1993

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Abstract
A recent memorandum received in my workplace, an Australian academic department, was headed 'Presence of Young Children in University Buildings during Working Hours'. Its content and tone were disturbing to a number of staff members (though certainly not to all). In its ‘Health and Safety’ bureaucratese, it expressed concern for the welfare of young children, some of whom had been 'come across ... riding alone in the lifts, playing on the stairwells or running in and out of the buildings'. Concern over the disruption to staff members and to the University legally, was expressed in a deeply condescending and repressive note of instruction. It was addressed to parents (via their heads of department), on the conduct of their parenting: 'school holidays, public holidays and curriculum days are all known well in advance and appropriate arrangements for the care of children can be made for such periods... Unsupervised activities . .leave children exposed to accident, injury and even assault ...'
LYN McCREDDEN

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How far have Australian or other Western democratic societies come, how far are they willing to come, in negotiation concerning child-rearing and the role of parents? My provisional answer, as a full-time mother and academic, is a gloomy one. While the above memo was directed to parents, and not just mothers, I would claim that what is so condescendingly being positioned is the role and practice of the maternal in a still rigidly polarized society. In Britain recently the letter pages of The Guardian have been full of renewed debate on the ‘Wages for Housework’ campaign. The core of the debate has been over the status of the campaigners, their status not amongst the general population but within the women’s movement. A range of writers asked whether these women, who argue the right to admit domestic and mothering work into the paid workforce, are the ‘loony fringe’ of the women’s movement, a ‘politically correct cult’ so idealistic it doesn’t realise the state of the nation? Their idealism, according to one correspondent claiming the title of ‘feminist’, has turned them into fascist watchdogs of feminism, unable to negotiate with the real world and critical of ‘career women’
who work for pay: 'When I was active in the women's liberation move-
ment in the eighties, no feminist group would have anything to do with
WFH. We believed they were funded by the CIA to infiltrate and destr.

troy the movement, based on the number of feminist actions and cam-
paigns they tried to take over, pick fights about, divert the politics of
and generally disrupt.' (The Guardian, 6/8/92, p.17, the 'Women' sec-

tion). In a counter claim, two 'sisters' of WFH point out that the attack
by the 'Establishment' on WFH's 'political correctness' is a 'fashionable
... way of descrediting those who oppose sexism, racism, homophobia,
discrimination against people with disabilities...'

In 1992 the media has carried harrowing images on the American
marches, sit-ins and brawls over abortion. And now the State in
Sweden, even Sweden, is reconsidering women's rights to abortion. At
this time of deep economic recession and attendant high levels of un-
employment in many Western countries, the practical and metaphoric
space of the maternal – the domestic, the female body, child-rearing or
the decision not to bear children, the role of medicine and technology
in conception; or in more abstract terms, the abject, the other, the pre-
symbolic – is being ravaged, yet again. It is being ravaged institution-
ally by the state, church, workplace, and concomitantly it is being con-
tested, often violently, between women, and between feminists.

In feminist theoretical debate on the maternal, and in the lived con-
tsequences of following, or even believing in, various positions within
this debate, a number of painful contradictions and urgent issues have
recently emerged. In order to examine these contradictions, this essay
will take two approaches: it will outline a number of contemporary the-
oretical formulations of the maternal, and will trace the viability or
consequences of these ideas through examination of several literary and
political sites.

A constant theme of French psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia
Kristeva's writing over the past decade has been with the maternal
linked to what she defines as the abject. Much has been written around
her notions of abjection, a psychic state by which the human subject is,
to varying degrees, shaped. Related in both time and space to the 'pre-
symbolic', that time before agency and language have emerged, the ab-
ject in its most violent emanations shapes the artist, the mad, and the
saintly. But in the highly metaphorical writing common to Kristeva, the
psychic state and the concrete object often blur. So, the broad and in-
visible psychic state of abjection is evoked through the most ordinary of
concrete bodily functions, excretions, oozings, tears, breast-milk, blood.
And with the same metaphoric slipperiness, abjection and the maternal
are intimately linked. In her recently translated work on depression and
melancholia, Black Sun, Kristeva is chiefly concerned with the causes
and the literary and psychic effects of these states. The paperback cover
of Black Sun is a poignant detail from Hans Holbein's Portrait of the
Artist's Wife, Elsbeth Binzenstock, and Her Two Children Philip and Catherine. The detail is of the child's head only, caressed by the mother's hand, as it stares upwards towards an invisible (for the viewer) maternal face. The child's gaze is hard to interpret, being anything from awed to resigned. But it is the invisibility of the maternal body, apart from the equally unreadable hand about the child's shoulder, that is the point. Drawing on the notion of depression which she interprets in Kant, Freud and Proust as a nostalgia, a memory event belonging to lost time, Kristeva writes:

I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something that I once loved. The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendency that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me. My depression points to my not knowing how to lose — I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss.

