
Original Article

The maternal death drive: Greta Thunberg and the question of the future

Lisa Baraitser

Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK.
E-mail: l.baraitser@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract The centenary of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920a/1955) falls in 2020, a year dominated globally by the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the effects of the pandemic has been to reveal the increasingly fragile interconnectedness of human and non-human life, as well as the ongoing effects of social inequalities, particularly racism, on the valuing of life and its flourishing. Drawing on earlier work, this paper develops the notion of a 'maternal death drive' that supplements Freud's death drive by accounting for repetition that retains a relation to the developmental time of 'life' but remains 'otherwise' to a life drive. The temporal form of this 'life in death' is that of 'dynamic chronicity', analogous to late modern narratives that describe the present as 'thin' and the time of human futurity as running out. I argue that the urgency to act on the present in the name of the future is simultaneously 'suspended' by the repetitions of late capitalism, leading to a temporal hiatus that must be embraced rather than simply lamented. The maternal (death drive) alerts us to a new figure of a child whose task is to carry expectations and anxieties about the future and bind them into a reproductive present. Rather than seeing the child as a figure of normativity, I turn to Greta Thunberg to signal a way to go on in suspended 'grey' time. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2020) 25, 499–517. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-020-00197-y>; published online 4 September 2020

Keywords: time; temporality; Greta Thunberg; death drive; motherhood; future



Time

And why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future? (Greta Thunberg)

This paper is late. Not just a little late but seriously forestalled. There is some pressure – an urgency produced by the centenary of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* falling in 2020 – and the desire and pleasure in partaking in a collaborative, timely celebration of the work. There are the ordinary repetitions that are holding this up: a chronic relation to my own thoughts, veering towards and away from the satisfactions and disturbances of ideas connecting or linking; the chronic overwhelm produced by the difficulty of saying ‘no’ and resisting the temptations of an overloaded life; and the realities of overload brought on not by a chronic relation to limits but by their obliteration by the institutions and systems that govern our lives. Then, of course, as 2020 has deepened, there have been the temporalities of illness, care and grief; of the suspension of time under conditions of lockdown; the stop-start of uncertainty and helplessness. For some, it has been a time of permanent and dangerous work; of intolerable waiting for others; and of the fault-lines of inequality and racial injustice urgently rupturing the otherwise monotonous rhythm of a global pandemic. In 2020, everything and nothing went on hold.

During this time, I continued to work with patients, albeit ‘remotely’, in the strange temporality of a five times per week psychoanalysis. Even with so much time, the wait between sessions can be felt to be intolerable. To be in an analysis is to be held in suspension from one session to the next. One of my patients describes the wait as an agonizing ‘blank time’, like the crackling of an old-fashioned TV. It is not dead time as such but the incessant noise of nothing happening. To be in the session, however, produces a different kind of disturbance: an utterly absorbing kind of time that they liken to the colour blue. We move between the absorbing blue time of the sessions to the blank, crackling, maddening time between them. There is a ‘session-time’ analyst, who is blue, and a ‘between-session-time’ analyst, who maddens with a blank, crackling absence. Time is both interminable – a wait between the sessions that feels like it goes on forever – and chronic: the repetition of blue, blank, blue, blank, blue, blank...

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is Freud’s meditation on the temporalities of repetition and return as species-time articulates with the time of the subject. In many ways, the death drive is a temporal concept, holding together the paradoxical time in which repetition contains within it a backwards pull towards the no-time of the living organism, even as the shape of this relation describes ‘a life’. 100 years later, time in the early decades of the 21st century



appears oddly analogous: it seems to loop or repeat but is undercut by a pull towards no-time, since the human and planetary future is not just foreshortened but now ‘foreclosed’ by the immanent twin disasters of capitalist and (neo)colonial expansion (Baraitser, 2017a, p. 8). Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi has long argued that our collective human future has come and gone and that the future has outlived its usefulness as a concept (Berardi, 2011). Time after the present will come, but it will not bring the promises of bettering the conditions of the now for most, this having been a central aspect of European and North American future narratives in the post-war period (Toffler, 1970; Lee, 2004; Luhmann, 1976). In fact, as Naomi Klein (2007) argues, the very folding of disaster into capitalist discourses, governmental policies and institutional practices does not stave off disaster but profits further from it, pushing the relations between the human and non-human world to the brink of sustainability. What this implies is that disaster is not a future horizon we must urgently draw back from but a condition we have already incorporated, profited from and continue to sustain in the present.

