

Time and the working mother

Kristeva's 'Women's Time' revisited

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Our Toil and Labour's daily so extreme
That we have hardly ever *Time to Dream*

Mary Collier, 1739

If there is one issue that occupies current debates in the media, and that is shaping British society in the last years of the century, it is the nature of time. This is arguably less to do with millennial fever than with the transformations in working practices which have, for the first time since the Second World War, brought women into the workforce in greater numbers than men.¹ If the dream was once of a future where increasing leisure would be the norm, that future now appears oddly anachronistic: like the Lost Planet of the B movie, with the monster of flexible accumulation breaking through the perimeter fence. Anxieties about work have intensified for those without employment and those attempting to hold it down alike. Work, as Blairite puritanism has it, is what gives us self-worth; and it is women's work, in particular, which is serving as a litmus test for changes in the way that we live, a measure of our modernity. 'Working mothers', writes the journalist Melissa Benn, 'are forever talking about time. Their need for more of it is a craving akin to hunger or the wish for sleep.'² Time has been rendered visible today in ways that were almost unimaginable even a decade ago. It is continually monitored, tracked and traded. Its disciplinary rhythms are internalized as a form of regulative virtue.

It is feminism that is often credited with the widespread 'success' of women: outperforming in schools, dominating the workforce. This much-vaunted triumph is widely seen to explain the demise of feminism – its purpose having been achieved – and serves as a potent ideological fiction. It is easily inflected into backlash rhetoric, effectively masking the complexities of women's lives. Feminism has had a lot to say about

why it should be women, and indeed certain women, who come to the fore in a part-time, low-wage economy, and why their acceptance of 'flexible' working conditions makes them a model for the future. The possibility thus arises for a renewal of a feminist politics which last emerged in the activism of the 1970s, a politics able to explain why it is that the growing 'success' of women is accompanied by old and unresolved problems stemming from the real conditions of labour, subsumed by the ideological notion of success, including that work carried out in the domestic sphere, which remains largely invisible and devalued. Given the density of these contradictions and their denial in contemporary society, it is unsurprising that the 'craving' for time is felt so intensely.

Yet the feminism invoked in these millennial times appears to take what we might call a post-political form. What is noticeable about its manifestations as a cultural discourse in the British media – beyond the wearying assurances about the wearing of lipstick – is that it often serves to *explain* the emergence of those 'feminized' practices of the late capitalist economy (flexible labour markets, radical transformations in the relation between public and private, post-Fordist production, consumption as citizenship), even as it smoothes away class and ethnic differences and systemic contradictions. Girl power is selling much more than slickly packaged CDs. Feminization and feminism have become indistinguishable to some in the culture at large, to the point where women are the ideological focus of the hegemonic battles of the moment: as scapegoats, the limits of regulation (unremittingly in the guise of the single mother); as instruments of change, promulgators of those caring values which will underpin the 'hard choices' of the future. The dominance of feminine values is thus said

to lie behind the ‘compassion with a hard edge’ which brings so many women MPs – ‘Blair’s babes’ – to vote to deprive single women of welfare and anoint them with the work ethic; behind a number of perceived crises in masculinity, not least the shocking levels of suicide amongst young men; and behind the swell of (inter)national feeling at the death of Diana, when men wept unashamedly in the streets – a woman hailed by some in the media (and by certain professors of English) as a ‘feminist icon’ who was both modern mother and Marilyn Monroe in one.

This chimeric form of cultural feminism, ubiquitous, powerful and yet at an end, confronts us with paradoxes. It continues to point to a sexual difference which, as Julia Kristeva puts it, ‘feminism has had the enormous merit of rendering painful, that is, productive of surprises and symbolic life in a civilization which, outside the stock exchange and wars, is bored to death.’³ Yet if feminism remains potently productive of our symbolic life, as the backlash against it attests, it is also an index of a contemporary sense of modernity, of transformations in ways of living and expectations of a future which are readily given a sexual-political key. The continual reiteration of its ‘end’ might thus not simply – or only – point to a flight from the political, but to the fact that modernities change through time. Is it possible to think the relationship between these two conditions of contemporary experience – feminism as symbolic form and feminism as an index of modernity – in terms offered by a feminist critique? Is there an approach that might recognize the ideological movement of feminism’s symbolic form(s), while attempting to articulate their relation to the desire for social change that the term ‘feminism’ implies? One way of negotiating this might be to imagine the stakes for a feminist politics of time, in which the times of the late capitalist world and those shaping women’s lives are thought together. In what way has the time of modernity become a ‘women’s time’?

Future perfect

The relation between feminist struggle and the concept of time was classically articulated in Julia Kristeva’s essay ‘Women’s Time’ in 1979. In what follows I want to explore in what sense these turn-of-the-century years are the future anticipated in that essay, and to test out what her account has to offer as a diagnosis of the present. This might appear a rather perverse return, given the anti-feminism of her work, as documented by a number of feminist critics. Ann Rosalind Jones, for example, detailed Kristeva’s rejection of collective politics in an article in *Feminist Review* in

1984, suggesting her work was nonetheless significant for its opening up of a ‘feminine position in culture’ and negatively as a measure of ‘post-political tendencies’.⁴ In her partial response to Jones, ‘Kristeva – Take Two’, Jacqueline Rose agreed that feminism ‘has never been the place from which she has chosen to speak’, but argued for Kristeva’s use of psychoanalysis as a fundamental attempt to understand the social and political in terms of psychic identity, a rich terrain that Rose has continued to explore in her *States of Fantasy*.⁵ Gayatri Spivak’s pathbreaking essay ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’ saw Kristeva’s anti-feminism specifically in terms of its location within the ‘individualistic critical avant-garde’ in France, shaped by its disillusion with the Left following 1968; pointing out both the ethnocentricity of her work and, nonetheless, the political potential of French feminism’s symptomatic readings.⁶ The formulation of Kristeva’s ‘feminine position in culture’ has recently been challenged on both philosophical and psychoanalytical grounds by Judith Butler, in *Bodies that Matter*, which traces an exclusionary logic in identity politics that Kristeva’s work also identifies, but that the latter might be seen to buy into, not least in homophobic terms.⁷ My purpose is not to explore here the resonances between Kristeva’s work from the late 1970s and that of feminist critics writing today. However, it is to risk a certain repetition, and to return to the ‘Women’s Time’ essay as a posited past that might be seen, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, ‘to define the prerogative of my present’.⁸

