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IN CONVERSATION

Lisa Baraitser in Conversation with Denise Riley

Lisa Baraitser¹ and Denise Riley²

¹ Birkbeck, University of London, GB

² University of East Anglia, GB

Corresponding author: Lisa Baraitser (l.baraitser@bbk.ac.uk)

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Interview: Denise Riley (DR) and Lisa Baraitser (LB)

LB: So, the first thing to say is thank you. I'm sure you've had much feedback on the work, but I found reading *Time Lived Without Its Flow* a quite extraordinary experience. Partly personally, and also because it articulated an area of temporal experience that I had been trying to think about and to articulate. I'm interested currently in tracking different forms of stilled or stuck or crystalline time, and to think about their relation to care. So it fell into my lap and it felt very fortuitous. In many ways, the book simply stands. You've said what you wanted to say in the book, so it's a bit much to ask you to say even *more* about it than you've already given us, you've given us so much already. But I'd like to draw out some associations with various themes in the book, and how your experience might relate to other kinds of temporal experience that might be similar and might be different. My aim is just to open up what is proposed in the book which is a way to struggle with the articulation of suspended time.

DR: I'll tell you how that book came about.

LB: Please do.

DR: As you'll see, my impulse wasn't academic. I hadn't thought any more or any less than all of us do about the nature of time and temporality. I'd looked at some academic studies of time and temporality. It was present as a topic in the 1950s and early

1960s, perhaps because of the post-war experience, people went back and looked at work like J.W. Dunne's experiments with time but then the whole question of reflecting on temporality went into abeyance, apparently. It seemed to disappear as a common project, and became specialist. Later studies I looked at seemed more of an academic literary kind, reflecting on, most obviously Proust. But I came to my tiny book not from any literary or philosophical experience of thinking about time. The reason that I stuck out my neck and wrote it is simple. I was so struck by the very vivid sensation I had after my son's unexpected death, of an arrested time; I was struck by that as a physical perception or a psycho-corporeal perception, and it lasted for me a good two and half years. It was accompanied by my complete lack of interest in writing anything. I wrote a few jottings but my sense of living was in a completely immobile, rather captivating kind of crystalline time, which really was not time but a suspension of time. Once that gradually, under its own impetus, started to recede and be gently interrupted by my returning perception of normal fluid time, then somehow an interest in seeing if I could write came back as well. The connection of the two is interesting. Or to put it another way, why, if you are living in that sharply clear and actually not melancholic, not shadowy feeling of time having stopped, what is there about writing and the flow of time which is so intimately linked that, if your sense of time as motion suddenly vanishes, your interest in describing, writing, and narrating vanishes as abruptly. And I keep wanting to emphasize that neither state felt melancholic.

LB: Yes, you're very clear about that in the book, which I think is a very prominent part of what you offer, this idea of a kind of lively engagement with the dead child, even when time has stopped.

DR: Perhaps that's what the stopping of time allows, to keep that engagement alive and vivid, I don't know, I'm just conjecturing.

LB: Yes, it's very important, that aspect of your parsing melancholia, which is a refusal to supposedly mourn and move on, from this other state. You don't seem to be proposing either mourning or melancholia, but something else again, which seems

to be a different quality of time, that allows a different quality of *attachment*, and I suppose that's really what interests me most. I'm very curious about what you've just said. It's very helpful to know, it was obvious in some ways because the whole thrust of the book is about a debate about how one can write this experience. Writing requires futurity, and without that how do you write?

DR: Absolutely

LB: And what you're saying now is that there is a retrospective process. Actually you didn't write during that period.

DR: No, that's right.

LB: What do you make then, of that two and a half years as a time scale? The time of suspended time not being infinite in fact?

