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In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Luce Irigaray refers to becoming divine as “entering further into womanhood”, and goes on to say that “the becoming of woman is never over and done with. A woman’s subjectivity must accommodate the dimensions of mother and lover as well as the union between the two” (1993c, pp 60-63). In “Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother”, Irigaray describes the mother/daughter relationship as “an extremely explosive core in our societies. To think it, to change it, leads to shaking up the patriarchal order” (1993c, p 86). Accepting the invitation to think and change the mother/daughter relationship, this paper unravels a series of associations Irigaray makes between angels, the placental relation, carnality and divinity. Testing the weight and resonance of Irigaray’s philosophy through my own experiences, I challenge her construction of the mother/daughter relationship, arguing that she privileges the becoming of the daughter and neglects the fluid subjectivity of the mother.

The figure of the angel represents one of the most intriguing and complex aspects of Irigaray’s philosophy. Angels, for Irigaray, are the winged others to ourselves that she imagines communicating at the thresholds of the body—skin, membranes, orifices, hymen, and placenta—and in exchanges between bodies, such as sex, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray writes that the figure of the angel is “not unrelated to sex”; instead, it is “as if the angel were a representation of a sexuality that has never been incarnated” (1993a, pp 15-16). The association between angels and the placenta offers a glimpse of the possibilities of this new sexuality. In Irigaray’s conversation with biologist Hélène Rouch in *Je, Tu, Nous* (1993b), the image of the pregnant body represents the incarnation of carnality and divinity together, demonstrated through the intersubjective relationship between mother and foetus enabled by the placenta.

Irigaray approaches the figure of the angel in “Belief Itself” (1993c) with a reading of Jacques Derrida’s replaying of the fort/da game described by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961). In *The Post Card* (1987), Derrida adds bracketed interpretations and associations to challenge Freud’s text, playing his own game of fort/da with the absences he finds there, predominantly Freud’s relationship with the mother and son. In “Belief Itself” Irigaray writes text around Derrida’s additions and Freud’s quotes, playing her own version of fort/da to emphasise her philosophy of sexual difference.

The story, in its original version by Freud, tells of one and a half year old little Ernst, a “good little boy” who has the “disturbing habit” of throwing small objects into inconvenient places (1961, p 14). His loud exclamation “o-o-o-o” as he does so is interpreted by Freud and the boy’s mother to mean “fort” (gone, faraway) (1961, p 14). In an elaborate game, Ernst plays with a wooden reel or bobbin to which a string is attached. He repeatedly practices throwing the reel so that it disappears over the edge of his curtained cot (“o-o-o-o”), then skilfully pulls it out again with a satisfied “da” (there). “This, then”, Freud writes, “was the complete game of disappearance and return” (1961, p 15).

In interpreting the game, whose meaning was “obvious” to him, Freud suggests that it is related to the child’s ability to allow his mother to go away without protest (1961, p 15). Simply put, the reel and the thread are a substitute for the mother. The game allows Ernst to
compensate for the absence of his mother or to manipulate her presence, to throw her away and return her to himself, to take his revenge against her for leaving him, and to play with pleasure and repression. Freud writes that throwing away the reel takes on a defiant meaning: “All right, then, go away! I don’t need you. I’m sending you away myself” (1961, p 16). At this point in the text, Freud includes a footnote: “When this child was five and three-quarters, his mother died. Now that she was really ‘gone’ (‘o-o-o’), the little boy showed no signs of grief. It is true that in the interval a second child had been born and had roused him to violent jealousy” (1961, p 16). Freud adds nothing more.

Derrida’s reading of the game plays with the fort/da of Freud’s relationship with Ernst—Freud is his grandfather, father to Ernst’s mother, Sophie, whose death is relegated to a footnote. In The Post Card, Derrida writes: “There is a mute daughter ... This is Sophie. The daughter of Freud and the mother of Ernst whose death soon will toll in the text. Very softly, in a strange note added afterward” (1987, p 306). The strangeness of this footnote lies in its reverberation for the reader. The weight of the footnote is not acknowledged by Freud; he seems himself to play at throwing away the mother, to take his revenge against her for leaving him.

