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The Politics of Cleaning in Doris Lessing's 1980s Realist Fiction: *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *The Good Terrorist* (1985)

In Doris Lessing's 1962 short story 'To Room Nineteen', published in *A Man and Two Women* just a year after the publication of *The Golden Notebook*, Susan Rawlings, a sensible, middle-class housewife with 'four children, big house, garden, charwoman' who will eventually commit suicide in a seedy Paddington hotel, struggles to articulate the feelings of entrapment and oppression that inexplicably plague her. The story, we are advised at the outset, is about 'a failure in intelligence', and after twelve years of a modern, intelligent marriage, Susan, to her surprise and distress, finds herself conceiving of family life as 'a prison sentence' and a 'voluntary bondage' from which she can 'never feel free'. 'She was a prisoner', concludes Susan, and although she quickly dismisses the idea as absurd and ridiculous, it nevertheless stands.[1]

This image of the home as a prison, a space of confinement and limitation, which Susan instinctively reaches for when attempting to articulate her distress, pervaded second-wave feminist discourse on domesticity. In her seminal 1949 study, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir speaks of the housewife in terms of 'vassalage', and subsequent feminist critics perpetuate the association of housewifery with a whole set of interrelated tropes around imprisonment, enslavement, indentured labour and servitude.[2] For Betty Friedan, writing in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the suburban homes of American housewives are 'comfortable concentration camps',[3] while Germaine Greer declares in *The Female Eunuch* in 1970 that women 'represent the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description'.[4] Sheila Rowbotham's mode of socialist feminist analysis describes the housewife as 'trapped

and bound' by capitalist society within the 'prison she calls a home',[5] while Ann Oakley's 1974 sociological study, *Housewife*, conceives of housewives as 'subject to deprivation and oppression in relation to the dominant group in society'.[6] A year before the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, Lessing describes in Susan a figure strikingly similar to Friedan's middle-class housewife who experiences the same 'strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning' that plagues Lessing's protagonist.[7] Like Friedan's inarticulately unhappy subject, Susan lacks a feminist vocabulary with which to describe 'the problem that has no name'.[8]

In this article, I examine the politics of cleaning in Lessing's 1980s realist fictions, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and while 'To Room Nineteen' is not 'about' cleaning in the manner of these later novels, it preempts pertinent questions pertaining to domesticity and women's labour that would go on to motivate second-wave feminism's analysis of housework and its role in retarding women's necessary liberation. The tone of this discourse is set by Beauvoir, who declares: 'Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day'.[9] This view is taken up and echoed by later critics such as Greer, who terms housework 'a typical vicious circle; work makes more work and it goes on'.[10] A concomitant suspicion of her own pointlessness haunts Susan in Lessing's story. For Beauvoir, 'The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present'.[11] Accordingly, Susan observes herself filling the empty hours when her children are at school: 'sewing shirts or dresses, which she might just as well have bought. She saw herself making cakes for hours at a time in the big family kitchen: yet usually she bought cakes'.[12] Like Beauvoir, Lessing casts an unsentimental eye over Susan's homemaking and rejects it as busywork: tasks that are an end in themselves – inconsequential labour that could be better and more efficiently outsourced.

For Beauvoir, influenced by Hegelian philosophy and existentialist concepts of self-determination, housework is a 'negative' and stultifying pursuit that 'provides no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality'. Liberty, she argues, can only be attained by a constant reaching out for other liberties. Consequently, 'There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future'.[13] Lessing famously distanced herself from second-wave feminism, but when Beauvoir charges women like Susan with being complicit in their own 'stagnation', Lessing, in this 1962

story, seems to agree. Susan knowingly consents to suspend her autonomy for twenty child-raising years. The finely balanced equality that exists between her and Matthew when they meet – similar experiences, careers, assets – is ruptured by marriage. While Susan does not particularly regret her job (it isn't a vocation – but neither is his), its loss shrinks her self-directed life and diminishes her capacity to act on and change the world. Lessing concedes that men, like women, are also bound and limited by bourgeois, patriarchal, nuclear family life. For Matthew, with 'Susan, children, house, and garden' to maintain, 'the mortgage still cost four hundred a year'.[14] Crucially, however, he has resources available to him that are denied his stay-at-home wife. As Beauvoir charges: man marries 'to obtain an anchorage in immanence, but not to be himself confined therein'.[15] Tellingly, Susan recalls her years of premarital employment in terms of '*living my own life*', and she concludes: 'from the moment I became pregnant for the first time I signed myself over, so to speak, to other people'.[16] For Beauvoir, committed as she is to the pursuit of transcendence, the acceptance of immanence, stagnation and subjection is nothing less than 'a degradation of existence'.[17]

