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## What's the Time, Anna Wulf? Crisis Temporality and Feminist Untimeliness in Doris

### Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

#### Abstract

When Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was first published in 1962 it was instantly lauded as a timely novel. In this article I investigate what is timely about *The Golden Notebook* through an analysis of the novel's complex temporality. Taking the book's phenomenal critical legacy as a signal indication of the fact that its timeliness is yet to be exhausted, I explore how Lessing's provocative figurations of time illuminate the ideological and representational structures within which Lessing and her characters find themselves confined, while also gesturing, speculatively, towards the means by which these structures might be subverted in the future.

When Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was first published in 1962 it was instantly lauded, by a number of reviewers, as a timely novel. Irving Howe declared it "the most absorbing and exciting piece of new fiction I have read in a decade; it moves with the beat of our time, and it is true" (20). Reviewers for *The Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Observer* likewise emphasised its deep engagement with "the conditions of modern society" ("New Fiction" 15), the problems of "modern woman" (Ring 16), and its scrupulous commitment to representing "the schizophrenia and alienation which make living and writing to-day equally difficult" (Hope 28). Such enthusiastic endorsements of *The Golden Notebook*'s evocation of the *now*, however, were simultaneously countervailed by suggestions of its *untimeliness*. So outraged was Patrick Cruttwell at Lessing's "genuinely harmful [and] degrading" assault on literature and society that he was moved to make the "pharasaical" proclamation that the book augured in a plague of "degeneracy" that would likely hail "a mental collapse . . . in the civilisation of the West" (595). While the timely qualities of Lessing's opus are well documented, these qualities have been retrospectively interpreted as prescient or *untimely*. *The Golden Notebook* is, then, often conceptualised as a work that is uniquely *of its time* and "*ahead of its time*": as both current and

anachronistic (Greene 114; emphasis added). Like all books that are garlanded for their timeliness, *The Golden Notebook* is commensurate with the mood of the time from which it sprang. Published before the start of British nuclear testing at the Nevada test site, before the Beatles recorded their first single, before the enforcement of the new constitution in Southern Rhodesia, before the Cuban Missile Crisis, before the contraceptive pill, and before the winter's infamous "Big Freeze", Lessing's novel is nonetheless marked by an anxious, anticipatory attentiveness to the issues – nuclear armament, decolonialisation, political violence, sexual liberation, and the decline of communism – that would underpin the seismic shifts of a year, and a decade, that was yet to come.

Lessing's own meditations on the novel in the decades following its publication have done little to dampen debates about its timeliness; or, more accurately, its *untimeliness*. Responding to *The Golden Notebook*'s inclusion on school and university curricula, Lessing hailed the novel in her 1993 introduction as "a useful testament to its time" (viii), and to Emily Parker of the *Wall Street Journal* in 2008 she proclaimed the impossibility of its being composed at any other historical moment: "No one could write *The Golden Notebook* now, because the time has gone" (para. 28). As confident as Lessing was in her retrospective declarations of the novel's timeliness, she had been disappointed by early reviews that seemed to overlook its broad implications and speculated in 1971 that *The Golden Notebook* had too much anticipated its audience:

This book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women's Liberation movement already existed. It came out first ten years ago, in 1962. If it were coming out now for the first time it might be read, and not merely reacted to: things have changed very fast. (9)

That *The Golden Notebook* would have to wait for Women's Liberation to calibrate an audience that was able to "read" rather than "react" is confirmed by other accounts of the novel's reception.

According to Jenny Taylor, Lessing's work anticipated a generation of "women who found reading and discussing novels . . . a crucial form of self-perception and analysis". Lessing, Taylor opines, "loomed up – wherever one looked, she seemed to be waiting" (5). For Jean McCrindle, too, the novel was characterised by its "prophetic" forecasting: *The Golden Notebook*, she remarks, "prefigure[s] all sorts of things that were actually to happen in the next ten years [...]. I think I even felt that I wouldn't fully understand it until I had actually lived another ten years of my life." (55-56).

While recent scholarship has drawn valuable attention to *The Golden Notebook*'s timely engagement with post-war nuclear politics, the demise of the Left, and what Lessing refers to in her 1971 preface as the "sex war", the novel's proliferating depictions of women's untimeliness also betray a deep concern about being *out* of time that is hitherto underexplored (8). In this article, then, I use the lens of timeliness to investigate the eccentric temporal manoeuvres that characterise and complicate Lessing's narrative. Taking the book's phenomenal critical legacy as a signal indication that its timeliness is yet to be exhausted, I argue that *The Golden Notebook*'s fantastical evocations of time serve to establish the novel as a site at which different forms of crisis can be explored as temporal phenomena. In this respect, Lessing's novel reveals the extent to which time itself is politicised; how individuals might be differently affected by certain experiences of time; how time can oppress and liberate; how the temporal aesthetics of the novel might productively reflect and/or re-imagine moments of crisis; and what literary fiction might expect to accomplish in uncertain political times. Composed at a moment when patriarchal capitalism had brought humanity to the brink of destruction, when the prospect of nuclear catastrophe was making it necessary to reconceptualise the future of time, *The Golden Notebook* exemplifies the logic of "crisis temporality". This term, developed by Lynn Mie Itagaki, usefully formalises the intimate