In these conditions of ‘crisis capitalism’, whole populations are kept in a ‘chronic state of near-collapse’ (Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 31),¹ a kind of temporal hiatus in which one goes on but without a future. Amy Elias (2016) has noted the intensive discussions about the ‘presentism’ of post-WWII globalized societies that have revolved around the idea of the loss of history (p. 35). In these narratives, a sense of a saturated, elongated, thin present is a product of a traumatized Western collective consciousness confronting the unprecedented ‘event’ of WWII. However, these narratives, she argues, have given way in the 21st century, as humankind ‘has created its own version of durational time inside (rather than outside) the box of historicity’ (p. 36). This durational time is not Bergson’s duration that teams with experience (Bergson, 1889/1994, 1896/2004) but the empty, timeless time of a ‘marketplace duration’ (Elias, 2016, p. 35), closer to the maddening crackling of nothing happening that my patient describes. In addition, as time is increasingly synchronized in the post-war period in terms of economic, cultural, technological, ecological and planetary registers, the ‘present’ itself becomes the management of a tension between time that is felt to be synced or simultaneous and time that is multiple or heterogeneous to simultaneity (Burgess and Elias, 2016, p. 3). We could think of this tension as produced by the dominating effects of European models of time (Mills, 2014, 2020). European time is constantly imposed by the West on ‘the rest’ through the temporal structures of Empire and enacted through colonization, exploitation, extraction and enslavement. European time comes to mediate representations of the world through the imposition of a particular account of the world-historical present on other temporal organizations – cosmic time, geological time, earth time, soil time, indigenous time, women’s time, queer time, to name a few (Chakrabarty, 2009; Freeman, 2010; Kristeva, 1981/1986; Nanni, 2012; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).



Another way to put this is that, although Freud proposes that repetition leads to the ultimate suspension of time – the return to non-being – the state of non-being produced by temporal suspension in the early 21st century is radically unequally distributed. Writing under conditions of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, Achille Mbembe (2020) states:

For we have never learned to live with all living species, have never really worried about the damage we as humans wreak on the lungs of the earth and on its body. Thus, we have never learned how to die. With the advent of the New World and, several centuries later, the appearance of the ‘industrialized races,’ we essentially chose to delegate our death to others, to make a great sacrificial repast of existence itself via a kind of ontological vicariate.

Non-being, or death, is a luxury that hasn’t yet been learnt by the ‘human’, non-being having been delegated to slaves – those humans who are denied status as humans against which the category of ‘human’ is both founded and flounders – as well as to non-human others. Unless we recognize the ‘*universal* right to breath’ (emphasis added) for all organic matter, Mbembe argues, we will continue to fail to die for ourselves, the death drive being projected, that is, into the body of that which is deemed non-human. If we go on collectively refusing to die for ourselves, we could say that the temporality of the current human predicament is closer to what Martin O’Brien calls ‘zombie time’ (O’Brien, 2020). As an artist and writer living with cystic fibrosis, which gives rise to symptoms very similar to Covid-19 (coughing, shortness of breath, exhaustion), O’Brien has now outlived his own life expectancy. He writes:

Zombie time insists on a different temporal proximity to death. Like the Hollywood zombie which holds within it a paradox, in that it is both dead and alive, those of us living in zombie time experience death as embodied in life [...]. We had come to terms with the fact that we are about to die, and then we didn’t.

Freud’s movement towards death is circular: a repetitive arc that leads us back to the inorganic, so that in some sense it too describes zombie time, the fact we have always already surpassed our death date, whereby a life is an act of return. Each organism follows its own path, he tells us, to death, and that deviation is a life. A path, however, is not quite what O’Brien is suggesting. Here the presence of death is sutured to every aspect of life, closer perhaps to Melanie Klein’s insistence on the death drive as a permanent unconscious phantasy that must be managed as a life-long psychic struggle (Klein, 1946/1975).



Two questions arise from this. Firstly, does recognizing ‘death as embodied in life’ lead us to begin to die for ourselves? In this ‘hour of autophagy’, as Mbembe (2020) puts it, we will no longer be able to delegate death to an other. We do, indeed, have to die not just in our own fashion but *on our own behalf*. In one reading of Freud’s death drive, it is associated with the freedom to do one’s own thing, follow one’s own path and stands as a marker of an independent life in many ways free from others – even if, as Lacan would have it, not free from the big Other.² But, as so many feminist, queer, disability, and Black studies scholars have attested, living an independent life is a fantasy; it is always premised on dependency or interdependency, which so often requires the temporary or permanent tethering of the life of an other, or, more profoundly, the harnessing of ‘life’ itself.³ Judith Butler (2020) writes in *The Force of Non-Violence* that we are all born into a condition of ‘radical dependency’ (p. 41), that no-one stands on their own, that we are all at some level propped up by others. Freud’s suggestion of ‘eternal return’ requires practices of maintenance that have largely been accorded to women, people of colour, animals, and other non-human others. These practices of maintenance entail the temporalities of often mind-numbing repetition: reproductive and other forms of labour that support, sustain, and maintain all living systems. In order to ‘deviate’, someone or something else needs to preserve, maintain, protect, sustain, and repeat. Those ‘others’ stay on the side of life, not as progression or even deviation towards death but as a permanent sustaining of life-processes. Death in life requires a simultaneous articulation, in other words, of *life in death*, in which the temporalities of progression, regression, and repetition can be understood as supported and supplemented by another temporal element within the death drive that operates through ‘dynamic chronicity’: an element that animates ‘life’ in such a way as to allow the subject to die in its own fashion. I call this life in death the ‘maternal death drive’ (Baraitser, 2017a) to distinguish it from the pleasure principle or the ‘life’ drive.