Back in 1981, in the introduction to her English translation of Kristeva’s essay, Alice Jardine asked ‘what will have to have happened before she can be read?’ She was responding as an American critic to the cultural specificity of the text, embedded as it was in a European arena informed by the concerns of French cultural-political life. The question also arose because of a particular temporal modality of the text, ‘a complex stratification of predictions and regressions’ which seemed best summed up in the notion of a ‘future perfect’: *what will have happened*.⁹ This tense has often been associated with the temporality of the postmodern, as in Jean-François Lyotard’s ‘What is Postmodernism?’, published in the same year as ‘Women’s Time’, where Lyotard discusses the paradox of the future anterior in which the writer works ‘without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*’.¹⁰ Both works may be seen to share a certain future-oriented tone, and what lies behind the invocation of the future perfect in the rhetorical staging of each is a suspicion of the

grand narratives of history, enacted via this curiously deterministic temporality-without-formation.

This is a suspicion that manifests itself in very different ways. Kristeva's essay is located in the shadow of the 'field of horror' fought over in the Second World War, and her next work on Céline, *Powers of Horror*, takes as its object the psychodynamics of fascism. 'Women's Time' undoubtedly shares the view of feminism as 'the last of the power-seeking ideologies', as she puts it in that later work.¹¹ For an essay which possesses the status of a manifesto, it stages the drama of the political for reasons other than the cause of feminism as collective struggle. In her view feminism, like all political discourse, risks a totalitarianism in which it becomes our 'modern religion: the final explanation'.¹² Despite this anti-feminist stance, however, Kristeva's drama of the three 'phases' of feminism not only addresses the relationship between feminism's 'symbolic life' and the desire for social transformation with which I began; it also poses the question of how that relationship is to be temporally conceived – both as a historical process and as anticipating a possible, transformed future. My aim in constituting my present in terms of the pastness of Kristeva's essay is thus to challenge its inevitable futurity, and thus its 'post'-political logic.

It is interesting to examine briefly in this context how far Kristeva's essay is prepared to recognize a utopian impulse within its temporal strategies, given

its suspicion of 'the political interpretations of our century'. Fleeting, perhaps, is the answer, and then only as a moment of enunciation ('if the preceding can be *said* – the question whether all this is *true* belongs to a different register', p. 209). Her discursive strategy appears to anticipate the figure of the 'contemporary interpreter' elaborated in 'Psychoanalysis and the Polis', who follows a 'post-hermeneutic and perhaps even post-interpretative' path:

the new interpreter no longer interprets: he speaks, he 'associates', because there is no longer an object to interpret; there is instead the setting off of semantic, logical, phantasmatic and indeterminate sequences. As a result, a fiction, an uncentred discourse, a subjective polytopia comes about, cancelling the metalinguistic status of the discourses currently governing the post-analytic fate of interpretation.¹³

This associative drive shapes that 'complex stratification of predictions and regressions' which Jardine terms the modality of the future perfect in 'Women's Time'.¹⁴ There is a performative element here in which the essay's utopian impulse resides: its tilt at the future is constituted through the subjunctivization of a speech act – 'if the preceding can be said'. The 'polytopia' she refers to might be seen, then, as the generative limit of the future perfect, one which 'will have' changed the very form of its determination: a utopian truth become montage.



Yet the logic of Kristeva's future perfect suggests a configuration of modernity, rather than Lyotard's post-modern. This might make us read her polytopic hope rather differently. It is as if the essay's enunciative gesture depends after all upon the interpretation of a truth – the truth of desires which are temporalized within political discourse – if only to attempt to leave it behind. In other words, as a manifesto, 'Women's Time' depends on a form of historical reflexivity that is both its rhetorical form and its object; on the elaboration of a process of a coming to consciousness that is as yet unfinished, even as it anticipates moving beyond such a temporal scene. The concept of modernity, Peter Osborne argues in *The Politics of Time*, is marked by a 'paradoxical doubling', a dialectical contradiction whereby 'it designates the contemporaneity of an epoch to the time of its classification; yet it registers this contemporaneity in terms of a qualitatively new, self-transcending temporality which has the simultaneous effect of distancing the present from even that most recent past with which it is thus identified.'¹⁵ It is this doubling that I will argue is present in 'Women's Time', and which shapes Kristeva's famous location of three 'generations' of feminism in Europe in terms of a 'problematic of time'.

The difficulty of assessing Kristeva's 'complex stratification of predictions and regressions' derives from the need to think this condition, which as I will argue is both invoked and disavowed by Kristeva's text. It is a doubling articulated in the very term 'generation', a 'phase' which is less understood by Kristeva as a chronological stage – as in first- or second-wave feminism – than as a '*signifying space*' (p. 209), which suggests a distinct, though not exclusive, praxis of women's time. As the essay progresses, however, it is clear that while each phase is seen to occupy synchronically the *same* historical moment, 'in parallel' or 'intertwined', a periodizing movement kicks into effect, and a third 'generation' begins to separate itself off from the two 'preceding' it. As if by some latent dialectic, it also suggests a transformation of their concerns, and the future possibility of feminism's 'end'. What makes Kristeva's analysis even more abstract is that the three phases of feminism are mapped against a temporal topography which offers a number of different landscapes for the thinking of this paradoxical condition: on one level, the differential time of the nation; on another, the times of production and reproduction; and finally, that of a fundamental psycho-symbolic logic which brings the social into being, or what we might see as an encounter with the originary timelessness of the unconscious.

