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## Wasting Time? The Politics and Poetics of Feminist Waiting

### Abstract

In this article I analyse the politics and poetics of waiting, as it is represented in feminist fictions of the 1970s, through reference to relevant philosophies of time. Focusing on examples drawn from American literary culture, I trace how writers including Lisa Alther and Marilyn French have envisioned the role of waiting in women's oppression and liberation, and ask why feminist fictions so routinely explore the issue of gender inequality through the experiences of those who wait. Extrapolating Henri Bergson's claim in *Creative Evolution* (1907) that waiting sharpens the individual's consciousness of time, I investigate the emotional valences of waiting and its literary articulations, arguing that the agitated feelings associated with waiting – from excitement and anticipation to impatience and dread – work to establish an affective temporality of waiting that comes to characterise the feminist novel in the 1970s. More pressingly, perhaps, as depictions of waiting acquire currency as salient animations of women's asynchronous temporality, I explore the extent to which attempts to represent women's fears and desires in time might, for certain subjects, model new forms of ethical engagement and political action.

### Keywords

Waiting, feminism, contemporary fiction, American literature, political activism, temporality

Marilyn French's bestselling novel *The Women's Room* (1977) opens with a signal figuration of the waiting woman. Mira, French's protagonist, is 'hiding in the ladies' room' at Harvard University, where she is trying to kill time before her classes begin. As her much younger classmates lean and loaf in the hallowed corridors below, Mira shifts awkwardly in the claustrophobic space of the toilet cubicle, 'feeling stupid and helpless, and constantly looking at her watch'. Though Mira's waiting is far from comfortable, her stalling in the stalls is not evoked as wasted time. As she waits, she takes delight in reading the graffiti left by other women who have loitered in the ladies' room. 'Down with capitalism and the fucking military-industrial complex', reads one scrawl, 'KILL ALL FASCIST PIGS!'. 'You simplify too much', replies another commentator, eschewing the inflammatory capitals. 'New ways must be found to kill pigs. . . . The way is slow and hard. We must cleanse our minds of all the old shit, we must work in silence, exile, and cunning. . . . We must have a revolution of sensibility'. In the febrile political

atmosphere of the women's bathroom, such entreaties for patience and moderation are conspicuously unwelcome. 'Stay in your cocoon. Who needs you?' snaps a third contributor. 'Those who are not with us are against us. Anyone who supports the status quo is part of the problem. THERE IS NO TIME. THE REVOLUTION IS HERE! KILL PIGS!' Nestled amongst the 'pasted-on notices of SDS meetings, meetings of Bread and Roses, and Daughters of Bilitris', Mira, marking time, thus alights upon the tactical impasse at which agitators for political change are apt to find themselves: is it better to undertake radical action 'now', or to wait? Is it more prudent to do or to think first? Is there a 'right time' for revolutionary politics, or is it always too soon or too late? In the main, the restive tenor of the bathroom symposium urges against waiting, as do the 'jagged letters' of the dictum that catches Mira's eye as she prepares to leave: 'SOME DEATHS TAKE FOREVER'. These words, emblazoned on the wall above the toilet, strike the thirty-eight-year-old Mira as a salutary caution about the dangers of tarrying, but the novel also seeks to establish that action, too, is not always productive: when the narrator discloses, in a retrospective flourish, that 'It was 1968', she issues the reader a desultory reminder that revolutionary actions do not guarantee revolutionary change.

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Caught between the 'NO TIME' of a revolution that is already overdue and a mortiferous 'FOREVER', in which time is experienced exclusively as deferral and delay, *The Women's Room* is marked by an ambivalent attitude to waiting that is reflective of the late-1970s milieu from which it emerges. Invoking the spectre of a revolution that never came to pass, French's reference to 1968 is redolent of Fredric Jameson's paradigmatic exegesis of the postmodern, which traces the 'time of postmodernism' to the failed social movements of the 1960s. Shaped by the lost prospect of a radically transformed future – of the type envisioned by the activist politics of the 1960s –

postmodernity is, for Jameson, experienced as an ‘eternal present’, an interminable ‘waiting’ in which we find ourselves listening out expectantly ‘for the missing next tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis’.<sup>2</sup> *The Women’s Room* unfolds along the temporal lines that Jameson traces, as French conjures a world in which opportunities for ‘renewed praxis’ – personal, professional or political – are often placed in the index of past potential, rather than future possibility.

Though not concerned explicitly with waiting, Jane Elliott argues in *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory* (2008) that French’s novel – along with Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and Marge Piercy’s *Vida* (1979) – exemplifies the workings of ‘static time’: a ‘specific experience’ of ‘comingled temporal stasis, epistemological uniformity, and diminished agency’ that is registered in proliferating cultural depictions of ‘time without meaningful change’.<sup>3</sup> Through a series of illuminating readings, Elliott speculates that the ‘temporal problems of the oppressed woman’ might offer ‘an ideologically charged analogue for [the] widespread sense of temporal crisis’ that is commensurate with the era of postmodernity.<sup>4</sup> While I am in agreement that these novels enact the principal contention of all *posthistoire* discourses – that ‘the world [has] outlast[ed] the human capacity to transform it’ – my approach departs from Elliott’s in its focus on waiting as a distinctive temporal phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, I want to argue that the rich philosophical legacy of waiting provides a context for recuperating the political potential of dead time. While waiting is a well-established strategy for marginalising groups and individuals, it also defies the temporal logic of patriarchal capitalism; it might actually be instrumentalised, then, in ways that challenge the systems in which women have been oppressed. Given that the active, accelerated logic of patriarchal capitalism also drives the revolutionary movements of the 1960s that sought to dismantle it, the feminist novel is a site at which waiting is shown to create space

for the generation of new forms of understanding that critique – and may even seek to transcend – radical and conventional politics alike.

