

Nostalgia for the Future:
Remembrance of Things to Come
in Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest*
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Abstract: Historically, nostalgia has a bad name. But what might an oppositional, regenerative nostalgia look like? In this article, it takes the form of a “nostalgia for the future,” a temporally-misoriented concept that is both a nostalgia for that which has yet to happen but feels as though it already has, and a nostalgia utilized for future revolutionary gain, a phenomenon best exemplified by Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* (1952). Nostalgia is often thought to begin at home, with a deep longing to return to an originary plenitude, but for white African settlers like the Quests, where is home? When living in self-exile with only a provisional dwelling, what is nostalgia's object? Martha, unsettled by waves of nostalgia, uses her nostalgia to envision a homeland for black and white alike, a utopic golden city on the horizon that may have been and may yet be. Lessing returns to nostalgia's past and remedicalizes the term to produce a “home-sickness,” waves of nostalgia set free from their traditional objects that thereby create a melancholy and despondency that rob one of presence and selfhood. In order to achieve her vision, Martha must overcome her home-sickness and wield her nostalgia so as to overpower racism and anti-Semitism.

Keywords: nostalgia, temporality, utopia, colonialism, home, Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest*

And as often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known.

Carson McCullers, “Look Homeward, Americans” (1940)

Introduction

In his 1688 dissertation that gave it its name, Johannes Hofer claims that nostalgia is symptomatic of an “afflicted imagination” (381). In the centuries since, nostalgia has been called much worse. Indeed, nostalgia is often thought to be crippling, regressive, and politically suspect, bound up with the worst aspects of nationalism—but nothing, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, that a little history lesson cannot cure (156). It is numbered among the “ugly feelings” taxonomized by Sianne Ngai in her study of the same name, “diagnostic rather than strategic” (22) and without a determinate object in mind; a “minor and generally unprestigious” state that tends to both immobilize and demobilize, arresting all attempts at action and preventing productive outpourings of emotion (6).¹ When Jennifer Wenzel claims that nostalgia is in need of “critical recuperation” (8), what is most surprising is not her statement of the obvious but rather the underlying presupposition that there is something in the experience worth reclaiming. This essay extends the work undertaken by Wenzel and others and, as a way of clearing nostalgia’s bad name, proposes an understanding of the concept that is at once oppositional and regenerative, what I call “nostalgia for the future,” a phenomenon best observed in Doris Lessing’s *Martha Quest* (1952).

If nostalgia is the mark of an afflicted imagination, in the case of Lessing’s titular protagonist it is also, as Gayle Greene notes in her reading of the novel, a sympathetic imagination, “the means to freedom and to creating a world where all can be free” (22). Martha is afflicted by various vague illnesses and sympathetic visions but suffers chiefly from what I diagnose as home-sickness,² by which I mean the negative feelings one associates with nostalgia, although freed from their traditional objects, which flare up when she finds herself with an opportunity to take a principled stand. Perhaps in our critical usage of a term like “recuperate” we forget its primary definition, which is to recover from an illness; it is this home-sickness that Martha must be strong enough to recover from so as to wield her nostalgia within 1930s Zambesia (a fictional nation modeled on Southern Rhodesia) as a tool and faculty against racism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism, among other things.

A nostalgia with such teeth has much in common with Wenzel's anti-imperialist nostalgia, which she devised as a counterpart to Renato Rosaldo's notion of imperialist nostalgia. Rosaldo defines his concept as the process of "people mourn[ing] the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (qtd. in Wenzel 7). Wenzel explains it as the way in which one experiences the change felt by others as though it were one's own, while failing to acknowledge one's role in that change. Anti-imperialist nostalgia, by contrast, is "a desire not for a past moment in and for itself but rather for the past's promise of an alternative present: the past's future" (Wenzel 7). It "refuse[s] to jettison the moment of promise . . . and would instead acknowledge the past in the name of the future" (23), "hold[ing] in mind changes that have yet to be realized, changes that were always yet to be realized" (7). While Wenzel's provocative thinking deeply informs my reading of *Martha Quest*—Lessing's novel is something of an intimate staging of Wenzel's argument—my concept departs from hers in my delineation of the difference between "holding in mind" (memory) and experience, the very difference responsible for nostalgia's own efficacy. Lessing leaves open the question of whether Martha, in her idyllic visions of a world transformed, is remembering or experiencing, and, moreover, whether such visions come from the past or a future only she is gifted to see. Is Martha a nostalgic or a prophet? Lessing, writing some fifteen years after the time period in which the novel takes place,³ collapses these distinctions as she experiments with genre (realism, *bildungsroman*, and science fiction) and explores the political situation of her adopted homeland, birthing a nostalgia for the future in the process.

To facilitate such a birth, Lessing performs a double move on nostalgia. Generally, it is thought to begin at home, but "home," as will be shown, is a knotty term in *Martha Quest*. By complicating the traditional nostalgic object of home and thus creating a strain of home-sickness, Lessing frees Martha to set her sights elsewhere in search of a lost, originary plenitude. Additionally, as Martha attempts to recover from her illnesses associated with nostalgia, Lessing recovers the element of illness lost in the term's common use by turning to its past, when the application of a word such as "crippling" could be taken literally. Lessing's

remedicalization of nostalgia enables one to consider it in relation to the contemporary critical context that Heather Houser terms “eco-sickness fiction” (381). Eco-sickness narratives operate, Houser writes, by “[using] the affects of sickness to theorize the conceptual and material breakdown of the body-environment boundary” (382). In *Martha Quest*, “the affects of sickness” that suture the separation between body and soil manifest themselves in visions of a “slow integration” with the land, moments in which she finally feels at home. The idea of nostalgia-as-illness is crystallized in Martha’s vision of a golden city, a homeland of hope welcoming of all worthy of its ideals, described alternately as having existed in the past and being a future promise:

