Mimesis, Metaphor and Representation: holding out an Olive branch to the emergent Schreiner canon

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ABSTRACT There are complex and interesting representational issues and interpretational practices involved in claiming to 'know past lives' and these have particular resonance in feminist terms. These ideas are examined in relation to a particular case study, of the feminist writer and theorist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), although the discussion contributes to the 'women's history and post-structuralism' debate by eschewing taking up an abstract 'position' in favour of examining these ideas through a grounded historical example. A range of representations of Schreiner is discussed, including a photograph which her estranged husband contemporaneously had 'touched up' before sending it to some of her friends just after her death, and present-day representations of Schreiner in the emergent feminist canon of claimed knowledge about her. The ideas of mimesis and alterity are used both in relation to photographic representation and also in relation to the use of metaphor to stand for perceived facets of Schreiner's character. Representational issues are fundamental and ought not to be excised from feminist discussion; at the same time, the past and its 'irreducible things that happened' must also be taken seriously.

Introduction

The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power ... [this] as necessary to the very process of knowing as it is to the construction and subsequent naturalization of identities.[2]

What (or how) do photographs mean in the context of autobiography? Do they come to the rescue of autobiographical referentiality through the presentation of the author's body in the world or do they undermine
the integrity of referentiality though multiple or posed presentations? ... it may be more accurate to say that photographs, which can display many views and variant versions of the same person, simply supply a visual metaphor for the divided and multiple ... self.[3]

Writing about 'past lives' in autobiography and biography has become increasingly popular over the last two decades, among readers in general but also among feminist readers in particular, as Nancy Miller's perceptive overview of 'life writings' and the position of feminist memoirs within them has pointed out.[4] Alongside this, autobiography and biography, with variant forms of the 'documents of life' or 'personal narratives' [5] such as diaries, letters and memoirs, have been receiving increasing academic attention across a wide spectrum of disciplines and multidisciplines. And from an initial focus on the 'spotlight' these cast on particular individuals [6], there has been an increasing recognition that they also contain - albeit in more subterranean ways - accounts of 'other lives', those of the other people that form the familial and social context that their particular subjects are a constituent part of.

'Past lives' and 'other lives' are two important preoccupations of the contemporary 'gaze' on social life and society. Indeed, in my view, this is more appropriately characterised as an 'ontological turn', rather than as a linguistic, cultural, spatial or temporal turn, in contemporary intellectual preoccupations, as others have proposed. Consequently, when Greg Dening makes the claim that 'Knowing the past, which we call history, and knowing the other, which we call anthropology, are the two great cultural metaphors by which we know ourselves and knowing ourselves constitute ourselves' [7], I find myself rejecting his association of such concerns with these two disciplines alone, as well as accepting his broad conclusion that it is through knowing 'others then' and 'others now' that individual and collective identity is constituted.

The representational and interpretational practices involved in the idea of 'knowing past lives' and 'knowing other lives' give rise to foundational epistemological issues. And while the 'ontological turn' is a general phenomenon, feminism more than other political/intellectual approaches has pioneered and promoted an interest in past lives.[8] My interest here, therefore, is in exploring some of the epistemological issues concerning representation which arise around the feminist interest in past lives. In order to put flesh on the bones, as it were, I discuss these matters through a 'case study' which concerns a number of different kinds of representation (and remembering here that 'representation' can be visual, but it can also be textual or oral as well) of and about the feminist writer and theorist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920).[9]

'Knowing the past' by investigating particular past lives necessarily contains competing ideas (from contemporaries, from present-day scholarly
or popular discourses) about what such a person was ‘really like’. Here what
is ‘real’ (factual knowledge about a person), and its perceived relationship to
the ‘mimetic’ (a representation of the person which may be thought a ‘good’
or ‘bad’ mimesis or ‘likeness’ of them), is centrally important. I shall discuss
some of the issues involved in thinking about the ‘real’ and the ‘mimetic’ in
relation to a photograph of Olive Schreiner taken not long before she died.
In doing so, I look at how descriptions about people are often made using
metaphors. Metaphors which are used to characterise the behaviour or cast
of mind of a person can sometimes become tropes which frame, in the sense
of govern, how we think about a person or a group of people and so come
to stand for their entire character.[10] Consequently, I shall look at the
governing metaphors used about Olive Schreiner and what these do, in
terms of how present-day readers understand and come to know about this
woman of the past. In doing this, I shall also examine some of the ways that
a dominating discourse, in the form of a canon of received knowledge about
someone, in this particular case Olive Schreiner, can be interrogated by
looking for contrary facts which dispute, undermine or otherwise trouble
‘what is (apparently) known’. My discussion throughout is couched in the
frame of ‘feminist auto/biography’, a conceptual approach I have developed
over the last decade across a number of detailed historical and other case
studies as well as within theoretical work.[11]

