

## The Mother Becomes Time

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### Exploring Altered Temporality in Contemporary Motherhood Memoirs

*This paper contends that the contemporary mothering experience disconnects women from dominant temporal structures—situating them as outsiders to its rhythm—and in doing so, it connects them to a maternal temporality associated with generational linearity and visceral understanding. Through the lens of Kristeva's notions on women's time, the paper begins by comparing the experience of modern neoliberal time to the temporality of mothering, and asserts that the continuous present of maternal time is incongruous to linear, clock time. It then turns to the question of dual temporality—how the mother's sense of futurity becomes aligned with her child. The central texts, Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* and Denise Riley's *Time Lived, without Its Flow*, are discussed as reflecting a trajectory of temporal unity. It explores Heidegger's "moment of vision" theory, and discusses the generative potential of the mothering experience. Following this, the paper examines the connection between birth and death, paralleling Manguso's text with Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Both writers suggest the potential for these events to position the mother within the motherline, within the "great unity." Finally, the paper discusses the motherhood memoir form as reflective of the altered temporality portrayed. It contends that motherhood memoirs value the experimental and open nature of the form. They are less concerned with linear progression.*

This paper is concerned with the representation of altered temporality in a selection of contemporary motherhood memoirs. Its main focus is on "pure states of being," which are suspended between temporality and mortality (Manguso 91). I contend that the mother memoirists present maternal time as being experienced as diverging from and at times in conflict with the everyday linear time of neoliberalism. The temporality of mothering is

experienced as a return to and remembrance of the unity and familial care in the motherline. I also suggest that the conditions of modern neoliberalist society, which champion time as a controllable resource, present a substantial temporal challenge for new mothers. Finally, the paper draws parallels between the form of these memoirs and the experience of time portrayed within them; it suggests that the writers attempt to construct a narrative shaped by the temporality of mothering.

The so-called motherhood memoir has exploded since the turn of the century. As a genre, these memoirs are hard to pin down; forging into the relatively uncharted territory of the matrifocal narrative, they seek to explore the maternal experience in all its visceral depth. Often in the memoirs, the adjustment to motherhood is felt through an altered temporality—whether it is the steady marching on of pregnancy, the relentless interruption of everyday childcare, or a deeper sensation of a shift in one's place within history. This paper discusses texts that either make temporality their main point of focus or a central theme. The first text to do so is Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, in which the author correlates the interruption into her obsessive diary keeping with the birth of her son. As the title suggests, the memoir's task is to attempt to reconcile Manguso's sense of ruptured temporal identity with her new motherhood. Acting almost as a parenthesis to Manguso's text is Denise Riley's memoir *Time Lived, without Its Flow*, a cathartic essay detailing the temporal struggles of dealing with the death of her son. The paper will also briefly discuss Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which shares with the other texts a desire to narrate an ontologically aware maternal experience.

### Maternal Time versus Neoliberal Time

In order to interpret the confrontation between the temporality of mothering and the everyday encounter with modern temporality, it is firstly important to define and explore the experience of both. In her essay "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva suggests that the female experience was traditionally aligned with cyclical or monumental time—the time of history, particularly linked to women's maternity. In comparison, male time was "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding," and was associated with the public realms of professional work and industry (Kristeva 17). Some scholars have suggested that the rise of neoliberalism and the capitalist economy in recent decades have combined to create a culture that constantly strives for autonomy, financial success, and individual achievement, and that prioritizes personal responsibility. Julie Stephens suggests that the aims of second-wave feminism, those of independence and equality, have been hijacked by the growth of neoliberalism in Western society. She claims that we have transformed into a "postmaternalist" culture

in which the “new, unencumbered (motherless) self is celebrated and defined by its separateness, autonomy, and purported freedom of choice” (Stephens 15). Ruth Quiney supports this analysis of modern capitalist expectations of women, and indicates that the single middle-class woman’s “self-conception before pregnancy is as comparatively genderless beings, a perception reinforced by ‘post-feminist’ cultural conditions” (30). Viewing this shift through the lens of women’s time, Karen Davies asserts that women “have been socialised into a modern, linear time thinking but certain parts of their lives and needs are bound up by a different temporal consciousness” (152).