She looked away over the ploughed land, across the veld to the Dumfries Hills, and refashioned that unused country to the scale of her imagination. There arose, glimmering whitely over the harsh scrub and the stunted trees, a noble city, set four-square and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces. There were splashing fountains, and the sound of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together; and these groups of elders paused, and smiled with pleasure at the sight of the children—the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South. Yes, they smiled and approved these many-fathered children, running and playing among the flowers and terraces, through the white pillars and tall trees of this fabulous and ancient city. (Lessing, *MQ* 21)

Martha’s vision, which superimposes on the present a scene whose trappings suggest the past but whose politics gesture toward an enlightened future, transcends a linear understanding of time. Her treatment of temporality suggests that she had availed herself of Ernst Bloch’s utopic thinking, best exemplified in his *Principle of Hope* (1959), the first volume of which was written roughly contemporaneously with the plot of *Martha Quest*. Martha’s utopia offers a kind of spectral simultaneity and shares affinities with what Bloch calls a “hope-landscape” (15), an

example of a “pre-appearance,” which is an element of the conceptual imaginary awaiting imminent eruption into existence (210). The etymology of “utopia” tells us that it is both “no place” and a “good place”; read together, Lessing and Bloch—writing about and from within a world on the brink of irreversible change—reveal that there is no such place as home. At least, not yet.

At the start of the novel’s second chapter, Martha, home from school due to pink eye, pesters her nurse into allowing her to sit out on the veranda. “She sat there all day,” Lessing writes, “and felt the waves of heat and perfume break across her in shock after shock of shuddering nostalgia” (*MQ* 35). Nostalgia invades Martha’s senses in the form of heat and scent, which corresponds with Linda Hutcheon’s observation of “how visceral, how physically ‘present’ nostalgia’s promptings are” (195). These sensory promptings to Martha’s memory, however, are far less “present” and far more elusive, leading her to ask herself, “[N]ostalgia for what?” (Lessing, *MQ* 35). This question might be understood in two ways: What is the source of these nostalgic feelings? That is, what is their object? Additionally, to what end might one utilize this nostalgia? A slight reformulation of this question leaves us with an ethical and political query: Nostalgia—what for? Why write an essay about the role of nostalgia, whether in general or in this novel? In an interview with Brian Shaffer on the value of nostalgia, Kazuo Ishiguro comments that he

accept[s] why nostalgia has a bad name in general, at least on the political and historical level. But the pure emotion of nostalgia is actually quite a valuable thing that we all feel at times. . . . [N]ostalgia is a way of imagining the possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit. . . . It’s something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and could be repaired. (Ishiguro 3)

When considered in light of Ishiguro’s claim, this affliction can be seen more positively as a sign of dissatisfaction with the way things are. Responding to Ishiguro and others featured in his study, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005), John Su expresses some

surprise that the authors choose to make nostalgia integral to their narratives despite their awareness of its “dangers” (11–12). At the same time, Su observes that, despite an increase in interest in most topics mnemonic, and despite its currency in a wide array of fields, very few literary scholars make nostalgia a subject of serious inquiry (2). In this essay, I demonstrate what is to be gained through attention to the workings of nostalgia, despite its attendant dangers.

To develop what I mean by a nostalgia for the future, it will be generative to begin by accounting for the ways in which such a phenomenon is understood elsewhere. Having encountered a similar notion in his data-gathering, sociologist Fred Davis calls it “logical, if intuitively incongruous,” but grants its possibility as long as one could project oneself into the future and look back nostalgically on events that were on the near horizon or could reasonably be expected in one’s lifetime (417).⁴ Otherwise, Davis suggests, nostalgia is characterized by looking “backwards rather than forwards, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery” (422). In their paper “A Future-Oriented Theory of Nostalgia,” psychiatrists M. Mike Nawas and Jerome J. Platt hypothesize that nostalgia can best be understood as “an expression of concern over, or dread of, the future,” rather than an “uncertainty of goals” and “pessimism regarding future prospects” (56). However, their future-oriented title refers to why one suffers from what ultimately remains a static definition of nostalgia that is past-oriented. It is a nostalgia *because* of the future, while Davis conceptualizes a nostalgia *from* the future, that is, from the point of view of a projected future self.

I emphasize the preposition “for,” an insistence that can be understood in two ways. First, *pace* Davis’ claims, this particular form of nostalgia looks forward, not backward, for (and to) novelty, discovery, and the hope of a better tomorrow. It longs for something not necessarily based in lived experience, but the seeming “presentness” of its promptings, to use Hutcheon’s phrasing, makes the individual feel as though it has. It is a possible future that only feels as though its time has passed. Second, it is truly a future-oriented nostalgia; that is, it is both “a necessary and often productive form of confronting loss and displacement,” as Su

writes (12), and a strategy to be deployed for revolutionary political use, as in Wenzel's concept of anti-imperialist nostalgia. With some alteration, it simultaneously avails itself of both forms of nostalgia—restorative and reflective—limned in Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). In Boym's text, the forms are at odds with each other; severing Hofer's coinage, the former aligns itself with the *nostos* as a desire to rebuild the lost home, whereas the latter loses itself in *algia*, the sense of longing (Boym 41). Nostalgia for the future fuses the two by shedding the nationalistic and conspiratorial overtones of the former and joining its potential for "emancipatory possibilities" (42) with the utopian reveries of the latter (342). In other words, the home that may have never been is ultimately restored as the only home that ever was. To begin, I will turn to nostalgia's history and demonstrate that, as in *Martha Quest*, when its past moment is brought into a present-day discussion, an opportunity for action and an alternative future, rather than simply for languid reflection, presents itself.