In a passing comment, Derrida playfully refers to the veil on Ernst’s cot as “the hymen” of the fort/da, but states that he has “neither the time nor the taste” to “open this curtain” (1987, p 308). Derrida plays his own fort/da with the hymen, returning to it when he focusses on the importance of the bed or cot for Ernst’s game: “Everything occurs around the bed, and has never occurred except around a bed surrounded with veils or curtains: what is called a “skirted crib” ... I am calling this once more, and necessarily, the hymen” (1987, p 316). The translator, Alan Bass, reasons that the hymen—so playfully elided in Derrida’s text—requires a footnote. He adds: “Hymen is irreducibly both virginity and consummation (marriage), related here to the conjoined interpretations of the father and daughter ... of what takes place around the bed” (Derrida, 1987, p 316, emphasis in original). Do we need a hymen—no, sorry, a footnote—to Derrida’s text to tell us that the father and daughter, grandfather and mother, are conjoined, in their agreement of Ernst’s “o-o-o-o” at least, if not in other ways? That the fort/da being played by Ernst with and against his mother, also plays Freud and Derrida? Is it really “around” the bed that this game takes place—hasn’t Derrida shown that it is entirely within (the curtains, veils, cloth, skirt of) the bed that the action takes place, even if he finds its consummation distasteful? Continuing his fort/da, Derrida again steps away from the hymen: “This entire syntax is made possible by the graphics of the margin of the hymen ... I will not exploit it here” (1987, p 317).

Irigaray takes up Derrida’s challenge to examine the veil (hymen) more closely, and finds that what resonates most powerfully in this play is the “rather white and transparent screen: air, canvas, veil” which covers the cot and conceals the reel. It is this veil—“more or less white, more or less transparent”—that makes little Ernst’s masturbatory game of “disappearance-reappearance, inside-outside, outside-inside” possible (1993c, p 30). It is on this veil that the game of the mother hinges; believing that she is attached to him by a thread, he reels her to and fro, into and out of the sheets. Of the veil and the part it plays in the symbolic absence-presence of the mother, wife and daughter, Freud “says nothing, knows nothing, wants to know nothing” (1993c, p 30). It is the veil Ernst plays with, rather than the reel and the thread, and, for Irigaray, it is the veil that symbolises the mother. This is a more complex and incomplete game than the one Freud interprets, “with him, foetus, playing at going in and coming out of her with a cord, a placental-veil, a womb-bed” (1993c, p 31).
Through his game, Irigaray suggests, the boy finds a reminder of the first veil he has known, “a first and longed for dwelling place, the happy time when he had space in her, and she in him, when he owed his whole life to her, before any call or claim” (1993c, pp 32-33). In reconstructing this amniotic world, Ernst is playing hide-and-seek with any number of absences and presences—the reel and thread, himself, his mother, language, womb, umbilical cord, and placenta. Taking the game higher still, Irigaray writes: “The most important fort-da ... refers, past the mother’s presence … toward that of god beyond in heaven” (1993c, p 32). This game, made possible through a series of veils or threads, is a game played with angels. Irigaray writes: “Before the son has perfected his stage set, one can try and steal his veil away from him, take the curtain of his theatre, the means or mediator of his fort-da, and ... give it back to the angels” (1993c, p 35, emphasis in original). In the whiteness, opaqueness and lightness of the veil over the cot, Irigaray recollects the image of the angel. She imagines the fort/da that angels might play as mediators of the game, the flesh, the relationship between mother and child.

