular that she expected.⁶³

During the several weeks in which she explores the inner terrain of her mind, body, and feelings, Martha has a series of revelatory experiences that introduce her to modes and depths of awareness she had first met via her time with Lynda’s breakdown but now become much more intense (she will later say that “it was if she had crammed a dozen years of intensive living into a few weeks”).⁶⁴ She comes to a

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 545.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 556.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 553.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 551.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 557.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 559.

profound understanding that has a deep, multivalent meaning beyond its cliché-like verbal formulation: “Living is simply a process of developing different ‘ears,’ senses, with which one ‘heard,’ experienced, what one couldn’t before.”⁶⁵

Near the end of the novel, Martha walks along a river in the English countryside, feeling herself as “a heavy, impervious, insensitive lump, that like a planet doomed always to be dark on one side, had vision in front only ...”⁶⁶ In spite of this personal lifelessness and inertia, Martha has realized, via continuing moments of realization, that the most important effort is “that one simply has to go on, take one step after another: this process itself held the key.”⁶⁷ In realizing what the next step must be, Martha understands that she must continue to develop her inner sensibilities and possibilities: “She thought ... Where? But where, How? Who? ... Then silence and the birth of repetition. *Where?* Here. *Here?* Here, where else, you fool, you poor fool, where else has it been, ever ...?”⁶⁸

9 “There is no Substitute for Experience”

Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Natanson writes that the achievement of imaginative literature is its portrayal of “the experiential foundation of our world.”⁶⁹ In smaller or larger measure, poems, short stories, and novels reflect “the big world of real life.”⁷⁰ In her many novelistic and short-story accounts of human lifeworlds and homeworlds, Doris Lessing provides sensitive, in-depth descriptions of human life as it has been in the twentieth century; most of her observations and conclusions continue to have bearing on our perplexing twenty-first-century time. For Lessing, human experience is the alpha and omega of all creative writing; in *The Four-Gated City*, she mentions at least six times that “There is no substitute for experience.”⁷¹ In this sense, Lessing’s writings parallel the phenomenological interest in lived experience, though obviously, she gives most of her attention to specific lifeworld situations and remains submerged in the naïveté of her own natural attitude, as remarkably engaged and discerning as it is.

My major aim in this article has been to draw on one novel by Lessing to illustrate one person’s process through which she realizes the homeworld of another, whereby

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 225.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 614. The novel proper ends with this scene, but the book continues with a prophetic appendix that describes a future worldwide apocalypse brought on by nuclear and chemical contamination of large portions of the earth’s surface, including most of Great Britain. The appendix briefly describes what happens to the novel’s major characters and indicates how clairvoyance and other “paranormal” sensibilities play an important role in guiding people to safety and helping them to restart their shattered lives. I don’t discuss the appendix here because it points toward a phenomenology of dramatically ruptured lifeworlds, natural attitudes, and homeworlds—a topic beyond the range of this article. This appendix foreshadows Lessing’s foray into space fiction, including her five-volume “Shikasta” series (1979–1983).

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 611.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 615.

⁶⁹ Natanson (1962, p. 97).

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷¹ Lessing (1969, p. 122, 218, 360, 391, 464, 572).

her own homeworld shifts in supportive, unanticipated ways. Partly because Martha attempts to discover new ways of understanding, she is able to accept and experience Lynda's considerably different homeworld. For sure, Martha makes these discoveries within the natural attitude but, even so, they have colossal significance for Lynda's future and for the trajectory of the Coldridge household. Martha's empathy and openness are a valuable model for phenomenologists because she demands that her understandings arise from human experience and disallow any claims or demands ungrounded in Lynda's unusual but *whole* homeworld. As Steinbock explains:

Not everyone participates [in a homeworld] in the same way. Since normal and abnormal, home and alien are “operative concepts”—concepts that occur on many levels and whose contents shift depending on the context—there are many ways in which one can be normal and abnormal, familiar and unfamiliar, acquainted and unacquainted, and still be home, other, or alien.⁷²

One of Lessing's most laudable achievements in *The Four-Gated City* is to present an unusual situation—Lynda's homeworld—and to make it accessible to readers, who might in the future see “mentally ill” individuals in a more informed, supportive light. In a series of articles on “renewal” written in the early 1920s, Husserl spoke of the struggle toward a “better humanity” and a “genuine human culture.”⁷³ He pointed out that, for a homeworld to continue to be a homeworld, the process requires what he called a “continual renewal,” by which he meant “to do that which is the *best possible* at a given time and in this way to become better and better according to the present possibility.”⁷⁴ In all of her writings, Lessing is interested in locating both the merits and faults of human life, particularly in our modern times. Though she is not a phenomenologist, she contributes to Husserl's renewal in that she presents human worlds forthrightly and points to ways whereby those worlds might be understood and acted upon in ways more respectful, fair, kindly, and sustaining.

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⁷² Steinbock (1995, pp. 223–224).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 200. For a discussion of these articles, see Steinbock (1994b, 1995, pp. 199–208). By invitation of a Japanese journal, *The Kaizo* (meaning “renewal”), Husserl wrote five articles, though only three were published; see Husserl (1981, 1989). On Husserl's understanding of renewal, see Allen (1981) and Moran (2018, pp. 26–27).

⁷⁴ Husserl (1989, p. 36); quoted in Steinbock 1995 (p. 203). Husserl wrote of “increasing success in actualizing genuine and enriching values.... *Something new must happen*. It must take place *within* us and be carried out by us, as members of humanity who live in this world, forming the world and being formed by it” (Husserl 1981, p. 326).

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