Against Matricide: Rethinking Subjectivity and the Maternal Body

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In this article I critically re-examine Julia Kristeva's view that becoming a speaking subject requires psychical matricide: violent separation from the maternal body. I propose an alternative, non-matricidal conception of subjectivity, in part by drawing out anti-matricidal strands in Kristeva's own thought, including her view that early mother–child relations are triangular. Whereas she understands this triangle in terms of a first imaginary father, I re-interpret this triangle using Donald Winnicott's idea of potential space and Jessica Benjamin's idea of an intersubjective space of thirdness. I argue that this space provides a maternal third term: a relation of connection and difference between two, a relation that inherits the affective, mobile, generative qualities of the maternal body as the infant (according to Kristeva) imagines it. This connecting space allows both mothers and children to emerge as subjects in their own right. I then suggest that potential-maternal space expands into language, so that language intrinsically allows the possibility of a speaking position of connection with the mother. Entrance into language need not entail separation or matricide: the problem is not language as such but the particular way that speech and logos have been defined historically.

"For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* of our individuation," Kristeva declares (1989, 38).[1] For Kristeva, becoming a subject requires that one separate from one's primary relations with the mother and her body, a "matricidal" separation because it involves deep psychical violence. Kristeva defends the necessity of matricide because she retains a version of the traditional psychoanalytic view that the paternal figure is necessary as the "third term" to break up the mother–child dyad and introduce the child into language and social life.[2] This idea of the civilizing

father originates with Freud and Lacan, and although Kristeva transforms this idea, considerably qualifying the father's role and giving much greater cultural significance to the mother, she never altogether abandons it.[3] In this article I want to move away more completely from the traditional psychoanalytic view that subject-formation requires a paternal third term. This view is problematic not only because of the sexed hierarchy that it enshrines—the father and his word *versus* the mother and her body—but also because it reinforces the traditional gender division of labor whereby mothers nurture young children at home while fathers are relatively distant breadwinners and law-enforcers. I will propose an alternative, non-matricidal conception of subject-formation: a conception of how we might become speaking subjects in relations of difference from and continuity with our mothers and the maternal body.[4]

Despite her defense of matricide, Kristeva's work is very helpful for developing this alternative. This is because she qualifies and transforms the idea of the paternal third term, and reappraises early maternal relations, in ways that point in anti-matricidal directions. Anti-matricidal strands of thought are woven into her important concepts of the maternal *chora* and the semiotic. I will expand on these anti-matricidal ideas and try to extricate them from the pro-matricidal ideas with which Kristeva entwines them.[5] In particular, I will draw on Kristeva's account of a form of triangulation that already exists within the early mother–child relation, although she understands its third term in terms of an imaginary father. I reinterpret this triangular mother–child structure in terms of Donald Winnicott's idea of potential space, especially as Jessica Benjamin has recently reconceived it, as an intersubjective space of thirdness between two subjects. I interpret this space as a *maternal* third term, a relational space that inherits the features of the maternal body as the young child (according to Kristeva) imagines it. Consequently the developing child becomes situated in a maternal space, which simultaneously enables mothers to emerge as subjects in their own right, distinct from this imaginary space.

I then suggest that potential-maternal space expands into language, so that language intrinsically allows the possibility of a speaking position of connection with the mother. Entrance into language need not in itself entail separation or matricide. The problem is not language *per se* but the particular way that speech and *logos* have been defined under patriarchy. Language as maternal space has the potential to support an alternative, non-matricidal, mode of subject-formation—but a potential unrealized under patriarchy.

However, this emphasis upon the maternal dimensions of subjectivity might seem to reinforce, rather than contest, the patriarchal norm for mothers to bear more-or-less exclusive child-care responsibilities.[6] In my final section, I will suggest that subjectivity and language are maternal in a way that makes them inherently open to being paternal as well. This enables me to suggest some possibilities for re-imagining the paternal figure as embodied and affective, no longer

the severe law-giver. This re-imagining would provide support, at the imaginary level, for full participation in child care by men and fathers at the social level. By rethinking subjectivity and language as maternal, then, I hope ultimately to contribute to dismantling the traditional, unjust gender division of labor.

1. Ambiguities of Matricide in Kristeva

Why does Kristeva see psychical matricide as necessary for becoming a subject? In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she understands being a subject in terms of not only having lived experience but also giving one's experience meaning, actively connecting its elements within narrative forms and conventions. To be a subject is not just to undergo experience but to *author* its meaning, and for this one must implicitly situate oneself *as* its author, implicitly assuming a position as one uniting parts of speech into sentences and representations into judgments. This means ascribing to oneself both unity under the function "I" (Kristeva 1984, 23) and a level of agency and autonomy sufficient to construct meanings: to take enough distance from the given linguistic field to manipulate and redeploy existing meanings. This self-positioning is not conscious but tacit, manifested in speaking style (15).

For Kristeva, this speaking position presupposes a particular psychical organization. To assume a level of unity, autonomy, mastery, and so on, one must separate from one's infantile, directly corporeal and affective dependency on the maternal body, because in that dependency one was not yet unified but more-or-less dispersed across and caught up in affective flows orchestrated by the maternal body. Yet this infantile-maternal stratum of the self always returns into speech as its material-semiotic aspect: its expressive rhythms, intonations, affective, and sonorous qualities. This undermines the speaking subject's mastery and unity, yet also enables meaning by infusing speech with affective depth and richness (McAfee 2000, 68). The speaking subject, then, must posit itself as a unitary agent, but finds this position undone in its very speaking. It is only ever a subject-in-process, constantly fractured and reconstituted. By no means the traditional Enlightenment subject, this is a subject whose autonomy is relational (Beardsworth 2004): one who can exercise autonomy only insofar as he or she also remains immersed in relations with others and in bodily drives and affects.