Common Usage, Radical Application

"The term nostalgia," Jean Starobinski writes, "is so familiar to us that we conceive of its recent and very scholarly origin only with great difficulty" (85). It may be surprising to discover that, for a concept that gestures at an irretrievable past and is rendered in phonemes that call to mind antiquity, "nostalgia"—from the Greek "*nostos*" meaning "to return home" and "*-algia*" meaning "pain"—is a word only a little over three hundred years old. In his original definition of the term, Hofer describes nostalgia, symptoms of which include despondency and melancholia, as "the desire for the return to one's native land" (381). One may also be surprised by the extent to which nostalgia was once considered a real threat, something one might catch as easily as a cold. Starobinski adduces an account by Madame Aupick about a voyage to the South Seas undertaken by Charles Baudelaire in 1841: "Fearing that he might be attacked by this merciless disease, *nostalgia*, whose effects are, at times, so deadly, the captain urged [Baudelaire] to accompany him to Saint-Denis (Bourbon)" (qtd. in Starobinski 86; emphasis in original).

By the mid-twentieth century, according to Davis, the word had undergone a kind of semantic nomadism; lost in popular usage were all traces of its medical and psychological origins, and its attachment to “a geographic home *per se* had also become considerably attenuated” (415). Davis identifies several key attributes of modern-day nostalgia: it looks back to a personally experienced past; it always recalls a positive experience; and it is turned to when an individual feels threatened with discontinuity. “Nostalgia,” he states, “became, in short, the means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which had been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times” (422). Theologian Ralph Harper, writing in the 1960s, views the reaffirmation of identity as an important function of nostalgia but posits that the central threat of the century is anonymity, or lack of recognition, which can make one feel as if she is “ceasing to be a real person” (22). Anonymity, he observes, “is a special form of homelessness” (24), and the “more anonymous life becomes, the more disquieted a man becomes, the more frequently will homesickness fall upon him” (26).

Historian Kimberly K. Smith, writing at the dawn of the new millennium, agrees with many of Davis’ and Harper’s insights but argues for nostalgia’s ongoing drift due in part to its increased familiarity as a psychological phenomenon. Nostalgia has ceased to be passive, a mere “label” (510), and has developed into a tool, “a lens through which we interpret our experiences, an emotional stance toward the past determined by a set of beliefs about its significance, desirability, and meaning” (510–11). The subject’s interpretation results in an active form of nostalgia, “a mode of resistance” (523) that is also at work in what Arjun Appadurai, reviewing advertisements for consumer goods, terms “armchair nostalgia,” that is, “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” (78). Instead of a manufacturer having to rely on its consumers to supply the memories, as in days gone by, today viewers bring to bear “the faculty of nostalgia” and, as with imperialist nostalgia, feel a sense of loss over something they never experienced firsthand (Appadurai 78). Over its relatively brief history, nostalgia has gone from something in the air, an affliction from which no one was safe, to something at our fingertips, a mental ability the modern merchandiser cannot afford its clientele to be without.

Nostalgia has become, in a manner of speaking, a lifestyle choice, a notion Harper addresses directly as he ponders the fate of the restless souls who wonder if nostalgia can be thought of as “a way of life.” He asks if one should be nostalgic and supplies his own answer: “The problem is to understand the nostalgia, not make it” (30). However, I counter that there is real value in seizing control of the means of production. With Smith’s nostalgic lens and Appadurai’s faculty, one at least has the potential to seek out a productive form of nostalgia, invent the object worth nostalgizing if it does not already exist, and in so doing combat the problems politically and historically associated with nostalgia. Nostalgia’s transformation into an acquired skill—something we learn from the world we inhabit, Smith argues—and a faculty that can be exercised by the individual means that it can also become the basis of a force that can recuperate itself and recover from the ill will attached to its name (Smith 510). In other words, it can become a nostalgia for the future rather than a nostalgia compelled against its will to forever look backward. In its orientation toward a given end, nostalgia thus understood loses its classification as an objectless ugly feeling, directed inward; even though, as Ngai rightly observes, “less traumatic,” “less profound,” and “more ignoble” affects like nostalgia are often attributed to female subjects (213), in Martha’s hands it becomes a potential gift.

I read *Martha Quest* through the lens of this nostalgia for the future, understood as a nostalgia for that which has not yet happened and, in the form of anti-imperialist nostalgia, a nostalgia consciously utilized for future gain. Yet at the same time I do not discard the ideas about nostalgia that I have already discussed; my disagreement is not necessarily with the attributes ascribed to nostalgia but with the temporal direction that has heretofore been insisted on. Indeed, nostalgia in *Martha Quest* functions as it is commonly understood and serves as a bulwark against discontinuity and as anodyne for characters estranged from the present and fearful for their futures. Lessing treats nostalgia in its general usage but also remedicalizes the term. The nostalgia Martha feels is now a symptom, now a cause, of the unexplainable illnesses by which she is plagued, a variation on Houser’s eco-sickness. However, *Martha Quest* poses at least two problems for this classification: first, it falls out-

side of Houser's timeline, which begins with the "prognostications" of Rachel Carson (Houser 381), and, second, at the time of its publication it had been roughly a century since anyone took nostalgia seriously as a malady.