While many second-wave critics took up Beauvoir's denunciation of 'the housewife trap',[18] others turned instead to a closer examination of the pervasive assumption, as Juliet Mitchell puts it, that 'housework is nothing'.[19] For Mitchell, writing in *Woman's Estate* in 1971, in a society that renders domestic work invisible and inconsequential, 'women are *redundant*', persistently told that their work is not *work*.[20] This is the argument laid out in Margaret Benston's pathbreaking 1969 essay, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', one of the first sustained analyses of the economic function of domestic labour, in which she observes that housework and childcare make up a huge proportion of 'socially necessary production' but, in a capitalist society fixated on commodity production, are rarely considered 'real work'.[21] Subsequently, across the 1970s and under the banner of the 'Wages for Housework' campaign, there developed a sustained materialist feminist analysis of housework which attempted to draw cleaning into the nexus of labour relations and capital. As Silvia Federici commented in 1975, the feminists calling for wages for housework were looking to define housewives as 'workers in struggle' and to challenge the basic assumption that '*housework is not work*'.[22] Set against this campaign were concerns that a salary would only serve to formalise and perpetuate rather than disentangle the connection of women to domestic labour. Joan Landes, for example, argues that the 'well-intentioned but mistaken' campaign fails to recognise that a wage, in itself, would not

free women from housework, nor alter the nature of that work. Indeed, she warns that it might have the opposite effect, 'freezing women into those jobs'.[23]

Repeatedly, second-wave feminists identified cleaning and housework as a key battleground in the fight for gender equality. Until women were freed from doing the cleaning, they argued, women would not be free. These issues and debates pertain to Lessing's novels of the 1980s. Where 'To Room Nineteen' is an early, pre-second-wave exposition of a woman's frustration with both the conditions of her existence and her inability to locate and express the nature of her seemingly unnatural discontent, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *The Good Terrorist* are produced against a backdrop of second-wave feminism's evolving and often fractious discourse on housework. In the two novels, Lessing pursues an idiosyncratic examination of the function of cleaning. Taken together, they provide an insight into her politics in relation to feminist arguments in the late twentieth century around the connection between women's liberation and 'women's work' and the value apportioned to women's labour in general.

The Diary of a Good Neighbour

Lessing published *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and its sequel, *If the Old Could …* (1984), pseudonymously as Jane Somers, with the two volumes later collected under her own name as *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984). Reflecting on her 'little experiment' in the Preface to the collected *Diaries*, she describes her desire to be reviewed on merit, rather than as 'Doris Lessing', and also to cheer new writers by demonstrating that access to publication is bound up with many more factors than simply talent. She also acknowledges a 'faintly malicious' desire to give to the reviewers who disliked the science fiction of her Canopus series, and often urged her to return to the realism of *The Golden Notebook*, what they professed to desire. None, she observes, recognised or particularly appreciated her writing when she did.[24] The ironies that attend the reception of *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* are amplified by the assumptions Lessing suspected were bound up with the original novel's cover note that 'Jane Somers is the pseudonym of a well-known English woman journalist'.[25] While the detail, she explains, was added to spark interest in an unknown writer, some 'potential reviewers, male, were put off by it'.[26] Jane Somers (known as Janna) is also the narrator of Lessing's novel; she is the Assistant Editor of a successful women's lifestyle magazine and a writer of romantic novels. Lessing's intention in

pursuing this metafictional technique, as Susan Watkins suggests, is to expose the commercial pressures that push certain authors towards certain genres 'and to challenge the association between realism, "authenticity" and women's writing'.[27] The suite of preconceptions that arguably attended this new work by a woman writer about a woman writer provide a resonant backdrop to a novel fundamentally concerned with the value afforded to women's labour.