Kristeva's general discussion of depression is based on Freudian and Lacanian notions of the family drama, its Oedipal struggles, castrations and fears of castration. The loss she describes here is of course connected to specific, experienced losses, and it is also a general mourning, given archetypal status, even as it is applied to individual cases:

When I say that the object of my grief is less the village, the mother, or the lover that I miss here and now than the blurred representation that I keep and put together in the darkroom of what thus becomes my psychic tomb, this at once locates my ill-being in the imagination. A dweller in truncated time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm.

Such a linguistic and temporal phenomenology discloses, as I have often emphasized, an unfulfilled mourning for the maternal object.

For Kristeva such mourning is potently brewed of love and yearning, as well as hatred and dreams of domination. It is an extremely melancholic overview of the human subject — in particular the poet, the mad and the saintly — in relation to the maternal. It is one which Kristeva evidences again and again in her aptly named Black Sun, through case histories and through her discussion of artistic production, specifically the work of Holbein, Nerval, Dostoyevsky and Duras. The maternal is always a battleground, where relations to 'the maternal object' are already ambiguous and agonized, a desire simultaneously full of yearning and the rage to overcome.

Like Kristeva's, Luce Irigaray's texts tease the reader with a constant blurring of metaphoric and concrete:
The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ par excellence. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell... And if there is now such a polarization over the questions of abortion and contraception, isn’t that one more way of avoiding the question: what of the imaginary and symbolic relationship with the mother, with the woman-mother? What of that woman outside her social and material role as reproducer of children, as nurse, as reproducer of labour power?

The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, especially in its religious dimension, the role of maternal-feminine power is often nullified in the satisfying of individual and collective needs.  

For some, Irigaray’s mix of universalizing apocalyptic and political application, her woman/women shuffle, is unsatisfactory. Like Kristeva, Irigaray takes great liberties with the registers of language, moving rapidly between high lyricism and particular, social application, between abstract and concrete, and between social, psychic realities and utopic exhortations. It is this utopianism which has been Irigaray’s hallmark, and it separates her finally from Kristeva’s very different, bleaker idea(lism)s. Kristeva’s work leans towards the bleak heroism of struggle with abjection, or melancholy, in order to produce the great thing: a life scarred and reconstructed, vision, great works of art. Irigaray, in her more flamboyant language, registers powerfully the disgust with which the maternal is written, spoken, lived, obliterated:

The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman’s sex as a whole. 

There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will therefore be anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration.

But this deeply-imagined recess, the maternal, is also a symbolic site of psychic and social regeneration. Irigaray calls for – imagines – a rebirth for men and women, where the once omnipotent phallus is seen not as a Freudian, competitive rival, desiring to kill the father and take his place, but reconstructed – in language, in relationships – as ‘a desire to do away with the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds, especially the female world ... no longer omnipotent it would, if it respected the life of the mother – of the mother in all women, of the woman in all mothers – reproduce the living bond with her.’

It’s hard to see here just who this ‘one’ is who has attempted to usurp the power of all worlds, but it is clear that Irigaray is seeking to actively ameliorate, through displacement onto a grand symbolic field, the battle between men and women, women and women. Part of her work
is to find ways of healing, remaking, renarrativizing, the wounded relationship women bear towards other women, and towards their own biological reality, as child-bearer.