Temporal encounters

The 'strange temporality' of the future perfect is not just part of the rhetorical method of 'Women's Time'. It is located more specifically as a modality produced by the waning of the nation-state, or rather, as Kristeva has put it more recently, its status as a 'transitional object'.¹⁶ Following the Second World War, she argues, the nation as a homogeneous entity becomes no more than a powerful ideological illusion, transformed by the pressures of globalization, and by the emergence of latent symbolic determinants of cultural and religious memory, which suggest other affiliations beyond its geographical confines, and thus broader 'socio-cultural ensembles' (of which Europe might be one). The nation thus becomes a signifying space, a social imaginary, whose borders as Homi Bhabha explains 'are constantly faced with a double temporality: the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical); and the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification (the performative).'¹⁷ In Bhabha's view it is one of the strengths of Kristeva's account that she attempts, like Fanon, to redefine the way in which the process of psychic investment in such collectivities as the nation might be understood. However, this 'double temporality' is expressed in 'Women's Time', in the first instance, by a disjunctive encounter between two discrete temporal dimensions which appears to be more limited than that presaged in Bhabha's account. For Kristeva, the time of production – 'a logical and sociological distribution of the most modern type' – is shaped by memories 'of the most deeply repressed past', the time of reproduction (p. 189). The times of capital, of political life, of historical change – all characterized in terms of a single form of linear time narrowly equated with history – thus encounter a monumental temporality associated with the body and the life and death of the species, which is the object of anthropology. Such an encounter is figured less in terms of a fracturing disjuncture that might open up the temporal processes of formation and loss in terms of the contingencies of history, than as a return of the repressed, in which the time of reproduction – as the unconscious – is located outside the time of history.

Kristeva suggests that the three phases of feminism are determined by this temporal topography. The first phase situates itself within the confines of the socio-politics of the nation, seeking to insert itself in historical time and identifying 'with the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation-state'. Its struggle is for equality (she lists the battles over abortion, contraception, equal pay, professional recognition, which 'have already had, or

will soon have effects even more important than those of the Industrial Revolution'). Her conclusion is clearly that the demand of this generation has been met to the extent that the principle of women's inclusion has been accepted, though it continues to be fought for. The second phase, dating from 1968, links radical separatist concerns and a rejection of the political process to aesthetic experimentation. This feminism demands recognition of women's 'irreducible' identity, attempting 'to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past' (p. 194). In part, Kristeva associates these moves with the feminist critique of a socialism wedded to an economic model of production. Its valorization of the time of reproduction reveals supranational connections between women, across continents and cultures. Both phases invoke a universal subject, Woman. But where the former globalizes the problems of women in terms of a progressivist model of historical change, the second reconnects with a traditional, archaic account of female subjectivity, verging on the eternal and spatialized time of myth. Yet even as the essay sets out its schema, it invokes a third 'generation' – 'I am not speaking of a new group of young women (though its importance should not be underestimated) or of another "mass feminist movement"' but of a 'third attitude, which I strongly advocate – which I imagine?' – which constitutes the contemporaneity of all three (p. 209).

The third phase

If it is possible to trace a logic of modernity in the rhetorical momentum of Kristeva's text as manifesto – in contradiction to what it theoretically avows – this also interacts with another conceptual movement in 'Women's Time' that ultimately comes to define such a logic as its symptomatic truth. Kristeva's future perfect is undoubtedly informed by a *psychoanalytical* account of time in which the future is approached retroactively, as in the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or afterwardsness.¹⁸ In this way it might be seen to reveal a different kind of 'historical decision', as Jean-François Lyotard describes in an elaboration of that concept, whereby 'the decision to analyze, to write, to historicize' takes place in terms of an encounter with 'the time of unconscious affect': 'in order to give it form, a place in space, a moment in temporal succession, ... representation on the scene of various imaginaries'.¹⁹ The historical totalization promised by one model of modernity thus meets a different spatial logic of time, another scene, with which it engages in

what Kristeva terms in 'About Chinese Women' an 'impossible dialectic':

A constant alternation between time and its 'truth', identity and its loss, history and that which produces it: that which remains extra-phenomenal, outside the sign, beyond time. An impossible dialectic of two terms, a permanent alteration, never one without the other. It is not certain that anyone here and now is capable of this. An analyst conscious of history and politics? A politician tuned into the unconscious? Or, perhaps, a woman.²⁰

The rendering contemporaneous essential to the political logic of modernity can thus also be read in terms of a psychic movement of identity in which, as Lacan describes, 'past contingencies' are given 'the meaning of necessities to come, such that the little bit of freedom through which the subject makes them present constitutes them.'²¹

Each generation of feminism might thus possess its 'little bit of freedom' to reconfigure time and thus its own contemporaneity. If the first and second 'phases' assert that freedom through a logic of identification and counter-identification with the social order, the third attempts to understand the nature of the psychosymbolic contract which founds both that order and their freedom. At the centre of 'Women's Time' – or, according to Freud's archeological topography, at its bedrock – is a psychoanalytic account of the social code which is at once the most generatively productive insight of the essay and its limit. Productive, because Kristeva locates the social in terms of psychic formation. (As Jacqueline Rose has suggested, Kristeva's engagement with psychoanalysis has, far from necessarily entailing a retreat from political commitment, often been a means of exploring 'the pre-condition of any effectivity in the social'.²²) Limited, because while it demystifies what Kristeva calls the 'symbolic bond', her psychoanalytical model produces an overwhelmingly phallogocentric theorization of power, and a formalistic account of what might be seen as 'women's time' that locates women *outside* the time of history and modernity. It is in this paradoxical space that feminism's third phase recasts its struggle in symbolic terms.