DR: Well, let me wind back just a bit further – to the reason I tried to set that very personal material down, although as you know I didn't describe my son's life and death at all. My impulse for doing it was based on a wager. It is one I have a lot of faith in – the wager that, however rarely described some of our feelings or experiences are, just the fact that we are human means that it's extremely unlikely that one individual is the only bearer of those experiences. So even in the teeth of such a peculiar experience as the arresting of time, in which its peculiarity is doubled because, for reasons my book tries to get at, the normal narrative mode has deserted you as well, so you can only describe in retrospect. It's paradoxical. What I thought was that of all those millions of people in the world who for one reason or another, some infinitely more violent and distressing than others, find themselves outliving their children, a range of reactions and emotions, some of which might be easily describable, some of which may not be, some of which may be predictable, and some of which may be anarchic and terrifying, or even blackly comic, if I, just one tiny sliver, make a stab at speaking about it, then it may be of some interest, or even some consolation, though that might be a bit overambitious on my part.

But there can be consolation in finding that a description of some feeling that you took to be unhappily unique to you is described by other people; that comes as a great relief.

My wager was that if I had this sensation of a radical suspension of time, this feeling was among the range of common experiences; then why, when I went to see what I could find, couldn't I find anything? Apart from, as I say in the book, in nooks and crannies, in Emily Dickinson's work, or an odd phrase in a novel, but nothing systematic. Then my question was why, and in that tiny book I started to guess aloud on paper about what the connection is between the stopping of time and the impossibility of narration.

LB: I'm fascinated by that, I think that's absolutely right, that one has to make a wager that something of your experience may resonate with others as a way to think of about the ethics, I suppose, of communication, how else to understand what you do. I suppose I'm curious about whether there's something particular about outliving a child, what happens to time around the unfurling of one life in relation to another, which is how you put it in the book, so beautifully, or whether there is a way in which what you've offered might also resonate with other kinds of experiences of stilled or suspended time, and even though they're not described, as you say. You don't find those accounts easily, but we do find them we do find them incidentally, or phenomenologically, through hearsay, or even through an imagined connection. I'm thinking about the condition that prisoners suffer from, which is called chronophobia, which is the fear of time passing. It's a very odd condition, given that you'd expect a prisoner to want time to pass, because it will bring them closer to release, but in fact time itself in prison feels always already too much, there's too much time to manage, so to feel its movement is something that becomes very, very difficult. There is a kind of withdrawal, I don't know if it's voluntary or involuntary withdrawal from the experience of time passing, which has some resonance with what you're saying. And then there is the question of the child – whether there is also this very peculiar aspect of time because of the unfolding developmental aspect of this relationship.

DR: Yes, that is again what I wondered. Again it was purely speculation. Maybe people who have lost an infant or a young child feel even more hyper conscious of this. I don't know. I did find, by the way, that the most interesting and helpful thing for me to do was to join a group of recently bereaved parents, and the particular self-organised small group I ended up going to had some terrifically vivid people in it, and we did talk quite a lot about time. This was a 'floating attendance' group of maybe five, maybe eight people, all as it happened women. Nobody had exactly my own experience of that complete cut in time, but I think I was the only one who was the mother of somebody who had quite literally walked out of my house and not come back. And was never seen again by me. Most of the other mothers happened to have had children with illnesses, which might make another complication, maybe. Does anticipating a death act as an introduction to the violence of the fact, in such a way as to not expose you to the complete cut in time which characterizes that 'time stopped' feeling? I've drifted away from your question.

LB: I think you're answering it to say that perhaps the preparation that illness may afford might help to protect against the cut in time, and that with a child there is this peculiar aspect which is that you are the elected or have elected yourself to care for and keep alive a child, whatever their age. And I suppose this is also radically called into question when a child dies. I was also thinking of my own experience of birth actually. I had some similar experiences, for a much shorter period of time, and it fits with what Donald Winnicott says about a psychotic phase just after birth. It seemed to me that time became very strange, and oddly malleable, with no fixed parameters, and I no longer knew what was day and night, and it seemed also to be in an odd way suspended. It might have to do with the ways that birth can be quite traumatic, but I think it's also about the coupling or linking that you have to do, which you described as ongoing - the experience of a relation with a child who is not here, but is living themselves in crystalline time, has something to do with the relational work of seeing your life fundamentally in relation to another.