Processual and fractured as it is, subjectivity remains organized by the break with early maternal relations:

> The individual's socialization . . . requires that this primitive relationship with the mother be repressed or sublimated. The incest taboo, which is constitutive of the social order as well as the order of language, is in the end a mother taboo for the boy and for the girl. (Kristeva 1996, 14)

This break can only ever be incomplete and partial but, Kristeva maintains, socialization requires that it take place to some extent. For this, one must identify with the father who "represents the symbolic moment of separation" (119)—that is, with "the 'paternal' position—the differentiation, distance, and prohibition that produces meaning" (Kristeva 1987, 29). For Kristeva, the position of speaking subject is structurally paternal: one must take the father-figure as the idealized bearer of the separateness, unity, autonomy, and distance to which one aspires (not necessarily the biological father, but someone taken to embody these qualities). These qualities can only ever be partly realized, but the striving toward them still structures subjectivity-in-process. The subject's position therefore remains structurally paternal even though its speech is permeated by and expresses maternal currents.

Despite defining subjectivity as paternal, Kristeva stresses that the maternal body *already* cultivates the infant (Oliver 1993). In this respect, she integrates Lacan's emphasis on language and the paternal function with Klein's emphasis on body, drives, and the "archaic maternal realm" (Kristeva 2001, 126), stressing that the maternal realm supports and shades into the paternal. The "maternal body" denotes the mother as the infant first imagines her, *as* body, specifically the all-encompassing bodily environment and field of energetic-cum-affective flows that Kristeva (drawing on Plato) famously calls *chora*:

> Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such . . . the term *chora* . . . denote[s the] mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by [these] movements . . . the *chora*'s vocal and gestural organization is subject to . . . an objective ordering . . . Drives involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother. . . . The mother's body is therefore . . . the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*. (Kristeva 1984, 25–27)

Flows of energy and affect course between infant and mother; what the infant experiences as the overall space of these flows is the mother-as-body. This maternal body is not yet an object, because not yet differentiated from the not-yet-subject, the infant; and this body is diffuse, boundless, because not yet being objectified it is not localized in any determinate place. The maternal body constitutes a limitless environment, not definitely located on the mother's side rather than the child's. Instead it is the place of their relation, the "mediating space that preserves the alterity of the entities engaged in the process of mediation, though not at the expense of their connectedness" (Margaroni 2005, 82). The maternal body is already the bond *between two*: two not yet fully differentiated as two, but not merged into one either because flows, processes, and movements of differentiation already unfold between them.

The maternal *chora* cultivates because it regulates the infant's affects into provisional, fluctuating patterns, according to rhythms of coming and going, weaning, meal-times, toilet-training, and so on. The infant's drives become patterned in significant, affectively charged, ways—a first level of acculturation imposed by "archaic maternal authority" (Kristeva 1982, 72, 75). Yet although the maternal function is to cultivate and civilize, Kristeva insists that "to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and child" (Kristeva 1996, 118). For Kristeva, then, the maternal body civilizes the infant by facilitating and regulating the infant's successive processes of renouncing and separating from this same maternal body.

We see this in Kristeva's account of abjection (Kristeva 1982, 12–13), the incomplete, ever-repeated movement in which the baby expels materials (saliva, vomit, excrement) to constitute a first unstable border between its own and its mother's body. The border is unstable because these abjecting movements are regulated *by* the maternal *chora*, and so presuppose the very absence of clear boundaries that they reject. The maternal body civilizes by regulating abjection, but by the same token civilizes incompletely, so that paternal authority is needed for full separation—although, reciprocally, paternal authority requires maternal civilizing work to prepare for and continually underpin it.

This account of abjection clarifies why Kristeva characterizes separation as matricide, language that might seem hyperbolic—if she simply means separation, why not say so? First, separating is not a neutral cognitive process: infants are intensely bodily beings, living in an imaginary rather than exclusively cognitive register, and their separation process reflects this. To judge "I am not she," the infant must viscerally put the mother outside itself, in an act of psychic violence. Borders between selves must be constituted, forcibly, before they can be recognized (relatively) neutrally. Second, as part of her position that the maternal body civilizes us, Kristeva maintains that matricide contributes as much to subject-formation as the parricide that Freud saw as founding civilization (Kristeva 2000, 21). Kristeva's emphasis on matricide thus accords with her concern to recognize the maternal body's cultural contribution.[7]

In this, Kristeva's advocacy of matricide has affinities with feminist concerns to re-value mothering and the maternal. These affinities arise at other points too. The more robustly one has psychically separated from the maternal body, Kristeva believes, the more one becomes free to relate to one's mother *as* an individual subject, disentangling her from the archaic bodily environment that one had previously taken her to embody. The less they are disentangled, the more one will experience one's mother as threatening one's separate selfhood: as engulfing, overwhelming, dominating. This will color one's relations to other women too, resulting in misplaced abjection: repudiation of and hostility to women in an effort to fortify the matricide that one never properly accomplished psychically (Kristeva 1987, 374; see also Oliver 1993). Thus, for

Kristeva, matricide enables positive relations to one's mother and to each other woman as a unique subject in her own right.