Any attempt to think the connection between feminism and 'a problematic of time' must engage with the issue of power at some level. What limits the first and second generations of feminism in Kristeva's account is the extent to which they define themselves in terms of the power of the dominant and patriarchal symbolic order, either by wanting to assume the mantle of its 'executive, industrial and cultural' forms, or by producing a counter-society which is a fetishized 'simu-

lacrum' of its dominant other (pp. 201–2). Kristeva's famous example of women's terrorism emerges here as an example of the way the brutal exclusion of women's affective life from the socio-symbolic order is counterinvested as violent struggle against the state. It is not that it is possible to step outside the dynamics of such an economy, for Kristeva, since power is what constitutes the very possibility of agency. To borrow the terms of her 'Psychoanalysis and the Polis', it is rather that these might be seen as choices defined by a political logic 'which does not lead its subjects to an elucidation of their own (and its own) truth.'²³ Contrastingly, this elucidation is the starting point for a third generation, which recasts the concerns of the first two by asking according to an analytic dynamic: 'what can be our place in the symbolic contract?'

Drawing together the Lacanian concept of the symbolic order with Freud's formulation of the castration complex, Kristeva defines the constitution of the social, of language, and of meaning, in terms of the privileged signifier of the phallus, and the violent separation – from the imaginary plenitude of the mother – brought about through the paternal function. This is the 'common destiny of the two sexes' (p. 199). The aim of such an elucidation is in part to grapple with the truth of a contradiction in which 'power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject', as Judith Butler puts it in *The Psychic Life of Power*, a double bind which is at the heart of Kristeva's thinking of the complicity of feminist agency.²⁴ If this is the truth that the third generation of feminism is working to comprehend, it is also seen to be the particular role of women and the 'new feminist ideology' to voice its sacrificial effects: 'they find no affect there, no more than they find the fluid and infinitesimal significations of their relations with the nature of their own bodies, that of the child, another woman or a man' (p. 199). With knowledge, emerges the possibility of what Kristeva calls a 'redoubling' of the social contract. The terrain of this struggle is cultural – the realm of 'aesthetic practices' – which through its contact with 'an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe' might provide the means to trouble the terms of that symbolic economy.

If the third generation anticipated here constitutes its contemporaneity according to the logic I have described, then its 'making present' resembles an analytic scene in which the subject 'is led to the economy of his own speaking.'²⁵ But what is this economy, and why is it women who speak it? In earlier essays, such as 'Woman Can Never Be Defined', an interview given in *Tel Quel* in 1974, Kristeva had positioned women in terms of a textual negativity:

we must use 'we are women' as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong to the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it', and 'that's still not it'. In 'woman', I see something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain 'men' who are familiar with this phenomenon; it is what some modern texts never stop signifying.²⁶

If Kristeva does not locate herself in terms of feminism, she clearly identifies with the subversive possibilities of this practice of negative inscription. It is such a negativity that feeds into the ethical attitude advocated at the end of 'Women's Time', one which promises to produce in Homi Bhabha's terms 'a dissidence, and a distanciation, within the symbolic bond itself.'²⁷ In Kristeva's political writings it is figured in terms of female exile; the view, in *Strangers to Ourselves* that women were the 'first foreigners to emerge at the dawn of our civilization'.²⁸ Such a negativity produces a kind of translatable alterity, expressed in *Tales of Love* by the view that 'we are all E.T.s', in which universality is rethought in terms of difference.²⁹

Such a figuring of negativity also suggests a spatialization of relations in which it becomes difficult to sustain a notion of 'women's time' as such. 'Women', Kristeva states expansively in 'What of Tomorrow's Nation?' in 1993, 'have the luck and responsibility of being boundary-subjects: body and thought, biology and language, personal identity and dissemination during childhood, origin and judgment, nation and world – more dramatically so than men are.' It is not just that women, as 'boundary-subjects', might be seen to mediate the differential times of the nation, as Kristeva argues in this later essay, as Hegel's 'everlasting irony of the community',³⁰ nor even that they are located simultaneously within the times of production and reproduction more 'dramatically' than men – whatever that might mean. It is that the woman as a boundary subject – as 'something maternal' – is *spatially* located at the very constitution of the social, at the meeting place of the imaginary and the symbolic. In this way the 'economy of her own speaking' suggests both the limits of what the symbolic order is prepared to recognize of itself, and yet that which brings it into being: what Judith Butler, following Ernesto Laclau, might call its 'constitutive outside'.³¹ Kristeva's exploration of what it means to articulate negativity in the social brings her to an elaboration of abjection in the work following 'Women's Time'. But what does this inscription of identity in terms of negativity mean

for the *temporal* dynamics of the essay? One way of approaching this question is to consider Kristeva's construction of the figure of the mother.