As is writ large in the opening chapter of *The Women's Room*, for those at the vanguard of revolutionary politics in the 1960s there was no time to wait. As radical discourses enjoined citizens to 'act now', waiting figured as the antithesis of action, its dangers highlighted in the slogans and images that circulated within the popular imaginary. The perils of waiting are zealously inscribed in the 1963 photograph of Malcolm X wielding a newspaper bearing the headline 'Our Freedom Can't Wait', as well as in the title of Martin Luther King's pathbreaking exhortation to nonviolent action, *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and in the urgent acronym of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which has adorned banners at feminist marches and pickets since 1966. To those energised by the prospect of social and political change – not least to the fictionalised women who leave their mark on the walls of Harvard University's bathroom facilities in French's novel – waiting signalled apathy, a passive endorsement of the status quo. If the case for a revolutionary temporality based on acting 'now' has since been encoded in the development of an inspiring national narrative about political progress that takes snapshots of, say, the March on Washington in 1963 and the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970 as its coordinates, then the destructive, self-defeating end-limit of this activist temporality is simultaneously established in images of the Long Hot Summer of 1967, the Days of Rage in 1969, and the shootings at Kent State in 1970. In light of these national histories, this article investigates the extent to which waiting might operate as a temporal mode that resists the normative association of action with progress. What, if anything, happens when we wait? What kinds of political possibilities, specifically, might the 'act' of waiting enable?

Although waiting features prominently and suggestively in a range of feminist writing, it has yet to be conceptualised in feminist terms. In fact, despite the frequency with which it is glimpsed in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, waiting remains relatively underexplored within accounts of modern philosophy more generally, leaving unanswered Walter Benjamin's urgent call for a 'metaphysics of waiting' in the *Arcades Project*.<sup>6</sup> If waiting awaits its theorists – feminist or otherwise – then recent innovations in critical approaches to temporality and historiography set out new directions for the study of waiting in women's writing. An especially evocative point of reference here is Lisa Baraitser's elegant meditation on 'time that becomes suspended' in *Enduring Time* (2017). Through poetry, photography, painting, memoir, and sculpture, Baraitser investigates the stilled modalities of 'waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, reserving, and remaining' in relation to an ethics and practice of care. She asks, pertinently, what happens when we pause to analyse the 'dull and obdurate temporalities' that lack 'the allure of the time of rupture, epochal shift, or change': what, specifically, might be gained by considering 'inertia' and the 'lack of obvious forms of action' as 'a way to understand care', and to what extent is care itself 'a mode of change that requires time not passing'? Baraitser's questions about 'slowed, stilled or stuck time' and the temporal politics of care are, of course, important touchstones for my own project, though my focus here – in contrast to Baraitser's broad and varied archive – rests firmly on feminist figurations of women's waiting.<sup>7</sup> In this article, then, I analyse the politics and poetics of waiting, as it is represented in feminist fictions of the 1970s, through reference to relevant philosophies of time. Attending to examples drawn from American literary culture, I trace how writers including Lisa Alther and Marilyn French have envisioned the role of waiting in women's oppression and liberation, and ask why feminist fictions so routinely explore the issue of gender

inequality through the experiences of those who wait. Extrapolating Henri Bergson's claim in *Creative Evolution* (1907) that waiting sharpens the individual's consciousness of time, I investigate the emotional valences of waiting and its literary articulations, arguing that the agitated feelings associated with waiting – from excitement and anticipation to impatience and dread – work to establish an affective temporality of waiting that comes to characterise the feminist novel in the 1970s. More pressingly, perhaps, as depictions of waiting acquire currency as salient animations of women's asynchronous temporality, I explore the extent to which attempts to represent women's fears and desires in time might, for certain subjects, model forms of ethical engagement that are capable of resisting the oppositional politics and crisis-driven 'emergency' logic of late capitalism. As Victoria Hesford speculates, after all, it could be the case that genuinely radical thought is *only* possible when we refuse the temporal demands of Western capitalism and attune ourselves to the rhythms of a 'slow time' in which we are free to imagine new political modalities.<sup>8</sup>

## **Waiting**

In *Creative Evolution* Bergson offers one of the most sustained and influential analyses of waiting in modern Continental philosophy. His discussion, subtle and suggestive, is organised around a description of the process by which sugar dissolves into water. 'If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water', he observes, 'I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts'. However seemingly banal, Bergson is quick to reassure the reader that this 'little fact is big with meaning', and proceeds to explain why:

[T]he time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own

duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*. It is no longer a relation, it is an absolute.<sup>9</sup>

Bergson's differentiation between 'mathematical' time and his 'own duration' in this passage corresponds to a distinction he draws decades earlier in *Time and Free Will* (1889). In this, his debut work, he discriminates between 'abstract time', which – in line with Newtonian absolutism – 'flows equably without regard to anything external'<sup>10</sup>, and 'pure duration', which characterises the individual's internal sense of time passing.<sup>11</sup> Unlike abstract time, pure duration – slippery and subjective – eludes both measurement and symbolisation. While the abstract 'mathematical' time it takes for the sugar to melt is of a readily quantifiable magnitude, then, the individual's qualitative experience of waiting for the sugar to melt remains ultimately mysterious. Waiting does, however, acuminate the individual's consciousness of time. In his 'impatience', Bergson becomes aware of time; or, more specifically, he becomes aware of being at odds with time.

