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Article

Mothering in Hindsight: Troubling Time(s)

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Abstract: This article draws on a small-scale study that explored the (re)configuring, (re)turning and (re)working of the experiences of mothering as seen from a position of looking back in hindsight. Temporality is implicated in several ways within this paper, deeply entwined and constantly shifting. Researching past events, experiences and emotions that appear in a location not of the present is problematic, especially when time is conceptualised chronologically. Making sense of past experiences of mothering in the present exposed parenting as not necessarily something that can be detached from the past or as an experience that lies in the past, but rather something where the past is very much present. Here, Barad’s diffractive methodologies, along with the work of Bennett, on new materialism is utilised to explore the temporal nature of mothering. Nine mothers whose children were aged 18–30 were asked “what do you wish you had known then that you know now about being a parent?” Objects kept from when their children were young were initially used to mobilise the temporal and the affective. However, the study itself, the journeys to mothers’ homes, the interviews, the pen, paper, recordings, photos and the files that stand waiting to be reached and the objects mothers brought have become entwined. This is also true for the new entanglements and engagements with post-humanist theory that unearthed themselves to me in the journey to this point in the process. The paradoxical nature of time evident in the narratives women shared, continued to shape early parenting experiences of how mothers perceived themselves through the constant (re)visiting, (re)evaluating and (re)analysing of these experiences is simultaneously reflected in the spacetime mattering of doing this research.

Keywords: mothering; motherhood; time; temporality; hindsight; posthumanism; new materialism

1. Matter: The Objects

Pregnancy test with thin blue line.
Scans, cot cards, name band, cord clamp.
Bootees, baby grows, first shoes.
Handprints, footprints, teeth, more teeth.
A lock of hair; first cut.
A stone, a stick.
Drawings, photos of drawings.
First report, prize giving, newspaper cut out.
Teddies, toys, soldier, doll.

2. Introduction

The project offered in this paper set out to listen to the (re)membering of nine mothers’ stories of motherhood and what they wish they had known then that they know now about being a mother.

(Auto)biographical in nature, the project was triggered as my own children were leaving home and moving on and as I tackled the “stuff”, the treasures and debris of their young lives, as I selected what to keep for them and for me. The mothers I listened to all had children aged between 18 and 30 years old; it was the looking back, the (re)turning to, in “hindsight” that I was interested in and the objects they brought as part of that (re)membering and (re)turning to. Standing on this cusp, this “vantage point of middle life” (Kamp and Kelly 2014, p. 891), mothers, myself and the objects they had kept, (re)turned to a past that was still very much present.

Researching temporality and the objects kept from childhoods offers the opportunity to explore the world beyond words. These objects or “things” not only hold, trigger or illustrate meaning, but are and have been matter in their own right (Bennett 2010). The selection of “things” mothers shared with me in the study reported here appeared conscious, deliberate, thoughtful and reflective, might from another perspective be seen otherwise. “Things”, according to Harvey and Knox (2014, p. 4), “act back on the world, manifesting resistances, capabilities, limits and potential, thereby challenging the normative subject/object dichotomy”. The starting with the objects for this paper is a deliberate provocation to subvert the “normal” narrative of the research ensemble and represents the struggle I face in writing this paper: how to “enable”, “allow” and “facilitate” (I am troubled by these words) the more-than-human when the tendency is, as you can see, to quickly revert to the humanist script to explain, understand, explore and speak for? I find solace in Barad that:

“ “matter” and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder” (Barad 2007, p. 3).

Thus, held by objects brought to the interview was a vitality to make the past come to life. More than this, objects that had outlived the time of small children, of babies held, made tangible time that did not exist in the past, but in the moment of the interview, was a new time, (re)turned to, (re)worked and (re)evaluated.