However, this generic chafing or rough fit into a kind of literary epidemiology (of affects rather than effects) nets a highly productive yield from Lessing's novel, particularly in the way it allows us to understand how one community member's vaguely defined illness provides a diagnosis for an entire society. Nostalgia, as originally conceived by Hofer, is an ideal way to examine Zambesia since the "illness" is, as Boym makes clear, "about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (xvi). While, in a *bildungsroman*, it is easy to lose sight of anything not within the protagonist's field of vision, Martha's blind spots, pink eye, and other occlusions reveal a troubled relationship between body and environment as well as between differently marked bodies and that same environment. The problem with the *bildungsroman*, Greene argues, is that it is impossible to write something "new and oppositional" against the system when one is using the system's own narrative conventions (39). I argue, however, that *Martha Quest* is an exemplar of what Jed Esty, in his study of the colonial *bildungsroman*, terms the antidevelopmental plot,⁵ which brings a "revisionary motif of arrested development" to the genre by troubling "the twin teleologies of the classic *bildungsroman*," personal and national maturation (161).

In a chapter on James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Esty observes that illness in the *bildungsroman* often functions antidevelopmentally (145), which again foregrounds the *-algia* in nostalgia since it, too, subverts time and acts, as Boym claims, as a "rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (Boym xv). Rather than Houser's "eco-sickness," then, I argue that Martha suffers from a veritable "homesickness," a product of a home from which she feels disconnected—a home that stubbornly refuses to be nostalgized—and of a broken homeland (seen in glimpses). Both elements free her to set loose her faculties of nostalgia on other scenes and images, in particular the vision of a majestic and just kingdom lying on the horizon, an antidote to the seeming

“futurelessness” of the settlers (Esty 162). This remedicalization—the shift from nostalgia as missing one’s home to home-sickness as missing one’s missing home—suggests that bringing the past into the present makes a worthwhile future attainable and realizable. Home-sickness signifies a lack of true origins, presence, and fulfillment and signals that something is amiss. Martha must overcome home-sickness and awaken from dreams into action if her nostalgia for the future is to amount to more than castles in the air.

Broken Homes, Fertile Soil

The novel, which begins in 1934, brims with characters who express nostalgic impulses. Closest to home is Martha’s father, a “dream-locked figure” who wants nothing more than to be left alone to think about the war that was and the war about to come (Lessing, *MQ* 38). The man who will make Martha a home, husband-to-be Douglas, expresses a desire to “get back to the soil” like his father before him (295). The people of the district are nostalgic for figures like Colonel Castairs and Lord Jamie and “the fabulous past of kaffir wars, and pioneers, and violence. How exciting life must have been then” (65):

How wonderful if that wild man on the black horse appeared again in his scandalous glory! How wonderful if Commander Day walked into the store (as he had once, in the golden age) flanked by his two half-tamed leopards, with his three native concubines behind him—but alas, alas, he did not, they did not, the time for the creation of legends was past. (66)

The dreams of Martha’s friends the Cohen brothers are both future-oriented, but each is rooted in the reclamation of something lost, whether through Solly’s Zionism or Joss’ socialism. Spaces, too, exude nostalgia; their attractive force acts like a gravitational pull and draws in otherwise inert figures. The local sports club, held together through an act of will by the magistrate’s son Binkie, seems only five years into its existence as if it has “existed forever, that it would exist forever; it was like a fairy story, drenched in nostalgic golden light, where everyone is young, nothing changes” (189). The flat belonging to Martha’s friends

from town, the Mathews—"bright, modern, compact" (218), a site of "blessed anonymity" (219)—becomes a scene of "gentle, tender nostalgia" for the comings and goings of Martha and her set (231).

Yet the structure most resistant to any kind of nostalgizing is the Quest home on the veld; there are any number of reasons why this may be the case, but the most compelling explanation involves its origins. The Quests moved to Zambesia in the hopes of striking it rich growing maize. "This had not happened," the narrator explains, "and the temporary house was still in use" (25). In one sense, the house treads too lightly on the soil, its inhabitants unwilling to commit. As the narrator articulates, "the family lived here without *really* living here" (26; emphasis in original). In another sense, however, the problem with the house is that its builders demonstrated an ignorance of their new terrain. A "plan which was really suitable for bricks and proper roofing had been carried out in grass and mud and stamped dung" (25). Martha shares her parents' "unconscious attitude," for she sees no need to feel ashamed or apologize for something that was "not really her home . . . something that one has never, not for a moment, considered as a home" (27).

And yet, toward the end of the novel, Martha experiences an odd sensation: "One might imagine I was homesick! she said to herself dryly; for she could not return to the farm again, not if it were the last thing she did" (270). Continuing to deal with life in town is equally unsatisfactory. There, refusing to retreat to the past or leave her apartment and enter the current of life, she makes herself "at home," not in a physical space but in a "mood of rich melancholy" (197), and later finds herself "dangerously at home" in "the gulf of rich and pleasurable melancholy" (227). If Martha, despite her dry tone, suffers from old-fashioned homesickness, it can be read as what Harper terms in his treatise on the phenomenon "a sign in man of his need for a true present" or of existence in the world (26). True presence in the material world is also what is lacking for Martha during her experience with what, for want of a more suitable word, she refers to as her "illumination" (Lessing, *MQ* 74). While Douglas wants to get back to the soil so as to make something out of it, or make it into something, Martha's relationship

to the land is entirely different, something spiritual, insubstantial yet significant:

There was certainly a definite point at which the thing began. It was not; then it was suddenly inescapable, and nothing could have frightened it away. There was a slow integration, during which she, and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sunwarmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery mealies, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms. (74)

This illumination is characterized by its existence outside of space and time, both of which, as in her melancholic moods, are mere words. It never lasts, leaving her “standing on the road, already trying to reach out after ‘the moment’ so that she might retain its message from the wasting and creating chaos of darkness” (75), and giving her a feeling of nostalgia and a desire to try once more. If earlier she ironizes her experience with homesickness, this particular nostalgia angers her because “she knew it to be a falsity; for it was a longing for something that had never existed” (75). The gulf she carves out of her melancholic feelings is in response to this apparent lack, despite its seeming presentness, of feeling at home in the world. Such feelings of the absence of presence and the ongoing provisionality of existence seem symptomatic—but of what?