connectedness of time and crisis by “highlight[ing] our assignation of meaning to time under crisis conditions”. According to Itagaki, “states of emergency” radically transform our experiences of time: they cause it to “expand and contract”; they make it mean “both little and everything” (200). As I will go on to demonstrate, many of the most influential accounts of *The Golden Notebook* are concerned with Lessing’s attempts to register the temporal effects of the nuclear crisis, but I want to attend here to the ways in which this concept of “crisis temporality” might assist in illuminating other temporal manifestations in the novel. What, for example, does the novel’s “crisis temporality” tell us about the relationship between existential peril and structural inequality? How does Lessing manipulate narrative time to establish women’s oppression as a crisis? To what extent is fiction instructive in such contexts? Through close reference to Lessing’s strategic experiments with diaristic and narrative form, as well as to the dreams and visions that find expression in the novel’s various “notebooks”, I explore how the temporality of *The Golden Notebook* is shaped simultaneously by Lessing’s attempts to inscribe both the “extraordinary” prospect of nuclear futurelessness and the “ordinary” experience of women’s oppression *in time*. As forms of existential risk continue to proliferate in the twenty-first century, encompassing everything from climate change to biotechnological disaster, what can Lessing’s novel – on its sixtieth anniversary – contribute to present-day debates about crisis politics, inequality and futurity? What, in short, can “timely” literature tell us – or do for us – in moments when we appear to be (almost) out of time?

The timeliness (or untimeliness) of *The Golden Notebook* has been heeded by scholars approaching the novel from a variety of perspectives. Remarking on the novel’s legacy fifty years on from its initial publication, Alice Ridout notes that *The Golden Notebook*’s “untimeliness” is tethered to its anachronistic feminism. The book is, she argues, routinely considered “outside the

moment of feminism by being respectively too early and too late”; it thereby disrupts developmental chronologies of women’s political and creative “progress” in the post-war period and “unsettl[es] [...] feminist readers, who can neither wholeheartedly claim [it] for their cause nor dismiss [it] entirely” (157). Correspondingly, in the same volume, Mark Pedretti argues that *The Golden Notebook*’s “untimely” elements – namely its stylistic experimentalism and its preoccupation with nuclear-age anxieties – have been too readily interpreted by scholars as signs of the novel’s “incipient postmodernism”. Making a persuasive case for Lessing’s distinctively British antinuclear sensibility, Pedretti rightly cautions against the “retrospective reperiodization” of *The Golden Notebook* as a “proto-postmodern” text and examines how the novel’s untimeliness might instead be mobilised as a means of interrogating the “national and historical periodizing assumptions” that shape the “dominant narrative of American ‘nuclear criticism’” (37-38).

Just as feminist accounts of *The Golden Notebook* have emphasised its prophetic prefiguring of the future of Women’s Liberation, other scholars have drawn valuable attention to Lessing’s engagement with the prospect of a future that has not (yet) come to pass. Along with Pedretti, Sarah Henstra investigates *The Golden Notebook*’s untimeliness in relation to the looming prospect of nuclear war and the influential body of “nuclear criticism” that surfaced in the wake of Jacques Derrida’s landmark lecture “No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missives, seven missiles)” (1984). As the touchstone for nuclear criticism, Derrida’s lecture – which features his famous proclamations about the uniqueness of the “inevitable” nuclear catastrophe and its “fabulously textual” status as an event that exists purely as “speculation” – have been the object of energetic cogitation in influential literary scholarship by Peter Schwenger, Richard Klein, Paul K. Saint-Amour, and Daniel Grausam (23). Pertinently, however, the literary implications of threatened futurity are also identified by Lessing years earlier in an essay from

1958 entitled ‘The Small Personal Voice’. Here, she surmises that “[w]e are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them” (11). For Lessing, in the late 1950s, the project of writing and the function of literature in a post-nuclear world could only be governed by the apocalyptic timbre of the times:

There are only two choices; that we force ourselves into the effort of imagination necessary to become what we are capable of being; or that we submit to being ruled by the office boys of big business, or the socialist bureaucrats who have forgotten that socialism means a desire for goodness and compassion – and the end of submission is that we shall blow ourselves up. (13)

The future of writing is a matter of obvious speculation in *The Golden Notebook*. This is a novel, after all, about a writer who cannot write. More specifically, it is about a writer whose inability to write is conceptualised as an affective response to the times in which she is living and to the assimilated fear that we shall, at some undesignated point in the future, “blow ourselves up”. The timeliness of *The Golden Notebook*, then, is in part ascribable to Lessing’s intellectual engagement with the prospect of a future in which time – along with everything else – is wiped out.