In this article, I discuss these issues as they arise in a feminist frame
and in relation to a case study concerning representations of Olive
Schreiner. However, I do so to illuminate some general issues, because
although these matters take a particular shape around this case study, they
confront other researchers dealing with representations of past lives as
well.[12] In addition, I do not see these matters as ‘problems’ which occur
because things have gone wrong, but rather as ‘problematics’. I use this
term ‘problematic’ less in its Althusserian sense and more in its
philosophical and sociological one, as intellectual concerns or issues which
need thinking about and appropriate analytic and procedural means adopted
to explore them even if (indeed, especially if) we cannot finally resolve
them.[13] My discussion of mimesis, metaphor and representation also
provides a coda to the ‘women’s history and post-structuralism’ debate
which took place in this journal, starting with an article in 1994 by Joan
Hoff and then through a number of shorter contributions during 1996.[14]
The central questions raised in this debate – what ideas and epistemic
communities are ascendant in feminist discourse; how are dominant
discourses constituted and reconstituted; is there ‘real life’ outside of
discursive practices; are social and interpersonal means stable or unstable;
what are archival and other sources referential of; are ‘compelling
chronological narratives’ intellectually passé or do they remain prime; what
can Women’s Studies know if we ‘do not consider women’s experiences and
actions as real'; and if 'gender' isn't *a priori* a characteristic of social life then how can a feminist analysis be grounded? - are those that I explore through this case study. I eschew taking one 'side' or the other in favour of examining these questions through a historical example in order to tease out what these matters 'look like' in grounded research practice.

**Mimesis: rethinking the realistic and the real**

We use a variety of different means to invoke or evoke 'a person who is not there', including people who are not there because their's is a 'past life' (in the case of the 'gaze' of history and biography ...) or an 'other life' (in the case of sociology, anthropology ...) These means include written descriptions or accounts of people in letters, diaries and journals and other 'private' accounts, in photographs or films or videos of people or events, and in a range of public documents. Although diverse in form, what they share is their *mimetic* nature, which Michael Taussig has described as:

- the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, 
- imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other ...
- to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character 
- and power.[15]

Taussig's interesting discussion goes on to point out that this mimetic function plays a particularly resonant role in relation to the past lives of history and the other lives of colonialism. My particular interest in the idea of mimesis comes from this, for Olive Schreiner is not only a person 'of the past' but also of one specific 'moment' in it which for many represents the quintessence of imperialism and which saw the establishment of an increasingly apartheid South African state out of the white imperial and colonial scramble for Africa.[16] Latter-day representations of Schreiner, I shall propose, have assumed 'character and power' in relation to hindsight knowledge about imperialism and apartheid in South Africa.

Mimesis contains an interesting and intriguing set of moves or 'translations'. A person, 's/he', becomes an 'it' when they appear in (visual, textual, oral) representational form in their 'likeness' in photographs, memoirs and so on; and this 'it' is then seen as holding something of the nature or being of 's/he', for the object is personalised by being read 'as if' the person (as in, 'oh look, there's Mary in that photograph', or 'that account of his life is just like Martin'). An example of the basic process involved is usefully provided by the title of Eugene O'Neill's trilogy of plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra* [17]: mourning becomes characterised around the person of Electra, and then the name of Electra becomes a signifier of mourning. Within this 'forwards and backwards' process, the qualities of mimesis and alterity are closely, indeed symbiotically, tied. Thus, the mimesis is the 'same as'; but, at the same time, as a representation it 'works' by virtue of being an alterity, 'different from' at one and the same time.

In addition, this one: we interpret something of the character of mourning, through a different form from the 'original' on a subsequent life of its own, mourning, say 'mourning' as predicated upon, an act of the symbolic aspects of the mimesis/alterity. Other, intellectual issues in research maintain an example.

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Figure 1. Olive Schreiner, un-retouched photograph in her passport, the South African Library, Cape Town, August 1920.

A passport photograph of Olive was 'taken' immediately before she died in August 1920, when she was...
virtue of being an alterity to the person it is 'of'. That is, it is actually 'different from' at one and the same time that it is also 'same as' the person concerned. In addition, this process is also a fundamentally interpretational one: we interpret something about Electra, but also something about the character of mourning, through it; and because the mimesis recreates in a different form from the 'original', this mimetic artifice or product can take on a subsequent life of its own. Thus, say 'Electra' and one also says mourning, say 'mourning' and Electra comes to mind, and both involve, are predicated upon, an act of interpretation. However, these interpretational aspects of the mimesis/alterity relationship raise practical as well as intellectual issues in research terms, as I can best explain through an example.

Figure 1. Olive Schreiner, un-retouched (INIL 3187) is published with the kind permission of the South African Library, Cape Town, South Africa.

A passport photograph of Olive Schreiner accompanies my discussion, which was 'taken' immediately before she sailed back to South Africa from London in August 1920, when she was sixty-five and some four months before she
Liz Stanley

died.[18] The photograph was found in Schreiner's possessions after her death by her estranged husband, Samuel 'Cron' Cronwright-Schreiner, who sent a copy of 'it' to one of her closest friends, Betty Molteno. He wrote to Molteno that:

I knew how you'd value the photo of Olive ... I managed to unearth ...
taken on the 6th August (she sailed on the 13th). I then had it touched up ... It is Olive old, weary &. so to say, dying, with her back to the wall.
One misses the violent force & the radiant energy & vitality which characterised her in her glorious power & which she showed at times even to the last; but I am so glad to have it.[19]

The crucial question I am raising about this photograph is whether Cronwright-Schreiner sent Molteno a copy of 'it' or whether he sent her a copy of something else and not this 'it' at all.

The photograph that appears here is in fact a copy of the original, the one that had not been 'touched up' by Cronwright-Schreiner so as to remove the most obvious signs of Olive Schreiner's ill-health through chronic asthma and heart disease. As his comments to Betty Molteno indicate, this original photograph of Olive Schreiner was certainly seen by Cronwright-Schreiner to be a realistic one, in the sense of showing her as she 'really was' at that time in August 1920, 'old, weary &. so to say, dying'. But Cronwright-Schreiner's comments to Molteno also invoke what he assumes will be their shared view that there was another, and even more real, Olive Schreiner antecedent to it, an Olive Schreiner who embodied 'force, radiant energy and vitality'. It was this 'real' Olive Schreiner who he presumed her friends would want to remember 'as her'; and thus the 'touching up' he had carried out by a photographer in order to reinscribe the real Olive Schreiner back into a mimetic but merely realistic, rather than real, photographic representation of her.