Parenting in general, and mothering in particular, is troubled by time. Motherhood is a relational activity; entangled within spacetime-matterings (Barad 2007); corporeal, embodied, temporal, discursive, materialised, political; more-than-human. Time dictates early childhood, with clock time prevalent in creating routine and a sense of order (Baraitser 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2012). Caring for young children creates a paradoxical temporal problem, an act that is at once grounded in the here and now, whilst at the same time, influenced by a pull to the future (Baraitser 2009). Within contemporary constructions, childhood is considered a site of social investment, a precious time where “the early” has been highly politicised (Edwards et al. 2015; Lowe et al. 2015; Jensen 2018), where motherhood, in all its forms, biological and social, is similarly constructed by default. The economic turn evident in the Heckman and Krueger (2003) fueled UK Government Cross-Party Report “1001 Critical Days” (Leadsom et al. 2013), which foregrounds the expectations of parents in general and mothers (albeit silently) in particular. This capitalisation of early mother/child relationships and experiences emphasises the importance of “getting it right from the start”, shifting the value of the investment in time and emotions to a distant place not yet here. Hence, time and temporality becomes an instrument of government, a tool by which mothers lives with young children are shaped, not in top-down hierarchical ways, but in the language and discourse that creates the images of how mothering “ought” to be.

Chrono-normativity saturates the discourse (re)producing repro-normativity (Freeman 2010), with statements that there is a “right time” to become a mother and there is a need to spend “quality” time with children being just two examples. The result implicates particular mothers, mothers who are “at risk” even before they begin their mothering journey (Gillies 2006), mothers who mother too early and/or alone (Duncan 2007), mothers who do not give their children enough time, who work (Duncan and Edwards 1999), and those who give too much, seen as over indulging, anxious or even “toxic” (Marsden 2019). Where childhood is seen as a site of social investment, women who have few material resources to invest in their children are seen as neglectful and the resources they do have are devalued and deficient (Gillies 2006). Perceived as individualised, detached and isolated from structural inequalities and demands, the role of mothers in bringing up children within neoliberal discourse typically takes a deficit stance. Unequal power relations impact on experiences of raising

children, where class, gender, ethnicity and (dis)ability intersect to create dichotomous constructions of the good/bad mother that are normalised, internalised and amplified over time. As neoliberal biopolitics rises within the changing political landscapes and carescapes, the constant is that mothering is always political.

In this article, I attempt to reposition the debate about the experience of mothering in a number of ways. First, mothers experiences of mothering over time troubles the idea of linear/chronological time and instead positions mothering and temporality within an ontological frame of inquiry. Second, the role of objects mothers kept from their young children's lives is explored, as these objects were not only key to the presence of a past still very much present, but also how the presence of these objects shifted from being representational to performative within the research process. Finally, the work of posthumanist theorist Barad (2003, 2007, 2014a) and new materialism (Bennett 2010) not visible to me at the start of this project have bumped and collided to make itself visible. The posthuman turn in, and the value of, problematising what time means, especially in relation to raising children, emerges from the entanglement of time, objects and talk-in-research processes. Out of these entanglements, the objects mothers kept show that time, in all its slippery constructs, emerges as something precious and political.

3. The Study: Mobilising the Temporal and Affective

Nine mothers whose children were aged 18–30 were interviewed for this study. Information about the project was posted in local shop windows, on social media and within the university announcements. The only criteria for inclusion was interviewee's children had to be between the ages of 18 and 30. Interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes and took place in mother's homes, their place of work or at the university. Participants were asked to bring three to five objects that they had kept from when their children were young. These ranged in number and variety depending on where the interview took place. Objects, as seen in the opening of the paper, varied widely, with each object telling its own personal story of its keeping. Objects told of the start of mothering, the pregnancy test with its thin blue line (Lucy, interview 2), or the first separation, the plastic cord clamp that the midwife placed between this and her clamp where the first cut was made by dad on request, to separate mother and child (Wendy, interview 9). Certificates and other memorabilia celebrating achievements told of struggles children had overcome whilst also reflecting aspirational narratives of future hopes for children. When interviews took place in the mother's home, a greater opportunity was had to see the extent of these collections: what, how and where these were kept. Women talked about the unconscious "tidying": small boxes containing the "essence of life", "small things with big memories" (Lucy, interview 2). Interviews were recorded and objects were photographed.