Henstra and Pedretti have alike demonstrated how nuclear criticism can be instrumentalised to shed new light on the temporal logics of *The Golden Notebook* and Lessing’s antic efforts to “enumerat[e] the costs of [a] futurelessness already materialized in the present” (Henstra 97). What I am interested in here, however, is how these compelling “nuclear” readings provide occasions to read *The Golden Notebook* through the lens of other contemporaneous crises. In particular, how is Lessing’s representation of gendered phenomena also shaped by the logic of crisis? How does she recalibrate the conventions of narrative form to register the shudders of catastrophes that are different in scale and duration to a nuclear event? What does the novel’s

“crisis temporality” reveal about troubled times, and about the role of the writer and literary fiction in these times?

### **A Record of Chaos? Keeping Time in the Diary**

That Lessing’s “timely” novel should take the diary as one of its multiple narrative modes is befitting of its self-conscious temporality. While the diary, as a literary form, demonstrates an investment in both the past and the future – in that it preserves the past in the present for the future – Lessing’s flamboyant manipulations of its calendrical format in *The Golden Notebook* are indicative of a deep-seated ambivalence about writing and the future alike. It is through the strikingly inventive use of diaristic form that Lessing chronicles the experiences of her unconventional protagonist Anna Wulf, an author who is struggling through an extended spell of writer’s block. Anna uses the diary, in part, as a way of killing time until she is able to write “properly”, though the writing that she undertakes during this unproductive period becomes, ultimately, *The Golden Notebook*. As might be expected, the diary format allows the reader to glimpse Anna at various intervals and in a range of different modes and guises, while also providing Lessing with a definitive means of marking time in a novel that is characterised by its partial disavowal of chronology. These dated entries also signify, however, as gestures towards the diary’s capitalist entanglements. The emergence of the diary is, after all, ineluctably aligned with the development of the increasingly accurate and ubiquitous chronometric technologies – clocks, pocket watches – that enabled the expansion of industrial capitalism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Stuart Sherman surmises, industrialisation precipitated a new public sense of time – one which expressed the discipline of capitalism – and the diary would



materialise as the expression *par excellence* of authors' attempts to "write the time the new clocks told", while also enabling "readers to recognize, interpret, and inhabit the new temporality by which the whole culture was learning to live" (xi). Organising time into an orderly sequence of endlessly unfolding "todays", the diary is intimately expressive of the new regimes of capitalist and patriarchal time, and structurally commensurate with the diurnal routines of its most basic cell: the heterosexual, reproductive family unit.

With its links to the private sphere and its flexible accommodation of the quotidian – as well as the extraordinary – the diary is a mode to which writers have been repeatedly drawn in order to explore women's experiences in time and of time. More specifically, perhaps, the diary has been instrumentalised by generations of women as a means of recording and reflecting on their relationships to what J. Halberstam terms "normative time". As Halberstam establishes in his landmark study *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005), normative time has three prevailing modes: reproductive time; family time; and the time of inheritance. Reproductive time is "ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples"; family time encompasses the "normative scheduling of family life . . . that accompanies the practice of child rearing"; and the "time of inheritance" refers to the generational transfer of "values, wealth, goods, and morals" between related parties. Normative temporality, in each of its modes, is predicated on the logic of heteronormative progress: having children, keeping healthful routines, and transmitting wealth and wisdom serve to enact this logic, demonstrating the individual's investment in, and optimism about, the future. By providing a record of births, marriages and deaths, chronicling and reflecting the daily schedules of "family time", and preserving the past for posterity, the diary – more than any other literary form – is hospitable to the various valences that Halberstam identifies with normative time. It is also, of course, timely,

in that it catches the writing subject in time, and in the act of marking time: it reveals what the diarist is at *this* time and in *this* place, remaining consistently cognisant of the specific contingencies of her emotional and material circumstances. That said, as the diarist chronicles the past in the present for the future, the diary inhabits different temporal modalities, often simultaneously: it is both reflective and speculative; nostalgic and desiring; as concerned with what might happen as with what has already occurred.

The flexibility of the diary format has long been apprehended by feminist scholars and writers. The decades following the publication of *The Golden Notebook* would see historical women's diaries opening up new worlds of thought, feeling and action for scholars to explore, recuperating women's "lost" experiences to the historical record, while several popular "consciousness-raising" diary fictions, including Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967) and Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* (1972) exploited the "private" affordances of the diary format in order to think through the emotional work of women's liberation. Though these later fictions would share Lessing's interest in using the diary to explore the struggles of women protagonists who are marked by their inability to keep time, they continue to replicate the "progress" narratives that Halberstam associates with normative temporality, albeit with an orientation towards the outcomes of feminist liberation. What I want to suggest here, however, is that Lessing does not just use the diary as a record of Anna's "progress"; rather, she instrumentalises the diary as part of the performative critique of normative temporality and narrative form to which she is committed.