Mother time

Kristeva argues that the figure of the mother will prove central to the concerns of the third phase of feminism, which might, with its understanding of the symbolic contract, be able to explore why it is that women desire to bring children into the world. As she suggests, in Freud's view such a desire corresponds to the desire for a penis – a substitute for 'phallic and symbolic domination' in Kristeva's words – which locates women's desires once again in terms of that privileged signifier. It is a view the essay is only 'partially' willing to acknowledge, in favour of an attempt to imagine a transformation of that phallic economy. The experience of maternity is seen as a border condition in 'Women's Time', 'a radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject', 'a separation and coexistence of the self and of the other'. The pregnant woman undergoes a transition from a state of narcissistic plenitude – that monumental realm of the eternal mother which appears as a 'socialized, natural psychosis' – to the experience of separation from the child in which she is brought to an understanding of love for an other (p. 206). Kristeva's notion of women as 'boundary subjects' is in part a rejoinder to those who might want to valorize one or other side of the border; in particular the imaginary 'maternal' space of the semiotic which is the focus of the revolutionary poetics of her early work. Her privileging of the maternal has often risked becoming implicated in the symbolic dynamics of the feminine she analyses, perhaps because, as Spivak argues, her project has been in some sense against the deconstructive grain: its aim 'has been, not to *deconstruct* the origin, but rather to *recuperate*, archaeologically and formulaically, what she locates as the potential originary space *before* the sign.³² Rose points out that an idealization of this space dangerously constitutes the feminine as 'the excluded instance of all culture', and ignores the psychic pain and violence which characterize the early relation between mother and child.³³ It is an idealization that is explicitly countered in 'Women's Time' in both psychoanalytic and political terms, although I will suggest, the prospect of feminine exclusion returns in the essay as fundamental to its thinking of time.

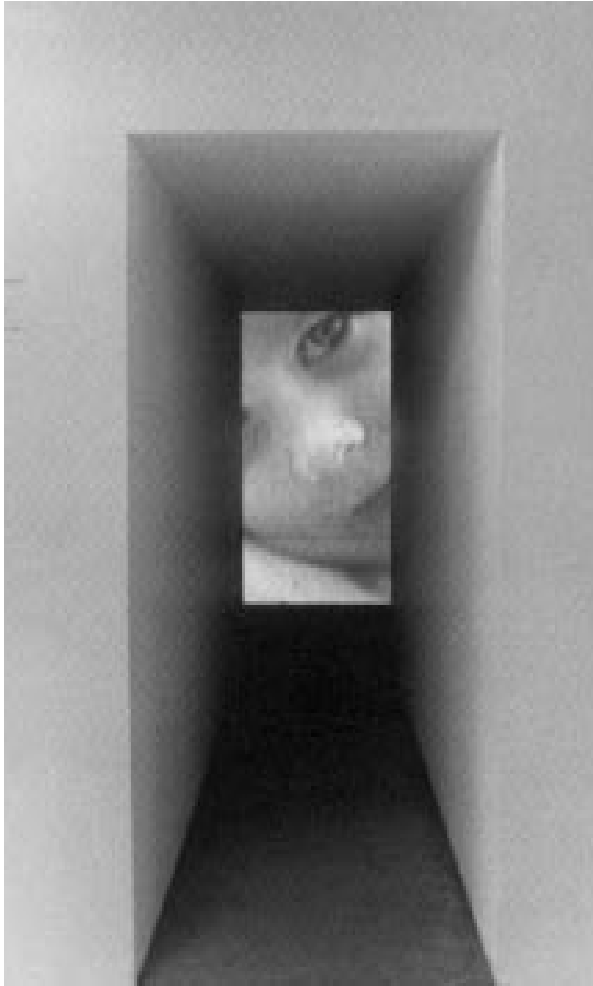
I argued earlier that the third phase of feminism constitutes the contemporaneity of all three, to the extent that it recasts their concerns in terms of its own symbolic knowledge. The issue of women's time

– its complex determinations already constrained within closed and homogeneous temporal categories denoting 'history' and 'reproduction' – is thus repositioned wholly within that psychoanalytic logic in which the 'little bit of freedom' of each generation to constitute itself in time is revised in terms of the *freedom of the mother*. Since the phallic economy of the symbolic order makes it difficult to imagine political desires as other than forms of identification or counter-identification, the temporal praxes of the first and second phases can only seem irredeemably collusive or impossibly utopian. The political desire for transformation thus gives way to an ethical spatialization of relations figured by the maternal as negativity. This, for a moment, returns us to that 'originary space before the sign', in order to understand what the mother's freedom might mean.

In a reading of Kristeva's account of primary identification drawn from her later work *Tales of Love*, Peter Osborne addresses the painful process of separation of the child from the mother that takes place as a precondition of psychic formation, which is also a 'process of the formation and deformation of meaning': signification. The mother's desire establishes the phallus not simply as the object of identification, but also as the privileged signifier, which will 'ground' the child's later access to the symbolic order and mirror phase. The child experiences the loss of the mother's desire as an emptiness which it attempts to recover, by identifying with the object of that desire – what Freud calls 'the father of personal prehistory', Kristeva terms 'the Imaginary Father', and Osborne, reacting against the phallicism of the model, names 'the Imaginary Other'. As Osborne describes:

in identifying with the Imaginary Other the child may be said actually (unconsciously) to be identifying with the mother. The independence of the Imaginary Other from the child, the 'gap' which identification covers over, stands in for the independence of the mother, the independence which threatens the child with 'emptiness'. We may trace the origin of 'death' within this framework back to *this* fundamental mapping or substitution.

What is significant about Kristeva's account is the centrality of the freedom of the mother, as both a 'threat to [the child's] existence and the condition of its identity'.³⁴ It is clear from this why the maternal is such a crucial concept for her work. On one level it is the freedom of the mother, her independence as a fundamental negativity, which guarantees the child's later entry into the symbolic order. It is also that border place, the mediating term of that 'impossible dialectic'



tic', where the relation with the other is negotiated, hence its centrality to the ethical position outlined in 'Women's Time' – a point of view shared with the earlier essay 'Stabat Mater', where she calls for 'an heretical ethics separated from morality, a herethics', which 'is perhaps no more than that which in life makes bonds, thoughts, and therefore the thought of death, bearable.'³⁵ Hence the social responsibility anticipated in 'Women's Time' – via an account of maternal love – for those negotiating the violence and 'threats of death' associated with the acknowledgement of difference at its very 'nucleus'.

