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MARY AND THE CARNAL MATERNAL GENEALOGY: TOWARDS A MARIOLOGY OF THE BODY

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Abstract

Starting from Luce Irigaray's concept of the female genealogy, I suggest in this paper a horizontal, carnal-based genealogy that brings Mary and women on a biological parity through the maternal body. Irigaray's sensible transcendental and her call to reconstitute the body to the mother, both culturally and linguistically, constitute my point of departure for reappropriating Mary through a language that presents the notion of *sang rouge* (red blood) as an alternative metonymy of her body. I will look at the aesthetic materialization of this incarnational approach to Mary in the creative work of some women who also envision her through a sexualised imagery of the maternal body.

The Virgin Mary is unique among women for having miraculously conceived a child without the participation of a man. Tradition further says that she was conceived free from original sin and that she remained a virgin both during and after delivery. The dominance of this literal view over symbolic interpretations has worked against women in creating an ideal spiritual or sacred body on the basis of difference, exclusion and the desexualisation of maternity.

This essay develops a material theology about Mary that seeks to create alternative links with her using the body as a motif. Parallel to the discipline of Body Theology, I would like to propose a Mariology of the Body that considers Mary in and through the flesh and creates a corporeal unity

between her and women, particularly through the language of sexualised maternity. My starting point will be Luce Irigaray's incarnational theology, which regards the body as immanently divine and makes its process of divinisation a linguistic task. According to Irigaray, women have no words that convey their physical divinity or give expression to their selves. This is more evident in the case of the mother: the 'body that gives life never enters into language', says Irigaray.¹ The images and metaphors of the father superimpose on reality and extirpate from language the imagery of the womb, the mother and the placenta. Patriarchy demeans the mother's power to give life and privileges a patrilineal genealogy in which man appears as the 'sole creator'.² The first section of this paper looks at how this cultural erasure of the mother's body dominates some of the representations of Mary in religious writings that enhance the divine origin of Christ by obliterating the materiality of childbirth. Irigaray's reflections on the maternal body and her defence of a 'sensible transcendental' is the focus of the second section, which discusses the implications that her theories have for an alternative analysis of Mary that integrates corporeality into religion.³

While Irigaray's thoughts are my point of departure for examining the figure of Mary from a redemptive perspective of the flesh, my thesis also departs in several aspects from the theories of this French philosopher, especially regarding the understanding of female genealogies. Irigaray postulates the necessity of giving ethical and cultural value to the vertical and horizontal dimension of the relationships among women. The vertical dimension is synonymous with the maternal genealogy, which society suppresses when the daughter separates from the mother to assume the role of wife and mother. The horizontal dimension includes women's relationships among themselves. My reading of the female-maternal genealogy is informed by a material perspective that aspires to de-hierarchise the female body in religion. I propose a *carnal genealogy* that privileges exclusively the notion of horizontality, by which I mean the relationship of corporeal sameness that binds women to Mary and to other women through the maternal body.

Following Irigaray's argument that women must find a new language that fosters a positive awareness of their bodies, the third section explores the potentiality of words—and visual images—to reappropriate Mary. I will examine how identical words and similar visual details used in the portrayal of Mary and ordinary women serve to strengthen the sense of commonality among them. Throughout this paper, my approach to the figure of the mother is not so much psychoanalytic (like that of Irigaray) as fundamentally material. What chiefly interests me about Irigaray is her critique of the cultural and linguistic loss of the mother's body in patriarchy, which I relate to the un-representation of Mary's sexual body in religion.⁴ As an alternative metonymy of her maternal body, I suggest the image of

the mother's blood, derived from the Irigarayan notion of *sang rouge*. I will assess this incarnational approach to Mary in some creative work by women who also envision her through a sexualised imagery of the maternal body.