While Lessing's use of the diary format initially appears to entertain the prospects of orderliness and progress, the dated entries are arranged in such a way as to betray the author's scepticism about the narrative strategies to which writers have traditionally taken recourse in order

to tell the time. Anna keeps not one but five separate “notebooks”. In these, she records the putatively discrete strands of her life: the black notebook contains recollections from her time in Southern Rhodesia; the red notebook charts her increasingly cynical involvement with the Communist Party; the yellow notebook is filled with sections for a novel based on a failed love affair; and the blue notebook chronicles Anna’s therapy, as well as some of her dreams and memories. It is only in the closing stages of the novel, when Anna obtains the eponymous “golden” notebook, that she is reconciled to the fact that all attempts at self-representation are flawed and partial. While, at that point, she elects to “synthesise” the fragments that were previously dispersed across the four original volumes and put “all of [her]self in one book” (528), I agree with Henstra and Claire Sprague that the Golden Notebook is not unproblematically expressive of the narrative’s movement towards an “inclusive, multi-vocal perspective” (17) or a “clear, unambiguous unity” (66). To complicate matters further, the entries from the various notebooks are interspersed with extracts of a novel, entitled “Free Women”, that Anna is trying to write. In its unpredictable shifts between Anna’s novel and the notebooks – which contain a mass of dated and undated entries (both in and out of chronological sequence) – *The Golden Notebook* seems designed to confound the reader’s sense of narrative progress. In the first of four sections that Lessing dedicates to “the notebooks”, for example, Anna’s sporadic entries in the black notebook span the period between 1951 and 1954; this timeline is interrupted, however, by the red notebook, which projects the reader back in time to “January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1950”. The yellow notebook, which follows the red, contains undated notes for a manuscript, and the blue notebook then moves from January 7<sup>th</sup> 1950 to 9<sup>th</sup> October 1946, before shuttling forwards in time from January 10<sup>th</sup> 1950 up to April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1954. While dated diary entries might be expected to help the reader navigate the subject’s passage through time, such scattered dates are of limited use as orientational aids. Furthermore, if diaristic

form typically encourages the subject to organise her experiences in accordance with the linear, progressive, (re)productive logic of normative temporality, then Lessing's splintering of Anna's experiences across different notebooks, as well as her radical resequencing of dated entries (and events), represents an assault on the diary and the protocols of capitalist and patriarchal time with which it is prevailingly associated. The political implications of *The Golden Notebook's* maverick sequencing are, perhaps, even more dramatically illuminated by the concept of "crisis temporality". Formulated initially as a means of theorizing the temporal dimensions of "real" political emergencies, Itagaki's account of "crisis temporality" anatomises the relationship between "individual and collective" experiences of crisis in ways that resonate with Lessing's novel, and which speak to the ongoing relevance of its concerns. Specifically, Itagaki's theory identifies the different "experiential registers" of both the short-term emergency (199) and what Lauren Berlant terms "crisis ordinariness" – those "long-term conditions of privation" that are, "for a given population", lived as "a fact of life in ordinary time" (760-61). If Lessing's disruption of diaristic chronology registers the novel's strategic resistance to the predictable pedestrianism of normative temporality, then the form and content of the entries – their varying durations and "experiential registers" – foreground the tension between public states of emergency and the "crisis ordinariness" that Anna experiences as a woman in post-war Britain.

### **Emergency Time and Crisis Ordinariness**

Anna is, by her own proclamation, a "woman of the times", and this is exemplified by her barometric sensitivity to global events. At various junctures in the novel, the relationship between the microcosmic movements of the individual subject and the macrocosmic operations of "society" is rendered explicit through Lessing's manipulation of diaristic conventions. On one occasion,

Anna becomes so overwhelmed by the reporting of current affairs that the blue notebook, in which she documents her therapy and her dreams, contains only newspaper cuttings about “events that seemed important”; it becomes, by Anna’s own admission, “a record of war, murder, chaos, misery” (228). Anna’s black notebook is also eventually abandoned, its pages “covered with newspaper cuttings, pasted in and dated, covering the years 1955, 56, 57. Every one of these news items referred to violence, death, rioting, hatred, in some part of Africa” (461). A similar fate befalls the red notebook, which is “taken over by newspaper cuttings, for the years 1956 and 1957” referring to “events in Europe, the Soviet Union, China, the United States” that concern “violence” and “freedom” (462). The repetitive displacement of narrative by newspaper cuttings is intriguing for two reasons. Firstly, it extrapolates the Lukácsian contention that there is an “organic, indissoluble connection between man” – or, in this case, woman – “as a private individual and . . . as a social being, a member of a community” (8). As Anna’s personal reflections are supplanted by public headlines, her identity as a “private individual” is called into question. Anna, as an individual subject, effectively disappears within the pages of her own diary, absorbed into the snapshot sequence of violence that constitutes post-war current affairs: “Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 52 OUR BOMB GOES OFF. First British atomic weapon exploded successfully. *Express*”; “Dec. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1952 11 COMMUNIST LEADERS HANGED IN PRAGUE”; “6<sup>th</sup> March, 1953 STALIN DIES. *Express*” (224, 226). Anna’s calibration to “the times” represents the calculated end-limit of Lukács’ proposal: she is not just marked as a “social being”; she *is* the times. While this section of the diary and the events it records is dated between 1950 and 1954, the news – which for Anna is experienced both in terms of its geographical remoteness and its affective proximity – reveals the seamlessness and sameness of political brutality. For the contemporaneous reader, how different were the headlines of 1950 to those of 1962? Civil unrest, political insurgency, nuclear