At seven months pregnant, my divinity is shifting under the weight of my humanity. I am becoming as never before; not since puberty—remember those pink triangular nipples? Those aching hips? The tingling surface of the skin? The desire to shrug off the body?—have I been so distracted by the sheer physicality and weight of my flesh. I am here every moment. But the metaphors that I have read about myself—container, envelope, split subject—and those I have read about you—parasite, possession, infection—roll away from me. They do not apply here. You/I—we—make our own rules. I feel more akin to Sylvia Plath’s loaf “big with its yeasty rising” and feel you as Esther Ottaway’s “seed-pearl swimmer ... in that shell-shaped abdominal universe” (Plath, 1989, p 116; Ottaway, 2006, p 6). I am carnality incarnate, with a greater awareness and intimate knowledge of the properties of mucus and the porousness of the body than ever before. My subjectivity is shifting. I am everybody’s object. My body belongs to the world at large. We are plural. My lips—purple now—attest to that. I am stretching the edges of the world.

Occupying the realm of the poetic, angels stand between the mortal and the divine. The angel represents and traverses the distance between humanity and God, moving freely between the finite and the infinite, emerging from beyond “the ultimate veil” (1993c, p 35). The angel arrives as a messenger, to make an announcement, to reveal what is yet to come. The “inaudible or unheard … and unreadable” words of the angel concern sexual difference—in the case of the fort/da game, the relationship between the mother and the son (1993c, pp 35-36). The angel in this game—mediating between reel and string, back and forth, near and far—is at the service of Ernst. His mother, Irigaray notes, seems to have no angel of her own; “she is thrown away and pulled back by means of the angel, but she herself cannot use that mediation, that messenger” (1993c, p 37). This mother/son relationship harks back to Mary and Jesus, where the angel—at the service of the Father, at the bodily threshold of the hymen—announces that she is with child. The mother has no angel of her own, and the coupling the angel heralds is that of the mother and son: “The other, the woman lover, is kept away from the scene” (1993c, p 37, emphasis in original). In An Ethics of Sexual Difference, Irigaray imagines a corporeal angel mediating between man and woman within a relationship of sexual difference. She writes: “A sexual or carnal ethics would require that both angel and body be found together”(1993a, p 17).

In Je, Tu, Nous Irigaray locates the angel in the complex role played by the placenta, through
an interview with French biologist Hélène Rouch: “On the one hand, [the placenta] is the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means there is never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms (Irigaray, 1993b, p 39). In contrast to commonly held views, the relationship is not one of “fusion (a ... mixture of the bodies or blood of mother and foetus)” nor one of “aggression (the foetus as a foreign body devouring from the inside, a vampire in the maternal body)”; instead, the placenta is an organ that is formed by the embryo but behaves independently and relatively autonomously (Irigaray, 1993b, p 39). Here Irigaray finds angel and body together.

To reach you, the doctor cut through the layers of my abdomen and uterus and left a wide sutured wound. During an angry, spiteful induced labour, without a break between contractions, many hours after the midwives had promised you would arrive in time for morning tea, when I had all but forgotten you, your heart rate dropped to 60 beats a minute. Very quickly—and I cannot tell you how long, as time was slippery now—we were in theatre. I was hallucinating at this stage—I told your father he was dressed all in red, and that the blonde man from Little Britain made a cameo during the operation. When the doctor made the final incision and pulled you out, he found the placenta had abrupted during labour. I was haemorrhaging and the blood was clotting behind my uterus; you were in distress. I had not known we were becoming detached from one another. When the doctor handed you to me, he kissed me on the forehead and said, ‘Well done’. It was only later that I discovered where we had been with the placental abruption: there is a foetal mortality rate of twenty to forty percent worldwide. The maternal mortality rate is higher. It was a long time before I could use the word “birth” to describe this day.