As Harold Schweizer observes in *On Waiting* (2008), Bergson's anecdote of the dissolving sugar reveals an individual in simultaneous conflict with both the abstract 'imperatives of official synchronized time' and the durational 'melody of his inner life'.<sup>12</sup> While Bergson characterises waiting as time *lived*, rather than time *thought*, his 'impatience' registers the affective valence of waiting: he *feels* time passing; or, more accurately, he feels time not passing quickly enough. Extending the logic of Bergson's proposal, then, we might venture to suggest that time *lived* is also time *felt*. Waiting, specifically, presents a scenario in which time is not only felt, but felt awkwardly. In this respect, Bergson's philosophy of time would seem to have implications for scholars seeking to understand the awkwardly 'felt' temporality of second wave fictions. How do women feel time passing in these fictions? And what happens – or can happen – while they wait?

If Bergson's conceptualisation of waiting is a key point of reference in contemporary accounts of temporality, then rarely is it considered in relation to issues of gender. When, for



example, Gaston Bachelard glosses Bergson's anecdote of the dissolving sugar in *The Dialectic of Duration* he, too, avoids addressing how – if at all – waiting is gendered:

If we prepare sugar in granulated form for the lecturer, we are giving him or her, as an initiating act, the means to drink a glass of sugared water without having to wait for it to dissolve.<sup>13</sup>

Gesturing back to Bergson's glass of sugared water, Bachelard foregrounds the inconvenience of waiting by imagining a scenario in which certain individuals are granted the luxury of *not* waiting. In this context, waiting is the implied experience of those who lack the status to be waited on. Who, then, commands the privilege of not waiting? Although neither Bachelard nor Bergson formulates a direct response to this question, Bergson's domestic symbolism, in concert with Bachelard's discrete differentiation of those who wait from those who are waited on, implies the potential for a gendered answer. Waiting, after all, expresses the individual's subordinate relationship to time; for this reason, it is a situation most likely to be endured by those who are least able to exercise influence over their surroundings.

As well as being a focus of E. P. Thompson's influential writings on the disciplinary regimes of industrial capitalism<sup>14</sup>, the relationship between time and power is addressed by Sylviane Agacinski in *Time Passing* (2003), where she identifies the 'Western hour' as the 'primary referential field for describing and organizing the whole of human societies' and the means by which the 'market value' of time is measured in the globalised capitalist economy.<sup>15</sup> While the temporal logic of capitalist production dictates that 'time is money', not all time is valued equally. Feminist scholars have long sought to expose the extent to which women's time, in particular, is sacrificed to the exploitative demands of the market. The caring and domestic responsibilities traditionally undertaken by women – and now most often examined through the lens of 'affective labour' – are the scaffolding of capitalist economies. As Valerie Bryson reflects,

however, these essential, ‘time-consuming’ labours are neither ‘valued’ nor ‘rewarded’ and ‘are usually treated as a source of disadvantage that prevents women from behaving like “proper” workers (that is, like men)’.<sup>16</sup> Where the ‘Western hour’ prevails, those who take on the unpaid, unpredictable, and ‘non-productive’ roles associated with affective labour will necessarily struggle to calibrate themselves to the (productive) time of capitalism.

While waiting is not gendered *per se*, the experience of being ‘out of sync with time [...] outside of the moral and economic community of those whose time is synchronized and who act predictably and in unison’ is recognised by Schweizer as being disproportionately ascribed to certain social groups:

The qualitative and moral difference between mathematical time and the mere duration associated with waiting may thus begin to explain why waiting is considered to be a waste of time, or why the person who waits customarily attempts to ‘kill time’, or why waiting is assigned to the poor and powerless so as to ritualistically reinforce political and social demarcations.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, the role of waiting in reinforcing women’s social and political marginality is latently discernible in a range of feminist philosophy and polemical writing, where waiting emerges as a signal feature of (white, middle-class) femininity. For Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), the condition of girlhood is, ambiguously but ineluctably, one of waiting: the girl’s youth, Beauvoir explains, ‘is consumed in waiting, more or less disguised’. In contrast to her male counterpart, who bounds ‘actively towards adulthood’, the girl ‘awaits the opening of this new, unforeseeable period, the plot of which henceforth is woven and towards which time is bearing her’. With ‘no valid aims’ of her own, ‘only occupations’, the girl is – more or less consciously – ‘awaiting Man’.<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir’s distinction between ‘aims’, which are actively pursued, and ‘occupations’, those repetitive distractions that fill the time of waiting, remains operable in her account of the housewife, who ‘wears herself out marking time’, existing in a perpetual present of