In the women’s movement over the last two decades, in many of its parts, there has been a dispersed uneasiness, and in some quarters an ideological dogmatism regarding the role of woman as mother. For some, this debate has taken the form of acceptance of the role of women as child-bearers and carers, accompanied by political lobbying on issues of contraception, abortion, medical intervention, child care. The issue is raised in the context of lesbianism, sexual alternatives, and in discussions on women’s careers and the work force. And repeatedly, in Western democracies, the debate seems to begin from the premise of individual choice. Often, this category of ‘choice’ reduces the debate to mutually exclusive alternatives for women’s lives – motherhood/career/lesbianism – for feminists as much as for others. The call, by writers such as Helene Cixous, to attempt a surmounting of the dichotomous structures which infest Western thinking, seems to be growing more distant of late.

An example of such polarizing, from the British press: in a recent feature article on the work of Andalusian flamenco dancer Cristina Hoyos (the Olympic games opening and closing ceremonies) British journalist James Woodall revealingly describes her work for the 1992 Edinburgh festival:

_Yerma_, Hoyos’s adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s tragedy ... is a powerful tale of a woman whose husband will not give her children, and will test the limits of both Hoyos herself as a dancer, and her medium...

For Hoyos, who plays the lead role, the key is Yerma herself. ‘Her obsession with maternity is the driving force. She is the true Andalusian woman, who understands the intricate connections between love and family.’

Married for 12 years, Hoyos has had no children herself. Her work has been her life; limited family commitments explain how she has kept physically and mentally in tune...

What is revealed here, most specifically, is the journalist’s reliance on the cliches surrounding motherhood: ‘her work has been her life’, too many family commitments sap the physical and mental capacities. Mixed with these cliches, and feeding them, are the larger myths of motherhood which Hoyos (in this report at least) repeats: the husband ‘gives’ children to the woman, who is longing, even ‘obsessed with maternity’, as with any ‘true’ [Andalusian] woman. And laced through these myths are the contemporary fables: this artistic, energetic, strong woman has chosen career over children, and it is a noble choice. Look at the product. A woman with all her passion intact, able to give to art what ‘family commitments’ have not been allowed to sap away. She is ‘Hoyos herself as a dancer.’
This polarizing of women’s roles, this turning of women’s lives into a battlefield of heroic choice, is a further part of the myth. It is a myth which many modern women, particularly in the decades after the contraceptive pill, have shared, even amongst themselves. I believe one of the greatest problems confronting the contemporary women’s movement is that being asked, or perhaps held back in strained silence. The question is not ‘Which direction do I choose?’, but ‘Why am I being made to represent (and adopt) a woman’s life in such polarized terms?’ This question in turn may sound like the ultimate Western desire to have it all, to operate beyond ‘choice’, particularly in the light of many women’s enslaved lives. Perhaps it will be argued pragmatically that women do have to make excluding choices. Of course. But the question which needs to be asked is not about the individual options of privileged women, but the polarizing and polarized values which define the different functions women perform. Who, or what, is defining and perpetuating the separateness of the different spheres? Irigaray’s textual engendering does offer one way of thinking beyond the dichotomies. For some, her utopics may be far too universalizing, even sentimental, as they rewrite the mother in all women.

It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example... If it is not to become traumatizing or pathological, the question of whether or not to have children must be asked against the background of an other generating, of a creation of images and symbols... we must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture.9

It is clear that this passage, and I would argue Irigaray genererally, rhetorically blurs the polarities of woman as reproducer, producer and produced. But this blurring takes full, creative cognizance of the actual life questions of women, the often ‘traumatizing or pathological’ struggles women are faced with. She uses ambiguity deftly, some may say annoyingly, to skirt the category of choice. Women here do not choose to be or not to be mothers, they ‘are always mothers’. The word ‘mother’ is given its full range of possibilities, from potentially passive, biologically-determined position, to object of others’ production, to active generator of children, culture, change. This is a manifesto daring to set itself up in dissent with long social and cultural traditions, institutions and practices which would ‘once more kill the mother.’ It takes seriously, within a perhaps typically French intellectual context, the efficacy of cultural production – that ‘other generating...a creation of images and symbols’ – and dares to place it, not hierarchically above the maternal, but in a complex set of changing, able-to-be-changed relationships.
So the struggle is firmly placed in the realm of representation, in the lap of artists, to whom both Kristeva and Irigaray, like Freud before them, appeal for illustrative and generative example. Three recently published novels by Australian male authors – Mudrooroo’s *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector* – prove to be revealingly confusing in their dealings with the maternal. While being wary of simplistic generalization, this female reader constantly registered unease at the violent ambivalence in both the imagery and the uses to which the maternal was put in each of these novels. Ambivalence is not of course a crime, but has been properly celebrated as an aesthetic mode, one which can work towards dissolving the straitjacket of dichotomous thinking discussed above. Yet I will be arguing here that in each of these three novels the ambivalent absence, withdrawal, failure or violence of the maternal figure, while often balanced thematically by the crimes of the paternal, forms a foundational crime or lack in the text. At what level of authorial intention such recrimination of the maternal operates it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to say. But it is in the crucible of the most ambivalently-compressed passages, those written with a dynamic tension between the thematic and linguistic concerns of the novel, that the representations of the maternal emerge.