The product of Cronwright-Schreiner's action in having this original photograph 'touched up' was an image of an alteric Olive Schreiner, one which was touched up so as to 'restore' a representation of the real woman from that 'before' time, which he writes had characterised her 'in her glorious power', as his letter phrases it. That is, the photograph that resulted and which he sent to Molteno and some other close friends was not mimetic, a copy (the usual way the medium of photography is described), but instead alteric, other, different from. Thus, Rob Stones's contention that 'The thinner the presentation of mimesis in an account, the more open it is to manipulation by the author' [20] is not only wrong in the case of this particular photograph, but also of all the other many 'touchers up' of mimetic forms as well. 'Thick mimesis' can result from such manipulations, as even a cursory thought about the history of official photography in the USSR demonstrates, with all the 'now you see him, now you don't' photographs containing and not containing Trotsky being but one example among many that could be given.

The first is the idea that something is more real than the merely real, but not others can indicate the 'realness' of Olive Schreiner more than, rather, it needed returning to 'the real' by passing of time had taken away representation as in some way, potentially holding this fund of Schreiner within it.[21] The second is whether the 'moment' of this photograph was not, rather, was a moment that never was, or which never actually existed. Thus the time that the photograph was written (say, invoked through an extension of the moment that apparently show an interior (relationships). And the third is what has not been 'touched up', and are both representations, realistic, are both representations, from – each other. However the people use mimetic forms 'as things other' to something else, something else of Olive Schreiner symbolically, as well as, the 'actual moment' of the people who looked at it (Molteno) in a knowing way, recoverable from it by any one else' of the meaning that comes but it cannot be shown to others, and weary to the 'radiant embodiment' of the real Olive Schreiner that Cronwright-Schreiner.
among many that could be adduced in this regard. And also, ‘thin representation’ opens up the presentation (not representation, for this ‘has never been’) of alterities which can be even more real than the ‘actually real’ realistic character of mimesis. There are some additional things going on here in the interplay of real and realistic, mimesis and alterity, representation and presentation, which are also relevant to my discussion of interpretational issues surrounding representation which I want to highlight.

The first is the idea that there is a ‘something’ about a person which is more real than the merely representational and that some representations but not others can indicate this. That is, for Cronwright-Schreiner, the ‘realness’ of Olive Schreiner needed adding to the original photograph. Or, rather, it needed returning to ‘her’, in the form of her image and to what the passing of time had taken away from this; and this involved him treating the representation as in some way actually being ‘the thing itself’, or rather as potentially holding this fundamental ‘beingness’ of the person of Olive Schreiner within it.[21] The second is the excision of time, which here is neither tempus fugit nor tempus paribus, but rather time apparently restored to itself, albeit in mimetic – or alteric – form.[22] That is, the particular ‘moment’ of this photograph of Olive Schreiner, taken at some time during 6 August 1920, is used by Cronwright-Schreiner to show a moment that never was, in order to characterise or personify something which never actually existed. The ‘restored’ Olive Schreiner did not exist at the time that the photograph apparently mimics; and instead this was, so to say, invoked through an exterior form (that is, the photograph) so as to apparently show an interior moment (the feelings and memories of close relationships). And the third is the recognition that what is ‘touched up’ and what has not been ‘touched up’, that what is real and what is merely realistic, are both representations as much as – although in different ways from – each other. However (and it is a highly consequential ‘however’), people use mimetic forms ‘as though’ they are real, thinking through them to something else, something other than the mimesis itself. This photograph of Olive Schreiner symbolically represents this ‘something else’ as much as, as well as, the ‘actual moment’ it literally represents, for it had meanings for the people who looked at it (including Cronwright-Schreiner and Betty Molteno) in a knowing way, which lie beyond the image itself and are not recoverable from it by any casual or unknowing looking. This ‘something else’ of the meaning that comes from knowing may be seen by some people, but it cannot be shown to others: only some people can see through ‘the old and weary’ to the ‘radiant energy and vitality’ that is characterised as the real Olive Schreiner that Cronwright-Schreiner and Betty Molteno knew.

The interpretational and representational issues I have outlined here around the un/touched up photograph of Olive Schreiner are not specifically feminist ones but they certainly have a general importance for
feminist analysis, for it is by such means that representations of women and the interpretation of these representations ‘in life’ are produced and ‘work’ in often powerful and consequential ways.[23] In addition, there are also issues here which bear in a very direct way upon feminist analytic concerns. Thus, in his letter, Cronwright-Schreiner presents his correspondent, Betty Molteno, with a very particular character for her now deceased friend Olive Schreiner: the real woman was someone characterised by her ‘violent force’, ‘radiant energy and vitality’ and ‘glorious power’. While some of these terms may be gender-neutral, others are clearly not; and violence, force and power are not only (stereotypically) masculinised terms, but also terms associated with the dominant trope of Cronwright-Schreiner’s biography, The Life of Olive Schreiner [24], which presents its subject as a damaged, meteoric, child-like genius. Cronwright-Schreiner’s letter contains both gendered and non-gendered descriptive terms; however, both are consequential by being harnessed to his interpretation of what constitutes the real Olive Schreiner, and it is this which is signified mimetically in the photograph and which defaces, literally so, its subject. The Olive Schreiner who was her own woman, the woman who was old, dying and with her back to the wall, is defaced, to be replaced by his Olive Schreiner. Succinctly, Schreiner herself, and her friend Molteno’s view of her, are both removed from sight; what we see is what Cronwright-Schreiner decided the looker would see: the ‘really real’ as he determined it, rather than the ‘merely realistic’, which he rejected and made invisible.

