

Lynne Segal in conversation with Lisa Baraitser

This conversation, between Lynne Segal and Lisa Baraitser, is the first in a number of planned intergenerational conversations between what are usually termed second-wave feminists and what could be referred to as the ‘daughters’ of this generation.¹

Conversations of this kind seem important for a number of reasons. Since MaMSIE was established, it has become clear that different generations tend to speak differently about the maternal, and sometimes there is quite a serious tension between generational positions. It could be argued that tensions between various positions are not necessarily linked to generational shifts or breaks but rather are rooted in theoretical disputes, say between those who approach maternal related issues primarily from psychoanalytic perspectives as opposed to those who approach it sociologically.

It seems, however, that discussions about motherhood are characterised by *tensions* that are more than mere manifestation of disciplinary differences. Tension, that is, seems to be a constitutive part of any discussion whose subject matter is the maternal. We believe that by paying attention to the intergenerational aspects of discussions concerning motherhood and the maternal, we might avoid overlooking its multi-dimensional characteristics. To be sure, we are not interested in labelling positions according to the generations to which they allegedly belong. Rather, we suggest thinking about the intergenerational dynamic in a dialogical setting. We might then also gain better understanding of the ways in which temporality manifests itself in the construction of different positions regarding the maternal.

Conversations constitute the possibility to go beyond formal exchanges of ideas. They enable a dynamics where acts of voicing and listening are bound together dialectically. A process of such kind enables us to witness the fact that different approaches are never simply representations of disciplinary interests, but rather are expressions of practical, ideological and political concerns. More concretely, the act of conversing may give us the opportunity to avoid treating the maternal in an overly

¹ Whether articulated as ‘third’ or ‘fourth wave’ feminists, or simply those who inherited and have chosen to engage with the legacies of the second wave.

abstract manner and consider its inherently situated character. Reaching consensus is not the purpose of these conversations. The context of intergenerational conversation compels the participants to reconsider and re-negotiate their respective positions, their understanding of the past, the present and the future of the maternal. In other words, it offers an opportunity to engage with a genealogy: an active consideration of cultural psychosocial constructions of the maternal as they become apparent within historical/generational and biographical contexts. Arguably, one of the main objectives of feminist thought throughout the generations has been to highlight the significance of generating a genealogy of the maternal. As Irigaray noted, a genealogy of that kind is necessary so that the 'daughter could situate herself in her identity with respect to her mother' (Whitford 1992, p.159). We hope that this series will contribute to such a genealogical enterprise, enabling the emergence of a *variety* of maternal subjectivities that can coexist alongside one another.

This series of proposed conversations will hopefully also help to establish the possibility of negotiating diversities as well as the exploration of continuities and discontinuities amongst those who have been engaged with the feminist project. A longstanding fascination with mother-daughter relations among feminists is related to the desire for such explorations to lead to a better understanding of female psychological development. The need to constantly re-think mother-daughter relations has been expressed by feminists such as Irigaray (1981), Chodorow (1978), Flax (1978; 1985), Hirsch (1989), Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) and a host of others. The intergenerational context may help us to trace the shifting nature of mother-daughter relations within the wider social context. In particular, it may shed some new light on questions such as whether mother-daughter tensions are symptomatic of the maternal: are 'daughters' destined to negate, abject and deny maternal voices and hence subjectivities until perhaps the point they themselves have children? Is it really the case that every generation needs to 're-invent' itself, its mode of being and its practices? How we think about these tensions may include the view that intergenerational tensions that arise in conversational settings are a confirmation of Kristeva's assertion that 'the daughters' must negate and deny. Following her account, we might have to accept that 'matricide',

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being part of a normative developmental process, would be enacted in every level and aspect of daily life. Matricide would reveal itself in all social arrangements, including mundane practices that do not seem to be related to motherhood and mothering. Following this line of thought, one could wonder whether it is feasible to expect *listening* to have happened in conversations of such kind. Many writers now express, in different ways, their objections to this formulation of matricidal law and its ethical implications (Tyler (2009), Jacobs (2007), Baraitser (2008) and others). Jacobs (2008), in particular, has offered a post-patriarchal reading of matricide that has the potential for generating new meanings for the maternal subject and for furthering our understandings of this under-theorized issue, including mother-daughter relations.

Judith Butler's assertion that 'attachment in its primary forms must both *come to be* and *be denied*, its coming to be must consist in its partial denial, for the subject to emerge' (Butler 1997, p.8), is another way of looking at the dynamics of intergenerational relations and their tensions. For Butler, this particular way of *coming to be* accounts in part for the adults' sense of humiliation when confronted by their earliest objects of love – parents, guardians and siblings. This intervention challenges previous articulations of the matricide written with the Oedipal paradigm in mind. Each of these accounts, however different, allows us to re-think intergenerational relations while acknowledging the tension they convey. Once recognised, tensions could become generative in their own right.

