

## Witnessing Dignity Luce Irigaray on Mothers, Genealogy and the Divine

*I interweave feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's writings on feminine genealogies and the feminine divine with legal theorist Drucilla Cornell's book Legacies of Dignity, which she wrote in honour of her mother. I explore Cornell's book as an Irigarayan exercise to establish a feminine genealogy. I suggest that the creation of a feminine genealogy is indispensable to the recognition of a feminine divine. Conversely, a feminine divine is necessary to uphold a feminine genealogy. In other words, empowering the mother-daughter relationship makes possible—and is made possible by—the creation of a feminine transcendental or divine. By recognizing the full humanity of our mothers we challenge the relegation of women to the natural realm thus opening up the spiritual realm to women. We thus make possible the imagining of a feminine divine. At the same time, recognizing a feminine divine upholds a feminine genealogy by providing the symbolic power necessary to support women's becoming.*

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother and daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother.

—Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (1997: 1)

No Jacob's ladder is there to help us climb back to the mother.

Jacob's ladder always moves up to heaven, toward the father and his kingdom.

—Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993b: 15)

In high school English class I received the typical assignment to write an essay about my hero. I wrote about my father, a son of immigrants who after more than 20 years working in a job he did not find fully satisfying decided to go back to school to pursue his dreams. I remember wondering why my first reaction to the assignment was not to write about my mother. I now wonder: Was it impossible for me to write that essay about my mother? I remember dismissively asking my mother a few years earlier than that high school assignment whether she had ever run a road race—which I was doing for the first time—or read the book I had recently discovered. I recall vividly the look of shock—and hurt—on my mother’s face, and now, perhaps, I am coming to understand why: Was my mother not a hero candidate because I did not see her as a full person? To ask a “Sex and the City”-esque question: Why are fathers our heroes and our mothers ... well ... our mothers?

Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (1932-) believes that shedding light onto what she calls the dark continent (the mother-daughter relationship) of the “dark continent” (how Freud referred to female sexuality) is critical to opening up possibilities for female becoming. Revealing and unleashing the power of the mother-daughter relationship will change the way women relate to each other and to the divine, thinks Irigaray. By narrating the lives of our mothers we recognize them as full persons, beyond their “natural” role of child-bearing, thereby making our mothers not only naturally important to us, but also spiritually important. Through this recognition that our mothers are not only our natural mothers, but our cultural and spiritual mothers as well, we open the space for the recognition of a feminine divine. Conversely, enacting the recognition feminine divine will create the symbolic room for mothers and daughters to relate to one another as full persons. In other words, empowering the mother-daughter relationship makes possible—and is made possible by—the creation of a feminine transcendental or divine.

In the first part of this essay I explore why it is so difficult for us, as daughters, to narrate the lives of our mothers. In the second section, I explore philosopher and legal theorist Drucilla Cornell’s recent book, *Legacies of Dignity: Between Women and Generations* (2002), as an Irigarayan exercise to establish a women’s genealogy. In the third section, I show how the establishment of a women’s genealogy creates the space for a feminine divine. In the final section, I explore the necessity of symbols of a feminine divine to uphold this genealogy of women. I suggest, with Irigaray, that a culture that recognizes the mother-daughter relationship as important will only be possible if symbols of the mother-daughter relationship are present in the important, culture-shaping arena of religion and spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Mother of mothers**

Patriarchy’s “staying power” lies in its ability to make love between women—particularly mothers and daughters—difficult. According to Irigaray, within patriarchy, women are reduced to the tasks of reproduction and

nurturing. It is difficult, even for women, to recognize their mothers as full persons within this society. Irigaray believes that western society has been built upon the womb of the mother. She writes,

The culture, the language, the imaginary and the mythology in which we live at present ... let us look at what foundations this edifice is built upon. ... All of western culture rests on the murder of the mother.... And if we make the foundation of the social order shift, everything shifts. (Irigaray, 1991: 47)

When we challenge the premise of society—the forgetting of the mother—we challenge everything.