This is so for Mudrooroo’s important novel *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, where the figure of Mada (a representation of the pigeon-English pronunciation of ‘Mother’), the white missionary wife becomes the site of strange sympathies, desires and violence. Mada is, in the waking world of the novel, a sickly, embittered woman forced to play at being the female symbol of British civilization to the aboriginal tribe her husband, Fada, seeks to educate. All the while she loathes her situation, her husband and his religious/commercial mission, and the pitiful Aboriginal recipients of his mission. She relies on the irregular supply ships to bring the painkilling medicine with which she blots out the horrors around her. The novel opens with a complicated night ritual performed by the remnants of the tribe, cross-dressed in a calculated jumble of aboriginal and white costume, dancing a modified reel to the sound of clapsticks and didgeridoos. As they dance, the Shaman, Jagamuttuk, prepares to enter the place of ghost dreaming, the site of white power, in order to capture the essence of that power and bring it back to his dying people. Mada, trying to sleep in her hut, ‘writhed uneasily, then jerked awake as the burning pain hit her...down in her abdomen and twisted along her spasming bowels’ (5). So it is that Jagamuttuk makes his journey to the supposed place of power:

A ghost female lay on a platform covered with the softest of skins. She was fair to behold. Stark white and luminescent was her skin beneath which, pulsing blue with health, Jagamuttuk could see the richness of her blood. Her lips were
of the reddest ochre and her cheeks were rosy and glowing with good health. She slept the sleep of a being seemingly content in body and spirit, but Jangamuttuk with his insight knew that this was an illusion. A wave of ill-feeling from her nightmare shivered her form and before his eyes the fair illusion of her face twisted with a hunger which might never be satisfied ... her hunger erupted in a scream of rage at the human. The female sprang at him. Before the claws could fasten on his throat, he regained his power and sprang aside... (15)

It is strange and disturbing, this image of colonial power and confrontation represented in terms of maternal and paternal warfare. The female Mada figure, keeper of the golden flask, 'the source of her good health', is overwhelmingly contradictory: guardian of the secret health and a nightmare-wracked illusion; a seductive, soft-skinned woman lying prone, and a harpie, clawed and violent; victim and perpetrator. Jangamuttuk here is the aboriginal agent, seeking the secrets of white power, but he is also the wily male lover/thief, watching, seduced, but finally powerful and successful. He returns with his trophy, leaving behind his enraged and enchanted victim, tamed momentarily by his song. To each waiting couple he is able to distribute a drop or two of precious fluid from what look like Mada's old medicine bottles, mimicking Mada's voice as he does so.

The web of allusions and possible readings is thick here. It is necessary, of course, to read Jangamuttuk's journey in the larger terms of the novel's concern for aboriginal genocide and survival. But it is surely worrying, in this episode, and in a number of others in the novel, that the maternal and female is compressed with the colonial power as the site of struggle. Mudrooroo's Mada figure comes close to Kristeva's abject space, the maternal identified with death, the struggle for individuation through suppression of the female, the place of unquenchable, overwhelming desire, 'a hunger which might never be satisfied'. This passage is all the stranger, since it is placed so early and influentially in the novel, but is at odds with less grotesque images of female power. Ludgee, the aboriginal woman for whom Fada entertains both sexual and religious desires, is given Dreaming powers, alongside her husband Jangamuttuk, and so empowered by the narrative. While I have argued elsewhere for the strategic courage of Mudrooroo's ambivalent discursivity in Master, it is important to register also the ways in which the maternal is once again, in a text by a male writer, the site of fear, desire, loathing and masculine struggle for supremacy.