In the following conversation, Lynne Segal and Lisa Baraitser discuss motherhood and the maternal using Segal's recent book *Making Trouble* as their point of departure. Segal, an academic and activist, challenges psychoanalytic thinking about the maternal by emphasising the socio-political dimension of motherhood. In her book, Segal describes the shift to motherhood as an event that precipitated women of her generation turning to politics. Motherhood is a personal event impregnated with political implications, and, for this reason, re-thinking motherhood should be primarily conceived in political terms. For feminists of her political leaning, a primary target should remain the systemic undermining of women by the liberal political order and the capitalistic system. Clearly, such a project should be collective in its orientation.

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Lynne's views on motherhood are informed by her political activism. Her personal story can be read as a summary of the goals and achievements gained by a collective movement of feminists in the '70s. As an activist, she acknowledges partial failure in relation to what was most precious to her: advancing mothers. She insists on making us aware of the inevitable link between the material conditions of women and mothers and the possibility of social and cultural transformation. While acknowledging those social changes which did occur as a result of her generation's activism, it seems that the change of material conditions that Lynne and her generation yearned and fought for have not been fully realised. Liberalism and more forcefully the neo-liberal economic system have failed women and mothers. As a socialist in her political orientation, such a failure has come as no surprise to her. To an extent, the repetitions of debates begun in the 70's and maintained through the years up to present day, including the very necessity of the current project, are seen by Lynne as testimonies to a failure to create better material and social conditions for mothers of the next generations. Admittedly, one can hear in her voice the mother who says: "All I wanted is that you'd have better life than I had."

One of the questions that emerge in this first conversation is of the place of psychosocial thinking within feminism. What, in other words, is its contribution to feminist thought and political practice. Lisa Baraitser seems to suggest throughout the conversation that if we wish to understand the partial failure to advance mothers as well as to attend to the intergenerational similarities and differences – some of which are constantly neglected – psychoanalytic thinking should be introduced. Perhaps most significant is Lisa's claim that discussions concerning motherhood and the maternal compel us to think in *psychosocial* terms. Attempts to carve a sharp distinction between the 'social' and the 'psychological' as if they were two 'purely' divided entities are problematic. Equally important for her is the awareness of the complexity of the relations between academic and social activities. The slippery nature of the maternal as it is discussed in academia is, by and large, a reflection of the fact that feminism is an ongoing project whose objectives have been constantly contested and are yet to be realised. In this sense, academic discussions should not lose sight of their practical horizon. Conceiving

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the psychosocial by re-examining constructions of the maternal in academic settings – especially through re-visiting its manifestations in daily life - may be seen as contributions to what is after all a social *praxis*.

As an engaged social practice, feminism is constantly challenged and interrupted. Psychosocial thinking has the potential to articulate those challenges, generating interruptions of strongly held positions, including habits of action and thought. Conversing and listening could turn, I think, the ‘tension between recognizing the familiar in order to confirm what we already know and listening for the unfamiliar that disrupts what we already know’ (Oliver 1999, p.181) into a productive space within which we can get a better sense of our complicated maternal troubles. I believe this first interview to be a good example of it.

Sigal Spigel

LB – Lisa Baraitser

LS – Lynne Segal

LB: I’ve been reading the section in your recent book, *Making Trouble*, in which you talk about the history of feminism and its engagement with motherhood. You say that motherhood prompted many women to join the women’s liberation movement in the first place. You identify motherhood as something that at the time was seen as a kind of crisis in women’s lives, and experiences of motherhood propelled women into a political engagement with the world in order to try to change it, and to try to change it in such a way that mothering could still carry on being a part, and a valuable part, of women’s lives, if that’s what they chose. You show us how the argument that was made at the time was that in order for this to happen, certain basic things had to change: child care and working hours and men sharing in parenting, as well as attitudes towards single mothers and illegitimacy. It is a very important point to make, that motherhood, which was experienced as so isolating and difficult, prompted women into an engagement with politics and social transformation, but not in such a way as to jettison mothering. And it seems to me that you are highlighting something about the role of mothering that gets lost in subsequent accounts about what feminism did with the maternal. Is that right?

LS: Yes. However, there is a lot that you are saying in MaMSIE today about actual mothering experiences that I think I don’t deal with adequately in anything I have written. I was writing about the experiences of some of my generation of women, entering adulthood in the 1960s, at a time when domesticity had become so totally hegemonic for women in the post-war settlement of the 1950s, with psychoanalysts, such