DR: There is something specific, I think, and it might be specific to women who are mothers, sometimes I imagine that they are a whole sex unto themselves!

But yes, the calendar of your child's life is somehow even after birth contained and developed within your own. On a banal level you can think 'oh I was twenty four, so my son would have been two at that time', and it becomes a series of complex Russian doll-like internal markers, but the proportions of your own life are made intelligible by thinking back 'that child must have been at playgroup, and my other child must have been going on to secondary school, and we were living there, and I was only 22 when my first baby was doing this and that, how did I manage, how did I organize these things, how did I find housing, how did I survive alone'? And it goes on and on in a series of frames, markers, or willy-nilly you get to be the big shiny red and green painted wooden babushka doll that's holding all of that. That's a very different temporal perception from the child's. The child isn't conscious of anything like that, it's not a reciprocal arrangement.

LB: No, perhaps the child almost by definition needs to believe in an open vista. It's the connection to narrative, if you like, that is the gift to the child, futurity, which is that capacity to be able to narrate. Adriana Cavarero talks about that – the 'who' is only ever made possible by somebody else's capacity to narrate our lives. Because we are not there at our birth we are given over often to maternal figures, but she argues it through the capacity for narrative, which is rather nice, so it's not such a relational model but more a model that is about that gift of futurity that in a way you have to not know about until after the event, when you can gather up a life, as if it has been.

It brings me to Emily Dickinson, and the question of why her. You're such a literary person. . .

DR: I'm not really!

LB: Are you not? I think of you as a literary person. How can you say you're not a literary person! You're not a literary critic you mean?

DR: I'm not a literary critic. No, I don't have a literary background

LB: But you write. . .

DR: Yes, ok, I write.

LB: That's my marker of the literary.

DR: That's fine. What I meant was I'm not a literary academic. I don't have that outlook, or that kind of training. Before I say more about Emily Dickinson, let me talk a bit more about the intended audience for my tiny book. It was published by a couple of my former graduate students who are both, in their different ways, accomplished writers, and they wanted to set up a small press which would produce essays completely of the writers' choosing, so I thought this would be very good because there would be a kind of anonymity and simplicity about its production. It wouldn't fall into the Americanized trauma publication industry, though I don't mean to disparage it. It's got its strengths as well as its shakier parts, you know a great deal about that yourself, but I didn't want that particular context for this particular book. I wanted to write something which might be accessible to anybody who had gone through a similar experience. My hope was that the library of somewhere like the organization, Compassionate Friends, might accept it. And they have! I don't know who reads it. I did get a letter from their librarian who said she found it resonant herself, as it happened. All books go out unprotected into the world, as they must. You can't follow them, and cluck after them, and adjust their backpacks for them. They have to go alone. I wanted to not overburden it with any literary or critical or ostentatiously philosophically apparatus. I couldn't find any existing apparatus of reflection in which my own speculations would feel at home, so I had to just stick my neck out. I read everything I could find about death and mourning, but I could find so little. So little. You might think there would be a huge literature about an experience that we will all have many times in our lives, but I was astonished that there isn't.

LB: It is astonishing!

DR: Again, as you'll know very well, even the academic literature on bereavement is relatively recent, or its density is recent, in part connected to Holocaust Studies. I read every book on child bereavement that was available in 2008, which is when my

son died, and most of these publications were from the States. A lot of them fell into two camps. There was an older camp that was rather briskly dismissive. It said you *will* get on with things, your husband will take you to the drive by-cinema and the local cake store and you will gradually take up with your friends, and your life again, and you'll be fine – brusque of that kind. And then there was the literature which was much. . . I hate the word 'sentimental', I really don't like it especially in this context, because god knows, if anybody has got a claim on sentiment . . . sentiment is not the same as sentimentality, but often that boundary is blurred. In the States I went to a meeting of a branch of Compassionate Friends, where I found that 'angels' abounded. There was a big angel literature.