I. MARY'S WHITE BLOOD

References to Mary's blood, though not frequent, are a constituent part of the Catholic tradition. After all, it was through Mary's flesh and blood that the Son of God became incarnate. However, except for the biological function of providing nourishment, Mary's blood appears to be removed from some of the main evidences that accompany maternity. For a start, she remained a virgin during parturition and did not suffer from labour pains. The *Protevangelium of James* in the second century states that Jesus miraculously comes into sight in a great beam of radiant light that fills the cave. In *The Ascension of Isaiah*, Mary 'straight-way look[s] with her eyes and [sees] a small babe, and she was astonished. And after she had been astonished, her womb was found as formerly before she had conceived'.⁵

The opinions of some of the Fathers of the Church and later writers favour the same belief, that Christ's birth was painless and bloodless.⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, for example, asserts that when the Virgin 'was a little weakened, as if drowsy with sleep, the infant came forth from her side—not from the opening of the womb—without her knowledge and without pain, corruption, or filth'. Hildegard even goes on to claim that 'no placenta covered the infant in the Virgin Mother's womb, in the manner of other infants, because he was not conceived from virile seed'.⁷ In her vision of Christ's nativity, the fourteenth-century mystic Bridget of Sweden notices that his 'flesh was most clean of all filth and uncleanness' and that Mary deftly catches her Son's umbilical cord with her fingers, cuts it off 'and from it no liquid or blood went out'.⁸ In the sixteenth century, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* likewise maintains that Mary 'brought forth Jesus the Son of God without experiencing ... any sense of pain': 'just as the rays of the sun penetrate without breaking or injuring in the least the solid substance of glass, so after a like but more exalted manner did Jesus Christ come forth from His mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity'.⁹

Extolling as they did the virginal birth as a manifestation of Christ's Godhead, scholars also aimed to highlight that it was in his mother's womb that the mystery of the divine incarnation took place. The fifth-century archbishop Proclus of Constantinople compares Mary's 'spotless flesh' to the Adamic thread used by God in 'the awesome loom ... upon which the robe of union was ineffably woven'.¹⁰ The similes of weaving and sewing—or that of Mary's womb as the oven in which Jesus, the bread, is 'baked'¹¹—became increasingly common in late medieval Christianity to

signify Mary's role in the Advent, in which she 'weaves the garment of Christ's humanity within her body'.¹²

Although many religious writings did not dwell upon the physiological particularities of Jesus' birth, others brought this subject to the fore, laying emphasis on the immaculateness of Mary's body and God's supernatural intervention. In doing so, these texts simultaneously reaffirmed a hierarchy that conflates ethics and biology and equates the second with purity, sexual chastity and, sometimes, even a nulliparous shape. These writers refer to Mary's 'virginal' or 'spotless' flesh and her 'chaste and virgin blood'.¹³ Thus, Hildegard of Bingen explains that the Holy Spirit 'caused a small clot to coagulate' from the 'utterly pure and chaste blood' of Mary 'and this coagulum became flesh in the form of an infant'.¹⁴ Bridget of Sweden notes the marvellous transformation that occurs in Mary's body after parturition: 'the Virgin's womb, which before the birth had been very swollen, at once retracted; and her body then looked wonderfully beautiful and delicate'.¹⁵ For Bridget, as for other authors, Mary's womb shines, containing as it does the divine child: her womb 'was as perfectly clean as ivory and shone like a place built of exquisite stones'. The walls 'were like the brightest gold'.¹⁶ The German mystic Gertrude of Helfta asserts that Mary's womb is 'as transparent as the purest crystal' and that her 'internal organs, penetrated and filled with divinity,' shine brightly, 'just as gold, wrapped in silk of various colours, shines through a crystal'.¹⁷ As Jacqueline Tasioulas argues, even Christ's 'foetal life' distances itself from the medical and philosophical tenets held from Aristotle to the Middle Ages.¹⁸

The language that describes Mary in these texts constructs another dimension where she exists beyond the human. Poeticity functions to sequester her even more from the body, which disappears in a web of similes and metaphors. Mary's body has no (linguistic) existence outside her virginal purity. Her oxymoronic white blood saves her from the discourse that exiles women from the sphere of the divine by associating their flesh with sin, corruption and lowliness, both physiological (because of the fluids) and moral (all children are born with the stain of original sin). Rather than making the Virgin one with women, the experience of childbirth sets her apart from them. This anonymous contributor to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* (1895-1898) shows, indeed, how problematical the association of Mary's motherhood with the ideal of purity can be for women:

I think that the doctrine of the Virgin birth as something higher, sweeter, nobler than ordinary motherhood, is a slur on all the natural motherhood of the world. I believe that millions of children have been as immaculately conceived, as purely born, as was the Nazarene. Why not? ... I place beside the false, monkish, unnatural

claim of the Immaculate Conception my mother, who was as holy in her motherhood as was Mary herself.¹⁹