What might be said to afflict Martha is what in a book review several years later Lessing calls “the white man’s malaise,” defined as “an unappeasable hunger for what is out of reach” (“Desert” 700) and synonymous with what I have here termed home-sickness, a hunger for that which is, like Martha’s illuminations and her golden city, beyond her grasp. “The emotional impulse behind nearly all white [African] writing,” Lessing writes, is “nostalgia, a hunger, a reaching out for something lost” (“Desert” 700). All literature produced by white Africans is “the literature of exile: not from Europe, but from Africa,” for it is the latter continent to which “umbilical cords” are tied (700); hunger is born of scarce nutriment from an indifferent, surrogate motherland. Near the novel’s end, Martha admires the landscape:

This naked embrace of earth and sky, the sun hard and strong overhead, pulling up the moisture from foliage, from soil, so that the swimming glisten of heat is like a caress made visible, this openness of air, everything visible for leagues . . . this frank embrace between the lifting breast of the land and the deep blue warmth of the sky is what exiles from Africa dream of; it is what they *sicken* for, no matter how hard they try to shut their minds against the memory of it. And what if one sickens for it when one still lives in Africa . . . ? (Lessing, *MQ* 311; emphasis added)

Should she fall ill even then, Martha is Boym's modern nostalgic, home-sick and sick of home all at once (Boym 50). Earlier, Martha observes with some distaste how "each group, community, clan, colour" that made up the colony "strove and fought away from the other, in a sickness of dissolution; it was as if the principle of separateness was bred from the very soil, the sky, the driving sun" (Lessing, *MQ* 67). If her home is a failed structure, it is due to the builders' ignorance of the native soil; if Zambesia itself is failing, it is because of an ignorance rising up from this native soil and producing a disconnection that "goes viral," in the contemporary sense, making one home-sick even as one is in the midst of Africa. It is telling that the ailment Martha first comes down with is pink eye, which affects the eyes but is only an irritant to one's vision; what one sees remains the same but the act of seeing itself is disturbed. One's feelings about what is seen might be similar.

These ideas of exile and divorce from the land reappear later in Lessing's preface to her *African Stories* (1964), in which she writes of how Africa "is not a place to visit unless one chooses to be an exile ever afterwards from an inexplicable majestic silence lying just over the border of memory or of thought. Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape" ("Preface" 8). The word "exile," with its suggestion of homelessness, comes up frequently in the literature of nostalgia, nostalgia itself being something that, as Hutcheon writes, "exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near" (195). By exiling one from the present, nostalgia

is accused of being reactionary, but, in an article on Lessing's *African Stories*, Dennis Walder makes a different claim about the way nostalgia has been used by writers. Instead of exiling one from the present, as Hutcheon argues, Walder suggests that "[m]emory, or remembering, offers a way of writing [oneself] back into the present—and perhaps even the future, since nostalgia often invokes utopia" (106).⁶ The first mention in the text of utopia, Martha's "familiar daydream" quoted at length in my introduction, is inspired by the pity she feels for a small black child at the head of a team of oxen and at the mercy of a "harsh and violent man who used that whip with too much zest" (Lessing, *MQ* 21). This vision, Clare Sprague submits, is "remarkable for its nostalgic quality," and yet "[w]hat seem conflated in embryo here are the edenic past and the Utopian future" (155). As a moment of both past promise and future utility, a vision affectively experienced through the insight brought by her illuminations, it heralds a cure for all that ails both Martha and Zambesia.

Of course, the major problem with such a statement is the phantasmagoric nature of this pre-appearance; that is, if it did not actually happen, how can it act as such an engine of change? One might argue that the golden city, Martha's "version of the golden age" (Lessing, *MQ* 22), is nothing but an idle dream, the imaginings of a young girl. In a novel that is so flecked with nostalgia, I concede that Martha's dream may be read thusly, but there is also more to it. Bloch makes a useful distinction between the "idleness" of the "nocturnal 'dream'" and "reverie"; the latter potentially contains "marrow" (88). Martha's reverie of a golden city is something she feels has been and ought to be and is a landscape "so much older than she knew" (Lessing, *MQ* 163) which persists until the novel's end. In the novel, a dream, in its everyday usage, is more in line with the "fevered daydream" Martha experiences in which "some rich and unknown relation would come forward with a hundred pounds, and say, 'Here, Martha Quest, you deserve this, this is to set you free'" (225). The "ideal landscape" of her reveries, on the other hand, is confirmed by the Blochian pre-appearances she finds in the poetry she reads. This landscape hovers over "the actual vistas of harsh grass and stunted trees like a golden mirage" (42). It belongs to all those without

“pettiness of vision and small understanding” (21–22) and is a “realm of generous and freely exchanged emotion for which she had been born—and not only herself, but every human being” (108). The city does not reveal itself to a passively accepting Martha, as is the case with dreams, but rather is built on “unused country” that is “refashioned” by Martha to such a degree that she “could have drawn a plan of that city, from the central market place to the four gates” (21). “[B]efore a builder . . . knows his plan,” Bloch writes, “[he] must have anticipated its realization as a brilliant, even decisively spurring forward dream” (76). It is inspired by a “hunger,” Bloch suggests (76), comparable to Lessing’s “unappeasable hunger” (“Desert” 700), that can enervate the individual yet may also activate her in the direction of her goals.