grandstanding: the content of the various conflicts – the debates, the persons, and the locations – may change, but the violent order of the events does not. While the dates in the diary continue to mark time, it is time without change; the forward momentum of the diary is arrested as the news of global conflict spools out *ad infinitum*. This constitutes the second point of interest. Anna is hitched to “the times”, but these times imply a particular temporal mode, one in which narrative temporality is both registered and suspended. The dates indicate that time is passing, but things stay the same, one act of violence displacing another. This is similarly the case with the blue notebook’s more personal entries, in which Anna’s relationships with men are marked by flickers of *déjà vu*. In a diary entry dating back to October, 1946, Anna describes a morning in Rhodesia with her lover Max, in whom she is increasingly disappointed. Hearing the “young married couple in the next room” making love before their baby wakes up, Max proposes that he and Anna also have a baby, and their child Janet is subsequently conceived (213). Years later on “Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1950” – the entry for which appears on the next page – Anna awakes to the sound of a baby crying next door and is reminded of “that hotel room in Africa, where the baby would wake us crying”. Once more, Anna is irritated with her lover – this time the married Michael – whose spontaneous whims she is unable to accommodate due to her responsibility for Janet. “I felt enclosed by the repetitive quality”, she explains, “the baby crying next door, and my hostility to Michael. (Remembering my hostility towards Max.) Then a feeling of unreality – couldn’t remember where I was – here, in London, or there, in Africa, in that other building where the baby cried through the wall” (215). While certain elements of Anna’s life have changed, her sense of entrapment, as a woman, remains the same. As a result, she is unable to situate herself confidently in space and time: is she in Africa or London? Is she with Max or Michael? Is it 1946 or 1950? This static scenario corresponds with Fredric Jameson’s proclamations that the time of postmodernism is defined by “the inertia of the

present social order”. “[F]or us”, opines Jameson, “time consists in an eternal present and, much further away, an inevitable catastrophe, these two moments showing up distinctly on the registering apparatus without overlapping or transitional stages” (70-71). Jameson’s “eternal present” is markedly conditioned on the temporal logics of the nuclear crisis, but in *The Golden Notebook* Lessing works to imply that other forms of crisis follow similarly predictable temporal patterns, even if they may differ in terms of duration. The novel, then, both domesticates and extrapolates Jameson’s claims. Anna’s day-to-day experiences of structural inequality – the ways in which her needs and feelings are insistently subordinated to those of the men with whom she associates – also constitute a crisis, but a crisis that has not been marked as “urgent” in the public imagination.

In *Emergency Politics* (2009) Bonnie Honig highlights the “threat posed to democracies by political emergencies”, which “tend to privatize and isolate citizens rather than bring[ing] us together on behalf of hopeful futures” (xvi). The threat that emergencies pose to the democratic body politic is further elaborated by Naomi Klein in *How to Change Everything* (2021), in which she recognises how “state[s] of emergency” can amplify existing forms of structural inequality. At such times, she argues, “ordinary laws and practices may be suspended” and citizens “may be so concerned with survival or recovery that they cannot focus on the large questions of what is being done, and who is benefiting” (70). While it would be difficult to argue that global pandemics and catastrophic weather events are anything other than “emergencies”, the rhetoric of emergency can work to diminish or occlude crises that are not characterised by suddenness. Amanda Watson and Corinne Mason have drawn important attention to “the ways in which urgency is manufactured around certain issues while other crises are sustained, left for ‘later’ and sometimes reinforced as unimportant by their ordinariness” (575). Questions of time and duration – whether now or later,

suddenly or slowly – shape how crises are experienced, responded to, and represented. What is interesting about *The Golden Notebook*, then, is Lessing’s determination to accord time to representing the “crisis ordinariness” of women’s experiences and to connect those crises that are lived “as a fact of life in ordinary life” with the extraordinary crisis of nuclear threat against which the novel unfolds. In “Securing A Feminist Future” (2007) Victoria Hesford argues that the “emergency time” of Western capitalism generates a climate of crisis in which – to quote Jerome Binde – there is “no time” for analysis (55). For Hesford, it is by “disavow[ing] the necessity for immediate action” and “thinking against the current” that feminism can best address itself to the problem of structural inequality (178, 181). What she envisions as “feminist temporality”, then, is a “constant, strained acting on the past, present, and future from a position that actively subverts, among other things, the ‘grid’ of language or ‘grammar of representation’ that produces and promotes war and nationalism” (179). Lessing’s writing in *The Golden Notebook* exemplifies this untimely “thinking against the current”: it attends – at length – to the minutiae of the “ordinary” crisis; it returns to the past, again and again, as a source of new meanings; it parodies the conventions of novelistic temporality and narrative closure. In short, it is a novel that unsettles temporal certainties in ways that are difficult to evoke within the terms of theory, revealing how “[s]peculative, non-instrumental thought, experimental approaches to the present and a skeptical, historicizing self-critique” can become “acts of resistance” in times of emergency (181).