The reduction of women to the task of reproduction has limited women's horizon of becoming. Because motherhood has been the only acceptable role for women to do as women,<sup>2</sup> the place of mother is vied for amongst women, even with our own mothers. Irigaray writes,

If we are to be desired and loved by men, we must abandon our mothers, substitute for them, eliminate them in order to be the *same*. All of which destroys the possibility of a love between mother and daughter. The two become at once accomplices and rivals in order to move into the single possible position in the desire of man. This competition equally paralyzes love among sister-women. Because they strive to achieve the post of *the unique one: the mother of mothers*, one might say. (1993a: 102, original emphasis)

Love between mother and daughter is broken because “the woman must leave her mother in order to become a mother” (1993b: 131). Because women are competing for one position—the Mother of mothers—there is neither room for love or respect of differences among women nor a language to speak about real differences between women. According to Irigaray, the result of not having a proper place in society is that women tend to have an undifferentiated, fused identity with their mothers and sisters with the only avenue for any possible differentiation being competition. We are confined to speaking in competitive terms, such as “more than,” “less than,” “like me,” etc—terms that can only measure quantitative difference rather than qualitative differences.

In order to create room for love between women, we, as daughters, need to begin the hard work of recognizing our mothers as persons. This does *not* mean denying the value of our mothers' personhood in relation to the family, but rather means *also* recognizing our mothers as political, artistic, and spiritual beings. According to Irigaray, we must reclaim the maternal as a life-giving force in all of culture: “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. But this creation has been

forbidden us for centuries, and we must reappropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women” (1993b: 18).

### On the dignity of women

In *Legacies of Dignity: Between Women and Generations*, Drucilla Cornell bears witness to the dignity of her mother’s death through bearing witness to the dignity of her mother’s life. Her book arises from a promise to her mother to write a book dedicated to her that would bear witness to the dignity of her death and, also, a book that would be understood by her mother’s bridge class. In order to bear witness to the dignity of her mother’s death, Cornell chooses to bear witness to her life, to the life of her grandmother, and to the lives of other women. She writes, “Bearing witness to my mother’s death as she saw it—as an exercise of her moral freedom<sup>3</sup>—can be done only indirectly by discussing how one witnesses to the dignity of the other” (Cornell 2002, xviii). From her mother’s life and death comes a book “about mothers and daughters and intergenerational friendship and love between women” (xviii).

In order to have intergenerational love between women we need to have respect for each other’s dignity, thinks Cornell. She defines dignity by pointing to it in literature. Nanny, in Zora Neale Hurston’s book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, speaks about dignity:

Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfil my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Da’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can stop you from wishin’. You can’t beat nobody down so low till you can rob ’em of they will. Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neighther. (1990: 16)

Dignity lies in the inability of others to take away our will. Dignity is in our resistance and our broken dreams which are passed on to our daughters as the hope that things will not always be the way they are. This ability to dream of a different world speaks to our dignity.

Cornell weaves the interconnection between dignity and mourning. It is through recognizing the dignity of our mother that we will be able to mourn for what we and our mothers have lost. Cornell writes, “Of course, we can grieve for them, but mourning, at least as I am defining it, demands that we recognize that there was someone else, someone other than our fantasies of them, that we have lost” (xx). In our retellings of the stories of women, we are called to excavate, imagine and mourn.<sup>4</sup> “To claim dignity when it has been denied, as in Nanny’s case, is already to transform the world. Once the dream is dreamt, the demand is made; it begins to echo in the ears of others,” writes Cornell (2). Through the work of mourning and recognition of our mothers as persons, we will create an echo in our ear which reminds us that we too are full persons worthy of respect. We tell the stories of our grandmothers, mothers, ourselves

so that our daughters might “be able to dream what we cannot yet dream and live out that which we can barely conceive” (xx).