Secondly, if the time of the ‘now’, as I’ve elaborated above, takes the form of dynamic chronicity, a suspended yet chronically animated time that pushes out temporal multiplicity, what work needs to be done in order that this form of time retains some connection to a futurity for all? Do the repetitions of ‘blue blank’ in their own circular fashion retain within them a relation to futurity, even if they don’t exactly lead us somewhere else? I would hope, after all, that my patient may eventually, with time, come to experience the ‘blue-session’ analyst and the ‘blank-absent’ analyst as one and the same analyst, even as the agonies of having and losing may continue to be difficult. From a Kleinian perspective, the time that this requires is the time in which what is hated and what is loved come to have a relation to one another, which Klein calls ‘depression’ (Klein 1946/1975) and which may entail ‘depressing time’. We could say that it is the time in which we come to be concerned about the damage done to what is loved, the time whereby what is loved and what is hated can



come to matter to one another, making the time of working through that of ‘mattering’ itself. Furthermore, Mbembe (2020) writes:

Community – or rather the *in-common* – is not based solely on the possibility of saying *goodbye*, that is, of having a unique encounter with others and honoring this meeting time and again. The *in-common* is based also on the possibility of sharing unconditionally, each time drawing from it something absolutely intrinsic, a thing uncountable, incalculable, *priceless*. (emphases in original)

This would suggest that, supplementary to the time of blue-blank (saying goodbye again and again), there is another time: that of the ‘in-common’. This is a time of permanent mattering, which also takes time to recognize. It is, if you like, the time in which depressive guilt survives and hence the time it takes for a future to be recognized within the present, rather than being the outward edge, the longed-for time that is yet to come.

In what follows, and taking my cue from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* itself, I attempt to rework Freud’s death drive by drawing attention to a particular form of developmental time that lies inside the time of repetition, which I link to ‘life in death’. In Chapter II of Freud’s essay, in the midst of his struggle with the meaning of repetition, pleasure and unpleasure, he turns to a child. The function of the child at this point in the text is to provide the case of ‘normalcy’ – the play of children – in order to help him understand the ‘dark and dismal topic of traumatic neurosis’ (Freud, 1920b/2003, p. 52). The child will be ‘light’ (read white) and playful but turns out to be deeply troubled. Instead of dragging the cotton reel along the floor as the adults intended, so it could turn and check its existence at any point, the child, standing outside the cot, throws the reel into the cot, accompanied by an o-o-o-o sound, so it cannot be seen, and then pulls it out with a ‘Da!’ that Freud describes as ‘joyful’ (p. 52). The pleasure of re-finding, however, is postponed – in the time between ‘gone’ and ‘found’, the child plays at waiting, as it attempts to remaster the experience, Freud tells us, of its ‘gone’ mother. This is of course also an attempt to deal with its own gone-ness from the imagined place of the mother; the child is standing outside the cot, after all. The passivity of being left is repeated but transformed through an act of ‘revenge’, a repetitive act of aggression in which, through psychic substitution, something essentially unpleasurable is turned into something ‘to be remembered and to be processed in the psyche’ (p. 52). The child does this by identifying with the mother, waiting in her place.

My aim is to repeat Freud’s impulse, re-inserting a mother and child into the scene of the death drive ‘proper’ as a way to signal how to die on our own behalf and therefore how to go on in the suspended hiatus we appear to be living through. The maternal, as I will elaborate, appears as a non-normative developmental temporality within the death drive. In my account, the child



reappears, however, in the figure of the child-activist Greta Thunberg. She is the child who has been invested in symbolically to carry hope for the future, a hope that she is decidedly pushing back towards those of the generation who came before her, calling on them to take action now, before it is too late. Although Thunberg names her vision of the world in terms of ‘black and white’ thinking, I draw on Laura Salisbury’s notion of ‘grey time’ (Salisbury, in press) in order to understand what to do with the time that remains in which action can still take place.