A new world often requires a new language to fit the changed situation, yet the blurring of reverie and reality and of past and future in *Martha Quest* finds a correlative in a pre-existent language, as shown in a study undertaken by cognitive scientist Rafael E. Núñez and linguist Eve Sweetser.⁷ The study explores a language called Aymara spoken in the Andean highlands, where a different relationship to temporality exists. Aymara represents a “radically different metaphoric mapping from the ones commonly found in the languages around the world studied so far” (403). In Aymara, “the basic word for FRONT (*nayra*, ‘eye/front/sight’) is also a basic expression meaning PAST, and the basic word for BACK (*ghipa*, ‘back/behind’) is a basic expression for FUTURE meaning” (402). That is to say, the present is, metaphorically, directly in front of the speaker, while the past proceeds, rather than recedes, into the distance, ahead of the speaker’s body, whose back is to the future. Writing about the study in the *New York Times*, James Gorman asks, “Is it possible that human concepts of time can vary this much because of language and culture? And what would it be like to think this way? Do I have the rest of my life behind me?” (D3). One example of what it would be like to think and live this way is found in Lessing’s novel. Martha’s aforementioned vision can be seen as utilizing the metaphoric mappings of both English and Aymara; she looks forward to a utopic future in which black and white and brown get along, but simultaneously looks into the far distance—what in Aymara is the past—at what is described as a

“legendary,” “fabulous and ancient city” (88, 21). As it is in Aymaran, in which literal foresight becomes forward-thinking, so it is in Bloch’s reading of the Marxist dialectic: “The rigid divisions between future and past thus themselves collapse, unbecome future becomes visible in the past, avenged and inherited, mediated and fulfilled past in the future” (9–10). Martha’s nostalgia, a product of colonized soil, reconfigures time and language so as to confuse future and past, a result of seeing her present—that is, her homeland’s sickness—all too well.

Fading Presence, Vanishing Presents

This city, this “other country” (Lessing, *MQ* 108), is the world that should have been Martha’s inheritance, but more often than not she finds that she “deserved something life had not offered” (225). Hofer makes no mention of nostalgia as an inheritable disease, making Martha something of a special case; her birthright is neither land nor riches, but rather a nostalgic mindset bequeathed from her father’s side and characterized by indolence. Early in the novel, Martha has no patience for her father’s “imaginary diseases,” seeing them as “an excuse for being a failure” (31). While she may have been born with an inclination toward inaction, it must be noted that this inclination is brought out in no small part due to nurture, inculcated by her mother’s pleadings: “Sleep, sleep, the house was saturated by it; and Mrs Quest’s voice murmured like the spells of a witch, ‘You must be tired, darling; don’t overtire yourself, dear’” (38). By the beginning of the next chapter, caught in the spell, Martha contracts pink eye, suffers her first pang of nostalgia, and begins to fear that she is “condemning herself to live on this farm, which more than anything in the world she wanted to leave” (37).

With time, Martha recovers from pink eye and moves past this nostalgic instance, yet home-sickness follows her into town where she yields to it rather than combatting it. During a group confrontation, rooted in rank anti-Semitism, with her one-time boyfriend Adolph, Martha “wanted to say this was the most dishonest disgraceful scene, she wanted to ask sarcastically why Stella had not said any of the things she had protested she intended to say” but one glance at Stella unnerves her and a “kind of tiredness came over her” (263). Later, once dissatisfaction with

Douglas has set in, she sees Joss and Solly having an open-air meeting; she wants to get out of the car and join them. The “impulse to do so surged up in her, and died as a tired shrug at the thought of undoing all the arrangements that had been made” (327). In these moments, the hunger that produced her utopic blueprint leaves her feeling fatigued, which Bloch warns is the obverse of action. The proverb that the “spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” springs to mind, but one wonders how willing that spirit is, especially when it seems to will its own flesh to be weak. For example, after the incident at Adolph’s, Martha wishes she were ill, a way of opting out of life for a while, and she gets her wish when she experiences “a vague, listless aching, rather like an illness” (267). This “dubious illness that could be described by courtesy as malaria,” the narrator notes archly, occurs at the earlier-mentioned moment when Martha considers whether she is homesick, a suggestion she once again denies: “She had a ‘touch’ of malaria, then . . . and she was not homesick” (271). It seems as if she is protesting too much, but it is just as likely that she fails to realize that her home-sickness, rather like an illness, may also be this “touch” of malaria.

Home-sickness keeps the world at bay, but as a side effect it also prevents one from being present and from being somebody. If her home-sickness is, as Harper argues, a symptom of the lack of a true present, it also indicates a fear of losing or lack of a true self; Davis argues that nostalgia, “by marshaling our psychological resources for continuity, seeks to abort or, at very least, deflect . . . threats of discontinuity” (420). Martha is upset with her off-and-on beau Donovan because he would not “accept her as *herself*,” but quickly qualifies: “whatever that might mean” (Lessing, *MQ* 212; emphasis in original). As she attempts to make sense of her “violent fluctuations of mood,” another symptom, she explains what is meant by the above qualification by saying it was “as if half a dozen entirely different people inhabited her body, and they violently disliked each other, bound together by only one thing, a strong impulse of longing,” a longing that returns her “home” to the aforementioned “mood of rich melancholy,” the nearest thing to a homeland that surfaces in the novel (196). Her body and the body politic suffer from the same illness; the shared soil that grounds them also separates them. When

observing others, Martha is alarmed because the eyes of those around her communicate one thing, while their bodies say something else entirely. She becomes “obsessed by the need to look at the eyes of these people and not their bodies; for they were serious, anxious, even pleading; while all the time their bodies, their faces, contorted into the poses required of them” (212). The “nostalgic golden light” of the Sports Club is sought out by those who feel buffeted by the world beyond its borders, and yet while the club may provide continuity its light also brings out a horror in its members’ eyes from the things they have seen, amplified by their inability to will their bodies to respond compassionately.

