

SPEAKING AT THE LIMIT: THE ONTOLOGY OF LUCE IRIGARAY'S  
ETHICS, IN DIALOGUE WITH LACAN AND HEIDEGGER

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation presents a reading of the work of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, with a particular focus on her most recent texts, which explicitly concern the question of ethics. Responding to concerns that Irigaray's work displays a discontinuity, and that this "later" work is perhaps no longer useful for feminists, I argue that there is in fact a rigorous philosophical continuity to Irigaray's work. In particular, I claim that Irigaray's central philosophical contribution is a transformation of the concept of human subjectivity by way of the thinking of sexuate difference as what I call a "relational limitation." This concept is at once ontological and ethical, and it describes the way in which Irigaray's oeuvre, taken as a continuous whole, transforms philosophical understandings of language, being, and ethics by way of thinking them relationally, combining all of these terms together into a new understanding of human subjectivity that involves a new way of thinking about language and meaning as constitutively shared. I discuss the way in which Irigaray elaborates this new understanding in dialogue with male thinkers, in particular with Lacan and Heidegger. I

identify an interest in the issue of relation in Irigaray's earlier work, notably through her engagement with Lacan, in whom she identifies what I call a "non-relational" limit, or a conception of human subjectivity and language that refuses the priority of relation.

Through her dialogue with Heidegger, I argue, Irigaray comes closer to articulating her own vision of subjectivity as inherently structured by "relational limitation," but she must surpass both Lacanian and Heideggerian paradigms in order to articulate her own unique vision of sexuate difference as two different, yet interrelated, manners of the unfolding of language and of human subjectivity itself. Thus, my tracing of this continuity of Irigaray's project shows how her most recent work is extremely important for feminist theory, insofar as it elaborates a philosophical and ethical vision of how to improve the (often impoverished and/or violent) relations between men and women. In particular, the concept of a "non-relational" limitation versus a "relational limitation" provides a helpful way of understanding the underlying causes and dynamics of the distorted relationship between the sexes under patriarchy—a point that I illustrate with the example of domestic violence.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: IRIGARAY'S VOICE

“Things could be thought differently” (ILTY: 43)

“Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. [...] She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished...” (TS: 29; CS: 28).

In her most recent texts—*The Way of Love* (2002) and *Sharing the World* (2008)—Luce Irigaray offers a vision of a new kind of dialogue between sexuate subjects that would, she suggests, re-invigorate our experiences of language, knowledge, and human relationships.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, she writes in *The Way of Love* that such dialogue cannot speak of “something or someone who already exists, and is even already in the past, or put into the past by what is said. The task here is different. It is a question of making something exist, in the present and even more in the future” (viii). This kind of language which would allow the unfolding of that which does not yet exist corresponds, for Irigaray, to the attempt to cultivate an unprecedented relationship between two human subjects, in which the foremost task is to “listen to the present speaking of the other in its irreducible difference with a view to the way through which we could correspond to it in faithfulness to ourselves” (xi). This dissertation is aimed at developing an interpretation of this emergent ethical vision. However, Irigaray’s recent texts are immensely complex, weaving together insights gleaned from nearly four decades of her own work in

linguistics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. They thus cannot be understood in isolation from a consideration of the overall development of Irigaray's work. Additionally, these texts are inherently dialogical: a reading of them cannot proceed in isolation from a reading of Irigaray's major psychoanalytic and philosophical interlocutors, because the thoughts at which Irigaray arrives in her recent works have been developed precisely through a complex process of inheritance: an engagement with the history of philosophy that at once contributes to a thinking of some of its most basic problems and destabilizes some of its most basic assumptions.