On the surface, Janna seemingly embodies a certain mode of 1980s liberal feminist success. Impeccably styled, well-travelled and well-connected, her job gives her both financial independence and cultural cachet. She is a figure of feminist aspiration for younger women such as her assistant Phyllis and niece Jill: 'clever girls, fighting their way up'. Janna is also selfish, inasmuch as she prioritises her self in a manner not commonly deemed acceptable for women. Childless by choice – a ready cultural signifier of a selfish woman – she loves and pursues her career; she spends an inordinate amount of time and money on personal grooming; she delegates house care to her cleaner; and, crucially, she readily acknowledges her own visceral aversion to the selfless care of others. The diary commences with Janna reflecting on her compulsion to emotionally and physically distance herself from both her dying husband Freddie and, subsequently, her sick and dying mother. Clear-sighted in her self-analysis, Janna recognises that she used work during Freddie's terminal illness as 'an excuse not to be with him in that *awfulness*'.[28] While acknowledging her personal limitations, Janna at the start of the novel is nevertheless broadly content. She has, however, started to worry that something may be missing from her emotional life. Into this void steps Maudie: a fearsome, belligerent, impoverished but proud old woman whom, much to her own surprise, Janna comes to befriend.

Janna first encounters Maudie while out shopping. 'A tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin, in black heavy dusty clothes', she reminds Janna of a witch. When she accompanies the old woman home, she enters a slum dwelling, 'dirty and dingy and grim and awful'.[29] Despite Janna's instinctive reluctance to engage with the 'awfulness' of need, she finds herself drawn to Maudie's fierce, characterful pride. Over the course of months, Janna seemingly irresistibly takes on more and more responsibility for Maudie, and in the process, learns to care for another person in a manner that closely echoes housewifery, as she cleans, clothes and feeds a dependent other for no financial recompense. And cleaning, specifically, is at the heart of this interaction. The novel's descriptions are graphic. Janna empties buckets of filth from Maudie's grime-caked kitchen, scalds greasy crockery and throws out

foul rags. When Maudie, weakened by illness, reluctantly and circuitously asks for help with washing, a horrified Janna realises 'she had shat her pants, shat everything'. Sickened by the stench and cognisant of the old woman's angry shame, Janna removes petticoats 'brown and yellow with shit', cleans the excrement from Maudie's withered body, cuts thickened toenails and strips and launders soiled bedsheets.[30]

There is something potentially retaliatory in the novel's depiction of Janna's abrupt initiation into the material realities of care. Contrasted with her usual self-indulgent routine of bathing twice daily and dressing in bespoke tailored silks, Janna must get her privileged hands truly dirty as she learns to place the care of another before her own comfort. Certainly, critics most commonly read Janna's engagement with Maudie as a form of lesson to be learnt. For Gayle Greene, the manner in which Maudie enters into Janna's life provides a kind of 'fantasy framework' that allows Janna 'to atone for former failures of sympathy by caring for Maudie'.[31] Watkins suggests that the encounters with Maudie's filthy, impoverished home and frail ageing body open Janna's eyes to a mode of 'women's work' that was previously 'invisible and unimaginable' to her and encourages her to 're-evaluate' her own highly performative mode of stylish femininity.[32] For Elizabeth Maslen, the unlikely friendship educates Janna on poverty and isolation and directs her in 'seeing through the stereotype to the individual, and learning to love and respect what she finds, despite filth, stench, incontinence, senility'.[33] Cynthia Port, instead, argues that Janna's relationship with Maudie forces her to reevaluate her consumerist pursuit of the new, which would condemn Maudie's decrepit belongings (and by extension, Maudie herself) as worthless rubbish. Contrasting Maudie's thrift with her own excessive consumption, argues Port, 'leads Janna to reconsider her definition of waste and her participation in an economy of obsolescence'.[34]

Each of these readings provides valuable insight into the significance and purpose of Janna's character development over the course of the novel as she undergoes a steady transformation. The experience of close, intimate care awakens in her, not so much a dormant guilt as a simple realisation of her previous sidestepping of responsibility: a belated epiphany that infuriates her long-suffering sister, Georgie. Maudie's impact can also be charted in the notable reduction in time afforded by Janna to maintaining her appearance, as she eventually realises: 'I do not have the inclination […] I have lost interest'.[35] Janna also – with caution and often reluctantly – allows certain others to encroach on her time and energy, eventually extending her care to Annie, another destitute old woman, and taking in Jill, sacrificing the precious solitude

of her flat. Clearly, Janna does learn from her friendship with Maudie, and she does change. In the midst of this celebrated personal development, however, there is a danger in reading *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* as a valorisation of women's domestic labour; one might be tempted to conclude that the novel proposes that learning to care for Maudie makes Janna a better person – specifically, a better *woman*.