Moreover, as we see from Kristeva's view that subjects are always in-process, no-one *can* completely accomplish matricide. Because signification is inseparably symbolic and semiotic, to completely leave the mother behind would be to lose the ability to make meaning (Beardsworth 2004; 2009). Making meaning depends upon remaining with the affects of the early maternal strata of one's life, allowing them into speech, and so remaining entangled in complex feelings about the mother: sadness at separation, anger at dependency upon her, joy at pushing her away. Yet to reintegrate these ancient currents and give them meaning, we need to have entered the symbolic register, which, for Kristeva, requires some level of matricide. Thus Kristeva speaks of "re-creating the mother through the freedom [that the self] has gained from being separated from her" (Kristeva 2001, 131). Giving meaning to the maternal past requires *both* matricide and the incompleteness of matricide without which there would be no affective, semiotic traces to render meaningful.

Kristeva's view of matricide, then, is qualified. Matricide may be necessary, but it can only ever be partial and incomplete, and completing it (should this be possible) would not be desirable but spell psychic death. Nonetheless, Kristeva still supports matricide in this partial and far from absolute form. Thus, although she argues that the maternal body civilizes, she conceives this civilizing work as pushing the child away, ultimately by directing the child toward the father—according to her account of the imaginary father and primary love. When the mother speaks lovingly to the child, the child imagines some vague other figure as the addressee of this speech (Kristeva 1987, 34). The child identifies with this imagined figure so as to remain, in fantasy, the recipient of the mother's love. Because this figure is seen as distinct from the mother, it is an imaginary father with whom the child is identifying (thereby consolidating its separateness, strengthening the border that began to emerge in abjection). Even though the *mother's* speech constructs this position, the position *itself* remains paternal. A first "ternary structure" (35) is emerging, which prepares for the child's subsequent embrace of the paternal symbolic order.[8]

However, we can push Kristeva's idea of the maternal civilizing function further so that its reference to a paternal third term evaporates, as I now wish to do.

2. MATERNAL SPACE

Kelly Oliver (1993) and Allison Weir (1993) push Kristeva's stress on the civilizing maternal function against her commitment to the paternal third term. Weir argues that the imaginary father is anything that "intervenes between mother and child to introduce the dimension of sociality, to create two where

one had been" (Weir 1993, 88): anything that the mother *desires*—men, women, books, work, friends, social activities—outside the mother–child dyad itself. The child's identification with this "father" is actually with the mother as subject of desire, speaker, and participant in social life. The child enters the symbolic order by identifying with the mother as divided between social life and body-to-body intimacy with the child, or, for Oliver, as a subject of desire, not merely the object/container of the child's needs/affects.

On the one hand, then, Weir and Oliver suggest that the mother–child relation is already in itself triangular and that the "father" merely indicates this triangular structure. On the other hand, they specify that the relation is triangulated by a third term, a pole of desire, *outside* the mother–child pair. What the mother desires must be something other than the child (perhaps empirically, or perhaps in the nature of desire itself, as pointing beyond any finite objects of need). But we can depart even further from the traditional view that the third term must be outside the mother–child pair. Once we see the mother–child relation as in itself triangular, we can locate its third term *within* this relation. Winnicott's idea of potential space, especially as Jessica Benjamin has subsequently developed it, can help.

This turn to Winnicott may seem surprising. Winnicott has not always been popular with feminists, since his propagation of the ideal of the "good-enough mother" fed into postwar efforts to ensure that women's place was in the home. Yet Winnicott stresses the importance of what mothers do and that mothering is a skilled practice, anticipating feminist ethics of mothering and care. I shall therefore try to draw out the positive elements of his thought while challenging his equation of mothers with domesticity and selfless devotion to their children. We might wonder, moreover, how readily Winnicott's ideas can be synthesized with Kristeva's, given their theoretical differences. But openness to multiple traditions already characterizes Kristeva's work: she draws on Klein and other British and British-influenced theorists. Nonetheless, synthesis entails some infidelity to each individual thinker—but, offsetting this, it gives us greater resources for re-imagining the maternal.

Winnicott theorizes potential space in his 1951 essay "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena." Potential or transitional space mediates between a mother and child who are becoming differentiated. In the first few months, the baby lives in the illusion that the breast is utterly under its control, an illusion sustained by the mother, who provides the breast just when the baby is fantasizing its presence, so that fantasy and reality appear to the baby to coincide. Gradually, the mother allows more absences, frustrations, and "opportunities for disillusionment." The baby thereby realizes that the mother is an independent being, which sparks the baby's frustrated aggression against her.

At this point, from late in the child's first year, transitional objects come into play. A child's doll is a paradigmatic transitional object. It exists outside

the child, a material object in the external world (as is the mother), but the doll is also under the child's control insofar as its significance is conferred by the child. The domain of all of the child's transitional objects and phenomena—songs, nonsense words, rituals—Winnicott calls potential space: a region of illusion where objectively perceived reality and creative fantasy coincide. This enables the child to learn to tolerate the existence elsewhere of external realities not conforming to its fantasies. In this way, potential space facilitates the child's eventual acceptance of discrepancies between fantasy and reality. Never simply left behind, potential space evolves into the worlds of art, culture, and imagination.