In the provocatively titled “The Promiscuous Placenta”, Jane-Maree Maher describes the placenta as “the point of communication between pregnant woman and foetal entity, allowing for and recognising their difference” (2001, p 202). She continues: “The placenta … offends and refigures bodily integrity and boundaries, it allows for at least two to work together at the site of one, while preventing against a collapse into singularity” (2001, p 202). Maher constructs the pregnant body as a performance of contagion, contamination or infection, in which “the ‘disease’ that is communicated is embodied subjectivity” (2001, p 201). The placenta is, in Maher’s words, “the materialization of this contagion” (2001, p 201). The terms Maher uses are unsettling—contagion, disease, offence to bodily boundaries (2001, p 202)—and, by association, they evoke the uneasy association between life-saving medical intervention and the maternal-foetal body. The notion of a “promiscuous” placenta suggests the location of carnality and maternity together; Maher writes that viewing the pregnant body through the placenta “is a challenge to representational order, for ... it confronts distinctions between ‘mother’ and ‘child’ [and] mother and sexual being” (2001, p 213). The porous and multiple notion of subjectivity that Maher constructs emphasises the passage of fluid, morphological confusion, and transformation between mother and child within a narrative of carnal maternity.

These are the first things I remember about you. You have a full head of fine dark brown hair, with a couple of grey hairs behind your left ear. You have long, fine fingers that everyone has commented on. Your eyes are an indeterminate dark blue brown grey. You have mild jaundice, so your skin is a perfect shade of holiday tan. To comfort yourself, you suck on your
entire hand—either hand will do. Your top lip is a perfect double curve, and you keep your bottom lip sucked in. You smell like oil and the sea. The midwives wrap you as tightly as a mummy. When you cry, it sounds as though you are singing. You raise your arm up in a fist like a champion. The first television program we watch together is a German documentary on harmonicas. Your right ear is a bit squashed, and sticks out slightly. You have your first good breastfeed on your second day in the world, while your daddy holds your hand and kisses your forehead as you suckle. I hold you under my arm like a football. Sometimes when you sleep, you wiggle your eyebrows up and down. At night, a fuzzy time, our outlines blur. On the third day, my breasts wake wet and heavy, and you cry your singing cry. Your body leans and presses. I overflow, and my hospital bed becomes a milk bath.

What do I know of maternal desire? The term too often refers to the desire to be a mother. Instead, I think of the fierce intensity of your mouth on my bloodied nipples, more sensitive than ever before and since. I feel again the urge to touch every place on your body, to know you inside and out, inside out, from inside me and without me. I remember the blurry half-light of night-time feeds, when our points of contact—cushion, breast, arm, chair, mouth—meet and merge. My body remembers the hormonal weight of your body against mine. Even now, more than a year since we have breastfed together, I think of you and my breasts remember, give that familiar tingling buzz and let down a solitary drop of milk. It is as though we could start again at any time. In the endless suck and flow of our relationship, in the stretch-mark reminders of the ripe fruit burst of my body, in the mole behind your left ear—my favourite place in the world—are where I locate carnality and divinity.

The mother, Irigaray argues, lacks recognition as a “woman lover” (1993c, p 37). The designation “woman lover” gives weight to the carnality of the mother/child relationship. Iris Marion Young rises to the challenge this represents, asking: “Why does the gender code require such a division between motherhood and sexuality?” (2005, p 876). In Young’s writing, carnality, transcendence and maternity come together; the pregnant body, in a model similar to Maher’s placental relation, challenges the binaries of maternity and sexuality, transcendence and immanence. Categories such as self/other, subject/object, female/male, singular/plural, human/animal, public/private, inside/outside are rendered indistinct. Young applies this logic to answer the question of the division between maternity and carnality, referring to the “eroticism” of pregnancy (2005, p 46). She describes her pleasure as “like [that of] a child” when seeing her naked body in a mirror: “Without stealth or vanity ... I turn to the side and stroke the taut flesh that protrudes under the breasts” (2005, p 54). In a passing comment, she suggests that a mother’s sexuality is closely aligned to that of the child, which she describes as “global and multiple” (2005, p 86). This is a reminder of Irigaray’s description of the plurality of women’s sexuality in This Sex Which Is Not One, where she writes that a woman has “sex organs more or less everywhere [and] finds pleasure almost anywhere” (1985, p 28). Young goes further in her description of the sexuality of the mother, demonstrating the carnal relation that manifests itself between a mother and daughter: “I lay there as she made love to me, snuggling her legs up to my stomach, her hand stroking my breast, my chest. She lay between me and my lover, and she and I were a couple … I looked forward with happy pleasure to our early-morning intercourse, she sucking at my hard fullness, relieving and warming me, while her father slept” (Young, 2005, pp 88-89).