That *The Golden Notebook* dedicates extensive time and space to “non-urgent” crises reads as one such “act of resistance”. These crises, which encompass all forms of sexist, racist and colonial exploitation, are hardcoded into capitalism’s DNA and therefore defy the kinds of short-term solutions that might be manufactured in response to other emergencies. Fiction accords Lessing the freedom to take her time in evoking and analysing these oppressions. By “expand[ing]



and contract[ing]” the durations of different experiences, along the lines described by Itagaki in her work on “crisis temporalities”, Lessing redeems the importance of “ordinary” crises, those “long-term conditions of privation” that Berlant regards as unfolding as “a fact of life in ordinary time”. The best example of this comes midway through the novel, with the resumption of the blue notebook, much of which has – to this point – been filled with headlines about various international emergencies. In a narrative gesture that rebukes the fleeting immediacy of these tabloid screamers, Anna resolves to “write down, as truthfully as I can, every stage of a day” (297). What follows is an exhaustive thirty-page anatomisation of the “17<sup>th</sup> September, 1954”. In these pages Anna gives voice to “the resentment, the anger” that she understands as “the disease of women in our time”. By scrutinising her feelings, actions and interactions, she identifies how her own time is encroached upon by a repetitive torrent of domestic demands (“I must-dress-Janet-get-her-breakfast-send-her-off-to-school-get-Michael’s-breakfast-don’t-forget-I’m-out-of-tea-etc.-etc.”) from which men escape, but she also expresses resentment that she must accord so much time to thinking about how to configure her experiences as a woman within the terms of literature: “I am worrying about this business of being conscious of everything, particularly in connection with my having a period”. While Anna notes that her menstruation is “of no particular importance”, she is conscious that her writing of it – which initially extends across three pages – risks “giving a wrong emphasis”, “changing the balance, destroying the truth” (303-305). Set against headlines about nuclear explosions and military coups, Anna’s personal diary entries in the blue notebook might, on first reading, appear inconsequential, but on closer inspection the mundanely repetitive cycles that play out in her various relationships with men are evidence of a similar temporal flatness: history repeats itself again and again in ways that desensitise and disaffect individuals, rather than in ways that inspire personal, social or political transformation. By “changing the balance”,

however – by stretching and compressing the duration of different experiences – fiction has an opportunity to adjust how crises are not only represented, but also perceived and prioritised.

By using the diary as a means of querying – through form and content – the relationship between chronology and progress, Lessing traces the ways in which normative temporality not only circumscribes women’s movements in the present, but also limits their ability to imagine how they might liberate themselves from these straitened circumstances in the future. Ironically, then, it is by foregrounding Anna’s feelings of being out of synch with the times – at a remove that enables critical distance – that Lessing’s protagonist is made timely.

### **Feminist Untimeliness**

Women’s untimeliness, and its radical potential, is a longstanding consideration within feminist scholarship. In “Women’s Time” Julia Kristeva famously explores the “problem” of reconciling female subjectivity to “the time of history”, which rests on a “conception of time . . . as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding”; “as departure, progression, and arrival” (17). The “conception of time” that is problematic to Kristeva is similarly so to Lessing. As Anna establishes in her conversations with Mother Sugar, she cannot find a “form” in which to write, as the linear, progressive, teleological forms of canonical literature to which she might once have taken recourse are constitutionally unsuited to the uniqueness of her experiences as a “woman of the times”. If, as Lessing would later claim, the meaning of *The Golden Notebook* – which went unheeded at the time of its original publication – resides partly in the “wordless statement” of its structure, then that meaning is necessarily entangled with this problem of narrative temporality (13). By rejecting the linear, progressive, teleological structures of normative temporality within the novel, Lessing offers a “wordless” critique of patriarchal capitalism and its constricting, destructive regimes.

This critique is also registered thematically towards the end of *The Golden Notebook* in Anna's return to a childhood exercise that she terms "the game". Tellingly, Anna is only reminded of "the game" when Janet goes to boarding school and she finds herself liberated from normative temporality, "no longer conscious of the clock" (480). As soon as she has time to think in ways that were foreclosed to her when she was locked in the rhythms of her daily routine, Anna is better able to understand – or, more accurately, feel – the perils of "the times". The game involves "naming" everything from the objects in her room to "the world, continent by continent, ocean by ocean", with the aim of "holding" these things in her mind "at the same time". At one point, for example, Anna is "simultaneously sitting on the floor and above the city, looking down at it" (509). The "simultaneous knowledge of vastness and smallness" precipitated by "the game" is contingent on Anna's ability to project herself outside of conventional time (481). The more Anna plays "the game", the more tenuous her connections to normative temporality become: "I no longer had a sense of time", Anna confesses. "I tried to feel time. But the time had gone out of me" (517, 518). She even consults a doctor to ask "what was wrong with someone who had no sense of time", only for the doctor to reply, cryptically, that it is "due to the times we live in" (502).