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as Bowlby and Winnicott, emphasising the importance of motherhood and fears of maternal deprivation, as never before. Yet, at the very same time as there was so much mainstream emphasis on the importance of the mother in the home, which in some ways was meant to be a revaluing of motherhood, there was also a countervailing cultural contempt for domesticity, particularly evident in the milieu young people like us were absorbing. This tied in with a complete contempt for women as mothers. And that's what the so-called 'angry young men', from Kingsley Amis, to Alan Sillitoe or John Braine, were expressing, backed up by the popular writings of clinicians such as R.D. Laing and David Cooper. Part of the rebelliousness of the 1960s was about getting away from this image of the post-war mother, who was represented as some sort of smothering python. As in John Osborne's misogynistic *Look Back in Anger* women were presented as domestic tyrants, who just wanted to eat up and smother the men. So somehow we, as women, had to try and find a place etween that unbelievably intensified sex warfare and female-baiting 'momism' of the time. The argument was not around actual mothering practice at all, but the role of the mother symbolically and the role of domesticity symbolically, which was seen as this hideous thing and, in a very particular way, domesticity was seen as quintessentially conservative and reactionary. There was just nothing progressive about motherhood. It was a way to stop people being able to be free and liberated which, as young women, we wanted to be. So we entered the swinging sixties and become a little more sexually active, although with difficulty, and a little more independent, although only in certain ways, and we tried hard to be more liberated. And then some of us had a child and [. . .] I mean, that was such a strange contradiction. Many of us were daughters of very resentful mothers, which was the way in which they had adapted to that fifties settlement. One way or another they were resentful, whether they were professional working women, like my mother, who themselves generally adapted to the mores of their time by holding other women in contempt, or mothers who often felt, after their war-time lives, that they had given up everything, and often became frustrated and resentful. Both those things, the fierce misogyny of the moment, and the bitterness of so many of our mothers, were so strong. Truly, it was often the case that not even our own mothers wanted us to end up in their situation. However, what was the new settlement for us to be? Nobody seemed to know. And in a sense we just had to find something new, I think.

LB: What you are describing is a situation that I think still resonates with many contemporary women, perhaps for different reasons and the historical and cultural context *is* completely different, but there are also some real similarities about the way you describe it.

LS: That's right. That's the confusion isn't it?

LB: Yes, because we have to understand what the similarities and differences are. There is something about the experiential aspect of what you have described, in which motherhood is felt to be a kind of hook that women get caught on after a period of establishing their independence [...] and difference from their own mothers, that perhaps still resonates. It's a contradiction that sometimes gets described as the difference between female subjectivity and maternal subjectivity, and the ways that those subjective

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positions get lined up as if in conflict. It sounded from your writing that you were suggesting that this conflict had been resolved in some crucial ways in the early phase of the women's liberation movement, as women wanted independence, but they didn't want it at the price of letting go of motherhood. You seemed to suggest that mothers were therefore always on the agenda.

LS: By the way, reflecting back now, I don't think it can ever be resolved. I think there is always going to be a tension between maternal and female subjectivity.

LB: But maybe that's a very important thing to say.

LS: Back then I think we hoped that it might be resolved by men and women *together* sharing the caring. It seemed as though it was almost as simple as that. Sharing the caring, sharing the love, women being out there in the world with men, and men being in there, in the home or the collective, sharing the caring – I mean, *that* was our solution. But I just want to say, even before we get to having the baby and the daily experience of mothering a small child, what women were dealing with then, right from the beginning of pregnancy, was layers of contempt: the contempt of the gynaecologist; childbirth in situations where nobody was there at all to support you while you were giving birth [...] you were just told to shut up, as I was, and that has been well described. Doris Lessing writes about that very well, which is why she was an early heroine for women's liberation, even though she rejected us. So, you know, you were being so badly treated as mothers at the same time. Yet this was meant to be a wonderful time in a woman's life. Of course there were certain welfare services for women as mothers that got set up after the war, but nevertheless, the ways in which women were being treated was so often with official contempt. So we were dealing, step by step, with that, and then you have the baby and, you know, I think so many women just describe the shock [...], they're in shock.

LB: Many contemporary feminists have described the same shock when they had a child. I'm thinking, for example of Naomi Wolf's account of childbirth in her book, *Misconceptions*, and if you look at other contemporary accounts of motherhood, say Rachel Cusk, Anne Enright, or the short-stories of Helen Simpson, many of these autobiographical accounts, or 'momoirs' as they are sometimes called [...] that genre of writing, it's imbued with shock.

LS: Well, I suppose we thought part of the shock was that women were expected to be *alone* with baby. And we thought that was what was so wrong, and what could change. And indeed, we did change many things, through campaigning for more respectful gynaecological care, the presence of partners, or others, in childbirth, or men's greater involvement in childcare. I mean, we did often manage to change our living situations, at least within our own feminist milieu, which was often in some way perhaps a little privileged, even if we were living on the dole, though nevertheless managing to survive through sharing finances and other collective means.

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LB: You mean in a localised way, in the specific contexts in which you were living your lives?

LS: In a localised way, men really felt they should be involved, in the childcare. They often felt it totally, even when they weren't the biological fathers of children they helped care for. You just didn't leave a mother to look after a child on her own. That was out of the question [...], it was simply out of the question. You know, in the communities we were living in and building, there was no way people could go off to a party or go off to the pub and leave a mother at home alone with a child in that decade of the 1970s.