The sexual language that Young uses here is both seductive and discomfiting. It confronts the erotics of the mother/daughter relationship which is established, in Adrienne Rich’s terms, within an economy of “compulsory heterosexuality” (1993, p 203). Julia Kristeva performs a
similar act in the poetics of divinity and maternity in “Stabat Mater” where she writes of her son using the erotic words: slides, fondles, inflates, flutters, slips. She writes: “A wave swells again, when he goes to sleep, under my skin—tummy, thighs, legs … The wakeful tongue quietly remembers another withdrawal, mine: a blossoming heaviness in the middle of the bed, of a hollow, of the sea” (2002, p 324). Writing on the erotics of breastfeeding, Alison Bartlett uses the terms “sexual … erotic, sensual, pleasure, passion and desire” to demonstrate the “expanse of experience” of maternal sexuality and the limitations of the language available to describe such experiences (2005, p 86). Bartlett asks: “what is at stake in denying that breastfeeding can be a sexual experience?” (2005, p 108). For Irigaray, at stake is the subjectivity of the mother as a woman.

One morning, when you were ten months old, I pressed my lips to your forehead, and came away burning. Your temperature was 38.4 degrees. Just after I gave you some paracetamol, you had a convulsion. Your legs and arms were stiff and shaking, your back was arched, your eyes rolled back in your head, and froth was coming from your mouth. I called an ambulance. On the phone, I was almost incomprehensible. You went limp, your breathing was erratic, you were blue around the mouth. When the ambulance arrived, you were unresponsive. I had my first trip through the new Lane Cove Tunnel in that ambulance. In hospital that afternoon, you had another convulsion with a temperature of 38.2. You had a lot of tests—blood, urine and mucus, an EEG, and a lumbar puncture. Everything seemed normal. The next morning in hospital, just after Daddy had left for work, you had a different type of seizure. You were unresponsive and turned blue. You were no longer breathing. Very quickly, you were surrounded by two doctors and four nurses—attempting to trace your heart rate, monitor your oxygen level, attach an oxygen mask, insert a cannula, take your blood sugar level, prepare a glucose drip and revive you. In the midst of the chaos, one doctor accidentally stuck a needle into his own hand.

At that moment, the “clown doctors” arrived—laughing, throwing balloons, blowing bubbles, and playing silly horns. I watched a bubble settle on your pale bruise-coloured cheek in the seconds before a nurse screamed at the clowns to “Get out!” and pushed them from the room. Twenty minutes later, you were sitting on my lap eating a bowl of pureed pear. The doctor described what had happened as an “acute shutdown” and said it was the most extreme reaction to fever she had ever seen. Two months later, just after your first birthday, we were back. You had been vomiting and had diarrhoea for a day, and began to deteriorate quickly. I called an ambulance. On arrival in hospital, you were taken straight to resuscitation. Once again, your system had shut down, but this time you didn’t have a fever. Your blood sugar level was recorded as 0.8 (normal is between 4 and 8). You were in hospital for five days on a drip. Once home, Daddy took your blood sugar level every morning. We held our panic close, and tried not to show each other the whites of our eyes.