Life in Death: The Maternal Death Drive

It is always an uncomfortable thing to do, to insert a mother and child into a scene where they are ostensibly not wanted. It carries the sour smells of heteronormativity and essentialism that still cling to discussions of the maternal and relegate mother-child configurations as the counterpoint to those who are ‘not fighting for the children’, as Lee Edelman (2004) suggested in his famous polemic *No Future*. For Edelman, the death drive is a queer refusal of futurity that allows negativity to operate as a ‘pulsive force’ that would otherwise trap queer as a determinate stable position (p. 3). The child and mother come to represent the ultimate trap, that of development itself – the unfolding of the normative temporalities of birth, growth, development, maturation, reproduction, wealth generation and death. In some ways, this is what makes the insertion of mother-child back into discourses about the death drive rather ‘queer’. In doing so, I deliberately refuse the association between motherhood and normativity and suggest that motherhood is the name for any temporal relation of ‘unfurling’ whereby the unfurling of one life occurs in relation to the unfurling of another, albeit out of sync. In fact, as I will elaborate below, for a life to unfurl there needs to be the presence of another life that is prepared to wait whilst life and death can come to have a relation to one another. This suspended time of waiting for life to unfurl is a non-teleological, crystalline form of developmental time based on the principle of life in death (Baraitser, 2017a, p. 92).

Whilst motherhood is always in danger of being squeezed out of this kind of queer theory, it is also in danger of being squeezed out of feminist theories that purport to make space for the maternal. Julia Kristeva’s essay ‘Women’s Time’ (1981/1986), for instance, conceptualized female subjectivity as occupying two forms of time: cyclical time (repetition) and monumental time (eternity without cleavage or escape). These two ‘feminine’ forms of time, she argued, work to conceal the inherent logic of teleological, historical, ‘masculine’ time, which is linear, progressive, unfolding and yet constantly rupturing, an ‘anguished’ time (p. 192). Masculine time rests on its own stumbling block, which is death. Cyclical time and ‘monumental’ or eternal time, Kristeva argued, are both



accessed through the feminine, so that the feminine signifies a less ‘anguished’ time because it is uncoupled from the death of the subject and more concerned with suturing the subject to extrasubjective time. Although this has been rightly critiqued for essentializing ‘the feminine’ through the normative positioning of the female subject on the side of the biological, as well as mobilizing a non-political appeal to ‘nature’, I have argued elsewhere that, in attempting to separate the feminine from cyclical and monumental time, feminist theory designates the maternal as the keeper of species-time, in which the mother becomes a biologicistic and romanticized subject attached to the rhythms of nature (Baraitser, 2009, p. 5). Toril Moi (1986) writes of Kristeva’s essay that the question for Kristeva was not so much how to valorize the feminine but how to reconcile maternal time with linear (political and historical) time (p. 187). Without a theory of the desire to have children (a desire that can permeate any gender configuration and that I name as maternal regardless of the gendered body that desires it), we leave the door open to the consequence of a failure to theorize and the maternal falls out of signification, time and history. Moreover, motherhood is not just the desire for children but a particular form of repetitive labour relegated largely to women and particularly, in the global north, to women of colour and women from the south. Although the concept of ‘social reproduction’ has been expanded to incorporate a much broader array of activities than caring for children, maternal labour remains distinct from other forms of domestic labour. Joy James (2016) argues that the ongoing trauma and theft involved in slavery, for instance, produces not only Western democracy but a repudiated ‘twin’ within Western theory that she names ‘the Black Matrix’ (p. 256). Where mothers in captivity and slavery have always provided the reproductive and productive labour that underpin wealth and culture, they are systematically erased – not just in culture but in what she calls ‘womb theory’ (theory, for instance, that accommodates feminism, intersectionality and antiracism, whilst still denying the maternal captive). Despite this, she claims, the Black Matrix can act as a ‘fulcrum’ that leverages power against captivity (p. 257). I would argue that this power comes, in part, from the impossibility of the maternal captive remaining indifferent to her labour. Subsistence farming, cooking, cleaning, household maintenance, support work and the production of status are forms of repetition from which it remains possible to emotionally disattach. But the ‘labour’ of maternity is ‘affective, invested, intersubjective’ (Sandford, 2011, p. 6) and retains an ethical dimension that is distinct. Here the maternal emerges as a figuration of the subject that is deeply attached to its labouring, whose labouring is a matter of attachment to that labour, as well as providing the general conditions for attachment (the infant’s psychic struggle to become connected to the world) to take place.

We could say, then, that the time of repetition under the condition that is maternity becomes the time of mattering, as opposed to the ‘meaningless’ time of reproduction: the time, that is, in which repetition *may come to matter*. This



time can be felt as obdurate, distinctively uncertain in its outcome, both intensive and ‘empty’, and bound to the pace of the unfurling other. What is at play is a kind of crystalline developmental time within the time of history. It takes the form of repetition, but this repetition holds open the possibility of something coming to matter, rather than the death drive understood only as a return to non-being. A maternal death drive? What might this conjunction mean?