Lessing's text, however, is inevitably more complex than it might at first appear. It is notable that the novel is largely populated with female characters. The army of social workers, Good Neighbours, and Home Help that circulate around the city's population of impoverished elderly are all women. When two rare men do appear, in the form of the 'Special Cleaning Team' sent in to tackle 'the rough work' in particularly squalid properties, they declare Annie's house beyond their scope, and depart, leaving Janna and Vera, the social worker, to prize up layers of lino, scrub floors, wash down walls and ceilings, and scour a stove 'encrusted with thirty years of dirt'. As Janna declares to the bemused men: 'Someone has got to do it'.[36] Indeed, there is a recognition in Lessing's novel that someone *has* got to do it: that someone has got to care for those who cannot care for themselves; someone must clean up the shit and sweep away the detritus of poverty and neglect. That this low-status work so often falls to women, suggests Lessing, is not so much natural and inevitable, as a consequence of structural inequalities that traditionally push women to prioritise unpaid labour – what Greene terms: 'the fabric of caring that knits society together' – over paid and culturally valued employment.[37]

Men largely inhabit the margins of *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and are commonly sustained by the unacknowledged labour of women. Yet Janna's frustration at the inequalities women face is tellingly best articulated when she addresses it to a women's liberation movement she charges with being distracted by inconsequential campaigns – at telling women 'It is our right to have *good* sex' – while failing to revolutionise the fundamental material realities of gender relations.[38] When Janna's colleague, mentor and great friend Joyce feels compelled to follow her faithless husband to America, giving up her job as a hugely successful magazine editor to become a faculty wife, under the threat that otherwise he will go with his mistress and break up their family, Janna's fury is directed at the feminist movement. When Joyce tells Janna that '*She has no choice*', Janna demands rhetorically of 'women's lib': 'What, in your little manifestoes, your slamming of doors in men's faces, your rhetoric, have you *ever* said that touches this? As far as I am concerned, nothing'. Despite the activism and the theorising, marriage, motherhood, and duties of care still impinge on and limit a woman's autonomy

and potential – just as they did for Susan Rawlings in the 1960s. Janna suddenly realises that Joyce has always been torn between family and career: has only been able to achieve her remarkable professional success ('Very few women ever get a job like this one') because she had Janna – childless and able to stay late and deputise when needed. As Janna recognises, '*I* have never said, No, I can't stay in the office late as usual, I have to get home'. She has a sudden vision of herself as part of Joyce's marriage – a necessary third pillar sustaining the precarious balance of work and home that feminism has not, after all, been able to resolve for women.[39]

A similar frustration at feminism sounds in a 1992 essay for the *Partisan Review*, in which Lessing accuses the women's movement of a host of deficiencies, particularly, failing – from a combination of snobbery and ideological purity – to reach out to housewives, conservative middle-class women, working women and older women. These blind spots, she argues, have meant that feminism 'has developed in a way that exactly mirrors traditional male attitudes' – denigrating certain women as insufficient and inconsequential rather than tearing up the old assumptions and starting again. In this essay, Lessing accuses feminists of patronising housewives: of doing nothing for them, and indeed making them feel worse. 'It is quite tragic', she declares, 'that women should consider themselves "only housewives"'.[40] At the same time, there is a tension in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* concerning the role and function of housewifery that revolves around the ambiguous nature of the service being provided as simultaneously voluntary and required.