Consequently, what I have done here by reproducing the ‘original’, that is, the ‘un-retouched Olive Schreiner’ rather than the ‘touched up’ photograph Cronwright-Schreiner sent to Betty Molteno, is to interrupt the mimesis and alterity dynamic which he had set up (although, of course, it is to replace it with another version, a mimesis, rather than something which is ‘really real’, the woman herself). Whether we see in this photograph an image which was prior to the posterior mimesis created by Cronwright-Schreiner (because ‘the original’) or not will depend on the relationship which is perceived to exist between his ‘description’ of Olive Schreiner (old, back to the wall), and the image in the photograph (a woman with her arms behind her back staring at an unseen camera). What ‘stands between’ the description and the image is interpretation.[25] All representations depend upon interpretation, of course, because active looking at and active thinking about these are involved, and these activities take place outside of the photographic frame, in the mind of the person who looks at a representational image and the talk they engage in about it, as well as in the mimesis/alterity dynamic. However, Cronwright-Schreiner has both placed interpretation within the frame and also and at the same time made it invisible: it would take a very knowing eye indeed to detect the ‘touching up’ that produced the ‘other photograph’ that Betty Molteno received.

Holding Out an Olive Branch

The idea of ‘Olive Schreiner’. The previous section of my discussion ‘touching up’ which the photograph and also Cronwright-Schreiner’s manuscripts. It has also been the nature of representation and realism. The metaphors that we write, how we theorise, have we need to be aware of our embedded within them are authors and readers, knowing ways which may or may consequential.[27] The central assumption raises issues and questions of the knower, Olive Schreiner (claim to authority is made on representation). In addition, making such claims also con
feminist analysis, for it is by such means that representations of women and the interpretation of these representations ‘in life’ are produced and ‘work’ in often powerful and consequential ways.[23] In addition, there are also issues here which bear in a very direct way upon feminist analytic concerns. Thus, in his letter, Cronwright-Schreiner presents his correspondent, Betty Molteno, with a very particular character for her now deceased friend Olive Schreiner: the real woman was someone characterised by her ‘violent force’, ‘radiant energy and vitality’ and ‘glorious power’. While some of these terms may be gender-neutral, others are clearly not; and violence, force and power are not only (stereotypically masculinised terms, but also terms associated with the dominant trope of Cronwright-Schreiner’s biography, The Life of Olive Schreiner [24], which presents its subject as a damaged, meteoric, child-like genius. Cronwright-Schreiner’s letter contains both gendered and non-gendered descriptive terms; however, both are consequential by being harnessed to his interpretation of what constitutes the real Olive Schreiner, and it is this which is signified mimetically in the photograph and which defaces, literally so, its subject. The Olive Schreiner who was her own woman, the woman who was old, dying and with her back to the wall, is defaced, to be replaced by his Olive Schreiner. Succinctly, Schreiner herself, and her friend Molteno’s view of her, are both removed from sight; what we see is what Cronwright-Schreiner decided the looker would see: the ‘really real’ as he determined it, rather than the ‘merely realistic’, which he rejected and made invisible.

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The sexual/textual politics involved here, then, concern interpretation and representation, and the way Cronwright-Schreiner has abrogated the interpretation of meaning usually involved in the 'look, see' gaze we give to a photograph, doing so by placing his interpretation, hidden, within the photograph he sent to Schreiner's friends by means of the 'touching up' of its subject. This directly parallels or mimics the way in which Cronwright-Schreiner engaged in related excisions and defacements. Thus, what stands between his biography and letters of Olive Schreiner and his edition of her posthumous publications on the one hand, and the present-day reader of these on the other, is another 'beneath the surface' set of interpretational and representational practices. In these, letters were bowdlerised, altered and sometimes manufactured, and manuscripts were intrusively edited, by him; and thousands of Olive Schreiner's letters, her diaries and journals and some manuscripts were destroyed by Cronwright-Schreiner once he had used them.[26] Cronwright-Schreiner's view of the 'really real' as he determined it has insistently excised, defaced, moulded, how readers have been constrained to interpret and understand 'the woman herself'. Subverting this has of necessity been propelled, not by reinterpreting his view (for, as I shall go suggest, much feminist work has instead recycled aspects of it), but rather through searching out documentary materials which escaped his excisions, defacements and bowdlerising.