Revisiting past experiences of mothering is ethically challenging since encouraging a returning to past events sometimes painful and potentially distressing. Whilst ethical approval was gained from the university, ethical vigilance was required at all times, both during interviews, later during the analysis of the data and here in the creation of this paper. Mothers were given the opportunity to review and retract any of their contributions.

Taking the problem of time, the following sets the scene for the re-reading of the texts of the mothers' narratives interviews with the performative presence of objects they brought with them to the interview. Entangled in these assemblages is me, mother-thing, researcher "tool-being" also object and other things: theory, ideas, pen, paper, book, internet, fingers, keyboard, bird song, new house and newly found "onto-epistemology" (Barad 2003, p. 829).

4. Troubling

4.1. Time: Looking Back in Hindsight

Hindsight, I initially thought, offered the opportunity of "looking back", through and with the layers of experience. Often attributed with a pedagogic quality, the notion of hindsight brings with it the benefit of knowing the outcome and how it all turned out, hence the opportunity for understanding (or learning from) the past. However, hindsight is embedded within a chronological

understanding of time. Chronological time with its fixed past at one end and open-ended future at the other end offers a view of time as linear, a time that can be described, recalled and recounted (Hein 2013). This is a powerful notion of time so fixed that it often goes unnoticed and unchallenged, “[a] grand or master narrative [...] undeconstructable” (Hein 2013, p. 493), a truth. The distance between the present and the temporal location of the original event or experience from this objectivist perspective where the “truth” is sought as something that can be recounted, clearly connected and reproduced in the present, is problematic. As a mother myself, early mothering was not something I had left behind with the objects gathered from my own children’s young lives:

Carried with me were those young children; impressions made in bosom, small head titled to one side, hand cupping soft down head of hair, the memory embodied; still engraved on my body. (Fieldnotes)

Time had not left its mark, had not passed, but was still present and hence the linearity of the discourse of time was likewise insufficient for the purpose of the narratives the women shared with me. Drawing on Deleuze’s ([1969] 1990) use of *Aiôn* (ontological time), as opposed to *Chronos* (chronological time), offers a way of conceptualizing the idea of time as other than linear, and a way of seeking to keep the past in the present active (Hein 2013; Kennedy and Kohan 2008). Time, according to Deleuze ([1969] 1990, p. 77), is infinitely divisible, where “each abstract movement endlessly decomposes itself of both directions at once and forever sidesteps the present”. Resulting in a paradoxical conclusion, this *Aiôn* time, this ontological time, is a past that never was and a future that can never be (Johnson 2017) and hence it is, in effect, a disembodied time, a posthumanist perspective of time. Within this project, it was the idea of ontological rather than chronological time that led to my entanglement with Barad’s idea of dis/continuity.

Whilst the idea of ontological time challenges the notion of chronological time, Barad adds to this the dimensions of space and matter; it is in these intra-actions and diffractions that bring meaning and matter together. Furthermore, although there are differences in the origins of both Deleuze and Barad’s theoretical perspectives of time, there are also commonalities. Like Deleuze’s *Aiôn*, Barad sees the present as not here or now, but “unmoored” and “already threaded through with anticipation of where it is going but will never simply reach—a past that is yet to come”. Barad, like Deleuze, “queers our presumptions of continuity” (Barad 2010, p. 247). Through quantum physics, Barad troubles the dichotomy of past and present, seeing phenomena as quantum entanglements where past and present are both one phenomenon, where there is “no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then.” (Barad 2014a, p. 168).

Hindsight then, is not a simple “looking back”, not a snap-shot of time captured, but is a “(re)turning”. This (re)turning is not in a linear fashion, not a temporal regression but:

a way of thinking with and through dis/continuity—a dis/orientating experience of dis/jointedness of time and space, entanglements of here and now, that is a ghostly scene of dis/continuity, a quantum dis/continuity’ (Barad 2010, p. 240).