Despite these facts, the aim of the current project is not to offer a comprehensive reading of Irigaray's entire oeuvre—such a task would far exceed the boundaries of a single dissertation. Instead, I am here to provide one interpretation of what I see as the core movement of Irigaray's oeuvre that, I believe, uniquely helps us to understand the vision put forward in her most recent texts. Rather than attempting to exhaustively enumerate all the sources on which Irigaray draws, then, I interpret her work through the lens of my own reading not only of its central themes, but also of some of the work of Jacques Lacan and Martin Heidegger, two of Irigaray's most important interlocutors. My primary argument throughout this reading that Irigaray's ethical vision is in fact incomprehensible if taken separately from her development of a relational ontology of sexuate difference. The development of this relational ontology, I demonstrate, can be fruitfully traced through Irigaray's primarily critical engagement with Lacan to her more recent (and somewhat more positive) engagement with Heidegger. I argue further that this relational ontology presents a thoroughgoing transformation of our understanding of human subjectivity—a transformation that ultimately re-figures subjectivity as

constitutively responsive to alterity. I show that Irigaray's vision of a new, ethically-enabling dialogue, then, grows out of her ongoing transformational thinking of what it means to be a speaking, embodied human subject. Since, for Irigaray, to be a "subject" is ultimately to be in relation to what is other—to move toward the other—there is, in Irigaray's work, an ethical imperative inscribed in the very movement of subjectivity itself. I use here the lens of this overall interpretation—that the central movement of Irigaray's work consists in the development of a relational ontology that transforms the concept of subjectivity—in order to draw out certain threads and dialogues within her work that, when taken together, demonstrate a certain internal consistency (without, for all that, providing anything like exhaustive reading of this body of work).

More precisely, my focus throughout this interpretive re-tracing of Irigaray's dialogues with Lacan and Heidegger is above all on the question of *limits*—that is to say, the question of that which marks us off from what is "other" to us. My readings of both Lacan and Heidegger thus focus on these thinkers' respective thinking of limit as that which marks the boundaries of human meaning. I approach this issue primarily through the question of language as that which is able to articulate meaning due to a certain functioning of limits. That is to say, language is that which, through articulating limitation (the possibility of sameness and difference) in one way or another, allows us to experience meaning (it should be noted, however, that the conceptions of language, limit, and meaning found in Lacan and Heidegger will be significantly different from one another). The questions of limit and meaning are also bound up with the question of sexual difference as the question of our relation to what is other to us—a point which Lacan's work explicitly shows us, and a concern that Irigaray brings to all of her

philosophical dialogues. Through my textual analyses of Irigaray's own engagements with these thinkers, then, I show how Irigaray reveals, through her creative inheritance of their thinking and her explicit concern with *sexuate difference*, a *new* way of conceptualizing limitation—what I call “relational limitation”—that carries with it a vision of a new kind of speaking: a new kind of relationship to language, the other, and the self. This new way of conceptualizing limitation is implicit in Irigaray's later work, and when drawn out by my interpretation, it will be revealed as crucial for understanding Irigaray's explicitly stated ontology and ethics of *sexuate difference*.

Several questions present themselves at the outset of such a project, however. First of all, what is the status of Irigaray's “dialogues” (as I have called them) with Lacan and Heidegger? In what sense does she receive their thinking, and in what sense does she supersede it? When does she speak in “their” voices, and when does she speak in her “own” voice? Further, how do I situate myself, as a reader and as a writer, with regard to these dialogues? What does it mean to *hear* Irigaray's voice? How, more precisely, does the strand of Irigaray's thinking that I follow and interpret here relate to the rest of her oeuvre? And how does my own interpretation sit with respect to existing scholarship on this oeuvre? This introductory chapter serves as a preliminary response to these questions. It also offers a more detailed overview of my project in order to orient the reader to its terms, methods, and movement.