The purification of Mary in religion through words distilled of any trace of carnality mirrors to a certain extent the repression of the mother's body in patriarchy. Metaphors serve to translate Mary's semiotic body into God's symbolic vessel, and her maternal, uterine blood into his light. As a mother, Mary only sheds her blood in the form of tears at the death of her Son (in Christian iconography, a sword pierces her heart and tears of blood fall from her eyes) or at the sorrows and sins of humankind (as seen in those allegedly miraculous statues of crying Virgins). While the blood shed by Christ on the cross is redemptive and sacrificial, the blood shed by Mary invariably denotes a mother's most dramatic suffering. As Irigaray observes, the maternal universe of flesh and blood is replaced by a 'universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh and drills a hole through the female womb and through the place of female identity'.²⁰ The verbal elusiveness, even refinement, of poetic language makes Mary 'more of a heavenly being, conversing with angels, than an ordinary woman of the people'.²¹ Proclus of Constantinople names her an 'untarnished vessel of virginity' and the 'purest fleece drenched with the rain which came down from heaven'.²² Ambrose reveres her as the 'temple of God'. In one of her lyrics, Hildegard compares Mary's womb to a 'cloister'.²³ Some of the laudatory titles generally given to her are borrowed from Ezekiel 44:2 and the *Song of Songs* 4:12: she is a 'shut gate', a 'tower of ivory', a 'fountain sealed', a 'garden enclosed' and a 'spring shut up'. Although Mary's bodily essence is constructed on the hymen and the womb—the first a membrane and the second an organ connotative of female sexuality—both serve to distance her from it. They are sacred, shut and sealed in what Marina Warner calls 'a literal epiphany of integrity'.²⁴

II. A CARNAL MATERNAL GENEALOGY

According to Irigaray, the 'murder' of the mother is at the heart of patriarchal society, which equates this fact with the male child's psychic growth into adulthood. Women become 'accomplices' in this murder,²⁵ which is likewise demanded of them when they enter the Symbolic. As the little girl grows into womanhood, she 'is separated from her mother and from her family in general. She is transplanted into the genealogy of her husband; she must live with him, carry his name, bear his children'.²⁶ She is reduced to being the man's extension that perpetuates his genealogy: not only does she serve as a vessel that bears his progeny but she also turns into a cultural agent that transmits the values of the system in which, like her mother before her, she remains culturally 'silent' and 'outlawed'.²⁷ As part of their enculturation, women further submit to a masculine language that,

in contrast to the 'language of intersubjectivity' advocated by Irigaray, is built on a subject-object relation.²⁸ This language denies women access to the divine by coupling them with the body and ascribing the sublimated realm of the spirit and the logos to the man.

Although for Irigaray the place that Mary occupies in Christian theology reflects the subsidiary place that women occupy in patriarchy, in some of her writings—particularly 'The Redemption of Women' and 'The crucified one: epistle to the last christians'—²⁹ this philosopher also valorises Mary on feminist grounds. In the second essay, Irigaray complains about Christianity's neglect of the instrumental role played by Mary in the genesis of this religion: 'her "yes" subtends Christian culture, which would not exist without her'.³⁰ Mary appears instead as a passive receptacle. She is either God's servant or the mother to his Son. In 'The crucified one', Irigaray's reading of the Incarnation situates Mary at the centre of an embodied vision of Christianity that disputes the conventional belief in a transcendental God who is 'loftily distant' from the human beings and is 'encountered only through death and resurrection', suffering, deprivation, repression and the denial of the flesh. The written Word (what God was turned into in man's texts and laws) becomes living flesh in the person of Jesus. Mary births the God of love, flesh and reconciliation in whom the human and the divine no longer stand in opposition. Her regenerative act gives 'God back to God',³¹ whom man had appropriated for himself in his texts.