Cornell recognizes that our mothers and grandmothers were denied the psychic space in which to actualize their dreams. She calls this space the imaginary domain—the psychic space within which and through which we are able to individuate ourselves. The imaginary domain is shaped by our relations with others and the images they have of us. It is this space which makes it simple, difficult, possible or impossible to claim our dignity. Oftentimes, the imaginary domain stifled more than women’s ability to actualize their dreams, but also their ability to dream in the first place. Cornell writes about her mother’s inability to dream:

My mother experienced the space of dreams not as closed, but as foreclosed, something so lost it could not even be sought after. She experienced this until the end of her life. Then she began to mourn its loss and to see that life as a “proper lady” was not one she wanted to continue to enact (24).

Our imaginary domains “color the way in which we envision ourselves, but do not determine the reach of our imagination in dreaming up who else we might be” (29). This is what Cornell calls dignity: the ability, even within small and negative psychic spaces, to dream of a different self and a different world. Cornell’s story of her mother shows that a person may dare to dream and claim her dignity when least expected, even at the end of their life. For Cornell, to have dignity is to be human; even if we are psychically unable to claim our dignity, it is still there. Cornell defends respect for dignity as the mandate to view all people as people who *in principle* can articulate their desires (29).

Cornell’s project is to mourn the loss of dreams, to claim her mother’s and grandmother’s dignity for them, and to dream the dreams which they were not allowed to dream. At the same time, thinks Cornell, we must recognize the times when our mothers did claim their dignity and tell these stories to our children. We must share with our children how our mothers and grandmothers were busy dreaming dreams not only for their lives, but for the lives of their daughter and granddaughters. Through reclaiming our mother’s and grandmother’s dreams, we will create the space for our own dreaming and this space for dreaming will be passed on to our daughters. Within this enlarged psychic space, it will become increasingly possible for women to claim and live out their dignity and desires.

Both Cornell and Irigaray recognize the difficulty in recognizing our own mothers. Through recognizing our mothers as full persons, we lose the dream that they are everything to us, or, more precisely, that we are everything to them. “But to talk to one’s mother as a woman presupposes saying goodbye to an all-powerful mother, accepting that one’s mother isn’t the all-protector, the ultimate amorous recourse, the refuge against abandonment,” says Irigaray

(Irigaray 2000: 21). Cornell adds that because of our internalization of patriarchal stereotypes of mothers, we flee our mothers and any association with them. Our biggest fear is becoming our mothers. According to Irigaray and Cornell, it is the very thing that we love about our mothers, namely their never-ending love for us, that makes us fear becoming our mothers.

Cornell argues that by losing our “mothers” we will gain women with whom we will be able to have a relationship and from whom we will inherit personhood. If the woman is an actively desiring subject—in family, but also in love, in work, in writing, in politics—the relationship with the child will by its very nature be marked by a third, which will protect the child and mother from fusion, thinks Cornell. A mother who lives her life with dignity in many arenas, including, but beyond the nurturing of her child, will pass this dignity on to her child. Through telling the stories of our mothers’ dignity, we create a larger story of dignity and dreams being passed on through generations of women. Through this telling, Cornell participates in an Irigarayan exercise to establish a specifically feminine genealogy.

### **Carving out a space for the feminine divine through genealogy**

Earlier, I noted that the “staying power” of patriarchy lies in its ability to make love between mothers and daughters impossible. On a larger scale, patriarchy makes a genealogy of women impossible and, thus, women have a limited cultural and symbolic story within which to place their own lives. In the quote from Anita Diamant’s novel (1997) *The Red Tent* with which I began this essay, Diamant recreates the words and inner life of Dinah, the sister of Joseph and daughter of Jacob. This quote illustrates the Hebrew Scriptures’ forgetting of Dinah as a person and of the intergenerational stories of women in general. Irigaray writes about the suppression of women’s genealogy: “In some way, the vertical dimension is always being taken away from female becoming. The bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, has to be broken for the daughter to become a woman. Female genealogy has to be suppressed, on behalf of the son-Father relationship, and the idealization of the father and husband as patriarchs” (Irigaray, 1993b: 108).