LB: Yes there are many angels on the internet too, in bereavement forums.

DR: Yes, in fact, there's a professor of death studies in this country, a sociologist, who has his Centre and researchers working with him, mostly in sociology and comparative anthropology, who has written a paper about the use of angels in Facebook memorials.

LB: It's a really interesting phenomena, and I imagine it has a history in the 19th century popular literature on consolation. Dana Luciano works on this literature in her book, *Arranging Grief*. Perhaps the angel is a floating form for how we might contain the image for something that is unimaginable. It's very interesting to see it in circulation currently.

DR: Yes. But you were asking you about Emily Dickinson.

LB: Yes, I was curious about it. She comes into the book in this very interesting and unexpected way.

DR: I think for a lot of readers the great strength and beauty of Emily Dickinson's writing is her knack of putting forward shocking or complex emotion in a clear, not necessarily an easy way – it's a combination of emotional complexity with a clarity of diction and simplicity of form, which I've always loved. She's someone who touches

on quite extreme and almost unpalatable emotion, and she is also very good on time, on this strange temporality of emotional states – or on shock, or the fall of the light, or a gesture, it's often some vivid arrested quality that her writing enacts.

LB: There is an instance of her work that you notice in your book – something to do with sound 'ravelling out'. It's so odd, I still can't understand, it's like a sentence that avoids representation, I still can't visualize how sound might ravel out . . .

DR: 'Sequence ravelled out of sound like balls upon the floor. . .'

LB: The balls help!

DR: Those knitting balls rolling round! Well, I found it so welcome and so encouraging when I read that because I thought, here is someone writing straightforwardly about the fact that perceived sequence, that feeling of continuity through time, can *go*, but the fact that it's gone doesn't leave you incapable of a differently inflected perception. You might think from the outside that somebody living such a condition might only be understood through the diction of psychosis or dissociation. Those are understood, I think, as borderline pathologies, or at least as states which must be distressing and denaturing to those who live them. But the surprise of my own sense of time having stopped was that it wasn't as disorientating as it sounds. It wasn't unpleasant or distressing at all. Something had certainly and rightly changed, but the compensation for that change was that everything possessed a great immediacy and sharpness.

LB: And that's what's in the poem. . .

DR: Yes, exactly.

LB: That combination of profound emotional experience with this kind of clarity. I suppose we could say any heightened emotional experience puts us in touch with a kind of clarity of perception, as you say, but there is something about the elongated nature, the two and a half years, that is so curious. It's not a fleeting moment, but an elongated, obdurate form of temporality.

DR: They become conditions of being, and they are conditions of being that for me had no possibility of being narrated. I had no impulse to narrate or describe at the time. At the time I knew that something vivid and extraordinary was going on, but nobody could have told by talking to me. Occasionally I tried to describe it to somebody, but it wasn't, and in a way I'm afraid it still isn't, describable from the inside. It isn't, for the linguistic reasons that I tried to gesture to in my book. . .

LB: Do you think the trauma literature would be enhanced by an engagement with thinking about this form of time as a way to imagine traumatic time? In other words to give something back from your experience that is not contained within trauma? I'm thinking about the classical descriptions of traumatic experience in which verbal forms of narration seem to become difficult, but images or pictures of the experience return in the form of a flashback. Perhaps this has become quite a stale metaphor for trauma, and doesn't match these livable elongated forms of non-time.

DR: It's the livability in conjunction with the a-temporality that is so interesting. If someone had explained beforehand to me, and thank God they couldn't, that this is what's going to happen, I'd naturally have assumed one could not have both livability and the suspension of time, as we are such temporal creatures. That suspension of the flow of time would mean a failure to live and feel, and be a functioning working human, but actually I didn't find it to be so.