Four months on, you had had another three hospitalisations and the diagnosis was still uncertain. A year on, and we have lost count of your hospital stays and your seizures. We have a few answers. You are a hypoglycaemic asthmatic epileptic. A recent MRI showed that your left temporal horn is underdeveloped and the cells around it are dead. The analogy that the neurologist used was a birthmark on your brain. Some point of connection to me perhaps? It is as if a part of you is absent, perhaps given back to the angels. What better gift to offer them than one of your horns? Maybe this is where you go in your endless to-ing and fro-ing, reeling and threading: to the angels. I still have nightmares. You grow beautifully. You take your medicine. You are strong and joyful and fierce: these are the words that I use
In “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, Irigaray plays her own fort/da game with the absence and presence of the mother as a woman, the absence of the daughter’s own subjectivity, and the fusion of the identities of mother and daughter. Adopting the voice of the daughter, she writes: “I start to breathe ... I have a home inside me, another outside, and I take myself from the one to the other, from the one into the other. And I no longer need your belly, your arms, your eyes, or your words to return or to leave” (1981, p 61). From the daughter’s perspective, the struggle for subjectivity is a negative one, expressed through an aggressive hostility towards the body of the mother: “You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralysing me ... My blood coagulates, remains in and near my heart” (1981, p 60). In her introduction to the text, Hélène Vivienne Wenzel describes the daughter’s “anguished voice” at being “glutted” by her mother (1981, p 59). Poignantly, and somewhat disturbingly, she dedicates her writing to her own mother “whom I would yet seek to touch” (1981, p 59). In contrast to the fort/da game between mother and son, where the little god Ernst manipulates the mother to and fro, the daughter of “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” struggles to separate herself from the reel and thread. Her fort/da game is as much with her own body as it is with that of the mother. Irigaray writes: “A girl does not do the same things when her mother goes away. She does not play with a string and reel that symbolise her mother, because her mother is of the same sex as she is and cannot have the object status of a reel” (1993c, p 97). The daughter has no need to replicate Ernst’s masturbatory game of in and out, since she is already touching herself with her two lips. Irigaray offers three alternatives for the little girl: to lose herself in distress, to play with a doll, or to dance. Through dancing, Irigaray suggests, the girl creates a space that challenges the binary of “here” and “there”, and opens herself “to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods” with “a territory of her own in relation to the mother” (1993c, pp 97-98).

Following Irigaray’s line of argument, Tamsin Lorraine suggests that the girl’s variation to fort/da is spinning or whirling: “She twirls in circles to continue the intensely immediate sensations of vital contact with her environment. Her whole body is thrown into and involved with this movement ... She makes her world in this twirling, and so makes herself” (1999, p 31). As Irigaray writes the scene in “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” however, the daughter is unable to “make” herself. She herself becomes a reel and thread who is thrown back and forth against the backdrop of her mother’s disappearance and return: “I look like you, you look like me. I look at myself in you, you look at yourself in me ... Here, in front of your eyes, I am another living you. But, always distracted, you turn away” (1981, p 61). She continues: “We would play catch, you and I ... And we don’t need an object to throw back and forth at each other for this game to take place. I throw an image of you to you, you throw it back again, catch it again” (1981, pp 61-62).

Struggling to differentiate herself, the daughter is reincorporated into the mother, and into the nourishment the mother provides. The mother is assimilated with food and milk, so that the relationship between mother and daughter is cannibalistic: “You’ve prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/ yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth and I suffocate” (1981, p 61). Resisting her mother’s offerings in order to avoid incorporation, the daughter makes a claim for an exchange between them: “Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you ... So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each
other—together” (1981, p 61).

Unheard through the strident claims of her daughter, the mother in this exchange has no voice. Irigaray criticises Freud and Derrida for giving Ernst an angel—a medium for coming and going—but leaving his mother immobile. For making her into a “thing” (2008, p 123). In “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, the mother is frozen, segmented, motionless. Her daughter cries out: “With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen” (1981, p 60). The mother has no identity separate from the womb or breast. There is no woman, no other, no lover here, no sensuousness or eroticism in their relationship—there is only mother. And this, of course, is precisely Irigaray’s point. In “Gesture in Psychoanalysis” Irigaray writes: “The mother always remains too familiar and too close. In a way the daughter has her mother under her skin, secreted in the deep, damp intimacy of the body, in the mystery of her relationship to gestation, to birth, and to her sexual identity” (1993c, p 98). There is no separation between mother and daughter; together, they are without the possibility of a relationship of difference.