Before motherhood, Manguso’s obsessive diary keeping reflects a temporal anxiety concerned with capturing memories and controlling the movement of time: “I started keeping the diary in earnest when I started finding myself in moments that were too full ... I’d be able to recover from today if it weren’t for tomorrow... If I allowed myself to drift through nondocumented time for more than a day, I feared, I’d be swept up, no longer able to remember the purpose of continuing” (11). She equates documenting daily events with proving her existence and is fearful of the “nothing” that exists between them. She senses her task is futile, yet is compelled to continue (Manguso 3). With motherhood comes an interruption into this dedicated documentation of passing time—an elongation of the present tense and eventually an acceptance of a temporality that is neither controllable nor structured in a way she once recognized. Voicing a familiar admission, Manguso says the following: “Sometimes the baby fed at seven thirty and cried again until feeding again at eight thirty. My life had been replaced with a mute ability to wait for the next minute, the next hour. I had no thoughts, no self-awareness” (55). Referred to by Lisa Baraitser as the “pitilessness of the present tense ... like one long cinematic take [acting] to obliterate the passing of time from what is to come, to what is, to what has been,” Manguso’s maternal present stretches into infinity and obscures the relevance of the modes of past and future (Baraitser, *Maternal* 66). But is this temporal shift problematic? Manguso’s memoir represents her journey to feeling at home in the experience of “ongoingness”—a greater acceptance of the fallacy of linear time, a loosening of her reliance on the dominant contemporary temporal structures, which presume the constancy of past, present, and future as well as beginning, middle, and end. She concludes that the “future happens. It keeps happening” (Manguso 88).

Through the death of her adult son, Riley’s temporal experience is radically altered for a second time. She is thrust back into the endless maternal present; she recognizes that “her old stance is changed ... by the shattering of that underlying intuition of moving in time, which you cannot register until it’s collapsed” (Riley 36). Like Manguso, Riley describes feeling suspended in the present and existing outside the structures of linear time. Although the

cause of this suspension in lived time is deeply traumatic, Riley asserts that the experience of temporal alterity “only becomes a trial if you attempt to make it intelligible to others who’ve not experienced it (10).” Both writers describe the isolation and loneliness of being pushed into a temporal reality markedly different and in conflict with the increasingly universal experience of everyday time as linear and predictably structured. Perhaps it is not the experience of suspended time itself that is onerous for these writers, but the effort of its exteriority and conflict with public everyday time.

### Futurity

In reference to Riley’s text, Baraitser claims “it is one’s relation to everyday life that goes through a dramatic shift, one in which time can no longer unfold predictably or reliably as a crisis has occurred in the reliability that the future will unfold” (“Time and Again” 6). It is here that we may link Manguso’s and Riley’s narratives, as both are concerned with the question of futurity (or lack of) and the aftermath of a “life that could be said to unfurl itself inside your own life” (Baraitser, “Time and Again” 6). Manguso has a crisis of futurity, of individual development, after her son is born, which affirms that “the mother becomes the background against which the baby lives, becomes time” (53). One could suggest that this cessation in sequential, productive movement is an oppressive force, as a loss of autonomy is perceived as destructive to the postmaternalist individual, yet Manguso’s text presents this maternal temporal unity and loss of singular futurity as ultimately liberating. She remarks that “I’ve basically been the same person since I had my son. I know this is true for all new mothers, especially those that are younger than me (and most of them are). But I feel like a monolith now” (Manguso 69). The image of the monolith is recreated throughout the text as a symbol of Manguso’s deeper understanding of lived time. Through Manguso’s meditations on the landscape of memory and time, she speaks of forgotten people whose identity lives on in thirty-thousand-year-old cave paintings and in a great cathedral bearing the work of generations past. Through motherhood, she finds herself connected to an ancient timeline, to Kristeva’s cyclical and monumental time. In stark contrast to the temporal anxieties described at the beginning of the memoir, Manguso feels relief in “knowing time will go on without me”—like the cave paintings, she is “dancing my little dance for a few moments against the background of eternity” (81).

Riley’s work provides an echo of this experience. Further on in her mothering experience, she reflects that “In the past you had sensed your living child’s time, including the physically interior time of its gestation as well as its early growing and independent life, as if it were your own. You had aged in tandem with it”

(72). Her sense of futurity is intimately tied to that of her son's: by becoming crystallized in time, as her son has, she may remain temporally connected to him. Baraitser suggests that Riley experiences a similar temporal alterity as that experienced in early motherhood, a "parallel register." in which "the maternal subject bears the suspension of time, a kind of impossible waiting which is the time the child's futurity requires of her" ("Time and Again" 6). Riley's memoir is an exploration of what happens when one's temporal development is indivisible from one's child and when a child's futurity is halted. Whereas Manguso's narrative is a process of coming to terms with this shift in temporal development to seeing the passing of time as taking place within her son, Riley's presents a rupture in this development. Like her son, she is "pulled right outside of time, as if beached in a clear light" (Riley 12).