‘washing, ironing, sweeping, [and] ferreting out fluff from under wardrobes’ in which there is no ‘creative flow, only the desultory ‘duplication of the past’. Waiting is an endless extension of the same; it hitches the individual to the present and – if one does not know what one is waiting for – then the years ‘spread out ahead, grey and identical’.<sup>19</sup> Over a decade later, when Betty Friedan diagnosed the ‘problem that has no name’ in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she investigated the lives of a post-war generation of leisured American housewives who were suffering through a similarly flat present: waiting for Prince Charmings to arrive; for children to wake up; for husbands to return home.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Schweizer, whose rhetoric implies that waiting is an atypical state in which the ‘poor and the powerless’ are revealed to be ‘out of synch’ with the moral and economic imperatives of capitalism, Beauvoir and Friedan emphasise that *women’s* waiting is, in fact, calibrated to the productive, accumulative routines of industrial enterprise. Beauvoir, in particular, weaves a narrative in which waiting accustoms girls to the feelings of boredom, frustration and despair they are destined to experience as women under capitalism. As wives and mothers, after all, women are likely agents of the irregular, unremunerated affective labour that has traditionally enabled men to commit to the scheduled demands of paid employment. For Beauvoir and Friedan, then, waiting is anything *but* unusual in the context of women’s lives; rather, it defines how women support and experience the cycles and stages of normative time.

### **The Waiting Body**

The commonplace experience of waiting is explored by the artist Faith Wilding in her landmark work *Waiting*, which she performed in 1972 as part of the trailblazing *Womanhouse* installation in Los Angeles.<sup>21</sup> Housed in a dilapidated Victorian mansion in Hollywood, *Womanhouse* was an

experiential art environment created collectively by students and affiliates of the Feminist Art program at CalArts. While the creative atmosphere of *Womanhouse* produced a number of flamboyant responses to the ‘longings, fears and dreams women have as they cook, sew, wash and iron their lives away’, Wilding’s *Waiting* offers an especially poignant meditation on how women pass their time, and how they feel as it passes. Surviving footage of Wilding’s performance shows her seated, hands placed in her lap, rocking rhythmically back and forth as she recites her poem. The world she evokes is one in which women’s oppression is registered through time; from cradle to grave, women experience little *other* than waiting:

Waiting to grow up                      Waiting . . .  
//  
Waiting for my breasts to develop  
Waiting to wear a bra  
Waiting to menstruate<sup>22</sup>

Regulated by the anaphoric throb of ‘waiting’, with which Wilding begins each line, the poem beats out women’s ‘passive existence through time’, from diapers and dresses to domesticity and death.<sup>23</sup> Wilding’s everywoman waits not only for her body, but also for the men whose actions will define her waiting:

Waiting for him to pay attention to me  
Waiting for him to fall in love with me  
//  
Waiting for my wedding night  
Waiting for sex  
Waiting for him to make the first move

Waiting out pimples and pregnancies, motherhood and menopause, bereavements and bowel movements, Wilding’s speaker is forever a hostage to time, forever ‘Waiting . . .’.<sup>24</sup> As a signal example of feminist performance art, Wilding’s *Waiting* – like Chantal Akerman’s real-time

account of a single mother's daily routine in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)<sup>25</sup> – establishes the necessity of analysing women's oppression as a temporal phenomenon. In performance, the metronomic swing of Wilding's (im)patient body keeps regular time, synched to the poem's predictable cataloguing of the rites and routines by which women's lives are typically structured. The rhythmic pacing of the performance foregrounds the speaker's adherence to the schedules of compliant femininity; if she is to maintain the temporal dispositions most closely identified with femininity – patience, forbearance, endurance – the speaker can do little *other* than wait. While the modulations of Wilding's voice inflect her waiting with longing, anticipation, frustration, and boredom, these affective orientations do nothing to alter the duration of the waiting, nor its outcomes. Bound by the parameters of biddable femininity, the speaker appears to wait her life away.

Viewed through a philosophical lens, one of the most intriguing elements of Wilding's performance is her decisive staging of the body as the exemplary site of waiting. While there is little question that waiting requires a body, it is rarely conceptualised in ways that account for its embodied dimensions. The neglected status of the body in Western philosophy is, of course, a mainstay of feminist critical discourse; in delineations of waiting, however, the body's virtual absence is also partly attributable to the fact that waiting leaves the body with nothing purposeful to do, no obvious action to undertake. What role, then, is accorded to the body in the act of waiting? When Bergson enquires into 'the function of the body in the life of the spirit' in *Matter and Memory* (1896), he claims the body as a 'centre of action', a dynamic nexus at which 'perceptions are born and actions made ready'.<sup>26</sup> Unsettling the ontological distinction between the mind and the body that lies at the heart of Cartesian dualism, Bergson foregrounds the materiality of perception, noting the degree to which perception directs itself to the prospect of somatic action:

‘the objects that surround my body’, he proposes, ‘reflect its possible action upon them’.<sup>27</sup> If we follow Bergson’s logic that perception is animated by the subject’s nascent potential to act upon the ‘objects’ in his environment, then what happens in the process of waiting, when the subject’s ability to act is prohibitively curtailed or suspended? How might we describe the perceptual activity of a subject with a body that no longer feels like a ‘centre of action’? What happens, also, to those who bear witness to waiting?