Freud always maintained that the two elements of psychic life that couldn’t be worked through were the repudiation of femininity in both men and women, by which he meant the repudiation of passivity; and the death drive, the repetitive return again and again to our psychic dissolution or unbinding. In ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’, written in the last years of his life, Freud (1937/1964) named these the ‘bedrocks’ of psychic life, evoking an immovable geological time. The permanent fixtures of psychic life that an analysis cannot shift are the hatred of passivity and the simultaneous impulse to return to an ultimate passive state, suturing the feminine to death in psychoanalysis. Earlier, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had offered an hypothesis in which, despite his conception of drives as exerting the pressure that presses for change, they are constrained by a conservatism, meaning they do not operate according to one singular temporality. This double temporality within the death drive is drawn out by Adrian Johnston (2005), who has noted Freud’s (1905/1955) developmental account of the drive in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and later in ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ (1915/1957), where the drive is articulated as maturing over time. Johnston (2005) maintains that Freud’s drive is simultaneously timeless and temporal, both interminable (it repeats) and containing an internal tendency to deviate, to change its object and its aim (it develops or alters) (p. 228). After all, something happens, according to Freud, that shifts the human organism from one that dies easily to one that diverges ever more widely from the original course of life (that is, death) and therefore makes ever more complicated detours before reaching death. For Johnston, alteration can be understood as an intra-temporal resistance to the time of iteration, a negation of time transpiring within time. This means that the death drive therefore *includes* rather than negates developmental time. This is not a developmental tendency separated off and located within the self-preservative drives or a ‘life’ drive but a death drive that contains within it its own resistance to negation. I would want to reclaim this doubled death drive as ‘maternal’, the drive that includes within it the capacity for development, for what Johnston calls ‘alteration’, which always mediates the axis of repetition or ‘iteration’ (p. 344). The maternal death drive would describe the unfolding of another life in relation to one’s own path towards death and marks the point that alteration and iteration cross one another.

If we move from Freud to Klein, we see how this double temporality plays out between the maternal and child subject. I have described elsewhere how, in



Love, Guilt and Reparation, Klein (1937/1998) tells us that anxiety about maternal care and dependency on the maternal body in very early life – the relationship, that is, with a feeding-object of some kind that could be loosely termed ‘breast’ – is a result of both the frustrations of that breast (its capacities to feed but also to withhold or disappear at whim) and what the infant does with the hatred and aggressive feelings stirred up by those experiences of frustration that rebound on it in the form of terrifying persecutory fantasies of being attacked by the breast itself (pp. 306–43; see also Baraitser, 2017b, p. 4). Klein’s conceptual infant swings in and out of psychic states that are full of envious rage and makes phantasized aggressive raids on the maternal body in an attempt to manage the treacherous initial experiences of psychical and physical survival. Klein (1937/1998) moves us closer to a more thing-like internal world permeated less with representations and more with dynamic aggressive phantasies of biting, hacking at and tearing the mother and her breasts into bits, and attempts to destroy her body and everything it might be phantasized to contain (p. 308). In Klein’s thinking, libido gives way to aggression, so that the defences themselves are violent in their redoubling on the infant in the form of persecutory anxiety. One’s own greed and aggressiveness themselves become threatening, along with the maternal object that evokes them, and have to be split off from conscious thought. Coupled with this are feelings of temporary relief from these painful states of mind (p. 307) and these ‘good’ experiences form the basis for what we could think of as love. It is only as the infant moves towards a tolerance of knowing that good and bad ‘things’ and experiences are bound up in the same person (that is, both (m)other and self) that guilt arises as an awareness that we have tried to destroy what we also love. Whilst this can overwhelm the infant with depressive anxiety that also needs to be warded off, there is a chance that this guilt can be borne and a temporary state of ambivalence can be achieved that includes the desire to make good the damage done. ‘Unfurling’, then, arises out of the capacity to tolerate the proximity of love and hate towards the mother, but the mother also needs to tolerate the time this takes – to be prepared to go back ‘again and again’ to the site of mattering without becoming too overwhelmed or rejecting.