LB: But that conviction didn't seep out of those small communities in any sort of substantial way?

LS: I don't think that's completely true, because certainly practices and experiences of childbirth changed. I mean, first of all, we studied how gynaecologists treated patients, we exposed doctors and what they did [...], certainly childbirth changed, and obviously the whole situation around abortion and the right to reproductive control also changed. But no, our way of living then did not survive different times, although I do think it was the beginning of a lot more emphasis on the fact that a father should be involved with children. This developed for complex reasons, partly because women were becoming more independent and so fathers were starting to fear that women might manage to bring up the children without them. You know, women were looking and feeling stronger, and so that really made a difference. It was no longer a situation for men of having your submissive woman at home.

LB: Charting those changes is absolutely vital, and it's interesting to compare them to more recent studies of fatherhood. I'm thinking about some recent studies where researchers have interviewed first-time fathers, and these are largely middle-class fathers who claim to be involved in childcare, but when you really begin to talk with these fathers about that, actually what's going on is that they're doing it, you know, in a way that is about minimizing how much disturbance it causes in their lives.

LS: But, you see, the world has changed considerably in all the wrong ways since the 1970s. We really believed we would get a shorter working day - that was essentially what we were fighting for, to enable men as well as women to be at home and out at work. Few may now recall Marx extolling the sharing of skills [...], a little bit of hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, criticism in the evening. Well, he didn't say childcare, but we added *childcare*, and you will have time to do the childcare with shorter working hours and also the setting up of community facilities. Why were we able to do that? Because many of us were on the dole, because that was before all the cutbacks in welfare support as well. And so [...]

LB: So that whole agenda got hijacked [...]

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LS: Welfare gets tightened up, the working day gets longer and longer and longer [...], women are out at work, so more people one way or another are either getting paid domestic help, or the women are somehow trying to fit their working day on top of the childcare. And the men are working much longer hours in their jobs than at other time, because the mother is less likely to be working full time and so everything goes haywire. Although it seemed as though both employment practices and home life could change, that became harder and harder to achieve. One thing we didn't factor in was that the workplace was, as I say, going in exactly the opposite direction, away from breaking down that barrier between the workplace and the home.

LB: So presumably some of your beef, if you like, is also with the women who colluded with that intensification of individualisation and the desire to take up a place in that kind of world and champion it [...]

LS: Not exactly [...], rather, my beef is absolutely with people who say Women's Liberation betrayed mothers. No, I say, we often *were* mothers, and were so concerned about mothers, and childcare was so much an issue [...], childcare, nurseries, they were just key issues.

LB: Given that this is well documented, what do you make of the kind of amnesia and perhaps deliberate overwriting of this period of feminist history? I think that this is the second point of tension, if you like, that we are discussing. The first is that experience of shock where mothering can be felt as a kind of tethering after an initial period of freedom, and the need to manage this experience of being somehow for one's self and yet for another, and wanting to inhabit both female and maternal subjectivities simultaneously, but within a world that makes this very difficult. That is one point of tension. And then the second point is something about generation, because what seems to have happened is an overwriting or denial of the ways that mothers were on the agenda. How do you make sense of that?

LS: Well, I think there are a number of different issues. I think it is hard to keep track of the background mapping of things and to understand that although our hopes might have been a little utopian, they weren't crazy. You know, some countries were asking for a shorter working week, and I think in Sweden they got down to a six-hour day, and genuine flexible working time [...] not this nonsense we have here now. So I think that, as situations change, the new situation seems the normal one and so you no longer understand what the hopes were from a previous time. It just seems too ridiculous to have even hoped for such change. That is one thing. But what I was thinking today, was about why people go on and on about the problem of 'working mothers'? Now obviously the issue of childcare, and whether children are being properly cared for and how, is not reducible to the issue of 'working mothers'. The issue is rather one of who cares for children, and how, that is the question. The real issue is whether a mother is satisfied and happy enough, and has the resources to look after a child [...], whether a child is being integrated into a community, loved and cared for by a mother, or by some others. Why just go on about the working mother? That's not the issue.

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LB: Perhaps we need to introduce some psychoanalytic ideas in order to understand that kind of obsession with working mothers [...]. Would you agree, for instance with a commonly held notion that there is a continued deep ambivalence and repudiation, even a hatred of the maternal in Western culture, as well as a concomitant idealization that then gets manifested in many of these debates?

LS: Except, is it just that? Because it comes from women; it even comes from women who are mothers.

LB: Absolutely [...], which makes it even more vital to understand this repudiation. I guess one way to look at it would be in terms of the overwriting of your experience as a feminist of your generation due to the desire for the daughters of that movement to deny you a subjectivity, as if one can't have both [...], as if the maternal must be abjected for daughters to lay claim to their subjectivity, to inhabit it as really theirs. People often say that it is harder for daughters to commit this 'necessary matricide' as Kristeva puts it, because they also identify with their mothers, but perhaps there are all sorts of ways in which the potential for symbolic matricide becomes available in the wider culture, and when it is available we sometimes choose to act on it.