Despite her significance as the human matrix of this new religion, Mary is not seen as divine in herself but only in relation to God. Additionally, Christian orthodoxy sacrifices her body, as it sacrifices that of Christ, to raise her into the higher spiritual world of the Father. Irigaray puts against this debasing view of the flesh a sensible transcendental that transmutes it into a source of divinity. The 'Good News' is that 'the divine can occur within and between bodies'.³² Divinity is not located in a distant Beyond. It is horizontal. It is incarnate in us, in men's and women's bodies.³³ Christ, the new Word, brings the message that proclaims the physical divinity of human beings.

Irigaray's call to 'unseal' Mary 'from her silent "yes"' and 'giv[e] her the word' or to recognise her 'share in creation',³⁴ connects this philosopher's theological liberation of Mary with the liberation of the mother. In order to abandon the economy of masculine desire, Irigaray remarks that women must 'return to the self',³⁵ which means that they should begin to be and love themselves, cultivating the relationship with their mothers, daughters and other women and creating a bond of love with them. Since maternal genealogies have been secondary or nonexistent in androcentric societies, women must re-imagine the maternal-filial bond in ways that move beyond the silence, beyond the subordination to and

deification of the male self, on which female identity has been shaped. This process of mutual becoming demands that the mother may recover her identity as a woman and not be immured 'in the ghetto of a single function'. Women need to rethink the mother in different terms that contribute to her cultural liberation: 'We must refuse to allow her desire to be swallowed up in the law of the father. 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'. According to Irigaray, language is at the core of women's rebirth, as their emancipatory project is intimately linked to the task of finding, rediscovering or inventing a language that conveys their bodily identity.³⁶ This language should also reconstitute the body to the mother, whose creative waters, fluids and organs have been 'negated, denied [and] sacrificed for the construction of an exclusively male symbolic world'.³⁷ Women should find the words that reflect the maternal-filial bond and introduce the mother's body into language, 'the relationship to the mother's body, to our body—sentences that translate the bond between our body, her body, the body of our daughter'.³⁸

I believe that any reconfiguration of the female divine must come to terms with the figure of Mary and the body, her body, which may start to function horizontally among women, instead of governed by a vertical dogmatism. Mary has been the role model of true femininity in the economy of male religious desire. Moreover, as Patricia A. Harrington writes, for women the "'progress" beyond the mother-child relation can be furthered by taking Mary as an object of identification'.³⁹ A *cultural genealogy* fashioned on the values of sexual chastity and selfless motherhood comes into being through the Virgin, which she inculcates in her daughters (or mothers in her daughters) as the pattern of virtue. Irigaray's sensible transcendental challenges the mythification of these values as elements constitutive of female divinity. The sensible transcendental evokes an alternative universe where divinity exists 'among us, within us, as resurrection and transfiguration of blood, of flesh'.⁴⁰ Rather than a source of impurity and sin as they have traditionally been considered, women's bodies are transmuted into a source of divinity.

To the cultural genealogy that dominates the relationship between Mary and women I oppose, therefore, a *carnal maternal genealogy* dependent on a transcendental that inscribes the physicality of the maternal/female body into religion; a transcendental that dissociates the corporeal from sin; and a transcendental that gives women a verbal and visual imagery that celebrates the communal, that which joins the mother's and the daughter's body in a genealogy of the flesh. Identification with Mary comes through the body and through a language that 'speaks the body'.⁴¹ This incarnational language is present already in the writings of Tertullian, as Tina Beattie has shown. In his treatise *On the Flesh of Christ*, he describes Mary's body in

ways that even nowadays may seem offensive to some readers. He talks about the

genital elements in the womb, the filthy curdling of moisture and blood, and of the flesh to be for nine months nourished on that same mire. Draw a picture of the womb getting daily more unmanageable, heavy, self-concerned, safe not even in sleep, uncertain in the whims of dislikes and appetites. Next go all out against the modesty of the travailing woman, a modesty which at least because of danger ought to be respected and because of its nature is sacred.⁴²

Tertullian believed that Mary was a virgin when she conceived the Son of God but not when she brought him forth. In his treatise, the biological rendition of birth and breast-feeding is remarkably vivid. Jesus is ‘bedaubed’ with ‘his afterbirth’⁴³ and is knit to the womb ‘by means of that umbilical cord, as it were an offshoot of his caul’. Tertullian also implies that Mary’s breasts ‘flow ... at the genital experience of the womb, from which the veins pay over into the teat that cess of the lower blood, and in the course of that transfer distil it into the more congenial material of milk’.⁴⁴