Winnicott leaves the mother's role in co-creating and maintaining potential space unexplored, although he mentions that she might avoid washing a doll to preserve its special smell (Winnicott 1975, 232). This suggests that her role is unobtrusively to conserve the material reality of transitional objects so that they support the child's fantasies and, by extension, to refrain from disrupting the child's fantasies. In this way the mother mediates the child's gradual adaptation to reality by slowly diminishing the amount of illusion in its life. Thus her contribution to potential space is actually indispensable.

The child's transition from illusion to reality is equally toward recognizing the mother's independence. The doll establishes an intermediate zone between the infant's illusion of the mother's mind-dependence and its recognition of the mother's mind-independence. Because it is the mother who unobtrusively maintains this zone, the doll in its materiality conveys the mother's support for and participation in the child's fantasy even when she is absent. This allows the absent mother both to conform to the child's fantasy (via the doll) and fail to conform (by being absent). This helps the child to appreciate, tolerate, and eventually embrace the mother's real alterity.

Is the "space" in potential space only a metaphor? The term "space" suggests the gap or distance between two (child/mother), so perhaps it is a metaphor for their relation of difference (two differentiated by a gap) yet connection (since the gap equally spans the distance between them, bringing them into contact). This relation is not simply internal to the minds of either or both participants, but exists between them, at the intersection of their psyches. For each the relation exists as much outside as within their mind, as much received as created. Moreover, the relation is maintained through the mother and child's corporeal interactions and is embodied in material objects and surroundings. As such, the relation does have a dimension of literal materiality and spatiality. Potential "space," then, is not merely metaphorical, but connotes a mode of relationality that is specifically embodied.

A positive feature of Winnicott's account is that the mother exercises agency, being as much an intelligent participant in maintaining potential space as the infant. Yet her agency seems entirely directed to supporting her infant's

needs. But there is a more fruitful way to reinterpret the mother's work, as Benjamin explores. In her recasting of Winnicott, potential space enables the child to recognize the mother as an independent subject.

Potential space, Benjamin stresses more robustly than Winnicott does, is intrinsically a space between two, an intersubjective space. Drawing on Daniel Stern's infancy research (Stern 1985), she argues that a first form of this space arises in the baby's first weeks within face-to-face interactions and reciprocal, mimetic play between mother and infant, in which they match, mirror, and rhythmically respond to each other's gestures and expressions. Benjamin calls the resulting space of interaction the "original third," "nascent presymbolic thirdness," "the energetic or primordial third" (Benjamin 2005, 51). Through these interactions the infant begins to enjoy being in consort with another, feeling how two minds temporarily and partially converge. In this convergence, a "field of intersection between two subjectivities" arises (Benjamin 1995, 29). This field is not "another person, or . . . thing, but some organizing principle that allows for accommodation and exchange of recognizing responses" (Benjamin 2005, 38). It is a dimension of mutual attunement and responsiveness that elicits, orchestrates, and coordinates the mother's and child's reciprocal, mimetic interactions—a background of relatedness that allows them to respond to each other and makes their interactions possible.

At around eight months, Benjamin suggests, the infant recognizes that it has been enjoying *two*-mindedness, but with this it also recognizes with displeasure that two minds can differ. If the other's responses and reactions add something, then that other exists in her own right outside the infant's mind. This sparks the infant's aggressive attempt to reduce this newfound other to being merely an object within its own mind. But, ideally, potential space now develops out of the "original third," enabling the infant to come to accept the other's otherness, to recognize the mother as a subject in her own right (Benjamin 1988, 95).

Benjamin's crucial idea is that early mother–child relations are in themselves triangular. Because the relation obtains between mother and child and is irreducible to them as single units, the relation itself is the third point in this triangle. The supposedly pure dyad of mother-and-baby is intrinsically a triad (Benjamin 1988, 28). Yet perhaps the same is true for Kristeva, since for her too there is a primary mother–child triangle the third term of which is "paternal" merely as a metaphor for the mother's desire. However, that formulation continues to locate the third term outside the mother–child pair, seeing the relation as triadic insofar as the mother desires someone or something besides the child. Benjamin instead suggests that the relation is triadic in its very relationality. This is not to deny that mothers desire things besides their children, but to suggest that that desire itself unfolds *within* the mother–child relation, which as a relation of differentiation accommodates—indeed, requires—mothers having desires for other things (intellectual work, friendships, and so on).

On this conception, maternal desire does not punctuate from the exterior what would otherwise be a purely dyadic mother–child relation. Rather, this desire is a component of the relation as inherently triadic, a relation between two whose psyches differ and intersect from their position of difference.[9]

An implication of this conception of the mother–child triad as it emerges from Winnicott and Benjamin is that the third is *maternal* rather than paternal.[10]

> This space begins between mother and baby—he [Winnicott] calls it the holding environment—and expands into what he calls the transitional area, the child's area of play, creativity, and fantasy. The transitional space is suffused with the mother's protection and one's own freedom to create and imagine and discover . . . through the unobtrusive mediation of the other. (Benjamin 1986, 94)

The maternal function has been transferred from the mother as body to the space between mother and child. Rather than thereby ceasing to be maternal, this function carries over the maternal qualities that previously attached to the mother's body as the infant imagined it. These qualities therefore "suffuse" potential space with a maternal character. However, Benjamin seems to reduce this character to protectiveness. We can gain a more complex picture by resituating potential space in terms of Kristeva's idea of the *chora*.