LS: I suppose so. Yet, for us in the '70s mothers were the heroines of women's liberation. We didn't know what we were meant to feel as mothers. That crisis that I said women felt before women's liberation, most of us didn't feel after it.

LB: Perhaps each time a woman becomes a mother she needs to experience it as if for the first time. During the 1980s, after your generation of feminists became mothers, we had what was a series of debates about the mother-daughter relationship, attempts to try to understand this generational process, not just in terms of mothering, but in terms of feminism and its daughters. This was a phase of re-valorization of the maternal, even though, as you have said, the maternal was already there on the agenda, which I can completely agree with [...], there is Adrienne Rich writing so incredibly poignantly and beautifully about motherhood back in 1976, but the perception was that the maternal had still been occluded, and some of the work was to try to understand something of those occlusions through a generational framework. I'm aware that there are many who reject this generational framework as a way to think about either motherhood or feminism.

LS: But our daughters on the whole are rather closer to their actual mothers, so much closer to their mothers than ever we were to our mothers. I mean, they are not our actual daughters criticizing us [...], they are often academic or feminist 'daughters', the new academic generation. How much is actually to do with mothering, or rather what it has to do with mothering, that's not as clear to me as I think you feel it to be. I mean, I do worry that somehow I don't quite know all these dynamics of mothering because I found one way of dealing with it myself, and my friends did too. But I think it's got much harder again for mothers to juggle things, it's more difficult for many women to have children today than it was in the seventies [...]. That is another reason for the attack upon my generation of feminists. It must be our fault, as though feminists could have done something to hold back

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corporate capital and global economic changes. But I think I'm always talking more sociologically, and you're talking more psychically and intra-psychically.

LB: We want to bring these domains together and try to understand them as not separated from each other, which seems a particularly important thing to do when we analyze the maternal [...], so that of course it was vital that you talked at the time about the working week and changes in childcare and the role of fathers. And it's also vital that contemporary work on motherhood continues to map the ways advanced capitalism produces new master-narratives such as a neo-liberal form of post-feminism in which reproduction gets unhinged from sexed bodies, as perhaps someone like Rosi Braidotti would remind us. But at the same time we have to think about the possibility that there is a certain fantasy at work, a fantasy that if only we can get the conditions right, everyone can have a bit of everything, and we can avoid some aspect of loss that may be bound up with the maternal. I suppose there is a strand of psychoanalytic work that tries to understand that maternal experience is about giving something up. Kristeva said recently that what she calls maternal passion is inhabited by the negative. Personally I don't advocate this position, but I think it is an important part of our discussions of the maternal nevertheless. It includes understanding motherhood as a certain kind of ethical relationship that entails a kind of self-negation in order that the other survives as a separate being. Now what does that do to our concepts of autonomy, independence, subjecthood, and ethics? We're in a different situation.

LS: Yes we are, because I don't think that we had that notion. By the way, I certainly don't think our mothers had that notion in the fifties either. You pushed the baby in the pram down to the end of the garden and got on with the housework or if you were a professional woman like my mother you just went out to work. I mean, that sense of sacrificing for the child I think is not really there.

LB: I'm not sure Kristeva is talking about that kind of literal sacrificing. She seems to be saying something about being prepared psychically to detach oneself. Her theory is immensely difficult for women to think through because of this notion of the necessary matricide that the infant must in fantasy commit, and therefore that allowing this is an inevitable part of maternity. We all know that mothers actually go on living, and desiring, and having lives of their own. But part of her role may be that she stands in that place of the one who lets the other be.

LS: Is it really only the mother? Not the mother and father? And a few grandparents and a few other people involved?

LB: Absolutely, I think these are all things that need to be opened up [...]

LS: I know the mother-child relationship may initially be dyadic, but I can't totally give up on thinking that mother-child dynamics are not aren't so matricidal or so violent when they are not simply dyadic. I feel in a weak position arguing with you because I never had that 'total' dyadic experience with my own mother since she was never there and that's not how I think about it, not having had that experience. I also always made sure that that

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was not my experience with my son. There were always other people there. So I'm not sure why it's *just* mother and not the mother and the father and maybe one or two others as well, dealing with this, dealing with how to let go of the child and give the child its own space.

LB: Yes, and perhaps we need to make a distinction between the day-to-day practices of mothering, and what is happening at a psychic level. There are all sorts of varied childcare practices that go on in terms of shared parenting and children who are brought up by a number of different people, in different configurations. One of the things psychoanalysis tends to do is to retroactively stabilize a host of different needs, desires, longings and fantasies under the term 'mother', whether she is there in reality or not, and I agree that this is very problematic. This fantasy mother who is going to meet all our needs is constantly reinforced in our current cultural conditions, which allows Kristeva to say that in the West we live in a culture that actually has no theory about motherhood.