During the period of the Wages for Housework campaign, some feminists argued that to attach monetary value to housework would diminish the value of care freely given. In a 1974 essay in *Liberation* magazine, Carol Lopate argues that domestic care provides 'the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other's needs out of love […] rather than being based on financial reward'.[41] Responding to Lopate's essay, Nicole Cox and Federici reply, with some feeling:

> It seems to us, however, that if instead of simply relying on love and care, our mothers had had a financial reward, they would have been less bitter, less dependent, less blackmailed, and less blackmailing to their children who were constantly reminded of their mothers' sacrifices.[42]

This haunting figure of the bitter, harassed mother appears in Lessing's novel in the form of Georgie, Janna's older sister, married with four

children, who has long resented Janna's evasion of caring responsibilities in pursuit of her 'smart little job' and 'glamorous goings-on'. When Janna, newly attuned to 'what it costs, looking after the very old, the helpless', tries to talk to Georgie about the years their mother spent caring for their grandmother and Georgie in turn spent caring for their invalid mother, her sister responds with the fury of 'years of resentment' to the idea of Janna, 'all fine and fancy free, not a hair out of place', suddenly opening her eyes to a realm of labour she has previously happily ignored.[43]

Georgie's presence in the text would suggest some sympathy on Lessing's part with Cox and Federici's argument, but at the same time, it remains crucial in the novel that Janna and Maudie's relationship exists outside of economic exchange. Throughout *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Janna must repeatedly rebuff the assumption of various sceptical observers of their improbable friendship that she is 'a Good Neighbour' – that is, a volunteer care worker. Indeed, Maudie herself is initially sceptical, while keenly wanting to believe that Janna 'was not an official, paid person, but just a human being who likes her'. Persistent attempts to understand her and Maudie's relationship within an institutionalised, if not economic, transactional framework, function – as Janna recognises it – to diminish Maudie's dignity, and so Janna repeatedly declares, with force: 'I am Maudie's friend'.[44]

And yet, despite this insistence that Janna's care of her friend must be freely and willingly given, Lessing never diminishes the value of Janna's paid work in the novel. As Port observes, it can 'seem as though Janna trades in one stereotype of female behaviour – the consummate shopper, for another – the self-sacrificing caretaker'.[45] Janna's unpaid care of Maudie, however, is always an auxiliary commitment for Janna – complicating, challenging and enriching her working life, but never proposing to replace it. While it may have its limitations, Janna's career provides her with her sense of self, purpose and autonomy. Crucially, it is through work that she develops her friendship with Joyce – a truly supportive, loyal relationship. As Greene observes, while Janna is often conservative and apolitical, 'what *is* feminist and revolutionary about the novel is its portrayal of women in relation to work and to one another through work'.[46] Where both Joyce and Jill disastrously give up their careers for men, Janna never underestimates the importance of work or, significantly, the pleasure it affords in her life.

Janna's friendship with Maudie makes her less selfish; it broadens and enriches her character. It does not, however, take precedence over Janna's career or compel Janna to see her primary role as caring for others. Indeed, Janna remains refreshingly acerbic about some of the

needy people she meets who attempt to make claims on her time and energy and to whom she feels no desire or compulsion to become beholden. She continues to assert, where necessary: 'It's not my responsibility', and to choose, instead, where she freely directs her care and attention.[47]

The Good Terrorist

In *The Good Terrorist*, Lessing constructs a very different novel which nevertheless returns to a strikingly similar preoccupation with cleaning and care. The protagonist Alice is a 36-year-old middle-class white woman committed to both revolutionary socialism and her dysfunctional, sexless relationship with Jasper, who generally treats her with contempt. Unlike the career-oriented Janna, Alice rejects paid work as a capitulation to bourgeois capitalism, while performing a discordant mode of idealised domesticity within the unlikely confines of an illegal squat. As Alice's left-wing radical comrades protest and plot the revolution, Alice sets about turning their derelict accommodation – a 'capacious, beautiful and unloved house' – into a comfortable home: stripping floors, painting walls, unblocking cemented drains and hanging curtains.[48]

There is a certain visceral satisfaction in reading the 'oddly pleasurable' early chapters of this novel, in which order is made out of chaos, comfort from discomfort, cleanliness from filth.[49] The domestic home stands at the heart of Lessing's tale of revolutionary politics. Made purposely uninhabitable by the council to discourage squatting, the substantial suburban property is first encountered in a state of dereliction:

> Light fell on desolation. Worse, danger: she was looking at electric cables ripped out of the wall and dangling, raw-ended. The cooker was pulled out and lying on the floor. The broken windows had admitted rain water which lay in puddles everywhere. There was a dead bird on the floor. It stank.[50]