Osborne's discussion of the freedom of the mother goes further, in a complex argument that I have only begun to sketch, to suggest that 'it is the freedom of the (m)other ... in the possibility of the refusal of recognition, which brings death (and hence *time*) into the world of the child'.³⁶ This realization is I think illuminating of the temporal structure that shapes Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. The 'little bit of freedom' with which each generation constitutes its own contemporaneity becomes, via the psychoanalytic account of the freedom of the (m)other, that which sets in motion the movement of temporalization *per se*. 'Women's time' in this sense names an originary spatialization

of relations – a disjunctive border encounter with the other – that brings time into the world. The conceptualization of time within the essay is thus inscribed within a psychoanalytical logic in which, shifting our categories of reference, we are brought out, as it were, on the other side of a moebius strip. And at the moment when the double bind takes place, it is possible to see both the constitutive moment of the psychic as social and what we might call the symbolic site of the post-political stance.

For Kristeva's figuration of the mother itself involves a form of symbolic violence, which takes effect through her concept of the maternal. The figure of the mother is implicitly double-coded: understood on the one hand as independent from and pre-existing the child, and on the other, as the site of originary unity with the child. In Kristeva's account the maternal *is* this doubling – which both produces time (for the child) and reproduces itself as conflicting times (for the mother). Yet what is privileged here in psychoanalytic terms is the figure of the mother seen from the standpoint of the child; a particular construction of the mother's autonomy that understands her 'freedom' as constitutive of the social yet itself remaining essentially *outside* time. What is missing in Kristeva's argument is any sense of the mother's independence as pre-existing her role in the formation of the child; her relation, for example, not just to *an other*, but to *the social*. Her formulation of the maternal thus brings about an ethical reinforcement of the mother's symbolic burden, while denying the complexity of the mother's experience of differing, contradictory times governed by the social necessity of labour – the multiple interactions of the times of production and reproduction. In short, the figure of the mother becomes the overdetermined site of the post-political in Kristeva's thought, the point at which social contradiction is condensed and internalized into the 'very nucleus' of personal and sexual identity.

Modernity revisited

At the outset of my argument I suggested that a feminist politics of time might offer the means to think the relations between two related conditions of contemporary experience: feminism as a symbolic form, and feminism as an index of modernity. Kristeva's essay appears to make it possible to explore a particular constellation of the two, setting in motion its 'impossible dialectic' of political and psychoanalytic logics. On one hand, it makes a powerful case as to why feminism as a cultural form might prove so potent, identifying the struggle and violence which constitutes the social bond. On the other, and relatedly,

it suggests how feminism might then become an index of those transformations taking place in the social, to the extent that a feminine ethics might bring about a wholly new regulation of its economy. Yet 'Women's Time' articulates such an argument at a cost, making a case for feminism's '*symbolic life*' (p. 193, my italics) – via the psychodynamics of maternity – at the expense of its *political* form.

In what ways, then, does the essay understand the relation between 'women's time' and that movement of modernity? On one level it might appear to name the split that Bhabha terms the 'time-lag', making possible 'a transvaluation of the symbolic structure of the cultural sign' and thus the constitution of modernity as such: 'Modernity as a sign of the present emerges in that process of splitting, that lag, that gives the practice of everyday life its consistency as being contemporary.' The interrogative stance that Bhabha associates with modernity – 'what do I belong to in this present? In what terms do I identify with the 'we', the intersubjective realm of society?'³⁷ – is similar to the question posed by Kristeva's third phase of feminism: '*what can be our place in the symbolic contract?*' In its privileging of the 'problematic of space', 'women's time' is elevated in this third phase to the very generative disjuncture that makes historical time possible.

Yet in this enunciative gesture much is lost, and its reflexivity emerges as a form of forgetting.³⁸ By sloughing off space from time in this way Kristeva structurally locates women outside history – which, in her schema, is that 'linear' obsessional time shaped by the actions of men. Given the overweening phallogocentrism of her model, it appears impossible to conceive of the symbolic repercussions of the long history of women's political and economic struggles, or even the retroactive significance for her phases of the insight that the symbolic order might be resignifiable, a hegemonic imaginary, as Judith Butler's work explores (something that not just women writers have known for several hundred years).³⁹ In other words, it is difficult for her to think of the politics of time here in terms of the *social practices* that might make sense, for example, of the continued coexistence of the three phases she outlines. Crucially, Kristeva's essay is unable to acknowledge 'women's time' as an index of the experience of the contradictions of capitalist modernity: specifically, the demands made upon women, and increasingly men, by domestic work and the necessities of the wider division of labour. If the figure of the mother – central to Kristeva's ethics – continues to be the locus of a great deal of ideologi-

cal work today, it is because women's labour in the home and in the workplace articulates contradictions that reach to the heart of the experience of modernity. 'Women's time' is in this sense, on the one hand, a systemic requirement: a temporality that incorporates, interpellates, in conditions which are not of women's choosing. Yet, on the other hand, it also names an imagined point of resistance to the rationalizations of capitalist modernity which has already been lost: the lived and non-alienated time – of the body, of age, of the hour of the day, of the seasons – that has, as Henri Lefebvre has argued, been expelled from social space under modernity.⁴⁰

Feminism/feminization

What might it mean, then, to return to Kristeva's essay in order to interrogate the current moment in all its contemporaneity? In a political culture seemingly marked by feminism's continuing end, in which the ethical demand has superseded political desire, its day might appear to have arrived. Books on 'new motherhood' abound, and calls for responsibility, for a 'gentler' management of change in this stakeholding society, are the norm. This is only a parody of 'Women's Time' in certain ways. Yet if the essay identifies a certain symbolic economy that 'women's time' makes present, it is unable to get to the ideological crux of why it is an index of the moment. For the flexible times of the late capitalist world are more than equal to the fluid subjectivities and the polytopic spaces of Kristeva's enunciated future; indeed, they would seem to *require* them. To put it another way, rather than providing the terms through which an interrogation of the equation between feminism and feminization might be possible – that space in which the current hegemony is being fought out – Kristeva's account dovetails with just such an equation. In focusing the concerns of the third phase of feminism on the figure of the mother, Kristeva reinforces the ethical, and thus, ideological, burden on the mother, while effectively removing her agency in historical and social terms and rendering the sphere of reproduction invisible. Her post-political argument thus offers little resistance to that ideological sleight of hand whereby the positioning of mothers as generative, and yet outside the social, polices the limits of what is acceptable: working mothers, for example, as both the source of the breakdown of society and the epitome of neo-liberal 'flexibility'.