LS: Yes that's sort of right. It is so hard not to collapse the different levels into each other! For instance, I think that blaming feminism for not having sorted everything out, I think that's happening on one plane which is distinct now from what you're talking about in terms of those actual mothering practices and the way in which you in a particular way might draw on some psychoanalytic or Levinasian or some other ways of thinking about the inevitable destructiveness between oneself and another and how mothers manage to deal with that. Because it's also about power, it's such a specific thing, isn't it, that I think it has to be kept a little distant from the way in which the mother is the ideal scapegoat and women are the ideal scapegoats. I mean, one reason I think the mother is the ideal scapegoat as well is simply that she's a woman, and we're so used to blaming women. That doesn't connect up with abjection and the sort of things that you're talking about [...], or it doesn't directly. I think you have to tease them out, these different layerings of our constructions of reality in terms of the conceptual issues we're trying to address. It's easiest for me to address the more sociological levels, the scapegoating, the blaming of women [...], it's harder for me, although I'm very interested in it, to address what you, or perhaps Jessica Benjamin, or to a certain extent Wendy Hollway, are discussing about mothering activities. I think you are doing it very differently and I tend to react rather negatively. I'm not sure that mothers really do have this ethical capacity that they're developing and learning from their relations with their child [...]. I can also see the mother giving up herself in order to allow the child certain things, you know, as a narcissistic gratification as well. This child is also a part of her and will take her forward into eternity and so on. It's not just a question of abjection and altruism and death of the self, it's also that you will live through this great little creature that you're allowing to be free, marching forward into the future, so I certainly have problems with that, looking at the ethical in that way. But I think you are also trying to talk about something else that the mother really does have to learn, I mean, one does feel this oneness with the child in which what hurts the child hurts you.

LB: I don't think we are used to thinking about what that experience is like for the mother. We are used to theorising it from the perspective of the child and what the child

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needs in terms of either a literal mother or a fantasy mother or, you know, a theoretical mother. We think through that passageway from child to mother and we don't often think about what you've just said which is all those kind of issues around what is it like to feel powerful over somebody, what narcissistic uses we put children to for our own psychological needs, and how do we experience that so-called oneness in our own separation from our mothers, and, you know, the impact that children have on our lives in all sorts of ways. It seems to me that there are these constant attempts through the history of feminism to write that story – Sara Ruddick was talking about mothering and power in the 1980s, and in fact if you look back, and I'm thinking of Tillie Olsen's book, at the diary writing of mothers through the centuries, it seems to me that there's a story that keeps leading back to the need to articulate maternal experience, again and again.

LS: But it is more than one story, though, isn't it? I think there are many stories.

LB: Of course.

LS: For instance, who else is there looking after the child? Who can you call on? My son comes in and he is unhappy and he is crying, and I get so upset I can't deal with it, so I immediately call on someone else in the house. So when we talk about the way that there isn't really anyone but mother there, there is just mother and child, there is no one else [...], for me there always had to be somebody else. I couldn't just cope with it myself.

LB: If you go onto an internet site like Mumsnet, you find people are writing about that experience a lot and using the Internet as a way of creating communities and other people to talk to and to draw on. Mumsnet has something crazy like 20,000 postings a day. That's a lot of traffic between mothers, breaking down some of that isolation, finding virtual communities even if they don't have them in their immediate surroundings.

LS: And you see the other thing is, it's not only mothering, it's caring. Who looks after the elderly, who looks after the disabled, who looks after the person with MS and cerebral palsy and everything else? I also want to bring that in, because in some ways mothers are the privileged ones [...], because at least there is something romantic about being a mother. There's nothing particularly romantic about being a middle-aged man or woman looking after your parent with Alzheimer's. We have only dared to speak about that over the last few years. How do you manage to give that person the chance to live as well as they could? I still want a chance to think about how to do that better.

LB: Absolutely. Some people would contend that the term 'maternal' signifies any relationship of dependency, not just with a child.

LS: That worries me a little. Other care work is looked down on totally. Look what carers are paid – nothing. You know, the more you're engaged with looking after the bodies of another, often the lowliest persons in the hospitals, the more you are seen as worthless because you are doing that work. So there is a type of glamour to mothering and having a baby that isn't there in the care for the old person or other sick and disabled people.

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LB: And you clearly feel that this is still a big feminist issue, given that most care work continues to be done by women [...]

LS: I like to see it as a feminist issue, and I like to connect it up. Another problem I have, as you know, with maternalising caring work linguistically, is that this confines care to an issue for women. And men can and do care. Indeed, some men can and do care much better than some women can and do.

LB: So would you advocate moving towards a notion of care work or parenting more generally?

LS: I'm ambivalent! Because partly the positive symbolic resonance of mothering is valuable and good to hold onto, but then [...] I'd like another word for really valorising that loving care work, the loving work of caring, the giving and loving work of caring that doesn't just reside in the mother.

LB: Or in women?

LS: Certainly, nor just in women, no.