**Holding Out an Olive Branch, Metaphorically Speaking**

The idea of 'Olive Schreiner, not/touched up' acted as a metaphor in the previous section of my discussion, having been used to indicate the literal 'touching up' which the photographer did on Cronwright-Schreiner's behalf and also Cronwright-Schreiner's own 'touching up' of letters and of manuscripts. It has also been used to discuss something else, concerning the nature of representation and its complex relationship to reality and to realism. The metaphors that scholars use to represent how we think, how we write, how we theorise, have epistemological reverberations. Consequently, we need to be aware of our own and other people's uses of them, for embedded within them are overlaying knowledge-claims which position authors and readers, knowing subjects and the objects of their knowing, in ways which may or may not be intended but which are always consequential.[27]

The central assumption and defining trope of biography immediately raises issues and questions of epistemology, for this is at basis a claim of 'I the knower, Olive Schreiner (or X or Y) the known' (and, of course, a similar claim to authority is made by the autobiographer and their own self-life-representation). In addition, the surrounding metaphors and tropes used in making such claims also condition what kind of 'knowing' relationship this
36

is – whether it is seen as certain or provisional, partial or complete, unique or shared, and so on. The biography of Olive Schreiner that Cronwright-Schreiner produced, for instance, makes some absolutely certain knowledge-claims about her and invokes these through a dominant metaphor, that of the ‘flawed genius’. [28] This metaphor draws on culturally pervasive ideas about genius discussed in The Life of Olive Schreiner which are related to its subject, so that even resisting readers, who might neither see Schreiner as ‘a genius’ nor accept ideas about genius in general, are nonetheless thereby implicated in thinking about these ideas in connection with her.

I am particularly interested here in the way metaphor can be used to indicate dominant motifs in character or personality, and indeed can be used to ‘stand for’ a whole life. Thus, for instance, Gordon Haight’s interpretation of George Eliot as ‘leaning upon’ George Henry Lewes acts in this way, as do the metaphors used to ‘stand for’ the people and lives discussed in Lytton Strachey’s Eminent Victorians, and indeed within its title as its key trope. [29] Here metaphor acts, or rather claims to act, as a key to the inner meaning of a life, which the reader can then read back into and use to interpret other aspects of this life, and it acts thereby as a means of closure, for what it provides is a conclusion. Although rhetorically it is apparently used in an open way, it is in fact a means of closing off further interpretation – we do not have to think too much about George Eliot or General Gordon or Florence Nightingale, because we know what was really going on by having this neatly summarised for us in metaphorical form.

The metaphors we use for how we think about past lives are important and we should be alive to our uses of them, firstly, because they advance overlaying knowledge-claims about the subject; and, secondly, because they position authors and readers, knowing subjects and the objects (other lives, past lives) of their knowing, in a hierarchical relationship in connection with such knowledge. To take up the stance of ‘I the knower, Olive Schreiner the known’ has implications for a feminist politics, but, more importantly for this present discussion, it also has implications for feminist scholarship. The philosopher Jean Grimshaw [30] has argued that we can, we should, treat metaphor more as a tool and less as a means of closure in feminist debates and arguments. I take this to mean not just having a reflexive awareness of the structures and consequences of our metaphors for thinking and theorising, but also ensuring their explosion into competing understandings, for doing this thereby changes the original metaphor, displaces its analytical placing as, and not just at, the apex of a set of knowledge-claims. The spirit of this is encapsulated in the aphorism that we should ‘think through metaphors, not think by them’. This is one of the purposes of my discussion of metaphor here, to use this to think through the tropes that structure what is written about Olive Schreiner and also other ‘past lives’ and the claims embedded in, authorised and apparently legitimated by this.
This provides my route into discussion of some aspects of the emergent ‘Schreiner canon’, the facts that are said to be known about Olive Schreiner. I do this through the lens of another metaphor, that of the ‘olive branch’. This metaphor is invoked in the subtitle of my article and it acts as a means of thinking about the disputes concerning facts and interpretations that exist around and about Schreiner and the emergence from this of a dominant discourse in Schreiner scholarship and accompanying subordinate interpretive positions. This metaphor draws upon cultural referents every bit as much as Cronwright-Schreiner’s notion of flawed genius: an ‘olive branch’ is something people wave when they want to capitulate, a sign of peace, and the metaphor plays on the association of an olive branch with Olive Schreiner’s name and it also invokes her well-known pacifism. However, it will become clear that my usage is in fact ironic [31], invoked to say something about the mundane ways power operates in academic discourse. I am thereby using this metaphorical device to position myself, not as an ingénue with pacifist intentions, but rather as disingenuous in my artful use of irony so as to take up an actually combatant position.

The origins and progress of the construction of an emergent ‘Schreiner canon’ of ‘the facts’ considerably interests me, both in its own right and as an example of general processes of canon formation in academic discourse.[32] Individual pieces of scholarly work on Olive Schreiner and/or her writing each provide particular arguments and advance particular claims. What has become a dominating strand within this ‘field of scholarly work’ is characterised by a circle of inter-referencing, treating key secondary sources as though containing primary data, with the consequence that the often unsettled, unproven or even disproved character of some of the claims made about Schreiner is somehow ‘lost’ in their presentation as ‘certain facts’ (because A and B contain them’). What results are ‘facts’ about Schreiner which are actually highly arguable claims but which are presented instead as both certain and definitive of the woman; these are assembled into an integrated ‘character’ or ‘personality’ which is assigned to her and which trades on the kind of shorthand summary ‘descriptions’ that metaphor provides.[33]