In Tim Winton's Cloudstreet, the maternal is figured in terms of absence and impotence. Dolly Pickles, matriarch of the Pickles family, is the repository of a number of stereotypes of the female, but preeminently she is the sluttish, drunken and neglecting mother. She is the unfaithful wife and mother, 'the woman astride the bed with her dress up ... sweat on her skin'; for the daughter she is cause of 'the terrible boiling dark in the schoolgirl's head, the confusion, the feeling, the
colour she can't put a name to' (15). Rose Pickle's childhood is spent retrieving her mother from the pub - 'I'll get her out in the end. I'll drag her home. I'll kick her shins, bite her arse. I'll get her out' (105) - where Dolly nests with her female friends:

Dolly was rooted to her soft chair in the Ladies' Lounge with all those wrinkled, smokefaced old girls who laughed like a flock of galahs and fluffed and preened and looked about with their black, still eyes, cold as anything. They rattled and prattled with gossip and rubbish, and yes, even their mouths were like horny beaks, and their tongues like dry, swollen fingers. Rose hated them, and she hated her mother with them. She should be home, heck someone should be home... (105)

There's a breathless venom in the writing here, in the long first sentence, in the male author's placing of such hatred into the mouth of the daughter, in the moral high ground worked over as the motherless child voices injustice - 'someone should be home'. The harpies at the bar - their need, their talk relished in the rhetorical pleasure of 'rattled and prattled with gossip and rubbish' - are all cold black eyes and horny beaks. There are glimpses of sympathy for the figure of Dolly, 'a damn goodlooking woman' going to seed, but she is overwhelmingly a pathetic and destructive figure of impotence and maternal neglect who infects everyone around her. The moral claims of the novel are not simple, but they are certainly not directed sympathetically at this figure of maternal failure.

The other maternal figure of *Cloudstreet* is Oriel Lamb. She is the counterpoint to Dolly's sodden impotence: busy, efficient to the point of mania, a shrewd businesswoman and housekeeper. But she is also figured as impotent, a site of death. She removes herself, is driven to remove herself from the family house, to camp in the backyard, because in the eyes of her simple-minded son Fish she no longer exists:

I want the water Lestah.
I'll take you down to the river sometime, son, when your mother's finished drivin Mr Clay off her mind. But even as he says it, it tastes like a lie. He knows Oriel wil never let him near the river again.
In the boat. Up in the water.
Hey, listen. I know. You can have a boat in the back. That's it, I'll get you a boat to have here. Dyou like that, mate? With oars and everything. You can even go fishin. Waddyasay?
Fish looks at the ceiling.
What's your name? Lester prompts.
Fish
Fish who?
Fish Lamb.
What's you proper name?
Samson.
Who's your Mum?
Who's your Mum?

... Your Dad?
You, Less.
Sisters?
Red and Hattie and Lane. (167)

The imagery of water and boats recur throughout the novel, swelling to become one aspect of the maternal, the place of baptism, joy, and death. It is the place in which Oriel, the mother who takes on the guilt of her son's near drowning, stands as door-keeper, forbidding a re-occurrence of the tragedy which took Fish's mind and left him a perpetual child. So it is that the role of the mother - guilt-ridden, authoritarian, protective - is seen, by Fish and by the novel, to be one of negation, abjection, and refusal of a larger, desired world of release. She cannot be named. Fish looks through her, never sees her after his accident. But he senses her power, her prohibition of his desire to see the water again, to row out on it in a repetition of the release he once almost experienced. The penultimate chapter - 'Moon, Sun, Stars' - thus becomes a moment of birthing as Fish escapes to the water's edge, 'sighing, slow, slow to the water that smacks him kisses when he hits':

I feel my manhood, I recognize myself whole and human, know my story for just that long, long enough to see how we've come, how we've all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us, and I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this, and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everywhere. Me. (424)