LB: I agree, I think that this uncoupling is precisely the movement that feminism made.

LS: Yes, and maybe that's another reason we hear about feminists betraying mothers. I see fathers today who are so devoted to their babies and their babies are so devoted to those fathers. They are also 'as one' when you see them together. There is something very distinctive about that and if we don't see that we won't understand how much men lose and men suffer from not being able to be at home with their young children, how wondrous it is for these older men with their second or third wives, who eventually retire to be able to spend so much of their time looking after the baby. And, you know, some of them can. So of course there is something distinct and particular about being a mother and caring but there is something very distinct and particular about being a man with your child, or some other child, and so I have problems [...] I guess I want to get back to a point where meanings are not fixed.

LB: I guess that is an ongoing project [...]

LS: That is absolutely true.

LB: And there is all sorts of other work to be done, on failure, and a desire to talk about maternal failure, whether that is the failure to conceive in the first place, through to the varied and often lurid representations of 'bad mothering' that circulate, and wanting to look at all the places where our idealization of the maternal unravels and disintegrates. There is work to be done on creating spaces for maternal voices, because there does still seem to be a continued resistance [...], there is a peculiar kind of lack of interest that

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comes in around mothering. Griselda Pollock was talking about it recently in terms of teaching younger women. As soon as she tries to teach something about mothers or the maternal or motherhood, her students just glaze over. It's just not on their agendas *at all*. It's not interesting, they don't want to know about it, they don't want to engage. So there is this weird thing that seems to go on in which mothers are everywhere and yet nowhere. I think MaMSIE is a space for people trying to articulate why that might be. Not that they just want to, in a crude way, put something back on the agenda about acknowledging the maternal.

LS: But would you agree that fathers can become 'mothers' then, or that fathers are involved in mothering in some way, do you want to say that?

LB: Well, I think that that intervention, which was made by Sara Ruddick at the end of the 1980s is very important. She wanted to talk about maternal work as a set of very specific social practices which she laid out in a systematic way. So these are things that have to be done for the bringing up of children, that's what mothering is, anyone can do them, mothers do them, fathers do them, grandparents do them, paid child carers do them, and all we need to really do is to think about what these practices are and keep working away at that. I think that's fine at the level of maternal practice. But I suppose I make a distinction between maternal practice and something I might think of as maternal relation and something I might think of as maternal ethics, and something I might think about as maternal subjectivity or identity, and something I might think about as doing all those things within a context of cultural representations of mothers and social locations of mothering that includes the incredibly important roles of race, ethnicity, and social class, so I think we actually need a more complex picture of the maternal than just a set of practices that can be done by anyone. Now, yes, some men do some childcare, ok, and I think that's fine, but I think when we talk about the maternal we're talking about all those layers that do tend to get associated with women, whether we like it or not, and therefore have specific consequences in women's lives. And more than that, women identify with that role.

LS: Yes, and the world certainly identifies women with it, too. And I'm very happy if you talk about all those layers so perhaps we can get closer to an agreement about that. I just wanted to say one other thing, though, about the shock at becoming a mother. I think there's a shock at becoming a parent as well, not just a mother, which young people – young men and women, young boys and girls, just can't imaginatively grasp. Just like when you are young, and you can't really imagine what it is to be old. You see older people, you may feel pity, you may feel contempt, you may feel something else, but you can't get it, and I think you can't *get* what it is to have a little creature so dependent on you, if you've not had that experience.

LB: Absolutely. So two responses: first of all, we still live in a culture in which the shock for men is mitigated against hugely by the fact that they mostly go back to work after two weeks. And so the hour by hour by hour living of that shock in the early weeks and

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months of mothering, and through the night if you're breastfeeding, is just not experienced by men in the same kind of way.

LS: But a lot of men do get up in the night, actually.

LB: Yes, perhaps that is true in certain communities, in certain social groupings. The other aspect of this is that we have seen this extraordinary shift so that people having children are either having them much earlier or much later, so the gap between the nineteen-year-old at university who is saying to Griselda 'this doesn't concern me', and the person who eventually has a child is a long, long gap.

LS: Yes, it may be twenty years,

LB: She is going to be established by then: identity and life style and a set of values and all those kinds of things which I think then, you know, the experience of losing something is enormous by that stage. In other words, the imaginative engagement that you are talking about is right; you can't imagine being a mother any more than you can imagine being old, because at one end of the scale to actually be a mother or a father is going to happen to you in twenty years time. So I agree with that, that we can't inhabit those experiences, and in many communities twenty-year-olds are not around children much either.

LS: A friend of mine told me about going back to her first women's liberation meeting after she had her first or second child in the '70s, and the person had already started giving a talk in the group when she came in to the room. It was her first outing after she had given birth to the child, and nobody, nobody said anything to her, and she thought this was really bad [...], she felt very much that they just weren't connecting with her. And I discussed that later with Sheila R. (who was in that group back then) and she said, yes, well perhaps it was true, we couldn't understand, even *we* couldn't understand how huge it was for her to go out for the first time and leave her child at home. You know you couldn't interrupt the person giving the paper. It is another world. So to bring your other world into even the women's group, even that was a tricky situation.