Therefore, through an intra-active diffractive reading of the interviews in this study, the aim was not to create “foresight” or engage in consequentialism; instead this study sought an understanding of the past that was not left in the past, but still very much present. It was not about encouraging a pre- or post-mortem, imagining how a decision made now will look or feel in the future or reflecting on a choice. Instead it was about creating opportunities for understanding mothering in the “more-than-human” context and “disrupting patterns of thinking” (Barad 2007, p. x) to reposition the responsibility about what matters in mothering. This is not to create a deterministic knowledge of the self but rather to allow:

an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which critique of what we are, is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault 1997, p. 118).

Therefore, the diffractive (re)reading, iteratively (re)turning to the data and its insights, over and over, as Barad (2014a, 2014b) describes, like earthworms (re)working compost, has allowed the

entanglements of Aïôn (ontological) and Baradian dis/continuity to mulch together, becoming difficult to tease apart, threaded through and woven, as “thicker understandings”. Furthermore, whilst the mixing of ontologies might be regarded as problematic by some (Hein, cited in Murriss and Bozalek 2019), the opportunities for thinking differently, for “cutting together apart, one move” (Barad 2014a, p. 168) in challenging the “versus” oppositional nature of the academic critique (Murriss and Bozalek 2019), is itself, an agential cut.

4.2. From Representationalism to Performance: Objects Mattered

Whilst the (re)turning to early experiences of mothering took central stage in this project, the objects that women kept rose to prominence during the course of the research. The existence, emergence and presence of these objects were originally a means to accessing the past, a route to the affective, a means of reconnecting with forgotten experiences and the past; objects, I expected, would represent something: an experience, a memory, from the past. Yet entanglements with others, readings, conversations, images, horse hair on barbed wire, time and space shifted my gaze, my touch, my hearing and my emotions wider (Lavelle 2018). The precedence I had given to words, words representing objects and objects representing experiences changed. This “Cartesian biproduct” was “asymmetrical”, which “brackets out” the “practices through which representations are produced” (Barad 2007, p. 53) was challenged. These entanglements, as Barad calls them, or “assemblages”, have implications for the traditional understanding of the concept of agency. As such, the matter came to matter. Hierarchies and dichotomist thinking was replaced by a flatter/monist ontology, opening up a multiplicity of connections and reducing universalisms (Fox and Alldred 2018, p. 23).

5. Meaning and Matter: The Keeping

Accounting for the stuff people keep and the remnants mothers hold on to from their young children’s lives is worthy of exploration. As Baraitser (2009) highlights in her book *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interpretation*, mother’s lives are full of stuff, childhood and maternal objects, bodies and leakages, nappies, dummies, bibs, blankets, bottles, buggies, shoes, laces, books, bricks, Hoover, clothes, feces, urine, snot, tears. These assemblages include the mother as a “tool-being”, Baraitser’s term, and cannot be separated out from the many things (Baraitser 2009, p. 129). How then do some of these objects become separated and singled out for retention? Like MacLure’s data that shines (MacLure 2013), these objects can be seen as actants, “things” that are active and “self-creating” (Bennett cited in Cudworth and Hobden 2014, p. 138), vibrant with vitality (Bennett 2010):

Well, I’ve always kept little bits and pieces and it’s partly because, I think I said didn’t I, I’m quite clean and tidy and I don’t like clutter, but I do like memories, and so I’ve had a little box, a very, very small box that I’ve just sort of thrown almost like the essence of life into. Very, very small things that remind me about a huge stack of stuff (Lucy, interview 2).

Yet, contrary to this, the “small box” Lucy had kept had grown into a large dedicated cupboard the size of an old-fashioned man’s wardrobe. Neatly filed and clearly regularly visited, the years of treasures were stacked, boxed, filed and organized, (re)turned to again and again over-time.

But there are some things you just can’t throw away and so...you almost know when things are significant somehow.

So the first thing of Jess’ was actually the little pregnancy test kit and we were sitting in that room up there and because, because I’d gone out and got the kit because I felt a bit strange, we’d been away doing some very heavy duty walking and climbing and I had started eating my head off, and I suddenly thought “oh shit what a start in life” and indeed I was pregnant, which was very strange.

Still got the blue line on.