Manguso's and Riley's texts present a maternal trajectory of unity and severance felt temporally—a duality that presents itself in a unique temporal flow. As Manguso begins to see the markers of time in the life of her son, Riley feels her "double inner time ... untimely ripped ... That was the space of the child's past, which used to lie like an inner shell enveloped by your own time ... a child you grew up with, nested like a Russian doll whose shorter years sat within yours, gave you time that was always layered" (44). Continuing the parallels between the texts and highlighting the severance between the experience of autonomy and dual temporality, Riley refers to her maternal grief as a "partial rebirth ... like a pregnancy run in reverse" (45). As Manguso begins to come to terms with dual temporality and futurity, Riley finds that hers is undone; her son's death produces a cessation in any movement. She insists that "Time 'is' the person. You're soaked through with it. This enormous lurch into arrested time isn't some philosophical brooding about life's fragility. It's not the same 'I' who lives in her altered sense of no-time, but a reshaped person. And I don't know how she'll turn out" (Riley 46).

### Moment of Vision

Both memoirists describe moments in which they were able to perceive the fallacy and unrealness of everyday time. Through their experience of mothering and the maternal identity, they become external observers of the flow of linear, clock time. Manguso questions the futility of her diary postmotherhood—a record that she believed once allowed her to control time and retain her memories. Yet she writes it was "ridiculous to believe myself powerful enough to stop time just by thinking" (82). From her vantage point on the temporal plain of maternal grief, Riley senses a deep detachment: "Only from your freshly removed perspective can you fully understand how our habitual intuitions of time can falter" (35). The experience of being "beached in a clear light" (Riley

12) is comparable to Martin Heidegger's idea of a "moment of vision"—a moment in which the subject can freshly perceive their place in the world as well as their inescapable finitude. In a Heideggerian sense, becoming a mother produces a renewed recognition of the self as a "Being-towards-death." The experience of mothering accentuates and illuminates one's existence in an ancient timeline. When a woman becomes a mother, she moves across an intractable barrier; she is still a daughter, but there is a shift into the space and time of the mother and into an altered perspective, which produces a moment of vision and clarity. For Manguso, her progression into motherhood provides a sense of clarity and perspective on the flow of time. She returns to the memories of her childhood—times that were "preverbal"—as she enters into a world of pure experience: "I'm forgetting everything. My goal now is to forget it all so that I'm clean for death. Just the vaguest memory of love, of participation in the great unity" (Manguso 86).

Riley's and Manguso's narratives are about seeing themselves as outsiders to the dominant time structures dictating everyday life. In a "moment of vision," subjects can separate themselves from the world of the "they-self," described by Heidegger as a world of social norms and an assumed adherence to linear time, through a crisis or event. Although Heidegger does not specify the event that justifies this "moment of vision," for Riley and Manguso it is the everyday yet monumental experiences of birth and death. In these events, they can perceive themselves as simply existing within the vastness of human history; they were born on a certain date and their death is also a certainty. This finitude is beyond their control.

Yet this "moment of vision" is not exclusive to significant events but reverberates through the experience of everyday mothering. We may suggest that the daily and hourly interruptions constituting the mothering experience—ruptures that punctuate the flow of time—work as a kind of cumulative moment of vision, which constantly reestablishes the present mode of immediacy for the mother. These interruptions necessitate a different way of thinking and a different kind of reflective thought that come from a "moment of vision," which illuminates our innate position as a "Being-in-the-world." Referring to her premotherhood anxieties, Manguso reflects that the "time I spent sitting and nursing and holding the baby and cleaning up his messes could have borne the worry from me as completely as I bore the baby, which in my experience marked a change of mind that by now seems permanent" (84). Heidegger believes that the "moment of vision," of renewed awareness, may produce a feeling of "angst" and anxiety, but it also has the potential for feelings of emancipation: "once one has grasped the finitude of one's existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities" and brings the subject "into the simplicity of its *fate* (emphasis in original,

435).” It is the endless multiplicity of possibilities that compel Manguso to maintain her diary; the removal of these possibilities releases her from a state of temporal anxiety.