### 1. Reading Irigaray, Listening

To approach the work of Luce Irigaray is already to recognize one's own limitations. What does it mean to read, much less to write about, the work of a thinker

whose own voice is at once literally entangled with a multitude of other voices from throughout the history of philosophy—not to mention branches of psychoanalysis, linguistics, and feminism—and yet simultaneously distinct, offering out of this entanglement a seemingly singular vision? How will we know when we have finally “read” Irigaray? When will we have heard her speak? Must we claim exhaustive knowledge of her many interlocutors (for example: Plato, Aristotle, Heidegger, Hegel, Lacan, Freud, Saussure, Kant, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Nietzsche, the Pre-Socratics, and de Beauvoir) in order to claim to have understood her? And even if we could claim such exhaustive knowledge, would this ensure that we grasped Irigaray’s own unique views and contributions? Furthermore, reading Irigaray from the position of a fellow philosopher (that is, reading her as one who also reads the above thinkers in an independent way) also raises the question of the status of Irigaray’s interactions with these thinkers. Does she understand them? Misunderstand them? Critique them? Copy them? Is it reductive, as a kind of “third party” reader—that is, as one who is witness to the many dialogues (and diatribes) found within Irigaray’s work—to read her interlocutors through her, or her through them? What does it mean, in other words, to read Irigaray reading? And what is the status of such a reading?

One might certainly ask if these questions are not equally pressing with regard to the reading of all philosophers—most of whom, after all, are in dialogue with multiple others, and who also, at their best, offer unique contributions to these ongoing dialogues. However, the unusual nature of Irigaray’s style of engagement with her interlocutors has forced these questions upon her readers in a more urgent way. In her 1991 monograph

*Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Margaret Whitford offers a helpful

interpretation of the status of Irigaray's interactions with these interlocutors. She writes:

It seems to me that what Irigaray is trying to do in her writing is to effect an *intervention*, so that her writing would function like the *parole* of the psychoanalyst and set some change in motion. [...] [Interventions] are essentially aimed not primarily at 'truth' but at bringing about a change in the psychic situation. An interpretation is [...] designed to effect shifts in the unconscious and open up other possibilities for the analysand who cannot effect the shift unaided. (36)

Irigaray's texts, according to Whitford, cannot be considered treatises proclaiming a certain "truth," or even a "reading" of, say, Freud or Plato. Rather, they must be understood as interventions into a series of discourses, in order to precipitate within them a certain change, a certain foment. Indeed, by revealing something about how these discourses have been constituted, and about the conditions of this constitution, Irigaray's interventions (Whitford says) precipitate a shift that would not have been possible had the discourse remained "unaided"—that is to say, had Irigaray not, through her writing, provided the place for such revelations to occur. This interpretation, upon which Irigaray is understood to be "psychoanalyzing the philosophers"—that is, utilizing her own subject-position as a blank screen onto which to reflect the ruptures and inconsistencies at the heart of their "masculine" discourse—seemed to many at the time of Whitford's writing to be essentially correct.<sup>ii</sup> Tina Chanter (1995), for instance, writing after Whitford, re-interprets this technique in philosophical (rather than psychoanalytic) terms as "Irigaray's 're-writing' of the philosophers" (the subtitle of her book). Chanter writes that Irigaray

insists on rereading 'the dominant discourse' (TS: 119; CS: 119), not in order to perpetuate it, but by 'interrogating men's 'mastery' (TS: 119; CS: 119), in the knowledge that we cannot afford to ignore the legacy of the Western tradition that has shaped our very ways of thinking [...] Her critical deployment of the resources



offered her by the tradition owes its energy not only to that tradition, but also to her difference from that tradition. (216)

Chanter here pinpoints the uniqueness of Irigaray's position at once inside of and outside of the Western philosophical tradition. She thus concurs with Whitford that Irigaray's work neither simply repeats traditional philosophical themes nor straightforwardly critiques them from an "outside" perspective. Instead, Irigaray performs an immanent critique, as it were, that destabilizes core assumptions of this tradition. Thus, according to Chanter, her work seeks to show up a difference or rupture *internal* to the tradition, but one which has previously gone unrecognized by that tradition.