The figure of the labouring mother and her related consciousness of a 'women's time' have a history. The intensification of the felt disciplinary pressure of time is not exclusive to the 1990s. In his essay 'Time,

Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' Edward Thompson recalled the work of the eighteenth-century washerwoman poet, Mary Collier, whose poem 'The Woman's Labour' details her acute awareness of the continuous assault of time on a working mother during every hour of day and night.⁴¹ It is the sexual politics of time – the articulation of the necessity of different forms of women's work in the home from piecework to childcare as *part* of the cycle of social labour (washing, mending, harvesting, brewing, polishing, serving) – that produces the political consciousness of Collier's text: the sense that 'Our Toil and Labour's daily so extreme/ That we have hardly ever *Time to Dream*'.⁴² No time to dream: such is the disciplinary penetration of time into women's mental space that, if we might read the phrase in its strongest sense, there is no utopian potential for imagining that things might be otherwise. What Collier represents in her poem, emerging in a world increasingly shaped by the not-so-hidden hand of capital, is the space of what Henri Lefebvre calls 'the everyday': in modern existence marked by a crushing of the cyclical patterns of reproduction by the instrumental repetitiveness of work. It is women, Lefebvre argues, 'who are sentenced to everyday life'.⁴³ This suggests an already more complex set of temporal relations between the realm of production and reproduction than that offered by the Kristeva essay, and a historical and social specificity to the spatial positioning of women. The 'women's time' of Collier's woman labourer is not the same as that of the woman she serves, who is nonetheless subject, as a consumer, to the rapidly changing times of new fashions – 'Fashions which our Forefathers never knew' – and no less aware that time is money.⁴⁴

In Thompson's account of the transition to industrial capitalism, he suggests that the hours of work detailed in 'The Woman's Labour

were only endurable because one part of the work, with the children and in the home, disclosed itself as necessary and inevitable, rather than as an external imposition. This remains true to this day, and, despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women's work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of 'pre-industrial' society.⁴⁵

Yet though Thompson goes on to question the easy categorization of historical change in terms like 'pre-industrial', the complexity of Collier's text demands closer consideration of the way women's experience is understood in historical terms, then as now. For

the sense of oppression – of 'external imposition' – in her poem is palpable, and the 'slavery' she describes takes place as much in the home as elsewhere. While Thompson's account identifies the problem of the naturalized 'necessity' of domestic labour, part of the force of Collier's argument is to situate that necessity within the wider world of work increasingly marked by 'the measurement of the clock'. It is not just that women's labour is rendered visible, but that it is framed temporally in a number of ways. What emerges from her poem, rather than an 'imperfect sense of time' in Thompson's terms (once again the time of 'reproduction' proving outside the reach of history), is an acute and practised awareness of it: as a series of differentials simultaneously and multiply lived in everyday life (at the workplace and home, and in the home *as* workplace); marked by the passage of the days and the seasons; according to the task, the employer, the technological means available; as representing various degrees of autonomy and imposition (that is, the extent to which it suggests agency and subjection, coercion and leisure, often simultaneously) as ideological, to the extent that the 'time' of reproduction and the home might appear to be no time at all – marked by other rhythms, 'other human tides'; and differently experienced by men and women. For Collier it is the labouring mother who evidently expresses the contradictions of women's experience of time in the extreme, contradictions which, Thompson suggest, remain 'true to this day'.

And now

If Mary Collier's 'The Woman's Labour' is a manifesto for the politics of 'Women's Time' circa 1739, it continues to indicate the complexities involved in abstracting out such a concept as we approach the twenty-first century. It does so not least because it registers in sexual-political terms the disciplinary pressures of another aspect of modernity – the time of capital – as it attempts to regulate the relations between the public and private worlds of women's work, between the cyclical times of reproduction (of the seasons, of childbearing, of the body), and the times of production. The significance of the figure of the working mother, the saturation of work and its supposed conferring of worth, the invisibility of domestic labour, the internalization of temporal constraints: all strike a deeply familiar chord, since it is here that ideological conflicts are at their most intense. 'Women's time' is indeed a measure of fundamental transformations in the way that we all live, a sign of contradictions in which the home is increasingly opening up to new technologies

of labour that must function alongside older, devalued forms. It is not surprising perhaps that parallels are to be found between two ‘transitional’ moments of capitalist change – the shift into industrial capitalism and the flexible regimes of late capitalism – requiring new forms of time-discipline, new kinds of subject. But if, as Walter Benjamin puts it, ‘the past can be seen only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized’, what might made of this moment of recognition?⁴⁶

The formalistic movement of modernity in Kristeva’s essay makes it impossible to think the contemporary as a ‘now’ in the fullest historical sense of the term, one able to forge alternative forms of possibility – despite its naming of difference – and to think through the manifestations of feminist discourse and their relation to the real contradictions of women’s lives. If one of the insights of her remarkable work is the painful psychic process of investment in the social, it is important to acknowledge, against the grain, the memory of *desire* that ‘Women’s Time’ represses in its suspicion of political truths. It is a desire uncompromisingly present in the Collier text, which has its own account of the anger and violence of the experience of women’s time, and which reminds us of the constitution of another time of modernity – that of capital – which appears now as an eternal and global condition of everyday life. Despite its polytopic hope, ‘Women’s Time’ is a disabling manifesto to take into the new millennium. If feminism is in part a practice of negativity, as Kristeva suggests, it may continue to set limits to the way we think modernity, here by saying ‘not yet’ to the post-political stance anticipated in her essay. In these circumstances the ‘*Time to Dream*’, in Collier’s terms, continues to be a political imperative.