Winton's moral and humanistic prose asks for a common sympathy: for Fish, as he seeks his identity, his birth; for Oriel, who in the final chapter is also released from her exile in the backyard; and for Dolly: 'The little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman folded end to end till the tent was a parcel that they hefted to their shoulders ... and then they went inside the big old house whose door stood open, pressed back by the breeze they made in passing' (426). The characters have 'all battled in the same corridor time makes for us', but it is the maternal which is registered as the place of struggle, the impossible place which must be acknowledged, in order to be surmounted. Fish's birth/death is not a separation from or a reunion with the maternal, but a self-birth- ing, a self-recognition. The narrative voice takes on the first-person consciousness of Fish here for the first time. His escape to the water is seen in Romantic, transcendent terms, as the proper achievement of manhood against all the protective prohibitions of the mother he would not name. So the role of mother, and the very space of the maternal, is re-
registered as burden, impossible contradiction, the place of death. While the intentions of the text? Winton? are sympathetic towards ‘all of us’, female readers may have a very different attitude towards Cloudstreet, reacting against the straitjacket of self-pity or guilt which imprisons the female characters.

If Winton’s novel humanistically evokes the absence or impossibility of the maternal, Peter Carey’s The Tax Inspector attempts heights of grotesquerie in its investigation of the failure of maternal agency. Down the warped and violent generations of the Catchprice family, the men have passed the gift of incest to their sons, but the mothers have proved impotent to stop the horror: Granny blanks out the knowledge, Sophie had shot at her molesting husband, missed and wounded the infant Benny, and fled. As Maria the tax inspector’s pregnancy grows, so does the narrative’s wild accusations and anti-realist claims. By the end of the novel, the greatest claim is that Benny, the molested and now bizarrely predatory sexual enigma of the Catchprice family, is some kind of avenging angel, hellish or transcendent, a freakish, embodied cry for maternal mercy from his prisoner Maria, his absent mother, the reader. Left in the incestuous arms of his father by a feeble and inept mother, Benny the beloved youngest son has become both the torturer and the ultimate sacrifice, an impossible image of the maternal he loathes and desires:

Maria felt already that she knew every part of her tormentor intimately: his thin wrists, his lumpy-knuckled fingers, his long, straight-sided, pearl-pink nails, his shiny hair ... his red lips, real red, too red...

He sat on the edge of the sofa, by her hip. He had one bare leg up, one out on the floor, not easily, or comfortably, but with his foot arched, like a dancer’s...He hunched his bare torso around the child and talked to it. ‘Give me my baby,’ Maria said again.

‘Benny,’ he said. ‘Little Benny.’

He talked to the child, intently, tenderly, with his pretty red lips making wry knowing smiles... He cupped and curved himself so much around her baby that she could barely see him – a crumpled blood-stained shirt, an arm, blue and cheesey, and small perfect fingers clenching. She would do anything to hold him. (276)

What is the reader to make of this ambivalent apocalypse to the novel? Maria’s desire for her newborn child, Benny’s tender insanity, his own orphaned vulnerability matched by his sexual malevolence, all compete for a place in this maternal economy. The reader’s sympathies are demanded for Benny – ‘She had no idea that he was as near as he had ever been to love. She saw only some pretty, blond-haired, Aussie surfer boy...’ (278). But the urgency of Maria’s task, the retrieval of her child, is also set-up. In this way, the final actions of the novel establish the maternal as the site of ferocious, incompatible, passionately violent
and nurturing drives. As the placenta separates from Maria’s womb, she manages to crush Benny’s skull, several times, with an iron bar, and to take back her child. Benny – ‘slowly, like a boy clowning at a swimming pool...’ – dies, relinquishing the child as mother Maria ‘took her little boy, warm, squirming, still slippery as a fish, and unfastened her bra, and tucked him in against her skin’ (279). Is the reader asked to champion this fierce, thrusting maternal instinct against the weak absence of agency in Granny and Sophie? To applaud the necessary execution of Benny the motherless child? To mourn his warped passing? All these possibilities are set up in the space of the maternal, and in such all-embracing ambivalence a bleak, unanswerable human fatedness is established.

Is it possible for Western literary traditions, so entrenched in a writing of the maternal through violently ambivalent imagery, or through simplistic, stereotyping symbols and structures, to find new ways of thinking and writing the maternal? Most educated westerners today live in a process of intellectual oscillation when thinking about motherhood. Their individual mothers are written for them by their eclectic knowledge of institutional realities: Freud more or less popularized, fiction and film, percolated feminist ideas; and their attitudes and actions in regard to the more abstract ‘maternal’ are directed too by their various experiences of being mothered. But it would be felt by a large number of such ‘educated westerners’ that the whole thing is problematic, if not traumatic. Hence the ‘God’s own country’ fundamentalism of the George Bush ‘family values’ campaign was so attractive? Hence the simplifying, individual-choice philosophy of the pro-abortion and wider feminist lobbies is all that is possible in the complex democracies now emerging? Is Luce Irigaray’s call for a cultural production which is able to help bring about change simply naive in the face of long centuries of repressive representation of the maternal in Western societies, and elsewhere?