The emergent canon of ‘the facts’ about Olive Schreiner begins with the originatory characterisation of her through Cronwright-Schreiner’s metaphor of ‘flawed genius’, as a tempestuous, wilful, damaged, lying child [34]; while what he proposed was her accompanying self-involvement and unrealistic self-importance has been taken to be confirmed by what appears to be the trivia of her letters.[35] This was followed by the claim that Schreiner’s asthmatic personality was the psychosomatic product of her neuroticism, itself caused by what is presented as a damaged early childhood and infant relationship with her tyrannical mother.[36] Racism was then later imputed to Schreiner’s insistence on the importance of women’s
subordination in South Africa [37]: and her political views were characterised as evidencing an essentialist maternalism and racial primitivism seen to stem from her social Darwinism.[38] Schreiner's published fiction writing has also been depicted as flawed because of her presumed inability to write coherent plots and to produce convincing characters [39]; and the conflicts said to have racked her life are also seen to have prevented her from finishing her novel, From Man to Man, with this being characterised as a confessional she supposedly rewrote throughout her adult life.[40] Schreiner's South African and feminist theory writings have also been characterised as racist because they are interpreted as being reliant on evolutionary thinking [41] and this has culminated in the contention that her supposed racial supremacism derived from eugenic theory, and her purported eugenicism is seen to have led her into a crude racism about 'inferior' whites as well as blacks.[42] In a discussion some fifteen years ago, I suggested that the governing metaphor of the ascendant strand of interpretation was that of the 'asthmatic personality of Olive Schreiner' [43], while now I conclude it would be better collected under the trope of 'Olive Schreiner the social Darwinist'. In addition, although nowhere directly written about, behind this governing trope and its purportedly 'descriptive' elements lies another interpretational device, one which is unacknowledged and unspoken and yet resounding 'there' as part of the interpretational moral economy involved: this is 'white South African'. This description holds the opprobrium it often does largely because of later political events after Olive Schreiner left South Africa in 1913, although these had their origins in the period when she played an actively oppositional role in Cape Colony and wider southern African public life. Some of the present-day condemnatory judgements of Schreiner and her work as Darwinist, racial primitivist, eugenist, racist, are achieved and apparently 'stick' through methods of working I have already outlined, but they have the resonance they do in the First World moral economy of guilt about apartheid and liberal condemnation of other people's assumed infringements of 'a line' on this so as to demonstrate one's own political and moral credentials.

However, there is something curious here, a puzzle which contributors to this characterisation of Olive Schreiner and her work appear not to have noticed. The composite depiction of 'her' in the canon is one of an extremely unattractive woman who was a kind of proto-Nazi in her crude racism, a sick neurotic who manufactured illness symptoms, and someone who also could not even write a good plot or produce decent characterisation. But this goes hand in hand with the critics' fascinated interest in Olive Schreiner and sometimes very emotional responses to her attempts to understand the rapidly changing world of colonial and imperial politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is a gulf between the
One important mechanism in producing this ‘portrait’ of Schreiner, I have suggested, lies in the recycling of claims made in secondary sources as though these were proven facts drawn from primary materials. Another and equally important mechanism lies in the way that the highly complex and internally fractured discourses of ‘social Darwinism’, ‘colonialism’, ‘imperialism’, ‘maternalism’, and ‘essentialism’ are flatly applied as though simple descriptions by seizing upon particular passages and extracts from her writing and without a detailed examination of what Schreiner herself wrote and how these brief extracts relate to the whole. My response to both has been to return to primary materials, initially by looking closely at Schreiner’s published work, to see whether what she actually wrote is matched by what people claim about it, and then later to investigate Schreiner’s unpublished papers and her many unpublished letters in archival locations. The conclusion I have come to is that the ‘facts’ in the emergent canon can be questioned and in many cases rebutted using the archival and published evidence, for these are actually claims based upon interpretations which can and should be interrogated using the archival and published evidence and can often be traced back to Cronwright-Schreiner’s hand in producing The Life and The Letters and destroying as much primary evidence as he could.

The dynamic of this process brings together the two mechanisms of Schreiner ‘portraiture’ and was set in motion by the originative metaphor constructed by Cronwright-Schreiner, the flawed genius of Olive Schreiner, so that ‘metaphorically speaking’ about Olive Schreiner has taken on its own life as a palimpsest, a kind of ur-Schreiner who stalks the far corners of the literary and historical scene. Since the publication in 1980 of Ruth First and Ann Scott’s proto-feminist biography, Olive Schreiner, small segment by small segment the critics have created, neither individually nor by design, the character of ‘Olive Schreiner the social Darwinist’ out of an alterity (critical revulsion) which actually depends upon a disguised mimesis (critical attraction). It seems to me that Schreiner is a case in point of what Greg Dening has proposed about the present-day anthropological critics who dismiss the work of Mead, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, that ‘The critics punish them ... for their not being what the critics are because of them’.

Against the punishing strand of criticism of Schreiner and her work, then, I have ironicised the components of the emergent critical canon around a contrary metaphor, that of the ‘Olive branch’. I have waved this combatively rather than pacifically by invoking the importance of primary source (published as well as archival) materials in challenging ‘the facts’ produced and recycled within the emergent canon. Of course, in what is a
discussion focused on issues surrounding representation, it would be inappropriate to look in detail at how the primary materials challenge the canonical ‘facts’ outlined earlier, although I have done this elsewhere.[49] One instance of it, however, is particularly relevant to my emphasis on representation here, and it can be outlined through standing one of the claims made about Schreiner alongside a statement from ‘Schreiner herself’. The claim is that made by Sally Ledger in her 1996 account of ‘New Woman’ fiction at the fin de siècle, in which she contends that:

It is Woman and Labour which has generally been singled out for attack in relation to Schreiner’s racial supremacism. Her evolutionary idea of humans ... is painfully clear in this much-lauded feminist tract ... [Her] deployment of eugenic theory in the name of feminism is of course particularly troubling in the late twentieth century when notions of racial strength and purity immediately bring to mind the shadow of the Third Reich ... If Schreiner’s anti-imperialist stance is clearly enough articulated ... her position apropos of racism is much less clear cut. Her implied criticism of Tant’ Sannie’s [a minor character in Schreiner’s novel The Story of An African Farm] crude racism is undeniable ... [but] Nor can Schreiner’s representation of Tant’ Sannie be exonerated from the charge of racism ... In this instance Schreiner’s eugenicist thinking is cruelly racist towards ‘the Boer woman’ whom elsewhere she had defended.[50]

I leave on one side the issue of whether Ledger’s ‘in passing’ opening comments provide a good, bad or indifferent depiction of Woman and Labour [51], and focus on her comment concerning characters in An African Farm. Ledger sees the characters in this novel as embodying racial characteristics and this in turn as indicating the eugenicist thinking of the author. Thus, for Ledger, Tant’ Sannie embodies a crude racist depiction of a Boer woman and the conflict between this and Schreiner’s elsewhere proclaimed views demonstrates that her anti-imperialism included evolutionary ideas which led to racial supremacism thinking. Another way of summarising this is to say that Ledger thinks that things written about characters inside this text tell us things about Schreiner herself outside of the text: she reads the views of the author from those expressed by some of her characters.

But what of ‘Schreiner herself’? It so happens that a hundred years earlier, Olive Schreiner had addressed this point concerning a letter she had received, the contents of which had complained about her depiction about another character in the same novel Sally Ledger comments on. Schreiner wrote to her brother Will in February 1896 about this letter, that:

Tante Sannie is a Dutch woman, Bonaparte Blenkins [another minor character in An African Farm] is an Irishman. Fancy my Home Rule friends crying out that I am false to the cause that I have traduced the
Irishman! It would be a sad day when each ... character not ideally
perfect was regarded as an attack upon the nation whose nationality it
shared.[52]

Schreiner is insistent that Tante Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins are
characters in a novel and say nothing about her being ‘false to the cause’ of
her political commitments. Characters function within the confines of a
novel and their characterisation and ‘who’ they are and what they do is
performative in textual terms. The idea that any character ‘not ideally
perfect’ is an attack on people and causes outside of the text and indicates
in any simple-minded way her own views is quite unacceptable to Schreiner,
and is a ‘sad day’ indeed. Ledger’s claim and the claim of Schreiner’s ‘Home
Rule friends’, and Olive Schreiner’s response to the latter, confront each
other here; and I am with Schreiner in thinking that authors and texts are
not coterminous.

The emergence and workings of a dominating canon in Schreiner
scholarship can be understood as a move from metaphor to metamorphosis.
Originating in a metaphor (‘flawed genius’) wrought to contain the untidy,
annoying woman by an outraged, vengeful husband, and progressively
divesting the complexities and contradictions inscribed in the archival
materials, the metamorphosis involved has produced an alteric (racist, social
Darwinist) Olive Schreiner. This is as ‘touched up’, and the lines and bags as
much removed, as anything Cronwright-Schreiner did and it reduces her
characterisation to a line-sketch, even a caricature, but one which is
represented to readers as though ‘Schreiner herself’. The critics know and
present her as they tell readers she ‘really was’.

As I indicated earlier, auto/biographical politics are not (usually) the
result of individual ‘things gone wrong’ but are rather part of the general
process of claims-making that all scholarship engages in. Scholarly claims to
know, not just to have ‘opinions’, are a constitutive element within a
political field. Such claims-making is an inevitable and necessary feature of
thinking and concluding, and the issues it raises constitute ‘a problematic’ in
the sense I noted earlier. However, in this case, it is also gives rise to ‘a
problem’, which I see as follows.

Knowledge claims argued around a set of facts which are seen to be
dependably known are an ordinary, indeed a necessary, facet of academic life
and scholarship. In these everyday scholarly practices, there is the
incremental assessment of new and earlier evidence and the range of
interpretations produced about this and earlier conclusions are
reinterrogated and re-evaluated, so as to produce ‘better knowledge, for
now’. However, a problem arises when the acts of interpretation involved are
made invisible by being presented as though ‘the facts’ themselves. What is
actually a claim thereby becomes ‘as though fact’, with important
consequences.
‘Scholarship’, in the sense of seeking for ‘better knowledge, for now’, depends upon the activity of knowing, that is, an active and ongoing engagement with the evidence, interpretations of it and conclusions from it. What has happened regarding the emerging Schreiner canon and its ‘claims are facts’ approach is that the act of knowing is foreclosed because what readers are given consists of conclusions inscribed and presented as though facts. Consequently, the only way to be a ‘knowing reader’ in the actively inquiring sense that scholarship requires is to return to original materials within the Schreiner corpus. This is both possible and also highly desirable concerning Schreiner’s published writings, for surely original texts and not ‘guides’ should be read and whole texts examined rather than just pre-selected and pre-digested passages. The situation is rather different concerning unpublished archival sources, in particular in cases where, as with Olive Schreiner, the unpublished sources are on three different continents and half a dozen key archives.[53] However, while examining archive sources is available only to relatively few, there is a strand of Schreiner scholarship which discusses original research on primary sources and which in my view should be more widely consulted and used. At the moment, such work is rarely referenced in ‘the canon’, and indeed, readers of this would be hard put to find out the existence of this other research-based work.