Yet, such a biologically exuberant narrative did not intend any exaltation of femaleness; on the contrary, Tertullian resorted to this kind of language for the purpose of emphasising that Jesus was born of God and a ‘human mother’⁴⁵ from whom he received his humanity. Tertullian further sought to refute the members of the docetic sect (particularly Marcion and Apelles) who maintained that Christ had no flesh and was something of a ‘phantasm’⁴⁶ whose body could be seen but was not real. Whereas Tertullian’s aim was to humanise Mary’s body (and, consequently, that of Christ), the authors in the next section try to make Mary’s *humanised* body divine, and hence women’s bodies. I will draw on Irigaray’s concept of maternal genealogy to suggest the mother’s blood as an alternative to the double metonymy—the womb and hymen—that informs to a great extent the perception of Mary’s body in Catholic theology, and which has for centuries conditioned woman’s psychobiological development.

III. MARY’S *SANG ROUGE*

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray contends that the economy of male desire ‘subjects women to a schism that is necessary to symbolic operations: red blood/semblance; body/value-invested envelope; matter/medium of exchange; (re)productive nature/fabricated femininity’.⁴⁷ Irigaray employs the phrase *sang rouge* (red blood) to designate the female genealogy, which is repressed when the woman abandons her relationship

with the mother to be part of the phallogentric genealogy. Margaret Whitford observes that ‘the *sang rouge* is opposed to the *semblant*, or the “other of the same”, which is a homophone for *sang blanc* (white blood). So red blood is opposed to white blood, the maternal genealogy to the economy of the semblance’.⁴⁸ What the Symbolic sacrifices is the red blood and the body, which remain unsaid, unwritten or misrepresented. The father’s genealogy replaces the womb—‘the original matrix’—with ‘the matrix of his language’, which denies representation to the mother’s body, ‘the first nourishing earth, first waters, first sheaths, first membranes in which the *whole* child was held, as well as the *whole* mother, through the mediation of her blood’.⁴⁹

As Jennifer A. Glancy points out, it is easy to imagine Mary’s round pregnant belly, or the infant Jesus suckling at her breast, but, on the whole, the artistic tradition has not depicted her ‘enervated by blood loss or exhausted from lack of sleep ... or propped on another woman’s lap, a midwife squatting in front to receive the child’.⁵⁰ The pictorial or written language that constructs Mary’s body avoids the genital aspects of maternity. Her body is assumed into the white, spiritual realm of the Father and is distanced from the red language of matter and human nature. She is tainted neither with the original sin nor with sexual motherhood. The matrix of man’s language translates her *red* blood into white, chaste and virgin blood. Her maternal function, which, as Irigaray notes, ‘is certainly divine, sets up no genealogy of the divine among women, and in particular between mother and daughter’.⁵¹ Only in the experience of breast-feeding and the white liquid of milk does Mary apparently seem to be one with women in the male realm of the *sang blanc*.

Some of the artworks by Helen Chadwick, Paula Rego, and Kate Hansen accentuate the sense of corporal homogeneity between Mary and women by inscribing into visual discourse the physicality of birth and the notion of biological reciprocity or relationality. Chadwick’s ‘One Flesh’ (1985), a collage of photocopies, blatantly appropriates the iconographic canon of the Madonna and Child paintings to portray a woman breastfeeding her baby and cutting her umbilical cord with a pair of medical scissors. A placenta is the symbolic halo under which this red-cloaked Madonna performs both operations. Chadwick’s subversive composition features a female ‘biological trinity’⁵² constituted by the mother, the daughter and the placenta suspended over them. In ‘The Nativity’ (2002), the Portuguese-born British artist Paula Rego depicts the Virgin in her birth pangs. Mary is dressed in blue and is lying on the ground with nude legs open wide at delivery. She rests her head and shoulders on the lap of a female angel who looks down at her with concerned face.⁵³ In her ‘Madonna and Child’ series of portraits, the Canadian artist Kate Hansen elevates real, ordinary women to the sanctity accorded to Mary, which

occurs through the act of giving birth, breastfeeding and the joy and beauty of maternal love. Hansen divinises maternity by painting golden haloes around the heads of these women and their children. Some of the portraits are tender breastfeeding scenes. In the words of Hansen, these 'modern Madonnas Lactans are a true celebration of motherhood': 'there is an aura of joy, bliss and awe surrounding a breastfeeding mother, as she seems to embody the fundamental divinity of motherhood, the Gaia and the Virgin Mary'.⁵⁴ These portraits gained public notoriety after Facebook decided to censor them because of their alleged obscenity. Another of Hansen's compositions, 'Childbirth Portrait with Gold Leaf' (2010), shows a midwife holding in joy a newborn between the mother's legs. The uncut umbilical cord still ties her body to that of the baby, whose head is surrounded by a large halo.