Such questions cut across *The Women’s Room*, a novel that is quick to implicate the body in women’s temporal oppression. According to Mira – who is initially identified as the focus of the narrative, and then, in an entirely foreseeable denouement, revealed as the narrator – few conditions accustom women to waiting more effectively than pregnancy, which she wryly extolls as the greatest ‘disciplining device in the human experience’. Pregnancy, she declaims, ‘is a long waiting in which you learn what it means completely to lose control over your life’:

You can’t wish away even for an hour the thing that is swelling you up, stretching your stomach until the skin feels as if it will burst, kicking you from the inside until you are black and blue. You can’t even hit back without hurting yourself, the condition and you are identical: you are no longer a person, but a pregnancy.

The waiting so garishly evoked by Mira is not the tolerable squirm of frustration that plagues Bergson as he waits, ‘impatiently’, for his sugar to melt. Mira’s waiting is felt in the tissues and organs of the body as a wrenchingly violent and inescapable discomfort: it is a ‘swelling’; a ‘stretching’; a ‘kicking’; a ‘hurting’. While Mira’s body is a ‘centre of action’ in the most literal sense, the action is not her own; she is unable to effect any changes in her circumstances. ‘[Y]our whole life stretches out in front of you in that great belly of yours’, explains Mira, ‘an eternal sequence of bottles and diapers and cries and feedings. You have no self but a waiting, no future but pain, and no hope but the tedium of humble tasks’.<sup>28</sup> Tellingly, Mira’s loss of bodily autonomy is compounded by her diminished sense of self. There is, in fact, no longer any self to speak of; in

the (embodied) experience of pregnancy, the self is replaced by a futureless, hopeless, monotonous (and disembodied) 'waiting'. Even the waiting, then, is not singularly ascribable to Mira (who has 'no self', after all), but is instead the murky province of an insistently transpersonal, pluralised, anonymous second-person 'you'. In other contexts, of course, this 'you' might signify a productive communality, borne of shared experience; here, however, it marks the (near) erasure of the individual subject within an indistinguishable mass of similarly disadvantaged subjects. In line with other feminist attempts to establish waiting as women's constitutive ontology, Mira's account of waiting can only be interpreted, counterintuitively, through the lens of her own (future) action. In feminist art and literature, after all, the staging of waiting bodies is a form of action in and of itself, with the artist or writer as a 'centre of action' and the text as the outcome of a creative processing and mediation that defies the putative passivity of waiting. Despite what the narrator implies, then, Mira's waiting is not passive; it is, rather, inextricable from the act of literary productiveness that materialises as the text itself.

In the process of representing waiting, French and Wilding, as well as Alther, are keen to attend to the 'active' elements of waiting and its ability to affect those by whom it is endured and witnessed. In feminist art and literature, after all, waiting is not only a thematic trope; its representation does something, formally, to the feminist text that shapes the way in which it is experienced in time. Like Mira's pregnant body, for example, French's language in the extract above swells, but – by dwelling on the forensic details of waiting – the narrative remains oddly static, taking its time to move on to the next incident, just as the pauses and protractions of Wilding's performance undermine its own timely progress. By arresting progress in this way – however temporarily – these texts alter the temporal experience of viewing or reading. They force us to wait. While these works predate the original publication of Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time'

in 1979, they are suggestive of a problem that Kristeva later conceptualises: that time – as it is experienced by women – is not readily reconcilable to the terms within which ‘temporality’ is prevailingly understood; namely, as ‘linear and progressive unfolding’. The concept of ‘women’s time’, then, enables Kristeva – like French and Wilding – to dwell on ‘repetition’ and ‘eternity’ as the ‘modalities of time’ to which female subjectivity is dominantly keyed. Rhythmed to the cycles of nature, ‘women’s time’ poses itself as a useful ‘problem’ in relation to the cultural instantiation of time as a ‘masculine’, ‘teleological’ project that is rooted in the logics of ‘departure, progression and arrival’.<sup>29</sup> If it is a problem, however, then it is also what Claire Colebrook describes as a ‘potentiality’<sup>30</sup>, in that it presents subjects with an opportunity to recalibrate themselves to the time of waiting: to wait *with*.

The value of ‘waiting *with*’ is examined with characteristic dexterity by Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury in their recent analysis of waiting and melancholia. While the structure of waiting is usually determined by a prepositional *for*, Baraitser and Salisbury suggest that it is only by waiting *with*, by sharing an experience of time with another person, that we can ‘have the chance’ of developing a phenomenological understanding of conditions – including depression – in which time does not flow. This ‘waiting *with*’, they claim, ‘gestures towards at least the possibility of a future that might not merely be a stuck present or a swelling, obsessively revolving present’.<sup>31</sup> As well as presenting the prospect of change, this waiting *with* also recuperates the social dimension of temporality. As Levinas opines in *Time and the Other* (1946/47), after all, ‘time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but [...] the very relationship of the subject with the Other’.<sup>32</sup> It is when we acknowledge this, moreover, that we can move towards the kind of ethical relationships that Levinas goes on to imagine later in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), in which the subject is defined through its radical responsibility to the Other.<sup>33</sup>