The *chora* is a space of passion, frustration, aggression, violently attempted and collapsed differentiation—a space already between two. In its ambiguous status between-two, the *chora* prefigures potential space. For potential space, like the *chora*, organizes, regulates, and cultivates flows of affect between mother and child, channeling them into proto-cultural expressions (the child might express aggression against the mother by mutilating the doll, love by cuddling the doll). Transitional space takes over the *chora*'s cultivating function and its function of embodying the child's fantasies—which liberates the mother from having to do so in her own person. Potential space is maternal, then, because its qualities for the child are those with which—following Kristeva's account of the *chora*—the maternal body was formerly suffused: qualities of containment, affect and its initial expression and inscription, rhythmic regulation, and flows between two.

Reinterpreting potential space as the evolved form of the *chora* thus makes clear its maternal character. But this raises the question: why not simply work with Kristeva's concept of *chora*? What does the concept of potential space add? First, it allows us to understand the form into which the maternal *chora* develops: that of a space that is located more firmly *between* two, and that is therefore increasingly distinguished from the mother as a subject in her own right. Where mother and *chora* had been compacted into one, the *chora* has now expanded beyond the mother into this ambiguous space between-two; calling it "potential space" signals that it is increasingly located in this "between." Sec-

ond, the concept of potential space highlights that this ambiguous area arises in a process of continuous, unbroken evolution—the evolution of maternal *chora* toward intersubjectivity—which unfolds with no need for external interruption. Thus we can use the concepts of *chora* and potential space to expand upon each other, by seeing potential space as the elaboration of the *chora* toward increasing intersubjectivity.

In being transferred from maternal body to potential space, the qualities of containment, affect, rhythmic expression, and so on do not lose their maternal overtones: in the nature of psychic life they carry within them the history of their affective significance. Moreover, potential space carries over these qualities because it emerges from the mother's body only gradually, in a process with no sharp breaks. In the development of this space, then, the *chora* has not disappeared but has been transferred from the mother's body to this region that encompasses mother and child, as two whose increasing differentiation arises within their unbroken connection. In this expanded form, the *chora*/potential space includes the mother as one of the subjects within it and simultaneously liberates her from her previous fusion with it.

3. Problems

Let me address some problems with my suggestions. The idea that the child learns through potential space to recognize the mother as another subject may not seem to answer the worry about the mother's reduction to a merely supportive role. For it is from the *child's* perspective that this development toward recognition of the mother takes place. The mother herself still appears wholly absorbed in support of the child.

However, Benjamin suggests otherwise: rather than being exclusively devoted to her child, the mother is all along engaged in holding onto or containing the tension between her own needs, desires, and fantasies and those of her child (Benjamin 2005). She struggles to remain aware of their differences and conflicts without suppressing any of the conflicting forces. Benjamin does not, however, discuss the possibility that the emergence of transitional objects and potential space might facilitate this maternal work of containing. But, plausibly, potential space relieves some of the tension of this work of holding opposites together, by giving the mother more space to pursue her own interests, desires, and needs while knowing that the child can still pursue his or her own needs and fantasies as well—even when they conflict. For instance, the child might assuage a wish to be nurtured by fantasizing that her doll is nurturing her while the mother is absent doing other work. Potential space makes the conflict between their needs less acute, reducing the tension of "holding" them.

Thus, what begins as the mother's intra-psychic work of holding tensions and differences increasingly becomes *externalized* as transitional space. In part, this means that this work is now shared with the child, who is learning to contain tensions through play. More broadly, the mother–child relation has expanded to accommodate their differences as integral to it. As a result, the mother can increasingly pursue her distinct concerns while still feeling securely connected to her child, because their relation inherently subsists between the two of them as different. In pursuing things that differentiate her from her child—paid work, or other relationships—the mother remains within the terms of and maintains, rather than breaks, this relation.

It might still be objected that I am considering the mother solely within her relation to the child, containing her within this relation rather than seeing her as both inside *and* outside the relation. But on my view the mother's relation to her child precisely includes their differences and therefore does not enclose or restrict the mother, but allows her to come and go, to move nearer to her child and farther away again, to desire to be a mother *and* other than a mother, an otherness that feeds into the maternal relation.

Even so, my continuing association of the maternal relation with containing might seem problematic. Perhaps the container image figures the maternal body as inert, unintelligent, and purely spatial *versus* the paternal or male self as active, intelligent, and temporal. If so, then the mother is figured as background to the subjectivity of others rather than as a meaning-making subject in her own right, reinforcing the traditional division of labor with mothers in a background, nurturing role at home (Baraitser 2008).

However, the maternal body and potential space as I have interpreted them are not inert, unintelligent, purely spatial vessels. Indeed, arguably, containing is never rightly understood as "a passively inhering property of a shaped space" but is always "a form of action in itself . . . requiring effort and care" (Sofia 2000, 190–91). For Heidegger, holding (as when a jug holds water) is a complex action, consisting of taking in, keeping over time, and supplying—and gathering and storing a diversity of elements, letting them grow and germinate. If even a jug's holding of water is complex, the mother's containing of her child's and her own emotional states is infinitely more so: it means negotiating between two psyches that in turn respond to how they are contained, generating further reactions and desires to be negotiated in a constant cyclical process. If containing is always an activity, embodying intelligence and responsiveness and extending over time, this is particularly true of maternal containing.