It is here that futurity emerges, not as that which is carried forward by the child but as this element within the death drive that I am naming as maternal, which is a capacity to tolerate repetition within the present. To return to a Lacanian formulation, Chenyang Wang (2019), in his work on differentiating Real, Imaginary and Symbolic time in Lacan, shows how Lacan’s death drive is not so much the reinsertion of the bodily or biological into the human subject but the traumatic intrusion of the Symbolic into the organism at the expense of the Imaginary, which evokes the Real body. Wang describes how what he calls the ‘Real future’ (p. 69) does not involve the human subject. Where the ego may continue to imagine a future of fulfilled wishes, hopes and expectations, in which the present is characterized as a mode of ‘waiting’ until the future



unfolds, the death drive in fact interrupts the fantasy of the future as something unreachable or unattainable and instead returns the future to the subject as something that has already structured it. For Wang, Real time opens the subject to the Real present that is neither instantaneous or immediate but the freedom of returning to the same place in one's own way. He sees this as the offer of the possibility of freedom that transcends the isolated, egoic individual, otherwise trapped in its established temporal order (p. 79).

We could say, then, that the death drive includes rather than negates developmental time and holds out the possibility of a time that breaks free of the ego's imaginary sense of past, present and future. Developmental time, from this perspective, is precisely a suspension of the flow of time, a capacity to wait for the other to unfold. Maternity, in its failure to be indifferent to the specificity of its labour, implies a return, again and again, to a scene that matters, a kind of repetition that is not quite captured by the death drive as excessive access to *jouissance*, nor to the death drive as a deviation towards a unique form of death, but that might after all have something to do with generativity, indeed with freedom, not of the self, but of the other. The return to a scene that matters is not a kind of flowing time (anyone who has spent time with small children will know this) nor the stultifying time of indifferent labour, but living in a suspended or crystalline time, which is the time it takes for mattering to take place.

Finally, we can link the maternal death drive to Elizabeth Freeman's (2019) concept of 'chronathanatopolitics' (p. 57) that extends mattering beyond the mother-child relation to the politics of mattering in the contemporary moment. In her discussion of 'playing dead' in 19th century African-American literature, Freeman notes that many African-American stories involve 'fictive rebirths' (p. 55). These are stagings of death and rebirth, not just once but multiple times, so that in these stories slaves and their descendants are constantly moving towards and away from death. Feigning death, she argues, does not solve the problem of having not been 'born' as human – a position well established within Afropessimist thought – but allows an engagement through repetitive staged dying with what Jared Sexton (2011) has called 'the social life of social death' (quoted in Freeman, 2019, p. 55). Freeman therefore builds on Freud's death drive to develop a concept of 'chronathanatopolitics' in which life is not simply the opposite of death but the opposite of the 'presence' of death (p. 57), a temporary 'disappearing' of death within life, the counterpart to the maternal death drive as life in death. Staging one's death again and again, she states, is a way of managing the life/death binary, rather than simply a commitment to life or an acceptance of unchanging black deathliness. Where Freud's death drive does refuse any simple opposition between life and death, Freeman notes, it nevertheless proposes a universal and purely psychic drive. She calls instead for recognition of a socio-political death drive enacted by white supremacy: chronathanatopolitics is the 'production of deathliness and nonbeing by



historical forces external to the subjectivity it creates for nonblack people, and forecloses for people of African descent' (p. 55). In the 21st century, we see 'playing dead' resurfacing in the 'die-ins' revived by the protest movement Black Lives Matter. Time becomes central, creating what Freeman terms 'temporal conjoinments' with death (p. 85) through counting 'I can't breathe' 11 times, as Eric Garner did. We have seen this repeated in 2020, when protesters hold a silence or take the knee for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the time that George Floyd had his neck knelt on by the police officer who killed him on 25 May. 'Mattering', in the sense of black life coming to matter, Freeman notes, captures the double meaning of coming to importance and becoming-inert substance or matter, giving the phrase an ambivalent valence. Mattering refuses the Afropessimist insight that black life is structurally foreclosed and instead implies a more open stance towards non-being. By miming death rather than life, Black Lives Matter activists 'commit to an (a)social life within death even as they fight for an end to the annihilation of blackness' (p. 86). Here, life in death is the 'social' work of activism that counts the time that is left within black life even as it is extinguished, just as it is the social work of mothering that waits for life to unfurl towards its death without knowing when or how this will take place. Miming death, again and again, is analogous to returning to the scene of mattering again and again, the hiatus within the path towards death that I have described as the maternal death drive. However, Freeman's work provides the corrective to an easy universalizing of the drive, pointing us towards the way that Black Lives Matter politicizes repetition in the name of life in death.

Greta Thunberg

Recently I've seen many rumours circulating about me and enormous amounts of hate. (Greta Thunberg)

In *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe*, Rebekah Sheldon (2016) charts a recent shift in the use of the child to suture the image of the future. The child, metonymic with the fragility of the planetary system and therefore in need of protection, has become 'the child as resource' (p. 16). As resource, the child is used to carry both expectations and anxieties about the future. Unlike earlier iterations, the child as resource is premised on a future that cannot be taken for granted. Much of the affect around ecological disaster – anxiety, fear, terror, hopelessness, despair, guilt, determination, protectiveness – comes not so much from an awareness of the current effects of global climate change as they play out in the present but from the projected harm to the future that it portends. And the future, Sheldon reminds us, is the provenance of the child.