Still got the blue lines, and that was a good stick wasn’t it?

Wasn’t it!

Yeah, it's just amazing.

That's definitely pregnant.

That's definitely, yeah. And we were both really, really pleased (Lucy, interview 2).

The pregnancy test starts the story of motherhood, its thin blue line remarkably still present and preserved, regardless of the 25 years that have passed. This small piece of insignificant plastic held once under a stream of hopeful/fearful pee made visible the as yet unseeable pregnancy (Schadler 2014). Bringing into presence a knowledge already known, the "not quite right" feeling of a first-time pregnancy. At the same time the emergence of the stick from its place of safety, held in its box and still suffused with the intra-action of stick/urine/chemicals/hormones holds not only the emotions of new mothering, but also the emotions of mothering in (dis)continuity. For the blue line might feel like a suspension of time, paused until its re-emergence, to then reveal those past emotions. However, it is the intra-actions with the stick, the blue line still present and the hopes and fears expressed by the stick in-talk-in-interview that create a new spacetime mattering, making "definite", "an inheritance that is never a given but always a task facing us" (Barad 2014b).

For Lucy, as with other mothers in the study, this keeping of what might be considered everyday stuff, sometimes with no apparent significance, appears to be part of the assemblage within which is not only a creation of children's identity, but also her own emerging past and current sense of who she is/was as mother. This can be seen in the interview below with Cath who talked with an image of a family holiday; she had brought it because her daughter now has a child of the same age. Both mothers across time are in the photo:

I brought this one because it is probably the same time, and there is a sense of myself as a young mum here, and obviously my daughter as a little girl of that age too. And I think, it's like, it's like another era... it was on holiday, I think we are looking at some kind of animals but I can see her, I can see her, I can see myself, I can see the kind of clothes we're wearing and you know, yeah, so it really captures a sense for me, of myself at that time as well, and what kind of mother I was to this little two-year-old girl... we're wearing very practical clothes.... You know they're kind of lost, those people, I think where are they gone?... but I just love the way, you know, the sort of, the look, the sort of engagement (Cath, interview 4).

From Cath's entanglement and intra-action with the photo, interview, microphone and me emerges a questioning of (dis)continuity: "where are those people?" she asks herself. Loss emerges from the photo, unmoored in the practice of knowing, (re)configuring the world as Cath (k)nows and (k)nows not. Cath, in the process of the interview, is "thinking with and through dis/continuity" (Barad 2010, p. 240), a "mediated remembering". The creation of new thoughts and feelings in the present, a "time regained" (Proust cited in Middleton and Brown 2005, p. 149), something that was not thought of or considered in the time past; a genealogical "opening-up" of space (Clifford 2018, p. 2). I, too, am implicated in this genealogical flowering. My own sense of slippage that began this journey, the sense of finiteness of life and time, (re)worked and (re)turned to over and over again in relation to others, mothers, objects and theory. "I am of the diffraction pattern", in the same way that the mothers in this study are neither outside nor inside, but "already multiply dispersed and diffracted throughout space-time (mattering)" (Barad 2014a, pp. 181-182) a "becoming with the data as researcher" (Taguchi 2012, p. 267).

6. Tangibility and Time

6.1. Knitted Entanglements

Many of the objects that mothers kept spoke of intimacy and offered some close physical connection with their children's past. These included not just clothes, scans, cot cards and name bands, but also children's teeth, hair and plastic cord clamps. Things that had been physically close to children, the clothes they wore, such as booties, first baby grows, knitted gifts of cardigans and jumpers, items worn on significant occasions, the favourite and well-worn. These small tangible

things not only released big memories, they also enabled a moment of the past to manifest in the present; in the moment of the interview, the context of the past emerged; “agential realism” (Barad 2007, p. 235), mobilising the temporal. This tangibility could be felt in the example below where Sarah rummaged through the pile of clothes heaped onto the table, liberated from their hiding place in the large old-fashioned trunk:

I can hear the texture and feel the material even though I’m not touching it, just like the past. Her story is buried in the pile of clothes, through the rummaging layers of that story are released, felt, freed.