The same is true of the containing done by Kristeva's *chora*. For her, the *chora* is far from inert:

> We must restore this motility's gestural and vocal play (to mention only the aspect relevant to language) . . . in order to remove motility

> from ontology and [the] amorphousness in which Plato confines it. . . .
> [We] can read in this rhythmic space . . . the process by which
> signifiance is constituted. (Kristeva 1984, 26)

The *chora* is active, not merely the static site in which energetic flows occur but
a mobile space the fluctuating borders and contours of which are constituted by
these very flows. Nor is the *chora* unintelligent. As the first set of patterns, ar-
ticulations, and pre-linguistic significances that affective fluctuations assume,
the *chora* embodies a primordial self-organizing intelligence within matter. Fur-
thermore, the *chora* is as much temporal as spatial, since it takes shape only over
time through the process in which flows assume patterns (Söderbäck 2009). The
potential space between mother and child inherits and develops these qualities
of the *chora*. A mobile, temporal space, it takes concrete embodied shape over
time as the mother's and child's patterns of coming and going, thus intrinsically
embodying the significance of their particular modes of being-together.

Moreover, as potential space emerges, the mother's containing work becomes
externalized in and supported by this space itself. Containing, supporting, nur-
turing is then received by the mother as much as given by her. Thus containing
ceases to be a function exclusively attached to the mother, although it remains a
maternal function borne by potential space. Nonetheless, the mother is set free
from being the only container. This suggests a mother never exhaustively ab-
sorbed in support for her children but always retaining distinct desires, interests,
and needs of her own, needing space and support to pursue these. Mothers as
individual subjects differ from the maternal body-space that increasingly exists
*inter*subjectively, not exclusively on the mother's side.

This returns us to Kristeva's idea that we can perceive our mothers as unique
individual subjects, and therefore sustain connections rather than hostility to
them, only insofar as we extricate the maternal body-space from them—which
we can never do completely, but still may do to varying degrees. For Kristeva,
this disentangling work requires a level of matricide. In contrast, my suggestion
is that this disentangling work requires ongoing, unbroken connection to the
mother within potential space. For it is the gradual, continuous emergence of
this connecting space that enables the mother to emerge as different from that
space itself, as the space takes over the functions that she formerly played. This
allows us to differ from our mothers, and our mothers to differ from us, a differ-
ence that arises within continuous connection.[11]

4. MATERNAL LANGUAGE

For Kristeva, matricide is bound up with the child's entry into language. Al-
though language's semiotic dimension prolongs the maternal *chora*, henceforth
the semiotic only ever exists under and within symbolic form, and language's

strictly symbolic axis entails a moment of breaking from the mother into iden-
tification with the father. However, perhaps we can instead see language as
expanding and continuing potential space as a specifically maternal space.

The French psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche's notion of the
"message" can help here (Laplanche 1999). From birth, he maintains, the baby
is surrounded by messages addressed to him or her by others, principally
the parents: extra-verbal and verbal signifiers—smiles, gestures, grimaces.
It is immediately evident to the infant that these gestures bear some meaning
to the adult, which is unknown to it. Being evidently significant, messages
directly call for translation, for the child to respond to the adult's (parent's)
address by decoding it. The call is for the child to take up the position of
addressee in which the adult is placing her, and to do so by translating
the message.

Laplanche always speaks of the impact of parents upon children rather than
mothers. This disguises the reality that generally women mother (women, not
necessarily biological mothers). Moreover, Laplanche focuses on the uncon-
scious sexual significance of these signifiers to adults, which goes untranslated
by the child. But this focus has a reverse side, recently brought out by Judith
Butler (2005). Insofar as the child *does* translate the parent's messages, the child is
called to do so by the parent. Or rather, once we recognize that this "parent"
is almost invariably a mother, the child is called by the mother. The child is
brought into language by being called upon to assume a particular position
in relation to the mother: the position of one who can understand her
messages (never completely, but well enough) and who can thereby enter
into a fleeting, partial meeting of minds with her. It is the position of one who
participates with the mother in a shared communicative practice and space
of significance.

Butler concludes that "the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived
from the situation in which one finds oneself addressed" (Butler 2005, 53).
Linguistic agency only becomes possible as the agency to respond to the
mother's address, so that this "structure of address" precedes what is said (38–
39). Because speaking is a possibility that arises in the child's relation to the
mother, it continues to take its psychical significance from that context.
Psychoanalysts have shown this with respect to transference: the way that
analysands, unconsciously and inescapably, bring their past history of speaking
relations to their new speaking exchanges (primarily with the analyst). As
Butler argues on these grounds, whenever one speaks to someone else, the
"scene of address" becomes structured by and recreates earlier, more archaic,
such scenes, transferring them forward into the new context (63–68). Our
speaking lives are organized by fantasy patterns and intersubjective structures
first laid down in childhood. Because, under existing child-care arrangements,
our first speaking relations have generally been with our mothers, our address-

ees will typically be presumed to be in the position, or a reworking of the position, of our mothers.

As such, the position of speaker embodies a psychical structure of continuous connection with, not separation from, the mother—a non-matricidal speaking position. It is not a position of autonomy, unity, distance, and separateness. Rather than being autonomous *tout court*, this kind of speaker is relationally autonomous, able to exercise speaking agency only out of prior dependence on the mother (and on others to whom the speaker relates on the mother's model). This kind of speaker is connected, not separate; responsive, not distant; not unified *per se*, but acquiring individual singularity only within a field of relationality.