### **The Structure of Waiting**

In the context of US feminist fictions, waiting is not only the focus of narrative scrutiny, but also an important structuring device. Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976) and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) each seek to examine what waiting does to women by placing their protagonists in situations in which they are forced to wait: Alther's exuberant heroine, Ginny – recently estranged from her own husband and daughter – is summoned to her childhood home for the duration of her mother's dying; and the narrator of *The Women's Room* finds herself killing time for the 'two and a half whole months' of the summer vacation before her students return to 'the little community college' where she teaches.<sup>34</sup> In these novels waiting is configured in terms of determinate objects and events, whether in the form of the death of a parent or summer's end. To the extent that these fictions seek to evoke the experience of waiting, then, the reader is compelled to wait with the protagonists, however tedious that might be. At formal and thematic odds with the Aristotelian equation of plot to action, the determination of feminist writers to carve out a narrative space for waiting speaks to a related desire to expose the prevailing ideological biases by which the novel is shaped. In their tacit critique of a masculinised narrative tradition, these attempts to depict waiting recall Virginia Woolf's famous despair at her inactive biographical subject in *Orlando* (1928), who insists on 'sitting still' and 'thinking' in ways that are not conducive to the representation of 'Life', which, 'it has been agreed upon by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer'.<sup>35</sup>

In *Kinflicks* Alther not only stakes a claim for the validity of waiting as a subject for (feminist) fiction, but also – though her formal attempts to attenuate the narrative's forward momentum – encourages the reader to 'wait *with*' Ginny as she sits out her mother's death.

*Kinflicks* initially seems to operate in the rambunctious picaresque mode that Lisa Maria Hogeland identifies with other ‘consciousness-raising novels’, including Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972), Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973).<sup>36</sup> Alther’s novel alternates between Ginny’s present-day reflections on the past, told in the first person, and six dated entries (for June 24, 26, 27, and 30, and July 7 and 27) that mediate the unfolding present-time of waiting in a third-person narrative voice. These expansive ‘diaristic’ entries chart the waiting of Mrs Babcock, Ginny’s mother, who finds herself in the ‘way station’ of the hospital, ‘suspended in time, with no awareness of its passage’, and of Ginny herself, who waits with her mother as she dies.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the six entries, the fraught relationship between mother and daughter mellows as a result of their waiting together. This waiting takes on a decidedly fixed dimension in the entry for ‘Tuesday, June 27’, which Alther places at the literal and metaphorical heart of the novel. On this day, Ginny, lying alongside her bed-bound mother ‘with a needle in her right arm’, makes a donation of her own blood to Mrs Babcock in the hope that it might improve the clotting disorder that is causing her demise. As Ginny’s robust platelets are transfused to Mrs Babcock the two women pass the time by watching daytime soaps and ruminating silently, but synchronously, on the ‘subtle shift in the balance of power’ that has taken place between parent and child. With the ‘ticking of the Hull clock’ marking time in the background, Ginny finds ‘undeniable satisfaction in the concept that her mother’s blood might “learn” about platelet management’ from her own healthy blood, not least when ‘the flow of instruction between them had generally run in the opposite direction’. Mrs Babcock, meanwhile, accustomed to a pattern in which she is ‘bleeding herself dry’ for her children, is ‘profoundly uncomfortable’ with Ginny ‘serving *her*’.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the novel, time has ‘ceased to exist in its usual sense’ and the women have taken to ‘judging segments of time by their quality, not by their

duration'.<sup>39</sup> Ginny and Mrs Babcock have – through waiting together – broken the 'intergenerational spell' that has kept them at odds, and each has developed a sympathetic understanding of the other.<sup>40</sup> When Ginny finally confides in her mother that she has left her husband and daughter, Mrs Babcock – having had time to reflect on her own grim experiences of marriage and motherhood – resists the 'impulse' to 'issue instructions' or proffer judgement, enjoining Ginny, instead, to 'do as you think best'.<sup>41</sup> Ginny is likewise able to intuit what her mother needs from her when, in the final chapter, she tells the doctors that the ailing Mrs Babcock is 'ready' to die. The women are brought into final alignment as Ginny thanks the doctors for their care on behalf of them both: 'we appreciate it'.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the de-subjectifying 'you' into which Mira's alienating experiences of pregnant waiting are amorously enfolded in *The Women's Room*, Ginny's 'we' is a consciously inclusive pronominal gesture, a mark of mutual recognition that emerges as the hopeful outcome of a shared waiting.

While the dated entries in *Kinflicks* chart a cumulative growth in understanding between the women that is precipitated by their waiting together, the diaristic chronology is interrupted by the first-person chapters, in which Ginny insistently projects the reader back into the past with lurid accounts of her youthful misadventures. *The Women's Room*, similarly, intersperses first-person accounts of the present – in which the narrator waits for her students to return to campus – with third-person renderings of past events in the lives of Mira and her friends. These temporal disjunctions, chronological vacillations and perspectival shifts represent a forestalling of progress at the level of narrative structure that replicates the frustrations of waiting. At the same time, however, the insights that emerge over the course of these expansive novels do so as a consequence of the fact that, in waiting, the protagonists find opportunities to attend to certain of their experiences. In other words, the lack of 'action' or 'progress' in these narratives is countervailed

by a deepening of understanding – of the self and of others – that is consistent with the aims of the consciousness-raising novel. That waiting might facilitate the enhancement of perception and comprehension is a possibility drawn into focus by the etymological vagaries of the term itself. In his discussion of Bachelard’s poetics of the instant, Schweizer remarks on the homophonic similarity of *attente*, the French for ‘waiting’, and ‘attention’. Although he acknowledges that Bachelard interprets waiting and attention as ‘radically different experiences of time’, Schweizer speculates suggestively about their relationship: ‘what if *attente* were the prerequisite for attention? What if attention were a function of waiting? Perhaps without waiting there can be no attention’.<sup>43</sup> The connections are not merely homophonic, however, as *attendre* (the French verb ‘to wait’) and ‘attention’ are both etymologically traceable to the Latin *tendere*, meaning ‘to extend outward, stretch, spread out, direct, aim’.<sup>44</sup>