In the same year that Chanter's book was published, however, Irigaray noted in an interview that she viewed her work as divided into three distinct, yet related, stages. She described them as follows: "Thus, three phases: the first a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the Western subject; the second, how to define a second subject; and the third phase, how to define a relationship, a philosophy, an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects" (JLI: 3). The description of Irigaray's work given by Whitford and Chanter clearly corresponds to the first phase Irigaray identifies—namely, that of a disruption or critique of the traditional figures of Western philosophy, insofar as it has been dominated by a single, masculine subject. However, over time it has become less clear to readers how exactly to situate the "second" and "third" phases of Irigaray's oeuvre, and in what way, philosophically and stylistically, they could be said to follow from the first. In the first half of this chapter, then, I offer a brief overview of Irigaray's oeuvre, in order to provide the reader with a framework for understanding the scholarly debates concerning the question of continuity in Irigaray's work. Following this, I also situate my own reading—on which we *can* claim a continuity within Irigaray's oeuvre—

with respect to these debates. In the second half of the chapter, I offer a conceptual map of my project, clarifying my uses of the concepts “ontology,” “language,” and “ethics,” and their interrelation in the concept of “relational limitation,” which I use to express my argument concerning the continuity of Irigaray’s oeuvre. Irigaray’s work, in my view, transforms each of these concepts (ontology, language, and ethics) by way of a thinking of relation; and thus draws the three together in a new vision of subjectivity understood as irreducibly structured by this “relational limitation.”

#### *A. Irigaray’s Three Phases*

The initial “disruptive” or critical phase of Irigaray’s work can clearly be seen in texts like *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985, orig. pub. 1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985, orig. pub, 1977). In *Speculum*, Irigaray’s method can be accurately characterized as the psychoanalytic “intervention” Whitford describes. Throughout this text, Irigaray’s voice works to reveal the hidden desires, projections, and repressions of the masculine subject of psychoanalytic discourse and philosophy. For instance, in the first section of the text, Irigaray performs a reading of Freud’s lecture on femininity in which she critically mimes the self-assured discourse of his “objective” and scientific observations. This critical mimicry works to reveal that the supposedly “neutral” point of view from which Freud speaks is in fact precisely a *masculine* point of view—his lecture is, in fact, a matter of a man, speaking to other men, about the object “woman.” Within this lecture, then, Irigaray identifies in Freud’s “definition” of woman the identifications and projections occasioned by this situation of dialogue and desire between men. She speaks of what she calls “hom(m)osexuality” to designate the fact that men (*hommes*) are the only subjects represented in this discourse on sexuality: their “definitions” of woman

are only projections of their own repressed desires (SOW: 142; SAF: 246). Further, Irigaray connects these masculine projections and repressions to the history of Western philosophy itself when, in the final section of *Speculum*, she offers an extensive reading of Plato's famous image of the cave. Irigaray's analysis suggests that this image can in fact be aligned with a certain masculine reality in which "nothing can be named as 'beings' except those same things that all the same men see in the same way in a setup that does not allow them to see other things and which they will designate by the same names, on the basis of the conversation between them" (SOW: 263; SAF: 326). But what is forgotten in this image is precisely the underlying structure of this visual scene: the physical passageway from outside to inside, which will "found, subtend, sustain the hardening of all dichotomies" (SOW: 246; SAF: 308). Irigaray links this physical passage to the repressed feminine-maternal origin of knowledge, from which man flees in a quest for objectivity, ideality, and, paradoxically, origin.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray's method can also be readily linked to the "disruptive" interventions described by Whitford and Chanter. The text is a collection of pieces published around the same time as *Speculum*, and also includes some pieces that respond to questions following its immensely controversial publication.<sup>iii</sup> Here Irigaray elaborates further on her critiques of psychoanalytic discourse (discussing Freud, Horney, and Ernest Jones). She also more explicitly takes on Lacan. In the essay, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," Irigaray explicitly asserts the importance of critiquing philosophy itself, claiming that she was led to a thoroughgoing critique of Western metaphysics through the discovery of the metaphysical presuppositions that circumscribe psychoanalytic thinking, especially those concerning