A similar idea of relational subjectivity is present in Kristeva's work. For Kristeva, speaking is always speaking *with* others, and this relational character of language arises from the permeation of symbolic language by semiotic currents that are always relational through-and-through (see McAfee 2000). Nonetheless, for Kristeva, the symbolic order that the semiotic permeates is organized by the paternal function, in turn supported by the role of the imaginary father within the first mother–child triangle. I am suggesting, instead, that language as a symbolic, representational structure arises as the further extension and elaboration of the mother–child relation as triangulated by *maternal* space. Thus, although Kristeva's ideas of relational subjectivity and of symbolic/semiotic intersection remain extremely fruitful, I am trying to rethink these ideas without the residual reference to the triangulating father that Kristeva imparts to them. On my proposal, language is maternal in its semiotic *and* symbolic dimensions, as the symbolic emerges from the continuous elaboration of semiotic flows and currents into increasingly imaginative, symbolic, and cultural directions.

Language, I suggest, takes on and retains this significance of a maternal space because it evolves out of the relations of connection and difference already maintained between mother and child within potential space. Language, our "mother tongue," takes over the imaginary significance of potential space *qua* maternal, and we carry this significance forward into our various relations with others in language. As the medium into which maternal space evolves, language is also a medium of relations between beings who are embodied: a volatile, affective, carnal space in which symbolic meaning emerges continuously from affective materiality and *vice versa*. However, this idea of language as maternal space raises several questions, to which I now turn.

5. MATERNAL RELATIONS AND GENDERED SOCIAL REALITY

If in principle language is a maternal space, surely in practice our entry into language *is* predicated on matricide? Given the sexed binary oppositions that

descend from classical Greece and the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which maternal body contrasts with paternal *logos*, language cannot but inherit the meaning of a paternal realm, entered by renouncing the mother's body. Consequently language is a maternal space only potentially; likewise our affective and speaking relations with one another are relations of connection and difference only potentially. Potentially we may always speak out of the maternal past, but in practice this past remains repressed in our speaking exchanges, entering them only from the ever-disruptive side of the semiotic. Yet this break with the maternal past is not a universal necessity but merely a historical construction. As a historical construction, however deeply sedimented, the matricidal paradigm can be transformed and surpassed, so that we could realize our potential for non-matricidal modes of relation to the maternal body, our mothers, and one another.

By reconceiving language as maternal space I have sought to re-imagine the maternal figure as civilizing and cultivating, contrary to the traditional hierarchy of paternal culture *versus* maternal nature. By re-imagining the maternal figure as civilizing, we can provide support on the imaginary level for the social reality that mothers increasingly participate not only in child care but also in many other activities and relationships, especially paid work. For the social reality of our family lives has changed dramatically over recent decades, including that women and mothers are ever more active in the labor force, and men and fathers are increasingly involved in child care. Yet as Kelly Oliver notes, our imaginary lags behind, and is in need of renovation (Oliver 2000).

However, in reappraising the maternal figure as I have done, I seem to have portrayed early relations and language acquisition as exclusively maternal, leaving the paternal figure with no role in subject-formation and language acquisition. This would be problematic: it would reverse the paternal/maternal hierarchy without questioning its binary logic, and—contrary to my own aim— it would reinforce the unjust social norm for women to bear more-or-less exclusive responsibility for child care (perhaps merely imposing upon women an additional burden of paid work). Indeed, by denying the need for a paternal third term, my position seems to reinforce the absence of fathers from child care by depriving them of even their traditional function as relatively distant, impersonal law-givers. How can we escape these problems?

First, we need to see potential space and language as being maternal in a way that intrinsically makes room for a paternal contribution (although not the traditional one of breaking with maternal relations). That is, we need to see these fields as being maternal in such a way that they are not *exclusively* maternal. Second, the ideas of potential space and language need to become starting points for re-imagining the paternal function in ways that include fathers in child care rather than excluding them from it still further. In particular, we

need to re-imagine the father-figure as bodily, affectionate, intimate, and caring. In both respects, Kristeva's idea of the imaginary father can be helpful.

We remember that for Kristeva, the imaginary father is the third pole of a primary triangle emerging directly between the mother and child as a function of her loving speech (loving in that through it she propels the child toward the differentiation that he or she needs, rather than clinging to the child). Crucially, the imaginary father too is a loving figure: fantasized as immediately reciprocating the mother's love, he is not clearly distinguished from that love but is its indeterminate other pole, one side of a couple joined in love. Insofar as he is part of a couple, his emergence corresponds to the child's increasing—but still not sharp—differentiation from the mother. As Oliver says, then, the imaginary father is not the stern father of law but an affective, still significantly bodily, figure, transitional between archaic corporeality and the symbolic register (Oliver 1993, chapter 3; see also Beardsworth 2009, 139–41).

But Kristeva still situates this loving father within the child's passage from body to word. For her, this passage is always partial and incomplete, and its poles are ambiguous: the maternal body is already significant, the paternal word always permeated by semiotic strata. Yet despite these qualifications, Kristeva's imaginary father retains a residual connection to the traditional hierarchy of (paternal) word over (maternal) body, insofar as his emergence signals a mode of relationality that is more mediated by speech and not so immediately corporeal as that of the *chora*.

However, Kristeva's ideas also suggest another possibility: that the father-figure might indeed embody an emerging difference from the mother, but as a pure, non-hierarchical, difference. This would not be a difference between more immediate and more mediated corporeal relations, but a difference *within* the corporeal field, between one set of corporeal forms (maternal) and another (paternal). If we imagine the young child encountering the father-figure as someone whose body differs from the mother's, then the paternal function would not be to advance the child's progression toward culture but to resituate the maternal body as one kind of body within a field of manifold corporeal differences that the child can explore, enjoy, and learn to express culturally. (By "father-figure," again, I mean not necessarily a biological father but any man or men who embody the paternal function for a child.)