Examples of such sights ironically and invariably involve figures who are largely invisible throughout the text. Black Zambesian characters lack presence and selfhood and are, along with the harsh realities of colonization, kept anonymous and in the background of the novel, thereby mirroring a social order in which ages-old ignorance is perpetrated on new terrain. However, the handcuffed curfew-breakers and children leading oxen serve as an impetus for Martha’s visions. Taken together, they play a tacit role in her fraught relationship with her home, perhaps demonstrated best in a scene at the club late in the novel in which Martha breaks with her circle, giving the reader some hope that, once she has removed herself from such noxiousness, she will recover from what has ailed her and will also recover her self. Her friend Perry, for his own amusement, imitates an African war dance amid a “circle of white-skinned people, [while] the black waiters leaned at the doors or against the walls, looking on, . . . their faces . . . quite expressionless” (280) and their location on the periphery symbolic of, at least on the surface, the novel’s priorities. Perry attempts to get a waiter to dance for him, but the waiter demurs and Perry loses his temper. Martha for once vocalizes her disgust, leading Donovan to suggest that she’ll get a reputation as a “nigger-lover” (282). This exchange provides her with all of the ammunition she needs to exile herself from, as the narrator puts it, “the Sports Club, and everything it stood for” (283), as well as the retrogressive thinking that kept it standing.

Yet she is inexorably drawn back when she meets Douglas and “her acquired manner dropped from her, and she could be natural.” At last,

“she was herself” (295). She “felt as if she had known [Douglas] . . . forever,” and he helps her dispel her fear of the future as the future was now a place “full of promise” (295). The feeling is short-lived, for Martha misreads Douglas—as it turns out, he is engaged to a girl in England—in precisely the way she has misread her whole life, her whole life long, with a reading practice that only “deepens and intensifies what one already knows” (44). Her self is shattered several pages later during their first sexual encounter, from which “she was quite excluded” (299). Douglas lavishes attention on her body, part by part, failing, in Martha’s eyes, to see her as a whole: “‘How sad—sad to shut them away,’ he said, closing the material over her breasts, and she felt as if they were burying a corpse. She thought angrily, *Them*—just as if they had nothing to do with me” (299; emphasis in original). By personifying her breasts, he creates a discontinuity between Martha’s body and spirit, and with her body and spirit “she ached . . . and hated him” (300), but by evening’s end, characteristically in the passive voice, “it was decided they would marry” (303). Martha does not view this decision as irrevocable and she still wishes to “check herself on the fatal slope towards marriage” (307), but when she brings Douglas home to meet her parents, no sooner has she emerged from the car than she experiences “a most familiar feeling of helplessness,” a home-sickness to counteract feelings of discontinuity and the break in identity that will be brought about by taking Douglas’ surname (313).

Martha returns to the house, but cannot go home again—indeed, it is as though home itself has now grown sick of *her*: “She was vividly conscious of the night outside, the vast teeming night, which was so strong, and seemed to be beating down into the room, through the low shelter of the thatch, through the frail mud walls. It was as if the house itself, formed of the stuff and substance of the veld, had turned enemy” (318). The “landscape of her childhood,” for which she had such great plans, is “shut off from her” (318); Douglas proves to be an insuperable barrier between her and it. She had thought that there would be a “moment of crisis, a point of choice” from which she might retreat back up the slippery matrimonial slope, but as the narrator cruelly comments, “Alas for the romantic disposition, always waiting for these ‘moments,’ these ex-

quisite turning points where everything is clear, the past lying finished, completed, in one's shadow, the future lying clear and sunlit before!" (325). Snared in past futures and futures past, both at her back and on the horizon, her present and its prospective points of choice, whether in love or in her reveries, has become nothing but a vanishing point.

Conclusion

The thought of undoing all of the wedding arrangements and starting over again proves too exhausting and—once again in passive voice—"therefore, was Martha Quest married on a warm Thursday afternoon in the month of March, 1939, in the capital city of a British colony in the centre of the great African continent" (331). The narrator acknowledges that there is "very little to say about the wedding itself" (330), its having happened at all trumping the particulars. When the novel begins, Martha is "expected [by society] to play the part 'young girl'"; by its close, emptied of all content, she plays "young bride" (10). Harper argues that homesickness will continue to prey upon the individual "unless he has surrendered to the many demands to depersonalize himself" (26). It is the same for home-sickness: As the narrative itself depersonalizes—resorting to cant and clichés signaled by scare quotes—Martha, too, must forget who she is and, moreover, where she came from, becoming little more than a stock character in the novel that bears her name and exhibiting, in Patricia Spacks' words, a "grotesque inability to take command even of her own life" (45). Too weak to fight, having abandoned hope of a blinding future promised by her imagined plot of land, overcome by home-sickness, and perhaps hoping to be rescued by the future war, Martha surrenders to arguably that most backward-looking of narrative conventions, the marriage plot.