In the last part of my paper, I would like to concentrate on a group of poems by the North American writer Anne Marie Macari that remain relatively unexplored and which, like the previous pictorial representations, are grounded in an incarnational vision of the flesh's sacredness reminiscent of Irigaray. Macari experiments with a new imagery for Mary that seeks its roots in both the biological and emotional pulsions of the maternal body. The title of the collection, *Gloryland* (2005), refers to the body, as the author explains in an interview: 'Although "Gloryland" comes from a spiritual ... (I have a home in Gloryland that outshines the sun), the Gloryland of the poems began, over the time of writing the book, to transform from a far off heaven to the heaven of the body.... it began to seem that being here, on earth, in these bodies, was enough of a miracle'.⁵⁵

Several poems in the volume come together under the theme of motherhood. According to Macari, culture and even women have minimised the act of giving birth. In the Gospels, Mary is 'the Virgin ... who conceived and gave birth magically, as if her body had nothing to do with it'. In place of this ethereal absence of the flesh, Macari presents Mary as 'a living mother who gave birth with her body, as we all do'.⁵⁶ 'Mary's Blood',⁵⁷ the opening poem, qualifies the maternal body as the physiological architect of Christ's flesh and juxtaposes this image to the tropic language that restructures reality and re-creates it in the form of similes and metaphors that show a passive picture of Mary: 'It was Mary's blood made him, her blood / sieved through meaty placenta to feed him, / grow him, though Luke wrote she was no more / than the cup he was planted in' (ll. 1-4). Mary is robbed of the language that describes the physicality of her woman's body growing and birthing the Messiah. The divinity of these acts, the maternal origin they reveal, is lost in a warped matrix of spiritual tropes. From the beginning, the text spotlights the dualistic tension between the materiality of birth and the fact of being fatefully possessed by a language that shuns the flesh and shapes a divine that exists beyond the sensory, either as an

abstraction or as a literal metaphor. The ornate words of the Symbolic spiritualise the moment of conception by enveloping it in the rhetoric of the mystic or incorporeal union with God, who comes to Mary 'like light / through glass, like a fingerprint left on glass' (ll. 7-8).

The poem replaces this heliotropic language with an obstetrical imagery that brings Mary's experience closer to that of women. The realistic vocabulary employed in the description of her pregnant and, later on, parturient body confronts the rapture of figurative speech and its negation of the mother's body. Like other women, Mary grows 'caul to wrap' the child (l. 35). His head 'rubb[s] her cervix' (l. 13). She 'spread[s] her legs' during birth (ll. 17-18) and cries out in pain 'as the small head crowned' (l. 22), her pelvis swings 'wide to push him' till he comes out of her (ll. 23-24). He is not wrapped in the white light of the Father but he is 'soiled' and 'lit with her own gore' (ll. 27, 26). The inversion of the scriptural tropes that prophesy Mary's virginal delivery (e.g., Ezekiel's simile of the 'shut gate') opens another space for textual representation. Jesus passes through the birth canal ('the wall of this world', ll. 24-25) and emerges through the 'door' (l. 35) she grows for him in her flesh, which he 'split [s]' (l. 23) and cracks open: 'it means / mother to crack open' (ll. 28-29). While Christ's blood redeems human beings through his death, her blood redeems them by giving him life.