Anna's lost "sense" of linear, progressive time shares some characteristics with the feminist approaches to temporality developed by Hesford, Misha Kavka and Meaghan Morris. These approaches stress the untimeliness of feminism, recognising the radical potential of its resistance to the pedestrian temporal logic of patriarchal capitalism. Building on earlier works by Wendy Brown and Elizabeth Grosz, certain elements of this scholarship find a precedent in Friedrich Nietzsche's valorisation of the untimely in *Untimely Meditations* (1876). For Nietzsche, the untimely – conceptualised as that which is "acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time . . . for the benefit of a time to come" – is the precondition for all critical thinking (60). It is

only by thinking anachronistically, against the norms and values that prevail in one's own time, that the individual can unlock the transformative promise of the future. While Nietzsche envisions untimeliness as a strategic and ethical choice for the male subject, it might be the case that women – with less secure connections to the organisational structures that determine the norms and values of a given epoch – are more ideally predisposed to untimeliness. Feminist accounts of women's experiences in patriarchy would certainly lend credence to such a theory, recognising as they do the extent to which feminism's ability to bring "into existence a future somehow dislocated from the present" lies, in part, in its being "untimely" (Grosz 51).

For Kavka, the shifting and multiple ethical investments of feminism, which "sometimes overlap with and sometimes work against each other", mitigate against its easy integration into historical progress narratives. Rather, because the visions of justice by which feminism is propelled are numerous, diverse and mobile, and because feminism refuses to understand the past, the present or the future in fixed terms, it is destined to be always "*out of time*" (33; emphasis in original). Morris likewise identifies feminism's thrust to openness as a factor in its untimeliness; it is both "too soon" and "too late" because it vies "to bring about concrete social changes while at the same time contesting the very bases of modern thinking about what constitutes 'change'" (xv). Due to its simultaneous engagement with the concrete and the conceptual – in which it "works towards a future without accepting the present and by sceptically questioning the past" – feminism requires a temporality that "operates, necessarily, in more than one time zone at once" (Hesford 34). This untimeliness is the source of feminism's revolutionary promise and the means by which it is able to think its way out of the stranglehold of capitalist time.

The multivalent, polymorphous temporality that Kavka, Morris and Hesford associate with feminism's transformative potential might help to illuminate Lessing's representation of time in

*The Golden Notebook*. Throughout the novel, the past, present and future are open fields of eventfulness, which are again and again returned to, reviewed and revised in ways that express Lessing's scepticism that the known structures of language and narrative can ever adequately mediate what she knows and feels. Anna is reminded, during her visionary experiences in the Golden Notebook, that the past is never finished with or closed off, but is something she has "still to work on" (537). This open past might, then, operate along the lines envisioned by Nietzsche – and later Grosz and Brown – as a site that can be mined for "something untimely" that will propel the next great leap into "an unknown future" that is "no longer recognizable in terms of the present" (Grosz 49). Tellingly, it is only when Anna is feeling untimely – or, in her words, when she is reduced to a state of "timelessness" – that she is able to develop a "new understanding of the world" (513).

While the meaning of Lessing's novel is not reducible to any one of its various elements, the Golden Notebook provides some fleeting insights into the "new understanding" that Anna appears to have reached. Here, in a phantasmagoric delirium, Anna finds herself viewing scenes from the past curated by a shadowy and cynical projectionist. While Anna is named as the director of these "well-made films" of her life, they are not familiar to her, but strange: "glossy with untruth, false and stupid" (538). The problem, it seems, is what Anna has already named in her sessions with Mother Sugar as "a question of form" (417). Anna realises that the material in the films had "been ordered by me to fit what I knew and that was why it was all false" (538). In this way, these films exemplify the "nostalgic glance backwards" that Victoria Bazin identifies with Lessing's critique of realism in *The Golden Notebook* (117). As "well-made" as the films are, these robust, authoritative narratives work to shore up the past, and in doing so they distort and deceive – especially for Anna, who intuits that the past is something she has "still to work on", and can never

really be finished with. “And what makes you think the emphasis you have put on it is correct?”, challenges the projectionist. “How would June Boothby see that time? I bet you can’t do June Boothby”. Thus baited by the projectionist, Anna begins to write from the perspective of June Boothby, a trivial figure whom Anna encountered during her time in Rhodesia. Unable “to stop the flow of words”, and crying “tears of frustration”, she attempts to compose June’s story, but can only do so “in the style of the most insipid coy woman’s magazine”. She cannot, in other words, think outside of the forms that she knows to be “false”. Anna feels the incorrectness of the form at the most visceral level: she cries; she shouts; she is “attacked by a feeling of nausea” brought on by the “strain of trying to expand one’s limits” (537-38). While Anna is endlessly attentive to these “limits”, and to cracks and gaps in normative temporality and narrative form, she remains unable to identify, in words, any credible alternatives. When Anna attempts to describe to Mother Sugar a “new” future with “new” forms, it is only a “hint of something” without a perceptible shape. Over the course of *The Golden Notebook*, then, Lessing invites us to imagine a future that “might pour in a different shape”, even though that shape is not yet available for naming (416).