Rachel Robertson analyzes maternal temporality through her background in disability studies. She claims that through the mother’s continued struggle to situate herself within “chrononormativity,” by the incessant interruptions of childcare, she becomes a “disabled” subject. In this way, mothers become “outsiders” and present “a challenge to chrononormativity [by] disrupting ideal linear development and exhibiting a failure to ‘fit’ within normative time and space” (Robertson 8). As in Heidegger’s “moment of vision,” Robertson suggests a generative potential to this altered state of temporality—the encumbered mother “may, by virtue of their non-normative embodiment and experiences, contribute specific ways of knowing the world” (7). Riley comments that the experience of temporal alterity, of “stepping outside of the entire sheltering sky of temporality,” brings one into a “not unpleasant state of tremendous simplicity, of easy candour and bright emptiness” (50). It may not be the encounter with altered temporality itself that produces a crisis in the mother, but a sense that one’s experience is no longer congruent to societal norms.

### Birth, Death, and Everything in Between

Questions of mortality are often raised in maternal memoirs; these questions portray the potential for the birth of a child to generate new understandings and experiences of mortality within the mother. Manguso observes the following: “I became a mother. I began to inhabit time differently. It had something to do with mortality” (53). We may now turn to Maggie Nelson’s memoir *The Argonauts*, which is particularly significant in its direct paralleling of the birth of Nelson’s son and the death of her partner’s mother, although it is clear that these events did not coincide. Manguso uses the same connection between birth and death, but in her case, she describes how her mother-in-law “was given twenty-four hours to live on the day I was told my cervix was 50 percent effaced” (51). The connection between these two events predicates Manguso’s musings on mortality and memory and on “pure states of being” (91). It can be no coincidence that Manguso and Nelson have paralleled the end of one mother’s life with the beginning of their own. For Manguso, considering these events helps her to comprehend her “participation in the great unity” (86). She begins to see herself and her son to be part of a monumental sequential movement, unaffected by the structures of modern time. As if to emphasize this difference in temporality, the birth of Manguso’s son and the death of her mother-in-law happen within weeks of each other, a coincidence that is illustrated in the text. The phenomena of

birth and death are figured as existing on an opposing temporal plain and as impervious to control through the use of clocks and schedules, which have the power to untether us from time.

The section of narrative in which Nelson alternates between the birth of her son and the death of her mother-in-law is also described as taking place in “the time that is no time” (156). Waiting for birth and waiting for death are juxtaposed with the timings, measurements, and schedules of everyday life. Nelson’s partner Harry, who the narration switches to during the sections involving his mother’s death, is “desperate to get there in time” (158), yet when he arrives at the hospice where his mother is receiving care, he finds himself waiting, as Nelson waits for her birth. He finds that it takes thirty-three hours to come around to the fact of her imminent death, yet this is really the time it takes him to join her on an altered temporal landscape. After she has passed, he stays “another 5 hours with her body, alone,” and time seems to fluctuate: “i felt like i lived a hundred years, a lifetime with her silent, peaceful body ... the ceiling fan above her was whipping air, holding the space of cycle, where her breath had been. i could’ve stayed another hundred years right there” (Nelson 166).

In the descriptions of her labour, Nelson speaks of being in a cavern, which has its own flow of time—the interventions of people around doing little to alter its movement. Nelson describes her labour and birth experience as “touching death,” darkly declaring that “you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy (167).” In her study on pregnant embodiment, Iris Marion Young recalls an interpretation of Kristeva’s “jouissance” as being a “pregnant and birthing woman” who renews her “connection to the repressed, preconscious, presymbolic aspect of existence” (Young 53). Again, Heidegger’s “moment of vision” comes to mind, predicated as it is on the subject’s renewed recognition as a “Being-towards-death.” This is not moment in which one fears death but a moment in which one can see themselves as being thrown toward one’s end—as being part of the journey of existence (Heidegger 296). The effect of this “touching death”—“moment of vision” that jolts the mother’s temporal experience onto a level of consciousness—may be described as primordial and visceral. Through her mothering, Manguso finds herself remembering “preverbal memories” she remembered “how it had felt to be wordless, completely of the physical world” and how her “body was an instrument for language it had been an instrument for memory” (66). Nelson concludes her memoir in a similar contemplative stance to Manguso; she seems to be referring to Manguso’s “great unity” when she wonders “is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don’t know. I know we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song (178).”