She tells me of the experience of raising her first child, of how “hopeless” she said she was as a first time mother, she tells of her neglect, her desire to meet her own needs before the needs of her child. She tells me of the moment of realisation that she was responsible and of the night that changed that. She is sorry. As she continues to rummage, she uncovers more threads of the narrative, connected and woven into the fabric of her life. She comes across a jumper knitted, she said by her aunt—dead now but briefly present in the story and in the room (fieldnotes from the interview with Sarah).

Here, the jumpers pulled from the pile were dis-entangled and “cut” away from the “parliament of things” (Latour 1981, p. 142) tipped out onto the floor from a battered suitcase of clothes that were knitted by an aunt “dead now”. Like the wool brought together with two sticks, held by the hands of the aunt, she is still present in the pattern, pressed close to the small body it contained, impression made. The image captured here—pen, consent form, camera, Dictaphone, knee, cup, tea—is extended.

Filling the air in the dim light of the afternoon sun is a musty aroma. The keeping and entombing of these kept clothes is released into the room to join the other objects gathered; scan image and pink cot card, once tied to the clear Perspex hospital cot. We joke about the memory of those “fish tanks” holding newborns on their first night (fieldnotes from the interview with Sarah)

My own (re)turning to(o), (re)membering, joining; more assemblages of assemblages.

Keeping what might look like insignificant or random objects to the person outside the inner story might seem unfathomable. However, for Lucy, Cath and Sarah above, the revisiting of objects, along with the filtering and sorting, had resulted in a layering of memories, constructed and reconstructed, with each encounter and dialogue with self, others and the objects. Thus, the object itself was part of the re-narrating together, its non-verbal contribution as significant as the word. The “thing power” enabled narratives to emerge; stories were not “reflected” in the objects but entangled with the matter (Bennett 2010). These small semi-assemblages entwined with the womens’ narratives, where these objects were vitalised, energised, enlivened and animated, not just through the talk around them, but as objects in their own right (Bennett 2010; Cudworth and Hobden 2014). Through their encounter with these objects, these “obstacles”, experiences of mothering were revisited, reworked and relived. The objects presented performed, “iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetimematterings), new diffraction patterns” (Barad 2014a, p. 168).

6.2. *The Lock of Hair: “A Morsel of Time, in the Pure State”*

The lock of hair, the colour and the quality—it freezes that moment—to give some access to that little body, you know, which is going to grow up so fast—I think I was conscious of that at the time (Cath, interview 4).

The lock of hair, “a morsel of time in the pure state” (Proust, cited in Deleuze 2000) “is not a simple resemblance between the present and the past, between a present that is immediate and a past that has been present.... [b]ut beyond the very being of the past itself, deeper than any past that has been, than any present that was” (Deleuze 2000, p. 39). The (re)turning to the lock of hair, kept by Cath,

was not a (re)membering, not a “replaying”, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of the past, that is, as Barad says, “much bigger than any individual” (Barad 2007, p. x), for time is political. Like the small human body from which the lock of hair was cut, the fragility of body, hair and time are “interwoven with the social, political, the non-human, the material” – “connected and enmeshed in a complex system” (Murriss 2018, p. 22). The fragility of time can be seen in the objects that kept alive and present the babies and children who have grown to be adults. Bennett (2012) draws on the work of Spinoza in her exploration of “the hoard”. Here, she identifies the connection with loss and stability. Time, on the whole, passes quickly and children “grow up fast”; therefore, the potential for the object to slow down the passing of time is explored by Bennett (2012, pp. 252–53). Objects like the lock of hair were slow to change and offered stability; children change and grow, but not that lock of hair. The relative lastingness of the objects outlive childhood, and therefore in the keeping of such objects, childhood is not lost. As Lucy (interview 2) highlights, there is a fear of loss, not expressed as a loss of the child past, for the child is still present, but of losing memories and the need to pass on the “things kept”. The “mother-thing” (Baraitser 2009) is responsible for the holding and containing memories not wanting them to be lost, “letting them go” but not letting them “go”, a holding-on-to. Time slips; object outlives.