Notes

1. As Sheila Rowbotham reports, the Office for National Statistics registered women’s outnumbering of men in the workforce in September 1997, and ‘men have been creeping back up since then.’ See her ‘Girl Power: All Work and No Say’, *Guardian*, 3 January 1998, p. 5.
2. Melissa Benn, ‘The New Motherhood’, *Guardian*, 31 December 1997, G2, p. 4.
3. Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 193. All further references are included parenthetically in the text.
4. Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics’, *Feminist Review* 18, 1984, pp. 56–73.
5. Jacqueline Rose, ‘Julia Kristeva – Take Two’, in her *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Verso, London, 1986, p. 157. Rose’s point is that Kristeva nonetheless locates her position in terms of what it means to speak as a woman within the symbolic economy, understood in terms of a fundamental negativity.
6. Gayatri Spivak, ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’, in her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, New York and London, 1987.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993.
8. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 247.
9. Alice Jardine, ‘Introduction to Julia Kristeva’s “Women’s Time”’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, p. 5.
10. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p. 81.
11. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 208.
12. Julia Kristeva, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Polis’, in Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 304.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
14. Jardine, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
15. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, pp. 13–14. I am indebted to this philosophical analysis of the politics of time for providing me with the space to think the Kristeva essay.
16. Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p. 41.
17. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 153.
18. The term ‘afterwardsness’ is favoured as a translation of Freud’s term by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, who transforms the concept using a model of translation. See his ‘Notes on Afterwardsness’, trans. Martin Stanton, in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, ICA, London, 1992.
19. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘the Jews’*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990, pp. 16, 17.
20. Julia Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, trans. Seán Hand, in Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 156.
21. Jacques Lacan, ‘Function and Field in Speech and Language’, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Tavistock, London, 1977, p. 48. This wording is taken from John Forrester’s translation of the passage in his *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, Derrida*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 206. Lacan uses the category of the future anterior to describe the tense in which the subject identifies ‘himself’ in language: ‘What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.’ *Écrits*, p. 86.
22. Rose, ‘Kristeva – Take Two’, p. 147.
23. Kristeva, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Polis’, p. 313.
24. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1997, p. 15.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Julia Kristeva, ‘Woman can never be defined’, in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds, *New French Feminism*, Harvester, Brighton, 1981, p. 137.

27. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 155.
28. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead and New York, 1991, p. 42.
29. Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, p. 383. As such, Kristeva's work – and her imagining of a 'paradoxical community' in which all are strangers to ourselves – can be seen to participate in the current debate in France arising from a crisis in republicanism and its concept of a universal subject, in which the social bond has to acknowledge the rights of different subjects. See Etienne Balibar, 'Ambiguous Universality', *Differences*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1995, pp. 48–74; and Joan W. Scott's interesting article on the parity movement in France: "'La Querelle des femmes' in the Late Twentieth Century", *New Left Review* 226, November–December 1997, pp. 3–19.
30. Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, p. 35.
31. 'The constitutive outside means that identity always requires that which it cannot abide.' See Judith Butler's use of this concept in the context of her discussion of categories of identity in psychoanalytical and political thought and the nature of abjection in *Bodies that Matter*. The quotation is taken from p. 188.
32. Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', p. 146.
33. Rose, 'Kristeva – Take Two', p. 154.
34. Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 94, 96, 97.
35. Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', trans. Leon S. Roudiez, in Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 185.
36. Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 102.
37. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 242, 245.
38. For a useful discussion of the limitations of Bhabha's account of hybridity in this regard, see John Kraniuskas, 'Hybridity in a Transnational Frame: Latin Americanist and Postcolonial Perspectives on Cultural Studies', in Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, eds, *From Miscegenation to Hybridity? Rethinking the Syncretic, the Cross-Cultural and the Cosmopolitan in Culture, Science and Politics*, Routledge, London, forthcoming.
39. For a discussion of the notion of the 'hegemonic imaginary' in the context of Butler's work see 'Gender as Performance', the *Radical Philosophy* interview with Judith Butler, collected in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, edited by Peter Osborne, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 109–25.
40. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 95. The final evacuation of time from Kristeva's essay in the name of a logic of spatialization might appear to echo this expulsion.
41. E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', in his *Customs in Common*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1993, p. 381. Thompson argues here that it was the rural labourer's wife who experienced the 'most arduous and prolonged work of all', and it is this collective figure – the working mother – whom Collier ventriloquizes in her poem.
42. Mary Collier, 'The Woman's Labour', in her *Poems on Several Occasions*, London, 1762, p. 20. The poem dates from 1739, when Collier committed it to memory. I would like to thank John Goodridge for a very interesting talk about Collier in a seminar held at Birkbeck College, which first set me thinking about her work. See his *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995. See also Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974; and Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture: Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, for further discussions of Collier. A fuller analysis of the Collier poem in the context of my discussion of Kristeva is forthcoming in R. Luckhurst and A. Marks, eds, *Literature and the Contemporary*, Longman, London, 1998.
43. Henri Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', *Yale French Studies* 73, 1987, p. 10.
44. Collier, 'The Woman's Labour', p. 20.
45. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', pp. 381–2.
46. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1973, p. 257.

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