The prodigious architectonics of fleshly creation within Mary's womb, her birth pangs and her emotional response during these stages not only intend to humanise her. More unconventionally, Macari also appropriates Mary's body in order to reflect a communal female experience. In fact, the text plays on a horizontal relationship between mother and daughter—Mary and women—who share the same body morphology, the same anxieties during pregnancy or the anguish and pain of parturition. This corporeal and psychological parity runs through the two succeeding poems. In 'New York, 1927',⁵⁸ a woman recalls her grandmother's thoughts and feelings during her difficult childbirth, empathising with her in the ordeal of maternity. This woman's grandmother, called Mary, gives birth to her first son after nearly two days of painful labour. Verbal echoes connect her to the biblical Mary: just as Jesus, the 'first-born' (Luke 2:7), 'opens' the womb of Mary (Luke 2:23), so this woman's 'first-born ... unlock[s] her for the others' (ll. 21-22).

'Night Feeding'⁵⁹ praises the deep physical and emotional intimacy between a mother and her newborn as she suckles him. The notion of carnal-linguistic mutuality is reinforced through the vocabulary of maternal corporeality ('pelvis', 'cord', 'nipples', 'breasts', 'milk') that binds this poem to 'Mary's Blood' and 'No Prophecy'. The child's rooting mouth searches for his mother's breast and 'the cord he pulls' reaches into her ankle and 'travels up / the inside of [her] leg ... to the nipple itself' (ll. 11-15). His hungry sucking tugs her 'into the muscle of [her] heart' (l. 8). She

is 'all water, all milk, from the soup / of the pelvis to [her] wet eyes' (ll. 9-10). Like Mary, the woman in 'Night Feeding' sustains the infant with her milk. Like Mary, too, this woman is a symbol of creation. She gazes at the babe she has 'made' (l. 23). She is 'undone / by exhaustion' (ll. 21-22) and her body still burns with pain where he 'left her ripped and bloody' (ll. 32-34), which reminds us of Mary's 'rent' flesh. These thematic and verbal echoes move forwards and backwards in time, place, and outside of them to create a genealogy of birth stories that join women together. In the miracle of virginal delivery, however, only her emotions are permitted to Mary. Her body is transformed into the mirror that reflects God's spirituality. In contrast, Macari's poems try to capture the words that convey the emotional and bodily fluids (since both exist in a mutual dialogue) that run through every inch of Mary and these women as they carry the children in the womb, give birth or suckle.

At the beginning of the book, the cycle from pregnancy to breastfeeding is split into three poems and seen through three different women. Yet, they are all linked by the experience of maternity. The opening poem shows Mary's blood feeding and growing the foetus and pictures the instant of delivery when 'her inside' is expelled 'outside' in pain (ll. 27-28). Her namesake's complicated childbirth is the subject of 'New York, 1927'. This poem is followed by 'Night Feeding'. The absence of a nominal and temporal referent in this text helps to heighten the sense of commonality, as the woman who breastfeeds her child may be any woman. Something similar happens in 'As If the Body',⁶⁰ where an inclusive 'she' is used in the description of a woman's contraction pains. Interestingly, this poem is preceded by 'No Prophecy',⁶¹ which depicts Mary's full pregnant body a day before birth.

'No Prophecy' celebrates the holiness of Mary's maternal flesh beyond the rhetoric of miracles and prophecies that transubstantiates her body into something sacred. Mary feels estranged from her present self (the statue she has become for the faithful) and from the magical stories that recount her Son's birth: 'Shouldn't what happened be enough? / Without angels or stars, no prophecy / no miracles with Mary attended / by messengers from above' (ll. 8-11). The poem converts her pregnant body into a chalice of holiness already from the anonymous days before Nativity: her flesh, her mouth, her tongue, her lips, her nipples, her 'swollen breasts' (l. 18) and her huge belly 'crisscrossed with blue veins' (l. 17). These final lines shape a sensuous liturgy of her woman's flesh.

In this paper, I have explored the possibilities that a horizontal genealogy of the flesh offers in attempting other modes of relationship between Mary and women. As Macari's poems reveal, this genealogy is also a genealogy of words shared by mother and daughter, by Mary and

women, which connects them through their maternal experience. According to Irigaray, cultures ‘have forced us to repress the female genealogies’ and to repress blood ‘because it is associated with female-maternal genealogies’.⁶² This repression is also linguistic. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, she alludes to the ‘decorative sepulcher’ of language that strips woman of her self and stifles her beneath eulogistic or negative metaphors.⁶³ The image of the sepulchre likewise conveys the cultural and linguistic sacrifice of the mother’s body. Language is the specular reflection of man’s imaginary, which ‘castrates’ woman of her words. As Irigaray says, the Symbolic creates ‘*blanks* in discourse which recall the places of [woman’s] exclusion and which, by their *silent plasticity*, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms’.⁶⁴ In Mary, these linguistic blanks negate the carnal and castrate her of these words. No possibility of transcendental immanence exists for women’s bodies within a religious system in which her maternal flesh is made her (linguistic) other.