To this dilapidation, Alice brings a phenomenal amount of energy and purpose, pulling the house into shape by sheer force of will. Throughout the transformation, Lessing does not romanticise the process of cleaning and repairing the house; as in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, the work is described in close, grotesque detail. The garden is cleared of scores of bags full of 'rotten and loathsome […] decomposing refuse' and a pit is dug, into which is tipped overflowing 'bubbling pails' of shit that have been stored on the top floor of the house by previous illicit tenants

without access to working toilets. Tackling this repugnant task, Alice 'worked steadily, carrying down two pails at a time, controlling her heaving stomach'. Once the excrement and detritus have been cleared, the work really begins: 'The cleaning. The *cleaning!* Windows and floors and walls and ceilings, and then paint, so much paint, it would cost …'[51] These processes are described slowly, over the course of chapters, with a keen focus on the laboriousness, the tediousness and the economic cost of attaining the seemingly neutral state of cleanliness and order. In its closely documented progress of the recovery of a derelict wreck into a desirable home, Lessing knowingly taps into our most atavistic instincts for security and comfort.

Alice's compulsive cleaning and homemaking can be read in various ways: most readily and self-consciously, in psychoanalytic terms. ('Arrested development', diagnoses one unimpressed character in an early scene.) We learn that Alice and Jasper are in search of accommodation after four years of living off Alice's mother Dorothy, driving her to economic ruin. Like a monstrous overgrown child, Alice demands and snatches from her exhausted, exasperated parents, while denouncing them as 'rich selfish bourgeoisie'.[52] There is a persistent purposeful irony in the novel's foregrounding of the conservative aspirations of Alice's radical lifestyle. She steals, lies, and extorts in order to construct a bourgeois vision of a pleasant middle-class family home:

> Round about four in the afternoon the kitchen was scrubbed, not a smear of dust or grit anywhere. The big table stood where it ought, with its heavy wooden chairs around it, and on it a glass jamjar with some jonquils out of the garden.[53]

The scene's incongruity at the heart of a radical project in alternative living draws attention to its echoing of another scene, occurring just two pages earlier, in which Alice sneaks into her father's house to steal money, slipping past his new wife and children, through the kitchen, 'which made Alice's heart ache, being large, and with that great wooden table set with bowls of fruit and flowers which for Alice were the symbol of happiness'.[54] The well-tended domestic space elicits in Alice both desire and fury: a simultaneous longing to possess and destroy.

Discussing the characters' politics, and observing Alice's skill in temporarily uniting the ramshackle gaggle of revolutionaries into a collective, Maslen suggests that 'her motivation stems more from a deep-seated need for a stable home and family than from genuine commitment to socialism'.[55] After unconsciously reconstructing her father's kitchen in the squat, Alice momentarily achieves this desire as she is

fleetingly transformed into a weary mother, falling asleep in a chair before being awoken by her children 'noisily crowding in, laughing and talking […] as she struggled up to greet them'.[56] For Jeanette King, offering a Lacanian reading of Alice's unresolved sense of pre-Oedipal loss, the daughter's frustrated desire to return to union with the mother is displaced onto identification with the mother. Thus Alice, rejecting Dorothy's exhortation that she not repeat her life of 'cooking and nannying',[57] performs instead as 'the ideal mother which was denied her', shoring up the maternal home like a good daughter, but in doing so, sublimates her sexuality and anger – which inevitably resurface in her warring desire to become the terrorist and burn it all down.[58]

Alice's compulsive cleaning might also be read in a sardonic mode, as addressing a key feminist argument around domestic labour and its invisibility within a leftist struggle for working-class liberation that too commonly disregarded feminist perspectives. Perceiving themselves to be fighting a battle on two fronts, against both the conservative Right and the revolutionary Left, Marxist feminists, in Cox and Federici's words, charged the Left with being wilfully blind to 'the enormous amount of wageless work women perform for capital within the home'. Indeed, they argued that the aim of campaigns such as Wages for Housework were not for waged work per se (which simply perpetuates capitalism), but rather to make visible, in the only language that capital understands – that is, *money* – 'the work and struggles of the overwhelming majority of the world's population which is wageless'.[59] This argument is exemplified in *The Good Terrorist*, in which male comrades such as Jasper and Bert take on the 'real' work of revolution – and its glory – happily benefitting from Alice's cleaning, repairing and cooking, while mocking her bourgeois pretensions. Lessing's novel makes visible Alice's unpaid labour. If cleanliness is unremarkable (if we only stop to notice objects when they are out of place), the novel spends precious time describing the scrubbing and scraping that go in to achieving that apparently inactive state. Lessing refuses to prioritise the revolutionary actions of the comrades – which are too often egotistical, ill-conceived and puerile – over the banal, mundane processes of putting the house in order.