## Narrating Maternal Temporality

At this point, it is valuable to interpret the formal presentations of the maternal memoirs and to ask how the experience of altered temporality affects the narratives themselves. Through the analysis of these memoirs, I have discussed the phenomenon of the mother existing in the infinite present, an “ongoingness,” in which the modes of past, present, and future become less relevant, at least in their modern incantations. To return to Kristeva, she suggests that not only is linear, teleological time associated with maleness and the realm of professional work, but historically it is also the time of “language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending) (17).” Riley and Manguso discover that the existing forms of narrative expression—the “well-worn metaphors” (Riley 36)—are no longer adequate vehicles to tell their stories. Reliance on beginnings and endings, journeys, chapters, is no longer possible. They can see only the “middle” of time, the “ongoingness”; they do not see the endings or conceive of the beginnings language demands. Both writers have a crisis of communication, prompted by their altered temporality: Manguso maintains that the “essential problem of ongoingness is that one must contemplate time at that very time, that very subject of one’s contemplation, disappears” (72). She must transform her “preverbal,” deeply experiential understanding of temporality into a suitable literary form. Riley, too, suggests a connection between her altered temporality and the paralysis of her writer’s hand: “this is also a question about what is describable, what are the linguistic limits of what can be conveyed ... it seems that the possibilities for describing, and the kinds of temporality that you inhabit, may be intimately allied” (8).

The form of the maternal memoir itself, or rather the seeming formlessness, becomes relevant. The structure and form of Riley’s and Manguso’s texts reflect their temporal position. They lack chapters entirely—the only hint of a traditional structure coming in the form of Riley’s subheadings directly lifted from her diary. Manguso’s memoir contains sporadic memories and musings presented in a seemingly structureless form on each page. Yet perhaps, as a writer, she seeks to compel her readers to experience her own temporal consciousness through the construction of her writing. Both writers are aware that the experimental and loose structures of their texts reflect their temporal experiences and subsequent disillusionment with traditional writing practices. Riley states that if “time had once ushered you into language, now you discover that narrative language had sustained you in time. Its ‘thens’ and ‘nexts’ had once unfolded themselves placidly. But now that time has abruptly gone away from you, your language of telling has left it” (59).

Returning to Kristeva, she asserts that written language is traditionally aligned with a temporality that is regarded as masculine and incompatible with the daily

repetitive and cyclical nature of mothering. It is also poignant to realize that literature has a long history of excluding mothers from its narratives—both in the form of matrifocal narratives and the historic lack of mother writers—and to question whether this is linked to the temporal structures of traditional narratives. Suzanne Juhasz discusses how women’s autobiographies are shaped by their lives and how they value process rather than solution; they show ‘less a pattern of logical and linear development to some clear goal than one of repetitive, cumulative, cyclical content and hence meaning’ (644). Riley’s and Manguso’s texts prioritize process rather than conclusion; their writing feels cyclical and organic, as if their readers could open them at any page.

The rise of the motherhood memoir in Western society since the turn of the century suggests that they are among the most popular literary vehicles for the new wave of mother writers. Alex Zwerdling states that memoirs are “open-ended, not rule-bound, a flexible form without predictable terminus, rooted in the accidental record-keeping of diaries and correspondence, and in a life that shapes us rather than is ours to shape” (5). He goes on to suggest that memoirs may not be tied to a distinct literary genre and that it “is the very freedom from the weight of tradition that has appealed to writers” so in need of a vehicle to record their experiences (Zwerdling 7). Kristi Siegel states that the “fragmented, disjointed style deemed characteristic of women’s autobiographies is often theorized as being imitative of the disrupted ‘dailiness’ of their actual lives. To illustrate the point, as I write this I am continually interrupted by my young daughter” (21). Yet Siegel goes on to question the legitimacy of viewing mother writing as merely mimetic, and suggests that this too may be an attempt to characterize and therefore limit the scope of the motherhood memoir. Perhaps we may characterize these motherhood memoirs by their experimental and philosophical approach as well as by the importance placed on experiential understanding.

The mother writers discussed in this paper are part of a new wave of writers whose work represents an original form of literary expression, which reflects the temporal conditions under which they were produced. They seek to portray the “pure states of being” that arise out of maternal temporality, both on the level of “dailiness” and the vast untold time of the motherline. Their narratives, which break away from traditional ill-fitting forms of literature, may be read as subversive to the dominance of modern temporalities as they find themselves to be outsiders to “chrononormativity.” Ultimately, these memoirs can be read as representing as meditations on the experience of alterity.

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