In the all-consuming heady days, weeks and months of early mothering, there is little time to consider time other than to live it. Now, seemingly removed from the exhaustive nature of early mothering, the overriding and dominant theme that emerged from the entanglements of interview, objects and talk-in-research-process was time and temporality. There was a paradoxical nature of time:

I did find it boring and time went so slow (Karen, interview 1).

It goes so quick, I remember trying to sit Kerry in a highchair because it was the next stage, she was far too little for it, I propped her up with cushions but gave up after a few days and left it for a couple of months.... Why was I trying to get her into it quicker, make her grow up too quickly? (Samantha, interview 6)

When children were small, the days were long and time went slowly. For some, this was excruciatingly painful; there is ambivalence in their stories, as well as boredom, frustration and anxiety. This gave rise to tension in the need to meet children’s needs balanced with the mother’s own needs. At the same time, there was much talk on the slippage of time, the acknowledgement of it going too quickly and the opportunities that were sought out to slow time down, to reconnect with children and to create opportunities for relationships. These times were often holidays, but bedtime routines also featured strongly. Chronological neoliberal discourses of development pull mothers to a future place as they struggle with the slowness of time with young children, to escape the intensity of often mothering alone. Whilst at the same time as the interview below highlights, there is a need to also slow down time, to “reconnect” as the clear plastic bug box told:

That brought back memories of how they used to collect all the bugs, on holidays, all those special times which were like taking a step out of your life and just taking a breath, remembering that we liked each other again, especially the boys.... They’d reconnect as friends, then they’d start doing things together (Jan, interview 5)

Woven into this “material-discourse” (Murriss 2018, p. 17) is the neoliberal economisation of time, a form of capital, a scarce resource, to be cherished and managed effectively; “not wasted”, “not enough”, “precious”. This was especially so when there were competing demands on that time, work outside the home, domestic work and caring for children. Mothers had to make the most of the time, spending it wisely, whilst at the same time looking at ways to make more time. Most talked about the futility of chores and how this was “wasted time”, a normative account perhaps in which the “good mother” prioritises time with her children over other domestic necessities. Time emerged as both a site of neoliberalism in the way that time is seen as a form of capital, a resource, invested in children but also a site of resistance in the “(re)turning” to.

7. It's about Time: The (K)nowing and the not (K)nowing

In conclusion, I once again return to my concerns of the pull to explain, understand and interpret the findings from the research-in-process. The original question I set forth with, namely: “what did mothers wish they had known then that they know now about being a mother?” has been troubled. Troubled by the entanglement of Aiôn (ontological time), a time that has never been and never will be, with Baradian (dis)continuity, motherhood, mothering and being a mother for many of the women and myself also entangled in the study, remained very much part of them/me despite their/my children being adult. Through a diffractive reading the relationship of the now and the knowing, the (k)nowing emerged, threaded through and with intra-actions in-research-process; “[t]he entanglements of response-ibilities” (Barad 2007, p. ix) continued to shape mothers’ views of themselves as a mother and of myself as a mother too. These response-abilities seemed at times saturated with expectations of mothering, especially in relation to the neoliberal economisation of time. The temporal was entangled in the objects women brought with them and released by objects in the stories of early mothering. The temporal and time could be seen as a technology of government (Rose 1999 p. 33), “an indirect mechanism of governmentality”. Where expectations of neoliberal mothering also includes participating in self-reflexivity (Jensen 2018), a “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1977), this research might be seen as contributing to this expectation. Hence, in interpreting the “findings” from this study, it could be argued that mothers in their talk-with-objects-in-research-process, (re)produced notions of “respectable” mothering. Even Sarah’s talk is in a frame of repentance for putting her own needs first. However, here I want to resist this refrain, for to do so is to collude with “good/bad” maternal dichotomies. Instead “intra-actions” in the research-process continues here with me, mother too, research-tool-being, with transcripts and with impressions made within the research-process and with you the reader, and with the intra-actions, the “enfolded articulations of the universe” in which this paper might find itself (Barad 2007, p. i).

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