Sheldon describes the history of this relationship between child and future as emanating from the 19th century at the same point as modern theories of 'life' begin to proliferate in Darwin and of course in Freud. 'The link forged between the child and the species', she writes, 'helped to shape eugenic historiography, focalized reproduction as a matter of concern for racial nationalism, and made the child a mode of time-keeping' (p. 3). In the face of anxious concerns about the deep biological past of the human species, the child held open a future through a coordination of the trio 'life, reproduction and species' with that of 'race, history and nation'. Freud's child, for instance, caught both in the relentless unfolding of developmental time and the timelessness of unconscious life, is also the site of the regulation of 'life' itself. Whilst these two axes of temporality (development and timelessness), as we saw above, cross one another, the figure of the child is nevertheless a 'retronaut, a bit of the future lodged in the present' (p. 4). Yet, at the same time, Sheldon's child is already melancholic. It knows its childness can't be preserved; it will be lost; just as the future is felt also to be something constantly slipping away. As a melancholic figure, Sheldon suggests that the child as resource has a very specific task right now: to cover over the complex systems at work in biological materiality. As non-human animacy becomes more visible in conditions of planetary crisis, with it comes the terrifying potential (at least for the human world) of nature to slip its bonds. The child stands in for life itself at a time of vibrant and virulent reassertion of materialisms in all their forms. The child's new task, according to Sheldon, becomes one of binding nonhuman vibrancy back into the human, into something safer, and into the frame of human reproduction.

This perhaps helps us modulate how we might respond to the figure of Greta Thunberg, the climate activist who describes herself as both 'autistic' and living with Asperger's, and to her work as a 'cry for help' (Thunberg, 2019, p. 3). During 2018, when she was 15 years old, Thunberg started to skip school to sit outside the Swedish Parliament with a sign reading 'Skolstrejk för klimatet' [school strike for climate].⁴ As a result of the school climate change movement that grew around Thunberg's 'Fridays for Future' actions during 2019, there has been an intensive, rapid sanctification of the plain-speaking, white, plaited-haired child now simply known as 'Greta'. Although she herself acknowledges that she is not unique and is part of a network of youth movements in the global south who bear the brunt in the present for the effects of climate disaster largely produced by the global north, she has nevertheless become an enormously influential figure through whom climate discussions now pass. Some describe her influence as simply the 'Greta effect' (Watts, 2019).

There is a specific and careful simplicity to the way Thunberg talks. In a speech entitled 'Almost Everything is Black and White', she states, 'I have Asperger's syndrome, and to me, almost everything is black or white' (Thunberg, 2019, p. 7). Utilizing what others may see as a disability, a difficulty in seeing shades of grey, she speaks against the need for more



complexity, more reflection, more science; in short, a more ‘grown up’ approach to climate chaos: ‘We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is to wake up and change [...] Everything needs to change. And it has to start today’ (p. 11). It is this rhetorical insistence that there is no more time and that the future of her generation has been stolen by the inaction of the generation that has come before that positions her as not so much future-orientated but backed up against a closing future, looking back towards those who came before her as they continue to gaze ahead towards what they imagine is her future. As she states, ‘We children are doing this to wake the adults up. We children are doing this for you to put your differences aside and start acting as you would in a crisis. We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back’ (p. 68).

In many ways, we could see Thunberg as performing a call, in the name of a human reproductive future, for the binding of nonhuman vibrancy back into the human, into something safe and stable, the child’s new task that Sheldon describes. We could also make a critical reading of the ways Thunberg – as a contemporary incarnation of Maisie in Henry James’ (1897/1969) *What Maisie Knew*, where the child-protagonist is sacrificed to save a negligent and damaged society – re-mobilizes a discourse that re-stabilizes the differences between the generations in the name of the reproduction of the white heteronormative social bond. However, I want to read Thunberg’s ‘black and white’ thinking as metonymic with my patient’s blank and blue: the oscillation between the absorbing blue of the analytic session and the suspended time of nothing happening between the sessions; the time of no-analyst and the agonies of waiting. Thunberg (2019) states: ‘There are no grey areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don’t. We have to change’ (p. 8). In many ways, she refuses ‘development’ in the sense of Klein’s depressive position functioning, where blue and blank come to be understood as having a relation to one another, and insists instead on their separation, on what Klein would call ‘paranoid-schizoid’ thinking, in which blue and blank are radically split apart, as a viable place to speak from. Indeed, she goes on insisting she is a child and that development is precisely what has got us into so much trouble. She warns us that, from the perspective of blank time (the time of nothing happening), blue time is absorbing for sure, but it is short, cannot last, and time itself needs to urgently come to matter if we are to find a way out of the current predicament. If we want to repair a relationship with monumental time, there is only action or no action, blue or blank, as we have now run out of time. Despite the obvious occlusion of the many brown and black children who have protested, spoken out, organized school strikes and presented to the UN over the years and gained no coverage, what is striking is that the white child claims that it is her unusual perspective, in which black and white remain separate, that is our only way out.