While the key to unlocking the meaning of *The Golden Notebook* might be expected to lie in its conclusion, this, too, represents another convolution in the novel’s already unpredictable temporality. The Anna who appears in this last instalment of “Free Women” confides in Molly that she is relinquishing writing in favour of a job at a matrimonial welfare centre. She also shares her intention to join the Labour Party and to teach night-classes for “delinquent kids”. As Molly discloses her own plans for the future – which include her forthcoming marriage to a “progressive businessman” with a “house in Hampstead” – she jokes that both she and Anna will soon “be integrated with British life at its roots” (576). Marriage, paid employment, and organised politics

are, at earlier points in the novel, experienced as inertia, and there is little evidence to suggest that things will be otherwise in the future. As if to stress this point, Lessing novel appears to loop back to the start; the final sentence, “The two women kissed and separated”, is a ghostly echo of its opening line: “The two women were alone in the London flat” (25, 576). For Earl G. Ingersoll, the “ersatz ‘ending’” of *The Golden Notebook* is “instructive” in the sense that it signals that the novel “has moved itself as a narrative . . . into a state of ‘breakdown’” (207). *The Golden Notebook*, in other words, drives itself into an impasse, at which point it does not so much offer a conclusion that looks to the future as imply a return to an all-too-familiar past. The misleadingly polite closure of the final line, coupled with the assignment of Anna and Molly to the conventional roles of marriage counsellor and wife respectively, suggests that women are as trapped and misrepresented by narrative traditions as they are by social and political structures. Taken at face value, there is nowhere for these “free women” to go, and nothing – beyond the usual – for them to do. What, then, are readers supposed to make of these final revelations? And what implications do they have for those of us seeking to understand the temporality of *The Golden Notebook*?

Predictably, perhaps, certain critics have interpreted the ending of “Free Women” as the novel’s last-gasp resuscitation of realist form and narrative closure. John L. Carey reads the conclusion in terms of Anna’s uninspired realisation that she must “accept alienation and live with it” (456), while Kathleen McCormick finds the reader tantalised but ultimately “disappointed by Anna’s near-achievements” (57). Other scholars, including N. Katherine Hayles, have examined the “peculiarly *parodic*” ending of “Free Women” through the lens of the notebooks in order to emphasise the productive ambiguities of Lessing’s concluding flourish (255; emphasis in original). In the *Golden Notebook*, after all, it is revealed that Anna’s lover, Saul Green, has supplied her with the sentence that she uses to begin “Free Women” (and, therefore, *The Golden Notebook*):

“The two women were alone in the London flat” (554). Examined in this light, the existence of the final section of “Free Women” is proof that Anna is, by the end of the novel, able to write; at the same time, this contradicts Anna’s assertion in that same instalment of “Free Women” that she is renouncing her writerly ambitions: how can “Free Women” exist at all if Anna is no longer a writer? For Molly Hite, “‘Free Women’ and the notebooks tell stories with different and irreconcilable endings”. In the former, “the discourse essentially returns to its starting point”, with Molly and Anna “each going off to attend to her own compromised ideals”. When viewed in its entirety, however, Hite concurs with Lorna Sage’s assessment that *The Golden Notebook* presents itself as “an impossible object”, where “the ‘inner’ space of the notebooks also contains its outer envelope”. Ultimately, then, the “hitherto linear narrative [of ‘Free Women’] reveals itself to be a Mobius strip” (22). The narrative, in other words, folds back on itself, bringing the reader to the realisation that an ending is not necessarily an ending in *The Golden Notebook*, just as a beginning is not always a beginning.

While the ending provides yet more evidence of Lessing’s determined disruption of linear chronology – and, with it, her indictment of a masculinised Aristotelian poetics that is no longer fit for purpose – it also suggests, through Anna’s writing outside the frame of “Free Women”, how these structures might be transgressed. As Magali Cornier Michael observes, after all, Lessing’s novel “pushes beyond [the] cynical and ironic resolution by making Anna the author of ‘Free Women’ and of *The Golden Notebook*” (99). In this sense, *The Golden Notebook* develops a temporality that demands critical distance; it is only by stepping back from the narrative, as Michael does, that its full scope is rendered discernible.

With its mixed-up diary entries, its delays, prolepses and recapitulations, and its impossible recursive loopings, the bewildering temporality of *The Golden Notebook* throws the reader out of



synch, repeatedly, with the narrative. This narrative asynchronicity performs that kind of temporal alienation that Derrida would later associate with the nuclear age and the emergence of postmodernism. It would also, however, echo the logic of untimeliness that Nietzsche described many decades earlier, in which it is the subject who thinks anachronistically, out of time, who is best poised to comprehend and critique the epoch in which he finds himself. While Lessing was understandably sceptical of readings that reduced *The Golden Notebook* to a clarion call for women's liberation, her focus on women's experiences of time anticipates the polemical and fictional anatomisations of "what women do all day" that would form part of feminism's contribution to culture in the late-1960s and 70s; at the same time, it also singles out the feminine subject – who is always and already estranged within the hostile structures of patriarchal capitalism – as the exemplar of a potentially productive untimeliness that might one day facilitate meaningful change. If *The Golden Notebook* does not summon up crystalline visions of what this change might look like, or name the type of future that "free women" might be given to expect, it nonetheless shows the reader how women's peculiar experiences of time can at least engender timely revelations about the present, while also producing the kind of critical distance that a "woman of the times" needs to imagine the possibility of a future that will, one day, "pour in a different shape".

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