At its most potent, Alice's eccentric homemaking might potentially fit within the frame of Susan Fraiman's concept of 'extreme domesticity': a mode of 'domesticity from the margins' that manages to resist both conservative heterodoxy and leftist condescension. For Fraiman, unorthodox homemakers such as Alice undertake a radical remaking of the home in a manner that is 'feminist, queer, or otherwise "improper"'.[60] Such revolutionary revisions of home and family are certainly to what

Alice aspires in her attempt at egalitarian, communal living. And indeed, Alice's domestic efforts do help sustain the group. As Sandra Singer notes, without Alice, 'the poor and disenfranchised members of the squat would not have a working, camouflaged base or the monetary means to plan and carry out their political aims.'[61] But fundamentally, Lessing indicates early on that while Alice's instinct is to create a clean, nurturing domestic space for her unconventional 'family', her mode of homemaking is fundamentally perverse. The 'family' she cares for are emotionally stunted children; her dogged care for Jasper merely perpetuates his selfishness and cruelty. And crucially, the house itself – and the whole sagging social structure that it represents – is rotten: corrupted with a dry rot that threatens to 'creep down the walls, into the floor below, spread like a disease.…'[62] Irrespective of any scrubbing and cleaning, its supporting beams cannot hold for much longer. And so, the farcical conclusion of Alice's situation is that, while she and her comrades flail around looking for a suitable target for their rage, they continue to uphold the rotten patriarchal system represented by the bourgeois home they inhabit and maintain. Alice's cleaning only ever sustains a temporary façade of homeliness. Unless the beams are pulled down and the house is rebuilt, the structure will inevitably collapse in on itself.

Like so much of Lessing's work, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *The Good Terrorist* sit uneasily with feminism. Something of the shape and form of Lessing's combative relationship with the movement is laid out in the 1971 Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, in which she describes her novel as having been 'belittled' by critics who read it 'as being about the sex war' and feminists who claimed it as 'a useful weapon'. The 'feminist' label, argues Lessing, detracted from the larger, more complex themes and purposes of her work, and her subsequent efforts to resist its limitations left her in 'a false position' – 'for the last thing I have wanted to do was to refuse to support women'.[63] By 1982, this regret had hardened to deep frustration. Pressed, in an interview, on her alleged abandonment of a feminist politics, Lessing retorts: 'What the feminists want of me […] is to bear witness. […] Do they really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I've come with great regret to this conclusion.' Lessing's disgruntled outsider status, however, often propels her most fertile interrogations of feminist debate. As Maslen notes, by refusing to be confined by an ideological position, Lessing looks to 'set up dialogues [… which] are spread over several works, meshing with networks of other issues.'[64] This process is evident in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *The Good Terrorist*, both of which engage with one of the most visible feminist

campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, while sustaining a characteristic critical distance on the 'women's libbers' who would define the terms of the debate.

Some twenty years after writing the suicide of the pre-feminist Susan Rawlings, Lessing's 1980s novels see her working through some of the contradictions raised by the spectre of the seemingly banal yet deeply, insidiously political theme of cleaning. Informed, perhaps, by her Rhodesian upbringing, which saw white women regularly relieved of domestic chores by black servants, Lessing brings an acute intersectional political awareness to her interrogation of women's work. When Janna in *The Good Neighbour* declares 'Someone has got to do it' (153), Lessing charges her readers to contemplate who that will be: what equitable system of cleaning and care might be envisioned that will resists women's subjection to domestic labour without falling back on exploiting the more economically vulnerable. Lessing's 1980s realist fictions trouble feminist debate on these matters. Both Janna and Alice experience cleaning as a complex web of pleasure, disgust, duty, pride, drudgery and accomplishment; they also distinguish between modes of domestic labour freely given in limited circumstances and that which is expected and unappreciated. In returning to the theme of cleaning across two major novels in a decade, Lessing persists in her unflinching exposition of the uncomfortable contradictions around cleaning that second-wave feminism attempted but ultimately failed to resolve.