In line with Schweizer’s recuperation of the ‘attentive’ dimensions of waiting, Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* (2004) suggests that we commit a dangerous category error when we seek to define agency in accordance with the logic of Western capitalism. ‘[W]hat may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view’, she cautions, ‘may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment’. Agency is thus ‘entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms’.<sup>45</sup> The resisting ways in which we ‘inhabit’ norms is a similar source of concern for Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak in *Ethnographies of Waiting*, in which the authors make a careful distinction between the ‘*politics* and *poetics* of waiting’ that bears on the feminist metaphysics of waiting that, I argue, takes shape in the feminist novels of the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> While the politics of waiting engages ‘with the structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait’, a poetics of

waiting traces the ‘existential affordances of being placed in temporal relations, gaps, and intervals where the outcome is uncertain’. Waiting, Janeja and Bandak argue, can precipitate ‘*active*’ modes of semiotic engagement with the world in which one is stuck; it can, in short, ‘forge innovation and creativity as well as destroy the persons waiting’. If we understand waiting, moreover, as a ‘form of becoming’, then it necessarily ‘open[s] up for the otherwise’.<sup>47</sup>

This sense of the pending but unrealised ‘otherwise’ resonates within the endings of *Kinflicks* and *The Women’s Room*, which are marked by a shared sense of temporal provisionality: Ginny, with ‘her mother’s clock [wrapped] in her faded Sisterhood is Powerful T-shirt’, leaves for unknown pastures, having acknowledged that she is ‘condemned to survival. At least for the time being’<sup>48</sup>; and Mira finds herself trapped in a ‘story [that] has no ending’, feeling it ‘is time to begin something new, if [she] can find the energy’. If waiting does have the potential to precipitate ‘new’ or ‘otherwise’ futures, then the post-radical feminist novel is reluctant to give these futures a determinate shape. As Mira observes on the concluding page, the world in which she finds herself ‘is not the world I would have wished’, but what the wished-for world she has waited (and is waiting) for *would* look like remains in contention.<sup>49</sup>

One of the things that does become evident to Mira during her attempt to ‘understand’ the past is that the political landscape has shifted in ways that could not be foreseen in 1968. The legacies of early-second wave activism with which Mira appears to grapple in the closing paragraphs of *The Women’s Room* are to some extent similar to those ‘unanticipated and unintended’ feminist legacies that are retrospectively delineated by Nancy Fraser in her controversial article ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’ in 2009.<sup>50</sup> For Fraser, famously, the failure of second wave feminism to sustain its materialist critique of structural inequality – or, as the restroom radicals of *The Women’s Room* would have it, to smash ‘capitalism

and the fucking military-industrial complex’ – gave way to a scenario in which feminism’s claims for social, political and economic justice were increasingly reframed ‘as claims for the recognition of identity and difference’. If, as Fraser posits, one of the major legacies of second wave activism has been a politics of ‘recognition’ (rather than of ‘redistribution’) that has facilitated the rise of neoliberal capitalism and ‘harnessed women’s emancipation to the engine of capitalist accumulation’, then this is certainly *not* what Mira et al ‘would have wished’.<sup>51</sup> What *The Women’s Room*, in particular, seems to offer is a prescient critique of the post-radical neoliberal version of feminism that was only nascently discernible in the late-1970s – a state of affairs, that is, in which change is so grindingly incremental and the prospect of genuine structural transformation so remote that the revolutionary subject has no option but to wait, and to wait alone. By the end of the novel, Mira’s community of revolutionary-minded women has fallen away: Val is shot and killed by the police during a violent protest; Kyla is studying for the bar and has a job as a law clerk; Clarissa becomes a television producer in Chicago; Iso is ‘on a grant’, writing a book and ‘working at the Bodleian and the British Museum’; and Ava, once a ballerina, is a housewife in Pittsburgh.<sup>52</sup> With some dead and others integrated into the establishment (as per the assimilating strategies of neoliberalism), the cadre of radical women is now just a scattering of individuals. Even the beach on which Mira walks ‘grows emptier every day’, its ‘large and vacant and mindless’ vistas seeming to betoken the vanishing opportunities for collective action.<sup>53</sup> At this point, Mira has done what she can as an individual. Having emancipated herself from the demands on her time made by husbands and boyfriends and children, Mira now has ‘enough room, but it’s empty’.<sup>54</sup> The circumstances she has engineered for herself are potentially conducive to a new kind of life, but the structures in which she operates remain hostile to the tarrying figure of the ‘liberated’ woman. Even as the putative beneficiary of neoliberal ideals – the white, heterosexual,