The need to reconceptualise Mary must therefore include the body. For Christians, Jesus’ birth through Mary should not only imply the sacralisation of her flesh but also the sacralisation of women. The mystery of Christ’s incarnation has been inextricable from the ethereality of his mother’s body. In addition, the belief in her asexuality subtends the notion of women’s carnal impurity. In exalting the virginal birth, traditional Mariology cut Mary off from the female line of birth stories before and after her. To see Mary through the maternal body as a woman like the rest does not debase her but, on the contrary, it brings her closer to women and it may bring Catholicism closer to less hierarchical perceptions of the female body. The carnal maternal genealogy that is not broken in Mary but continues through her weaves a sense of corporeal relationality among women, who may feel more closely identified with Mary. The traditional (dogmatic) discourse about her still perpetuates itself in many texts. As I have tried to show, some contemporary authors replace the blanks and echoes in this discourse with a visual and verbal liturgy of the female/maternal body as presence, as images and words deeply rooted in the creative, biological plasticity of Mary’s flesh and blood.

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¹ L. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 46.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³ Although Irigaray's sensible transcendental and the feminine divine have received considerable critical attention, the possibilities that her theories offer for a re-evaluation of the figure of Mary remain comparatively less explored. Tina Beattie has made the most outstanding contribution in this respect. Special mention deserve her two books *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002) and *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ I introduced this Mariology of the Body in its double aspect of the sexual and maternal body in a previous essay. See M.M. Perez-Gil, 'Contemporary Transformations of the Myth of the Virgin Mary in Women's Literature', in *The Survival of Myth: Innovation, Singularity and Alterity*, eds. P. Hardwick and D. Kennedy (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 207-26. In the present article, I consider Mary's maternal body from an Irigarayan perspective and argue for a biological reconceptualization of the notion of *sang rouge* and the maternal genealogy.

⁵ *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ascension.html>; accessed 7 March 2010.

⁶ Beattie points out that some of the patristic texts interpret this circumstance as a symbol of female redemption through Mary, who ends the negative association between parturition and pain that began through Eve. Beattie, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

⁷ Hildegard of Bingen, qtd. in B. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 176.

⁸ *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, ed. M.T. Harris (Mahwah, NJ: The Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 203-4.

⁹ *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*; <http://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/ccco.htm>; accessed 7 March 2010.

¹⁰ Proclus of Constantinople, Homily I, 'On the Holy Virgin Theotokos Delivered while Nestorius was seated in the Great Church of Constantinople', *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1-5* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 137.

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- ¹⁵ *Birgitta of Sweden*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ¹⁷ Gertrude of Helfta, qtd. in J. Tasioulas, “‘Heaven and Earth in Little Space’: The Foetal Existence of Christ in Medieval Literature and Thought”, *Medium Aevum* 76.1 (2007), p. 30.
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- ²⁰ Irigaray, *Sexes*, p. 16.
- ²¹ T. Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, ed. H. Stanton (London: Mowbray, 1997), p. 70.
- ²² Proclus of Constantinople, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- ²³ Hildegard of Bingen, ‘O quam preciosa’, *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 134-5.
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- ²⁵ Irigaray, *Sexes*, p. 19.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ²⁸ L. Irigaray, ‘The Redemption of Women’, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, ed. L. Irigaray (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 160.
- ²⁹ This is the title of the last chapter of Irigaray’s book *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 164-90.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186, 171, 176.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 186.
- ³³ I disagree with Irigaray’s tendency to essentialise the divine, causing her over-idealisation of the feminine. While she concedes that divinity also resides in men, she sees in women an ‘almost natural disposition to the divine’, a disposition that ‘does not tolerate the domination over nature, over the world, even arrogance towards them’. L. Irigaray, ‘The Age of the Breath’, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, p. 167.
- ³⁴ Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, pp. 171, 176.
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