LB: It was a 'being with'. I don't know if you've read Marion Coutts' book, *The Iceberg*, which is about living through the death of her partner, the art critic Tom Lubbock. She describes how during Tom's illness she had an intense desire to be with him and her son in a lively and full way. In the end she managed to find this in the non-time of the hospice. 'Hospice time' may be another space for these elongated, suspended crystalline times, that are neither dead time or alive time but something else, and she describes this as simply the time that they had. And people couldn't understand that it was a joyous time, full of their relating. I thought you described that so beautifully in the book, this period of living with your son after his death that was also the condition for relating, that this is relational time.

DR: Yes. And of course the sad aspect of the return of the flowing of time is that you lose that. I'm still so interested in why this is so rarely talked about. I'm just intuitively convinced that that feeling of arrested time, maybe after an unexpected death, makes sense, it must be commonly encountered.

LB: Yes, but unspoken. . .

DR: Yet all we have is the cliché. I'm interested in why clichés become clichés, and what work they do, the cliché that 'time stopped'. It sounds so much like a completely dead metaphor, and it's almost comical when you think, I'm living a dead metaphor which has resurrected itself!

LB: My take. . . yours would be narrative, mine would be something to do with the uncanny, and experiences that frighten us when we don't feel their motion. I think we get frightened of experiences that don't appear to have beginnings and ends and parameters that we imagine to be spatial and have to do with movement, because we can't really conceive of time outside of motion. I'm very interested in trying to open up the ways we do have experiences of time outside of motion. . .

DR: And therefore outside of language. . .

LB: Exactly. You didn't experience it as fearful when you were in it, you lived in it, but when we anticipate it, we don't seem to have a way to manage our anxiety about being trapped in time that won't move. Just as we often dream that we cry out and no sound comes out, when there is no language to help us to temporalize experience it's frightening. I'm interested in the early resonant aspects of those experiences, that are not trauma exactly but common shared experiences of encasement or enclosure, or silence. They're frightening to think about.

DR: Yes. As if the normal flow of language in time guarantees you a way out, a way forward.

LB: Yes, incarceration then becomes a metaphor of time without language. I'm thinking about solitary confinement at the moment as I'm writing about an artist,

Jackie Sumell, who worked with a Black Panther called Herman Wallace, who lived for the whole of his adult life, 42 years, in solitary confinement in a US jail. It is unthinkable, and she wrote to him, inviting him to imagine a house that he would live in outside of captivity and out of this they started an art project together that went on for many years. I think there is something so profound about what happens to time when there is really no possibility for its relationality, and I suppose the relationality is also about the possibility of a future, it's not only about shared time with another person.

DR: Yes, but communicability vanishes when you are living in an arrested time which is resistant to being narrated. It didn't throw me when I was very aware of having the experience which I could not linguistically convey. Then when the experience itself had ebbed away, I could try to convey it, but only in retrospect.

LB: Was there ever the possibility of another form – are you someone who draws, who cooks, who plants. . . ?

DR: Yes, all of those. My faith, though, would be in the cinema. I say somewhere in the tiny book that the one instant during my two and a half years of frozen time was when I did see an exact equivalent; it was a few moments in a movie made by an Argentinian director, Lucrecia Martel. It was filmed from inside a car; a woman looking out through its glass windows, there was something about the visual acuity of it that struck me. I *would* like to know how frequent this experience of a-temporality is. As you say, what other kinds of shock or what other kinds of surviving of bereavement take on this particular mode, let alone what propels one person into this mode and someone else into a very different mode?

LB: What's so resonant about what you've said is the matching of this phenomenological experience of your own and its lack of any cultural representation, and I'm interested in these approximations that we make culturally to versions of suspended time, that have particular functions in relation to frenetic time, or time that is only ever running out. The fantasies we have about stopped time, or slowed time, or stilled

time are of a kind of respite within these broader timeframes of lives that that feel so harried. There is also this yearning for an alive stilled time, that in some ways is a kind of model for how we would all like to have time, rather than be always running out of time. I see those yearnings cropping up around fantasies of about psychoanalysis, for example, the ongoing time of the couch as an attachment to a particular cultural phenomenon that somehow staggers on as a spectre, in relation to CBT, for instance, and the health service and the crisis it's in. A tiny number of people can do that now, but it sort of survives as a . . .