Her fate may not be as dark as it seems, for within Martha there is a voice that, curiously, the narrator does not identify as hers; Martha does not tell herself the following but rather "*hear[s]* a voice remarking calmly within her that she would not stay married to him," a voice which "had no time to make itself heard"—yet (Lessing, *MQ* 328; emphasis added). As the opening volume in a pentalogy that later incorporates heavy science fiction elements,⁸ and despite its relative con-

ventionality compared to what follows, I think it is fair to ask where this voice originates, particularly given its prediction. One possible answer comes courtesy of Slavoj Žižek who, tampering with temporality as much as Bloch and Lessing, writes: “[T]he actual revolutionary situation presents an opportunity to ‘redeem’ . . . past failed attempts which ‘will have been’ only through their repetition, at which point they become retroactively what they already were. . . . [T]his past which repeats itself in the revolution ‘comes from the future’—was already in itself pregnant with the open dimension of the future” (141–42). Like the eventual independence of Zimbabwe, this unlocalizable voice comes from the future⁹ and is perhaps the first stirrings of the “critical and untouched person within herself” of whom Martha becomes aware in the third part of the novel. The depersonalization effected by having body and spirit decoupled, as in her experience while having sex with Douglas, might be the price that must be paid for the future survival of this second self who will retroactively redeem her sacrifice. *Martha Quest* offers little hope as it concludes with war on the world’s horizon and the state of the nation symbolized by a black man run down by an out-of-control automobile. There are, however, minor exceptions to this general hopelessness: Martha may cling to the moments when she was on the precipice of promise, whether joining the Communist Party or speaking out against anti-Semitism and racism, and that she may make manifest in the present-to-come an “exquisite turning point” (Lessing, *MQ* 23) in which her vision of a future utopia of racial harmony is one with her reverie of a city of the past. Homesickness conquered, the clock is restarted and both the female subject and the adoptive homeland are allowed to develop, not in accordance with historical time, but on their own time.

What Martha saw and felt to be true, then, is not realized in the pages of *Martha Quest*, and is revealed to be little more than an imaginary homeland, to use Salman Rushdie’s phrase. Art, Bloch claims, “has consciously to bear the responsibility of prefiguration, and the prefiguration at that of an objectively real appearance, of the world of process, of the real world of hope itself” (1374). For this reason, having read novels by Dickens, Tolstoy, Hugo, and Dostoevsky, Martha is distraught as

she witnesses the sight of chained black curfew-breakers because those prefigurations never materialized: “All that noble and terrific indignation had done nothing, achieved nothing, the shout of anger from the nineteenth century might as well have been silent” (Lessing, *MQ* 226). A decade after *Martha Quest*, Lessing wrote that “[i]f people had been prepared to listen, two decades earlier, to the small, but shrill-enough, voices crying out for the world’s attention, perhaps the present suffering in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia could have been prevented” (“Preface” 7). Those voices, including Lessing’s own, occupied a mode Bloch calls the “Not-Yet,” a womb in which the future is “processing itself out” and awaiting the development of ears capable of hearing (307). In other words, the failure to hear these voices, or of these voices to be heard, is not a failure of the voices themselves. From our contemporary perspective, those prophetic voices crying out against a society’s deaf ears and blind spots were temporarily displaced rather than lost and have now been restored, resounding as if they had never been silent. The rest is history, which is made, Bloch argues, by the “working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts” (1376). What such beings work toward is “something which shines into the childhood of all,” shining like a golden city “in which no one has yet been: homeland” (1376).

Notes

- 1 Ngai coins the term “stuplimity” to describe a feeling that is a “strange amalgamation of shock and boredom” (2). Replace “amalgamation” with “oscillation” and I think one has a rather fine understanding of the range of Martha’s experience of nostalgia, at one moment a feeling of stupor, at another sublimity.
- 2 I hyphenate “home-sickness,” the mysterious ailment that plagues Martha and a symptom of nostalgia, so as to distinguish it from “homesickness,” synonymous with nostalgia.
- 3 Spacks, referring to the novel’s first publication in America, writes that “*Martha Quest* issues from an imagination of the 1960s informed by memories from the 1930s” (45). In utilizing the insights of sociologists and psychologists of the 1960s, Spacks argues, Lessing’s depiction of adolescence is somewhat out of time as it feeds the behavioral harvest of the novel’s era back into the text. Even though the novel was originally published in 1952, I think it is fair to credit Lessing with no small amount of prescience.

- 4 Although within different registers—the personal and the historical, respectively—there are affinities between Davis’ proposition and what Jameson calls “nostalgia for the present,” the “estrangement and renewal as history” of one’s present through a depiction of that present as the past of a determinate future (285).
- 5 Lessing’s surname recurs throughout Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth* (2012), but she is not offered as an example of his thesis until the very end, and in bullet-point fashion, which leads one to wonder if he had conceived at one point of writing more extensively on the novel or if it was always beyond his book’s chronological purview.
- 6 Perhaps I am biased given my subject, but this remark strikes me as too good to have not been pursued further, yet Walder does little more with it, even when exploring the same scenes of illumination in *Martha Quest* as I do. He is attuned to the notion that there are many different kinds of nostalgia and yet he reads Martha’s visions as little more than dreams (Walder 106).
- 7 I am indebted to Linda Charnes for both this reference and the Gorman article that follows it.
- 8 Science fiction is, as Jameson claims of the novels of Philip K. Dick, a way of seeing one’s “present as (past) history” (296).
- 9 I do not think it is accidental that the word “afterwards” appears over twenty times, giving us some indication of what a future Martha will think about certain points in her life.

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