A Brief Conclusion

In this article I have explored some of the epistemological issues surrounding representation which impact on feminist work on past lives, doing so through the lens of a case study concerned with Olive Schreiner and how ‘she’ has been represented through a ‘touched up’ photograph, in governing metaphors used to characterise her, and within characterisations of ‘her’ provided by an emergent canon of ‘the facts’. While these issues take particular shape in this specific case, they are issues which arise in investigating and writing about ‘past lives’ in general. That is, they exemplify more general issues about representation and more general processes of canon-formation by which some ideas and interpretations, but not others, gain intellectual ascendancy and legitimacy. Ideas, I am proposing, then, do not gain ascendancy because of their inherent persuasiveness but rather through the grounded practices by which hierarchies of authority and knowledge are created and maintained; and this is as true of feminist ideas and scholarship as any other.[54]

My discussion, I proposed earlier, forms a coda to the ‘women’s history and post-structuralism’ debate in this journal. This debate raised questions concerning what ideas and epistemic communities are ascendant in feminist discourse, how dominant discourses are re/constituted, whether there is
For some readers, my comments on the emergent canon within Schreiner scholarship might be countered by arguing that these problems cohere around feminist literary criticism and theory - they are not those of feminist historiography, which almost 'by definition' pays close attention to evidential sources, and that consequently I am 'preaching to the converted'. However, that feminist scholars might call on traditional discipline-specific mores and conventions in response is deeply ironic, not least because it fails to acknowledge that these problems are occurring in the multidisciplinary arena of academic feminism/Women's Studies. We do not sit behind disciplinary walls, we necessarily rub shoulders with other academic feminists with a wide range of backgrounds and working practices; and we know very well that the traditional disciplines are in practice very different from how they present themselves in theory. In addition, feminist historians have been reluctant, to put it no stronger, to reflect upon issues surrounding representation and interpretation and the implications of these for their research and writing practices - as indeed the 'women and post-structuralism' debate demonstrates. Moreover, while the strains and pushes and pulls of disciplinary and multidisciplinary ways of working are important, I do not want to lose sight of the two larger arguments I have been making.
The first of these arguments concerns the processes of canon-formation which are at work in academic feminism/Women's Studies as well as in mainstream disciplines and multidisciplines. Given the history of Women's Studies as a means of making new knowledge and challenging old orthodoxies, it is important to consider the ways in which hierarchies of knowers and knowledges are constituted and reconstituted within it. Thus, while I have discussed these matters in a case study concerning the emerging canon of facts surrounding Olive Schreiner, they have wider applicability to the working practices of academic feminism than just this particular case.

The second of my larger arguments concerns the interpretational processes I sketched out earlier, concerning the relationship between mimesis/alterity and between metaphor/metamorphosis. These are not esoteric matters, but are fundamental aspects of how interpretation works on and with representation and they underpin all 'claims to know'. It is instructive to note that what is meant by the term 'interpretation' is rarely discussed in feminist scholarship even though it underpins every claim we make about the world and women in it. Scrutinising the dynamics of mimesis/alterity and metaphor/metamorphosis in some detail, as I have done, demonstrates how closely acts of interpretation and objects of representation are bound together. Making clear the interpretational moves involved in the arguments we produce about 'past lives' and the representations we and others make of them would enable a more active readerly engagement with the products of feminist scholarship and a better evaluation of its facts, arguments and conclusions.

In addition, and finally, I want to argue that in practice (if not in theory) we can 'have it all'. That is, we can recognise the fundamental and indissoluble issues in knowing that post-structuralism, postmodernism and deconstructionism have placed so firmly on the intellectual agenda; and we can also insist that there were irreducible things that really happened in the past and that it is crucially important for feminist thought to engage with this too. This is what I have endeavoured to show through my case study: issues surrounding interpretation and representation are epistemologically fundamental; and they have this quality because lives were lived and things that really happened in those lives and the things we claim about this now matter.

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Notes

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[8] Such an interest featured in feminist writing from the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Sheila Rowbotham Hidden from History (London: Pluto Press, 1973), and underpinned the late 1970s and 1980s attention to autobiography (and to a much lesser extent biography) in feminist work. For a number of excellent collections setting out the ground here, see Teresa Iles (Ed.), All Sides of the Subject: women and biography (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); Julia Swindells (Ed.), The Uses of Autobiography (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (Eds), Getting a Life: everyday uses of autobiography (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (Eds), Women, Autobiography, Theory: a reader (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Pauline Polkey (Ed.), Women’s Lives into Print: the theory, practice and writing of feminist auto/biography (London,
Liz Stanley

Indeed, I would argue they arise in work on ‘other lives’ in the present as well, and have argued this elsewhere (including in Liz Stanley & Sue Wise, *Breaking Out Again* (London, Routledge, 1993)).


See here Joan Hoff, Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis, *Women’s History Review*, 3 (1994), pp. 149–168; and for the debate in *Women’s History Review*, 1996, vol. 5, no. 1: June Purvis, Women’s History and Post-Structuralism, pp. 5–7; Susan Kingsley Kent, Mistrials and...
between him and Havelock Ellis provide additional pertinent information about this.


[31] As many of her friends noted, Schreiner’s pacifism was held militantly; and my ironic use of the ‘olive branch’ metaphor draws upon this too.


[33] Thus, Cronwright-Schreiner claimed Olive Schreiner exaggerated; this is repeated by Ruth First & Ann Scott, Olive Schreiner (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), drawing on his account; and through twenty years of secondary referencing this appears ‘as fact’ in Sally Ledger’s discussion in her The New Woman: fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

[34] Cronwright-Schreiner, The Life of Olive Schreiner.


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