The suppression of the genealogy of women correlates to the reduction of women to the role of natural reproduction. The key to challenging the relegation of women to the natural realm, then, lies in creating a genealogy specific to women. The creation of a genealogy for women—the “putting into words” the lives of women—is important because women have traditionally been denied the right to define, through words, their own world. To put the mother-daughter relationship into words is to raise the mother from her position as the substrate upon which culture is built into culture itself. Through a genealogy of women, we will be able to create our own language, ethics and culture. Within this world, we will no longer have to vie for the ultimate place of mother because we will: a) recognize ourselves and our mothers as more than natural, interchangeable placeholders, but rather as persons who are irreducibly

unique and b) be able to speak about our differences in a non-competitive way because we will not always be measuring ourselves in terms adopted by a male world.

Recognizing our mothers and creating a feminine genealogy counteracts the ability of patriarchy to make love between women impossible. By recognizing our mothers and creating a feminine genealogy we create a world for women constituted by a vertical—constituted by mother-daughter and daughter-mother relationships—and horizontal dimension—constituted by love among women and sisters. Without a vertical dimension love among women cannot take place. Irigaray writes,

Within themselves, among themselves, women need both of these dimensions ... if they are to act ethically ... Because this horizon has still to be built, women cannot merely remain a horizontality, ground for the male erection. Women must construct a world in all its and their dimensions. A universe, not merely for the other, as they have been asked to do in the past, as keepers of the home and children, mothers, in the name of property, the laws, the rights, and obligations of the other's State (1993a: 108-109).

By creating this world for women, we not only inaugurate the recognition of women beyond their role of reproduction, but we also create room for the recognition of a feminine divine. By recognizing women as not only natural, bodily beings but also cultural and spiritual humans, we challenge the assumption that the divine is always already male. Through creating a genealogy of women, we inaugurate, within ourselves and within society in general, recognition of the cultural, symbolic and spiritual importance of women's lives. We thus directly challenge the suppression of women's spirituality, spiritual becoming and the possibility of a feminine divine. Creating a feminine genealogy is important because it challenges the reduction of females to nature and males to culture, thus creating room for a feminine divine.

### **Divine images of the mother-daughter relationship**

While creating a feminine genealogy is necessary to open the space for a feminine divine, the recognition of a feminine divine is important in sustaining a feminine genealogy. Without a specifically feminine divine, thinks Irigaray, we still live within a world where women are not fully recognized as both naturally and spiritually important. In order to ensure that the vertical dimension of the mother-daughter relationship creates the possibility for a new ethic, the mother-daughter relationship must be spiritually recognized. Irigaray believes that "a vertical dimension is necessary for female freedom, and that this dimension is made up of the genealogical relation and, at the same time, of woman's relation to the divine" (Muraro, 1994: 325).

The recognition of a feminine divine is important for the sustenance of a

feminine genealogy. First, as we examined in the previous section, women must be recognized as both naturally and spiritually important. The recognition of a feminine divine reinforces this recognition. Second, religion holds the symbolic power to create images and signposts for living. To use Cornell's term, our imaginary domains widen when we see ourselves, and the mother-daughter relationship, reflected in religious symbols. Third, women, like men, need to be able to project/reflect themselves in the divine realm.

While our divine images revolve around the Father-son relationship, we have limited representations of the mother-son relationship, and barely any images of a mother-daughter relationship. Mary, the most significant female in Christian thought, is truly the Mother of mothers. Given this, Irigaray recalls the time when she was surprised by a representation of the mother-daughter couple. "In the museum there is a statue of a woman who resembles Mary, Jesus's mother, sitting with the child before her on her knee, facing the observer. I was admiring this beautiful wooden sculpture when I noticed that this Jesus was a girl! That had a very significant effect on me, one of jubilation—mental and physical!" (1993c: 25). After seeing this statue of Mary and her mother Anne, which she had first mistaken for Jesus and Mary, she describes her feelings: "... joyous, in touch with my body, my emotions, and my history as a woman" (1993c: 25). If our relationships were reflected in the divine and if we could see the divine being reflected in our relationships, our relationships with women would gain a spiritual dimension. Further, by symbolizing the mother-daughter relationship in the spiritual realm, we can place our own mother-daughter relationship within the larger picture of a genealogy of women.