The “parler femme” strategy of Irigaray’s mother/daughter writing is risky. Marianne Hirsch challenges her exploration of the mother/daughter relationship through masculine paradigms such as Freud’s fort/da, arguing that what is developed is an “androcentric system, which, even if it is deconstructed and refined, still remains a determining and limiting point of departure” (1981, p 205). It is in this context that Hirsch describes “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” as “acknowledging the interpenetration that characterises female identity” (1981, p 210). The term “interpenetration” is a critical one, given Irigaray’s emphasis on labial logic to disrupt masculine economies. Domna Stanton concurs with Hirsch’s assessment, suggesting that the maternal metaphor in Irigaray’s writing is “an offspring delivered by/from the father” (1989, p 169). Reading Irigaray alongside Cixous and Kristeva’s “l’écriture au maternel”, Stanton suggests that these works do not successfully “produce revelations as much as revalorizations ... embedded in phallogocentric” (1989, p 168). She measures her criticism by asking: “Do [these texts] make an elsewhere reverberate? Do they signal movement ... to another place?” (1989, p 168). Her answer to these questions is in the negative; she concludes that “the maternal metaphor, in my opinion, does not herald the invention of a different poetic or conceptual idiom” (1989, p 168). In “Toward an Ethic of Nurturance”, Éléanor H. Kuykendall similarly concludes that Irigaray’s work does not realise a “developed feminist ethic of nurturance” (1983, p 272).

The inequality of the relationship between mother and daughter—the uneven weight that Irigaray gives to the daughter’s voice—is similarly problematic, and is compounded in Irigaray’s later work. Annie Smart notes this curiosity also, asking: “Does Irigaray speak of or for mothers?” (2000, p 391, emphasis in original). She refers to Irigaray’s slippage between the terms “maternal genealogy” and “feminine genealogy” and wonders whether this might be symptomatic of “an unsettled attitude towards maternity” in Irigaray’s writing more generally (2000, p 391): “A particular maternal body—subject to pregnancy and childbirth—and a maternal experience are not greatly represented ... Nor does Irigaray explore the idea that motherhood might produce its own particular values, subjectivity, and way of thinking” (2000, p 391). Certainly, the voice of “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” is resoundingly that of the daughter. There is no hint of the double or plural subjectivity that Irigaray demonstrates in “When Our Lips Speak Together” (1985) where Irigaray rejects the language that defines women as daughters, wives, and mothers in familial relations, and embraces the plural subjectivities that form her definition of woman.
In “Animal Compassion” (2004) Irigaray again speaks from the daughter’s perspective. She recollects staging a hunger strike to return home after hearing of the death of her rabbit Moïse. She writes: “I leave the girl in her preferred landscape with her winged and furry friends. Being thus immersed in life was her consolation, her happiness. She demanded nothing more. But what became of her exiled in “adult life”? In “society”? In the “city”? (2004, p 196). Irigaray seems to demonstrate a singular and stable subjectivity with a smooth transition from the girl in the garden to the woman in the city. In my experience, motherhood interrupted such stability and singularity of selfhood, not only through the challenges that pregnancy offers to constructions of subjectivity, but through the physical, emotional and mental upheaval that motherhood generates. Childhood recollections are overshadowed by complex questions from a mother’s viewpoint. Remembering such experiences as those Irigaray describes, it is as though I embody a double subjectivity, with the innocence of the garden superimposed on the anguished and complex decision-making that responds to the daughter’s hunger strike. For instance, when Kristeva writes of childhood memories in “Stabat Mater”, she recalls honey, softness, roundness, warmth as well as “the echo of quarrels: her exasperation, her being fed up, her hatred” (2002, p 325). But the hatred Kristeva feels from her mother is not straightforward, it is “always held back … a spasm that is held like a delayed orgasm” (2002, p 325).