In describing what she calls ‘grey time’, Laura Salisbury (in press) reminds us that grey is not, strictly speaking, a colour at all; rather, it is a shade. As such, it is achromatic, composed of black and white in various shades of intensity, rather than hues. Moving from colour to time, Salisbury claims that grey time can be thought of as similarly a time that contains intensities of affect, naming grey time as ‘anachromistic’, a form of intensive temporality that belongs to and traverses the perceiving subject and the aesthetic object.

To speak of grey time as *anachromistic* is to evoke an aesthetic experience that is against colour or hue, but, with its echo of anachronism, also produces a slub in the fabric of time as it is usually thought. The double gesture of the term *anachromism* is the attempt to speak to time’s intensity rather than, as is more usual, concentrating on its flow or movement, while trying to capture an atmosphere where there is a weaving or binding in of blank, uncertain, colourless ‘colour’, and affect into what is felt of time. (emphasis in original)

Grey time, then, is an intensity of time that moves us beyond the impasse of action and no action, or blue and blank, by acting as a slub or thickening in the oscillation between the two. This thickening, if we follow Salisbury, both reveals time’s stuck oscillation between black and white at the same point as it acts to bind greyness into what is felt of time. Grey inhabits black and white without resolving the oscillation, both intensifying the sense of time’s stuckness but also drawing attention to the affect of greyness, of uncertainty. Whilst the time for grey thinking, as Thunberg states, may have passed, perhaps Salisbury’s attention to grey time is important. As the existential dangers facing humanity deepen – by Mbembe’s description, the destruction of the biosphere, the criminalization of resistance and the rise of determinisms, whether genetic, neuronal, biological or environmental – so perhaps Greta Thunberg’s urgency cannot be heard until we bind the blank, uncertain, colourless affect of the grey ‘now’ into what is felt of time. Mbembe (2020) writes of the Covid-19 virus:

Of all these dangers, the greatest is that all forms of life will be rendered impossible. [...] At this juncture, this sudden arrest arrives, an interruption not of history but of something that still eludes our grasp. Since it was imposed upon us, this cessation derives not from our will. In many respects, it is simultaneously unforeseen and unpredictable. Yet what we need is a *voluntary cessation, a conscious and fully consensual interruption*. Without which there will be no tomorrow. Without which nothing will exist but an endless series of unforeseen events. (emphasis in original)

This is, indeed, grey time – a voluntary cessation, a conscious and fully consensual interruption to business as usual as a response to the profound



uncertainty that is the reality of the interdependencies of all forms of life. Although I know that there is no way for ‘couch time’ to have an effect without a ‘session-time’ analyst and a ‘between-session-time’ analyst eventually coming together in the time that is an analysis, it may be that we have simply run out of time. Then a new psychoanalytic temporality may be needed, one that understands the simultaneous need for and suspension of development in the name of really knowing about the death drive; one in which action would no longer be simply understood as acting out but in which the mutative interpretation, the one that brings about change, can be grey, ill-timed, coming too soon and too late, before it is too late.

Funding

The research in this paper was funded by a Wellcome Trust Collaborative Award, ‘Waiting Times’, grant number [205400/A/16/Z] (see waitingtimes.exeter.ac.uk). Data sharing is not applicable as no datasets were generated and/or analysed for this study.

About the Author

Lisa Baraitser is Professor of Psychosocial Theory in the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, and a Psychoanalyst and Member of the British Psychoanalytical Society.

Notes

1. See The Invisible Committee, the *nom de plume* of an author or group of authors of *The Coming Insurrection* (2009), *To our Friends* (2015), and *Now* (2017).
2. See Chenyang Wang’s excellent book *Subjectivity In-Between Times: Exploring the Notion of Time in Lacan’s Work* (2019) for an account of the death drive understood as the demand the Symbolic makes on the body, rather than the ‘instinctual’ bodily or biological demand made on the mind.
3. See, for instance, Freeman (2010), Halberstam (2005), Hartman (2007) and Hedva (2016).
4. In doing so, she was perhaps unwittingly building on a long history of school strikes, certainly dating back at least 100 years in the UK, in which schoolchildren mobilised against caning in 1889 and later came out on strike as part of a number of localised general strikes in 1911. See Bloom (2010, 2011).

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