In closing, one particular contemporary situation will be narrated here, in the face of these questions. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the Australian government pursued a protectionist policy towards the children of aboriginal Australians. In reality this meant that thousands of young children were removed from the care of their parents, often single mothers deemed unfit to manage their children, and were placed in orphanages run by government or church bodies. This policy produced two and three generations of children and parents who have grown older without, in many cases, any contact. The wonderful blossoming of Aboriginal literature in English which is now occurring in Australia has enabled white readers to begin to understand something of the tragedy of aboriginal children and parents. The lament of the motherless child, and of the childless mother, is a common and often heartbreaking genre amongst aboriginal poets, and Kevin Gilbert’s 1988
anthology of aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*, carries many examples. Eva Johnson’s consciously child-like, almost pidgin voice in ‘A Letter to My Mother’ may be accused by indifferent academic perception as romanticizing, utopic, sentimental:

I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now
White fulla bin take me from you, I don’t know why
Give me to missionary to be God’s child.
Give me new language, give me new name
All time I cry, they say – ‘that shame’
I go to city down south, real cold
I forget all them stories, my Mother you told
Gone is my spirit, my dreaming, my name
Gone to these people, our country to claim
They gave me white mother, she give me new name
All time I cry, she say – ‘that shame’
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.\textsuperscript{12}

I think what makes such poetry so hard for white, middle-class Australians to read is its (representation of a) wide open, sentimental cry. But while the critic may theorize the maternal, and the state of Western subjects’ melancholic loss of the maternal object, with its attendant double-edged rage and grief, this poem is clear-sightedly metonymic in its utopic connections. The mother, materially and symbolically, is ‘my spirit, my dreaming, my name’, a people, country, language. The ambiguities pointed to in Kristeva’s analysis of Western melancholic loss, are here directed outwards, as a mounting rage against those who have perpetrated such a loss, and as a claim to renewal. There is much of Irigaray’s symbolic gathering of rage against ‘the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds’, operating here symbolically, and in the particular, named institutions and forces: ‘Missionary’, ‘the laws of White Man’, ‘this Burden’. The final stanza’s energy is that of grief turning into a verbal and political strength and solidarity – ‘Two Women we stand... We will silence this Burden, this longing, this pain/When I hear you my Mother give me my Name.’

At a recent lecture and reading by Aboriginal women poets in Melbourne, Australia, the air was bristling with social, political and literary contradictions. The audience, a mix of feminist and politically-active/aware students, was addressed by several Koori women. One main issue was the history of government and church orphanages, and the need felt by many Kooris to trace their black mothers. No sophisticated theoretical reasons were given by these speakers for their need. Could such a question have been helpfully asked by the audience? Could the genres of sentimental ballad, of motherless child seeking the comfort of the mother’s arms, been usefully critiqued in that place, at that time? Jostling against each other in the minds of many of the white, middle-
class audience, I am sure, were the sophisticated theories, representations and experiences of 'The Maternal', with the claims of a deeply-felt need in many aboriginal people, which had been driven into the realm of trauma. Hopefully, many feminists, including myself and others in the audience, had their representations – or their right to free-ranging, intellectual modes of representation – shaken, even reshaped, by such a moment. The locus of Aboriginal rights is at the moment where politics, literature and human reality are intersecting in a painful and regenerative way in Australia. Questions of the maternal inform many of the stories of Ruby Langford and Sally Morgan, and poetry particularly by women aboriginal poets. Sophisticated white theorists, as well as university memorandum writers, can benefit from the strong and real role played by Aboriginal women in their valuing and practice of the maternal.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 5.
4. Ibid., p. 61.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. Ibid., p. 42.
9. Irigarary, op.cit., p. 43.
11. See the essay 'Critical Solidarity: Towards (Inter)Change in Australian Aboriginal Writing', in Aboriginal Voices (University of Minnesota P., 1993, forthcoming).