There is something of the delayed orgasm in Irigaray’s writing, when she imagines a carnal relationship between mother and daughter. In “Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother”, she writes: “Our task is to give life back to that mother ... We must give her the right to pleasure, to sexual experience, to passion, give her back the right to speak, or even to shriek and rage aloud” (1993c, p 18). She continues: “We need above all ... to discover our sexual identity, the specialness of our desires, of our autoeroticism, our narcissism, our heterosexuality, our homosexuality ... We need to discover what makes our experience of sexual pleasure special” (1993c, p 19-20). As the daughter in “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, Irigaray holds a mirror to the mother and shows her that there is nothing to see. In so doing, she also abjects herself.

I edit my words, I censor myself, because I write to you. There are many things I do not want you to know. If, perhaps, one day, you tell me you are pregnant, I will cry. You will think I cry from happiness, with joy. No. I will cry because of your vulnerability and fragility. I will cry because I remember my weakness after you were born; because I argued with the nurses to allow me to have a shower alone; because for months after, I held onto the railings of staircases and was frightened by crowds. I will cry because your father and I railed, and tore; because your ears were wet with my tears as I nursed you; because my pillow heard fists and screams; because your father’s face was mud; because my own mother held and rocked me at three in the morning. Was there some connection between the rupturing of our placenta and the damage to our family? How can we find our subjectivities for ourselves, together? At nearly one and a half, when I ask you to point to mummy, you tap your hands against your own chest. You can identify your father, your grandparents, your friends, yourself, but you stumble when asked to separate me from you. Sometimes I do the same.

Michelle Boulous Walker uses the words sensuous, erotic and amorous to describe the “labial logic” of the mother-daughter relationship that Irigaray imagines (1998, p 4). Walker writes: “Irigaray offers us the mother as a question or problem to be explored ... [and] problematizes the mother in ways that force us to reflect critically on the status of the mother in and for feminist philosophical thought” (1998, p 175). This paper, in response to Walker’s
exhortation to think critically on/as the mother, and Irigaray’s challenge to “think” and “change” the “explosive” possibilities of the mother/daughter relationship, has articulated something of the problematic of the mother and her libidinal relationship with a daughter in the context of the divine (1993c, p 86). The maternal figure evoked here is ambivalent and loving, absent and present, angelic and carnal. For Irigaray, a starting point for a maternal model of carnal divinity is that women “find value in being women and not just in being mothers” (1993b, p 11). For me, a maternal subjectivity that accommodates carnality and divinity recognises the great shifts in subjectivity experienced in becoming a mother, and the contradictory feelings of soul-expanding love and rage. This would mean a recognition of the fort/da game the mother plays on a daily basis—the strings that keep her upright, the threads that stop her reeling through the day, the absence of past certainties, the to and fro, back and forth and pushing and pulling rhythm of feeding, patting, pacing, rocking, and curling into oneself exhausted. The subjectivities that emerge from this—of the mother as woman—are newly formed and mucus-like in consistency. The mother-daughter relationship, enabled by the recognition of each other as divine women, moves beyond the mediation of the reel and thread, the placenta, or the breast, and toward a new conception of self. It is my contention that such a differently sexed culture—one that recognises the carnal and the divine in the relationship of difference between mother and daughter—has not yet been articulated in Irigaray’s philosophy.

References


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Dr Agnes Bosanquet completed her PhD in Cultural Studies at Macquarie University, examining carnal transcendence as a problematic in the work of Luce Irigaray. Dr Bosanquet’s research not only explicates philosophical models; it also attempts to put into practice a poetics—a playful and subjective rewriting of theory.