Like Ludwig Feuerbach (1957), Irigaray believes that humanity does and should project an idealized image of itself onto the divine. This divine, for Irigaray, is a horizon of becoming; God is the possibility for humanity's future. "God is the mirror of man," wrote Feuerbach (1957: 63), but "Woman has no mirror wherewith to become women," responds Irigaray (1993b: 67). While "Man is able to exist because God helps him define his gender (genre), helps him orient his finiteness in reference to infinity" (61), women have no God. Irigaray writes, "Having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. In order to *become*, we need some shadowy perception of achievement..." (67). Women need a God so that they can have a horizon of becoming specific to women, or else they will still, ultimately, live within the horizon of man's becoming.

Love between women is impossible when we live in a world which is not our own within which we have to vie for the place of Mother of mothers. Women's becoming, thinks Irigaray, is being stifled by women's relegation to the natural realm. Without vertical access to the transcendental, women will continue to be confined to living in a world which is not really their own. In Irigaray's words, "The only diabolical thing about women is their lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of God, they are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut themselves off from



themselves and one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfilment” (Irigaray, 1993b: 64).

To create a world for women within which women are recognized as full persons irreducible to one another and we are able to love one another, we must have *both* a genealogy of women and a feminine divine. Learning to love our mothers as full persons is perhaps our most immediate and most individual task within the larger collective task of building a world for women with our own genealogy and divine. We, like Drucilla Cornell did in her book *Legacies of Dignity: Between Women and Generations*, need to excavate the stories of our mothers. My task, perhaps, is to return to my ninth-grade assignment and narrate the life of my mother as a full subject in love, in work, in play, in politics and in religion.

The importance of the mother–daughter relationship cannot be underestimated. “The mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship is an extremely explosive nucleus in our societies. Conceiving it and changing it amounts to disturbing the patriarchal order,” says Irigaray (2000: 21). The importance of unearthing the mother–daughter relationship lies in its potential to unsettle the patriarchal association of the feminine with the natural and the masculine with the spiritual and to blur the traditional distinction between natural and spiritual. Put simply: “The mother–daughter couple is also divine,” states Irigaray (1993b: 132). To claim the right to a natural and spiritual life for women is to undermine the patriarchal order.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The examples in this essay of religious symbols will be drawn from Christianity because those are among the examples offered by Luce Irigaray, who was raised Roman Catholic, and the religious tradition with which I am most familiar.

<sup>2</sup>Women have been allowed to enter the edifice of society, but only if they do so as men.

<sup>3</sup>After ten years of enduring numerous illnesses, Drucilla’s mother chose to end her own life. Cornell writes: “She wanted me to witness to the process in which she claimed her own person through an exercise of the right to die” (2002: xviii).

<sup>4</sup>Cornell writes, “Often when we look back through the history of women’s lives we seem to find a grim wasteland of broken spirits, victims of their own internalized oppression. But when we impute dignity to those souls, our vision of them changes. Their worth appears to us in such a way that we can, at least, undertake to excavate, or when that fails, imagine, who or what they might have been in that struggle. If we are to remember, we must learn to mourn. Yes, there have been many women . . . who were so constrained by circumstance they could not begin to fulfil their dreams of womanhood. Actual slavery is an extreme example, but we all know, from the history of our own mothers, the should have beens, the could have beens, of an unrealized life” (xx).

<sup>5</sup>At the same time as women are denied access to the transcendent, men have

been denied (or denied themselves) access to the natural. Irigaray believes that undermining the patriarchal order will allow men to reconnect with the natural, including their bodies.

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