Notes

1 Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories* (London: Flamingo, 2002), 354, 352, 364, 365, 365, 363.
2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans and ed. H. M. Parshley. (London: Vintage, 1997), 689.
3 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 336.
4 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970), 329.
5 Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. 1973. (London: Verso, 2015), 57, 79.
6 Ann Oakley, *Housewife*. 1974. (London: Penguin, 1990), 4–5.
7 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 15.
8 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 20.
9 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 470.
10 Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 327.
11 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 470.
12 Lessing, 'To Room Nineteen', 360.
13 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 470, 27–28.
14 Lessing, 'To Room Nineteen', 353, 364
15 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 475.
16 Lessing, 'To Room Nineteen', 360.

17 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29.
18 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 337.
19 Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*. 1971. (London: Verso, 2015), 143.
20 Ibid., 143.
21 Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation' (1969), in *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos. New Edition. (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 1995), 100–09 (102).
22 Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework' (1975), in *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos. New Edition. (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 1995), 187–94 (188).
23 Joan Landes, 'Wages for Housework: Political and Theoretical Considerations' (1975), in *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos. New Edition. (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 1995), 195–205 (198, 204).
24 Doris Lessing, 'Preface', *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), 5–10 (5).
25 This note was included on the book jacket of the first edition, published by Alfred A. Knopf (New York) and Michael Joseph (London) in 1983.
26 Lessing, 'Preface', 5.
27 Susan Watkins, *Doris Lessing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 104.
28 Doris Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), 13–261 (18, 13).
29 Ibid., 20, 22.
30 Ibid., 60.
31 Gayle Greene, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 27.
32 Watkins, *Doris Lessing*, 97.
33 Elizabeth Maslen, *Doris Lessing* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2014), 44.
34 Cynthia Port, '"None of it adds up": Economies of Aging in Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*', in *The Art of Ageing: Textualising the Phases of Life*, ed. Brian J. Worsfold (Lleida: University of Lleida Press, 2005), 115–26 (121).
35 Lessing, *Good Neighbour*, 225.
36 Ibid., 153–54.
37 Greene, *Doris Lessing*, 198.
38 Lessing, *Good Neighbour*, 205.
39 Ibid., 77.
40 Doris Lessing, 'Women's Quests', *Partisan Review*, 59:2 (1992), 189.
41 Carol Lopate, 'Women & Pay for Housework', *Liberation*, 18:8 (May/June 1974), 8–11 (10). Discussed in Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen and Wages for Housework: A Perspective on Capital and the Left*. 1975. Second Ed (New York: New York Wages for Housework Committee and Falling Wall Press, 1976).
42 Cox and Federici, *Counter-Planning*, 9.
43 Lessing, *Good Neighbour*, 65, 65, 66, 67, 67.
44 Ibid., 26, 216.
45 Port, 'None of it', 122.
46 Greene, *Doris Lessing*, 196. My italics.
47 Lessing, *Good Neighbour*, 30.
48 Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*. 1985. (London: Grafton, 1986), 5.
49 Watkins, *Doris Lessing*, 111.
50 Lessing, *The Good Terrorist,* 6

51 Ibid., 52, 67, 67, 87.
52 Ibid., 37, 18.
53 Ibid., 80.
54 Ibid., 78.
55 Maslen, *Doris Lessing*, 45.
56 Lessing, *The Good Terrorist,* 81.
57 Ibid., 329.
58 Jeanette King, *Doris Lessing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 95.
59 Cox and Federici, *Counter-Planning*, 2, 4.
60 Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity: A View From the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5, 19.
61 Sandra Singer, 'London and Kabul: Assessing the Politics of Terrorist Violence', in *Doris Lessing: Interrogating the Times*, ed. Debrah Raschke, Phyllis Sternberg Parakis, and Sandra Singer (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 92–112 (96).
62 Lessing, *The Good Terrorist,* 153.
63 Doris Lessing, 'Preface', *The Golden Notebook* (London: Grafton, 1973), 8.
64 Maslen, *Doris Lessing*, 24.