In this scenario, the paternal function would not interrupt maternal bodily relations but would continue and extend their already civilizing, cultural function. The child's relation to the father-figure would take shape as a bodily, affective relation, on the model of the child's relation to the mother; but the paternal relation would give the child a new appreciation of the plurality of bodies. Insofar as our speaking position would then be one of embodied relationality *and* openness to bodily difference, language would be both maternal and paternal. Admittedly, I characterized potential space and language as

maternal in sections 2 through 4. But they need not be exclusively maternal, and perhaps cannot be. After all, they are maternal (I've suggested) in exhibiting a form of relationality that is embodied, affective, and structured by difference between two. As such, the way in which potential space and language are maternal—as domains of bodily difference—also makes them domains in which the child can become open to bodily difference in those further specifications that a paternal figure might enable. That is: as a realm of bodily difference, the maternal realm renders us intrinsically open to body relations with paternal figures as those who embody (a further kind of) difference.

Thus, rejecting the traditional view of the paternal "third term" need not entail eliminating all paternal dimensions from subjectivity. Instead, this rejection can open up possibilities for re-imagining the paternal figure as a *bodily* figure, although I have had space for only a few suggestions. This re-imagining would support men and fathers participating in child care at a corporeal and directly affective level, hence sharing fully in the everyday material and emotional care of children. Indeed, only by maintaining intimate, bodily relations with children could men embody the paternal figure re-imagined as a bodily figure.

This raises a final point. I have suggested that potential space and language are maternal in character—even though their maternal potential is presently repressed—because of the historical reality of female-centered child care (which ensures, for instance, that generally our mothers invite us to speech). Yet I am also suggesting that the same historical reality of female-centered child care can point us to rethink transitional relations and language as being maternal in ways that, potentially, would *extricate* women from exclusive absorption in child care (since the maternal relation is inherently one of differentiation) and would *include* men fully in child care. Paradoxically, our gender division of labor has generated a mode of mother–child relation that points toward a different paradigm of relationality, one that is incompatible with traditional gender divisions.

NOTES

I am grateful to the anonymous referees for their very helpful responses to an earlier version.

1. My focus on matricide owes much to Irigaray 1991; Ziarek 1993; and Jacobs 2007.

2. On Kristeva's ongoing commitment to the paternal function, see Gambaudo 2007.

3. I do not mean to suggest that Kristeva is a simple follower of Freud and Lacan. She draws on many psychoanalytic (and other) thinkers, notably including Melanie Klein, whom Kristeva also reads as theorizing matricide with her "depressive position" in which children come to grips with separation from their mothers (see Kristeva 2001).

4. In part, I will suggest that we can *differentiate* from our mothers without having to *separate* from them, two concepts that are often conflated.

5. I focus on Kristeva 1982; 1984; 1987; and 1989. I bracket out the differences among these texts to focus solely on continuities in their views of the maternal and paternal functions. On Kristeva's project in its different phases, see *inter alia* Oliver 1993; Beardsworth 2004.

6. Admittedly, many theorists see the maternal and paternal functions as being only formally, not necessarily empirically, maternal and paternal. Kristeva, though, does not treat the symbolic as purely formal. Although for her the maternal and paternal functions are "phantasmatic figures" (Gambaudo 2007, 136) that differ from the empirical social roles of men and women, Kristeva sees these two pairs of terms as connected—plausibly, I believe. Generally, hitherto women have carried the maternal function (and men the paternal), so that our relations to the maternal shape our relations to women specifically (Kristeva 1996, 72).

7. We see this when Kristeva reads Klein as a theorist of matricide (see note 3).

8. This is an instance where Kristeva's Lacanian and Kleinian influences meet. Kristeva praises Klein for recognizing the "combined parent figure" (Kristeva 2001, 128–29), but criticizes her for truncating the father's role in this couple by reducing him to the mother's appendage (to the penis held in the mother's body). By reinterpreting the imaginary father as a function of the mother's speech, Kristeva seeks to find a paternal figure who emerges from the mother, but as a distinct party, not her mere appendage.

9. One advantage of this view is to recognize that mothers also have desires *for* their children and to mother and be mothers (de Marneffe 2004). However, maternal desire is rarely directed exclusively toward children and mothering. Accordingly, I am trying to conceive mother–child relations as permitting maternal desire to circulate freely between mothering and other activities.

10. Benjamin does not explicitly say that potential space is maternal, and she would probably be unwilling to do so. For her, the notion of the self containing multiple positions applies in other contexts beside mothering: to the psychoanalyst and, ideally, to the post-Oedipal individual who could recover and hold multiple gender identifications (Benjamin 1988, 106–7). Thus thirdness, with which the self identifies so as to contain a manifold, is not a specifically maternal function for Benjamin.

11. One might object that, psychoanalytically, differentiation from the mother cannot be non-matricidal but necessarily involves psychical violence and aggression. Aggression indeed figures in Winnicott's and Benjamin's accounts of development, but for them transitional space contains the child's (and mother's) aggression—where "contain" means include, affirm, and creatively harness, not suppress. Transitional space contains aggression by expressing it in fantasy, play, and symbolism. Because aggression is thus held within the mother–child relation, this relation overall remains one of connection and not separation, and so this relation as a whole is non-matricidal—even though (or rather because) it contains and expresses aggression that is, in principle, matricidal.

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