DR: An ideal.

LB: Yes, an attachment

DR: A therapeutic ideal.

LB: Yes, I think so, which is some version of an alive stilled time that is relational. I mean you don't achieve 'insight', as such, you just wait and wait and wait some more. It's a kind of endurance practice. That would be one cultural representation, and I think motherhood itself is another of those practices in which the time of the maintenance of the life of another gets hidden in its capitalist function, and it is what keeps the whole machine going, it really is. . .

DR: Yes . . .

LB: . . . It's such a simple statement that has made over and over again for about 50 years now, but we want to keep that under raps, and I find that quite extraordinary. It's another fantasy, we have attachments to motherhood in similar kinds of ways. She will be the still point, the casement for the unfolding of the other. That's a cultural fantasy. I mean some of us do it, but it also has the function of allowing us socially to evacuate time. I'm interested in these odd, unusual types of experiences that you might have the chance to live in your life, however painful, and their function as a social cultural metaphor for stoppage that is not stoppage. It's deeply linked with ideas about care. I haven't worked out the rest yet!

DR: What are you writing about this at the moment?

LB: Just that. I'm writing a book that has a relation to your work, and that I'd like to tie into a wider discussion about motherhood, this project on incarceration I was describing, some ideas about intergenerational waiting as a form of political change, the ways waiting for change over long time scales becomes a form of politics. I'm bringing together Louisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation*, with Richard Billingham's photographic work charting his family's poverty over a long period of time, and the performance artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who did one of the first projects scrubbing nappies in the art gallery, and her brilliant work as the self appointed artist in residence in the New York sanitation department. She's done a life long project on rubbish and the maintenance of life systems through the processing of rubbish. So I'm drawing together an archive that tries to put this phenomenological and social issue of stilled time together, to think about what its function is in this frenetic moment which I think of as a time crisis. The future is rather foreclosed now.

DR: You're right. Various material resources will run out, water. . . and not in a billion years hence. . .

LB: Yes, we all know that the planet will give out in a billion years, but now within our lifetime we must restructure all of our relations to time. Which I think intensifies this fantasy and need for this suspended time, changes its function.

DR: That sounds terrific. One thing that I must do is to re-read Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. There was something in that paper, when I read it in 1981 that I wanted to return to. I'd like to re-visit it now.

LB: She makes a very interesting link between cyclical and monumental time. Progression is male time but instead of women's time just being cyclical, which is its traditional form, Kristeva insists it's also monumental.

DR: It makes me think of the whole arena of sculpture, you know, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, their concrete representations of space, but also of time.

LB: I went last week to the new museum in Wakefield, which is not the St. Ives Hepworth but the Wakefield Hepworth, her upbringing, and the collection they've got is fantastic. They have very few bronze sculptures but they have all the plaster forms that she then makes her bronze casts from, so you see the scrapings and the flakiness which you never see when the sculpture comes to fruition. It's really worth visiting.

DR: Yes, I'll do that.

Transcribed August 2015.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors Information

Denise Riley wrote *War in the Nursery* (1983); *'Am I that Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988); *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (2000); *The Force of Language*, with Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2004); *Impersonal Passion: Language As Affect* (2005) and *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012). Her collections of poetry include *Penguin Modern Poets 10*, with Douglas Oliver and Ian Sinclair (1996), *Denise Riley: Selected Poems* (2000) and *Say Something Back* (2016). She teaches part-time for the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

Lisa Baraitser is a Reader in Psychosocial studies at Birkbeck, University of London and a psychotherapist in independent practice. She is author of the award winning monograph *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (2009) which explores the intersections between maternal subjectivity and ethics, and *A Feeling for Things* (Punctum, 2016), an edited collection with Michael O'Rourke on the work of Jane Bennett. Her forthcoming monograph with Bloomsbury is on temporality, care and gender. She is co-founder, with Sigal Spigel, of the research network MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics) and the journal *Studies in the Maternal* (Open Library of the Humanities).

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