LB: That is really interesting.

LS: Yes. And then of course within a few years a significant number of women's liberationists had had babies, and so that by then more would have understood

LB: And people talk about that endlessly, if you go onto a blog about motherhood, they talk about that dividing line between their old life and their new life and having not been able to imagine it until they crossed over that line.

LS: Yes, exactly.

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LB: And once they've crossed, they can't come back [...], all they can do is try to connect with people who are already there with them. That is a constant refrain. It's interesting to hear that expressed from the generation before. That nothing prepares you.

LS: Yes, nothing prepares you, and other people don't understand. And by the way, returning to Kristeva, and what became known as the French women's movement, I'd like to make a different point. It was so very particular in terms of *not* challenging the division of labour, especially for the psychoanalytic feminists.... And it was the same in Italy. There were big cultural differences between European and Anglo-American feminism, where so many issues of social practice and gender divisions were raised in the Anglophone world. But in France you have that extraordinary contradiction then, which Joan Wallach Scott has spoken about, in which on the one hand everybody is an individual in terms of Enlightenment theory, and on the other hand, women are women and men are men, and forever will be, and so gender practices, which were exploitative of women, were rarely challenged. They were challenged in my feminist milieu, even though, as I suggested above, our ideas for sharing the pains and joys of caring work got covered up again as times changed, when our practices seemed merely utopian and our ideas harder to voice.

LB: Well, I think it keeps being spoken. I think you are right, it was spoken and it gets covered over, and it does keep coming back. I think it is very interesting how difficult it has felt to set MaMSIE up, because it feels anachronistic, like why would one do that now? You know, set up what might be perceived as a separatist forum to discuss the maternal, of all things! Of course MaMSIE is a space where fatherhood is discussed, and I'm sure there are some people within MaMSIE who would argue for using term 'parenting' rather than motherhood, or are interested in birth and reproduction rather than maternal practice – that is another issue. But it is interesting how difficult it has felt to set up this space, and perhaps partly in relation to this refrain from your generation of feminists who say 'but of course we did all that, and the reason it didn't work out was beyond our control'.

LS: And you want to say something more, which I accept.

LB: Well, I don't know if I want to say something more, but I want to ask what is the problem, why is it so difficult to keep putting the maternal back on the table, as a substantive area for social science investigations, for theoretical investigations, for psychoanalytic investigations, for literary investigations, or any of the other things that we do about every other research area, all the time. If we are prepared to study childhood, development, war, terror, intimacies, love, relations, whatever, why is it so hard to set up a forum that says, I want to study the maternal? There is still only one dedicated forum for the study of the maternal in the world, which is in Toronto. Although this is now changing, this is bizarre to me.

LS: I guess the mythologies around the maternal are so gripping and extreme as well, it's hard to feel one's way around the mythologies to say the sorts of things that one wants to

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say. And, of course, the maternal is quintessentially at odds with the market. If anything is at odds with the market, it's the maternal.

LB: I guess there is a psychoanalytic response to that, which would be different [...], which would be to say actually what we have to include all the time is maternal hatred. Not that we hate our mothers, but that mothers hate their children, too. And that's what can't be thought about. And so mythologies emerge as a way of dealing with our ambivalence, because we can't manage our experience of actually thinking about, conceptualising real maternal ambivalence – neither as daughters nor as mothers. So perhaps there are different kinds of explanations for why it is so hard to make a space to discuss this.

LS: There's the big picture and there's the little picture. Yes, that's what I do have a sense of [...], I know I always want to say, look, let's at least keep a grip on these things, not just run with the one or the other without seeing that, you know, for so many people the way we want to talk about the maternal might seem rather strange because they are just coping, just surviving, meaning working out simply how to feed the kids.

LB: Yes, and perhaps MaMSIE is a space where we can explore, debate, research, and make visible those experiences. But I am still interested in the way shame clings to the maternal. When I'm in a university context and people ask me about my research interests, and I say, actually it's motherhood, it's the maternal, my sense is that they glaze over in exactly the way Griselda described her students doing.

LS: Really? I think it is a wonderful thing, I really do. I do think it was a wonderful and important move. Very much so. I am not familiar with the sense of in any way being 'just' a mother or looked down on for being a mother – I just didn't have that experience once women's liberation came around.

LB: Perhaps it is difficult to continue to make available a space to discuss the maternal in a context in which a return to 'hard' politics has come to the fore again.

LS: But it *is* the crucial voice of politics. Well, to me it is the critical, feminist voice of politics. It is what politics has not been able to deal with up until now, and must continue to tackle. My generation of feminists don't tend to have infants any longer, though I do look forward to the grandchildren. And I do want to keep mothering, caring, on the political agenda. Absolutely!

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