middle-class, educated woman – she cannot find an appropriate job because ‘nobody wanted to hire a woman over forty even if she had a Harvard degree’.<sup>55</sup> It stands to reason, then, that Mira should find herself in a state of frustrated untimeliness: she keeps ‘expecting that there should be something out there that would make it easier to be in here’. The failure of the ‘out there’ to transform in accordance with the ‘in here’ marks the limit of a politics that insistently devolves responsibility for progressive change to the individual. As Mira explains in the final lines of *The Women’s Room*, ‘I have opened all the doors in my head. I have opened all the pores in my body. But only the tide rolls in’.<sup>56</sup> It is not the case that Mira’s activism has been in vain, but neither has it resulted in the large-scale structural transformations that seemed possible – even, perhaps, inevitable – in 1968. In Mira’s state of waiting openness, however, there lies the possibility of ‘something’ that might help to turn the tide back towards a collectivist politics focused on the ‘out there’; a politics, that is, which attends to structures as well as attitudes.

If nothing else, waiting has endowed these (privileged) subjects with the awareness that they can do and be ‘otherwise’. In this respect, the novels continue to enact the ‘hopeful’ orientation towards the future that Rita Felski associates with all feminist enterprise.<sup>57</sup> By attending to the politics and poetics of waiting, these novels model forms of action that look and feel different to those that grabbed headlines in the ‘crisis-times’ of the 1960s. Working against the assumption that waiting is a ‘waste of time’, these texts make a case for the affective traction of waiting, in that it is shown to *do something* to those who wait. Rather than a form of existential immobility, then, waiting can give the individual pause to attend to their circumstances in ways that might generate more ethical engagements with the world and the people in it. Feminist authors return again and again to the experience of waiting as a point of shared identification between women; by depicting scenes of waiting in which time is ‘felt’ as well as ‘lived’, they gesture towards the

affective potential of ‘waiting *with*’ as a means by which different – as yet unnameable – collective futures might one day come to be.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room* (London: Virago, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Elliott, *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time*. (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 169n and p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 859.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 2-11.

<sup>8</sup> See Victoria Hesford, ‘Securing a Future: Feminist Time Against Nation Time’, *Critical Matrix* 16 (Fall 2007), pp. 26-39 and p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 2003), pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Newton, *Sir Isaac Newton’s ‘Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy’ and his ‘System of the World’*, trans. Andrew Mott (Berkeley: California University Press, 1966). 2 vols, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. 154-155 and pp. 105-106.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> See E. P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967), pp. 56-97.

<sup>15</sup> Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Bryson, *Gender and the Politics of Time* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 351.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471 and p. 610.

<sup>20</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 113, p. 19 and p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Organised by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, the co-founders of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute for the Arts, *Womanhouse* was an ‘environmental art piece’ in which participating artists created works that explored the ‘longings, fears and dreams women have as they cook, sew, wash and iron their lives away’. See Johanna Demetrakas (dir.), *Womanhouse* (Phoenix Films, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> Faith Wilding, *Waiting, Womanhouse* (Los Angeles, CA, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Sam McBean, *Feminism’s Queer Temporalities* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 148.

<sup>24</sup> Faith Wilding, *Waiting, Womanhouse* (Los Angeles, CA, 1972).



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- <sup>25</sup> See Chantal Akerman (dir.), *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Paradise Films, 1975).
- <sup>26</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), p. 4 and p. 44.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>28</sup> French, p. 49.
- <sup>29</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7.1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 13-35 (pp. 16-18).
- <sup>30</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'Stratigraphic Time, Women's Time', *Australian Feminist Studies* 24.59 (March 2009), pp. 11-16 (p. 15).
- <sup>31</sup> Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury, 'Depressing Time: Waiting, Melancholia, and the Psychoanalytic Practice of Care', *The Time of Anthropology*, ed. Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Bob Simpson (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 103-122 (p. 116).
- <sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 39.
- <sup>33</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- <sup>34</sup> French, p. 7 and p. 515.
- <sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 155.
- <sup>36</sup> See Lisa Marie Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998).
- <sup>37</sup> Lisa Alther, *Kinflicks* (London: Virago, 1999), p. 94
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286-289; emphasis in original.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 473-474.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.
- <sup>43</sup> Harold Schweizer, 'On Waiting', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74.3 (Summer 2005), pp. 777-792 (p. 788).
- <sup>44</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary*. I am very grateful to the anonymous reader who identified this etymological association. It not only confirms the connection of waiting to attentiveness, but also renders legible an equally suggestive set of links to 'tension', another derivative of *tendere* that invites interpretation in relation to the affective dimensions of waiting.
- <sup>45</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 15; emphasis in original.
- <sup>46</sup> Manpreet K. Janeja, and Andreas Bandak, 'Introduction: Worth the Wait', *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, ed. Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-40 (p. 3; emphasis in original).
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 and p. 5; emphasis in original.
- <sup>48</sup> Alther, p. 569.
- <sup>49</sup> French, p. 514 and p. 517.
- <sup>50</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 211.
- <sup>51</sup> Fraser, pp. 219-221.
- <sup>52</sup> French, pp. 512-514.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 515.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 517.

<sup>57</sup> Rita Felski, 'Telling Time in Feminist Theory.' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21.1 (Spring 2002), pp. 21-28 (p. 22).