female sexuality. She writes: “it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt*, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse” (TS: 74; CS: 73). She thus explicitly speaks of “‘reopening’ the figures of philosophical discourse—idea, substance, subject, transcendental subjectivity, absolute knowledge—in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, [*les emprunts au/du féminin*] to make them ‘render up’ and give back what they owe the feminine” (TS: 74; CS: 72). Further, if the feminine has been repressed throughout the history of Western philosophy, Irigaray suggests, there is no possibility of simply claiming the “reality” of woman as a subject, because to do so would already be to operate within the masculine scheme of discourse. Instead: “There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path,’ the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (TS: 76; CS: 75). This line can be read as an explicit statement of the “critical mimicry” some readers identified in Irigaray’s work.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, to “convert [woman’s] form of subordination into an affirmation” is precisely to be a *bad* mimic—to mimic in a way that is imperfect inexact, and, as such, is a form of imitation that reveals the mechanism of mimicry itself. Such a revelation would, according to Irigaray, precisely destabilize the masculine illusion of self-sufficiency.

In sum, this early “phase” of Irigaray’s work, comprised of primarily *Speculum* and *This Sex*, fits well with the image of Irigaray put forward by Whitford and Chanter—an image of a feminist philosopher engaged in immanent critique, subverting philosophical and psychoanalytic paradigms from within, and offering, in the name of the

repressed “feminine,” a thoroughgoing indictment of “masculine discourse.” These texts also remain the most widely read of Irigaray’s work—the title essay from *This Sex Which Is Not One*, for instance, appears in many feminist anthologies and across women’s studies curricula.

But in the years following Whitford’s and Chanter’s publications—and in light of the appearance of more English translations of Irigaray’s texts of the 1980’s and early ‘90’s—some readers began to identify what they perceived to be a distinct shift in Irigaray’s work, both in terms of content and in terms of style. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, written in 1984 (based on Irigaray’s lectures in philosophy at the University of Rotterdam) and translated into English in 1993, in some sense marked the beginning of this transition. While this text could still be read as a re-interpretation of philosophical themes and figures (Irigaray explicitly advocates there a re-thinking of place, space, and time, and offers readings of Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and Diotima’s speech from Plato’s *Symposium*), the goal of the text seems to be less a revelation of the repressed feminine than a discussion of the repressed possibilities of a *relationship* between two different sexes. Irigaray uses the language of “woman” and “man” in this text, whereas previously she had more often spoken of “masculine discourse” and the “feminine.” This emerging focus on “two” different subjects surprised many readers who had associated Irigaray’s work with deconstruction and multiplicity.<sup>v</sup> Additionally, texts like *Sexes and Genealogies*, a series of lectures delivered in the 1980’s and translated into English in 1993 (orig. pub. 1987), *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* (1994, orig. pub. 1989) and *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1993, orig. pub. 1990), presented a voice that was more topical, and seemed more to “own” its own

perspective, rather than mimicking or deconstructing. In these texts, for instance, Irigaray responded to current events such as the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, investigated the possibility of a feminine divinity, commented on topics such as AIDS, women's health, and beauty, and developed her notion of "sexuate rights." She developed the latter concept further in *I Love To You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity Within History* (1996, orig. pub. 1992), which is largely an engagement with Hegel, as well as *Democracy Begins Between Two* (2000, orig. pub. 1994) (originally written in Italian, and reflecting Irigaray's ongoing political engagement with the Italian Communist Party). During this middle period Irigaray also composed more poetic texts, which invoked a more "positive" voice rather than a strictly critical one: these could be said to include *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991, orig. pub. 1980), *The Forgetting of Air In Martin Heidegger* (1999, orig. pub. 1983), *Elemental Passions* (1992, orig. pub. 1982), and an actual book of poetry, *Everyday Prayers*, which, though published in 2004 consisted of selected poems written during the 1990s. Some of these more "positive" engagements (although, to be sure, the first two remain critical in content) were described by Carolyn Burke as Irigaray's "Romancing the Philosophers" (Burke, 1989). To refer back to Irigaray's own taxonomy of her work, these texts can be viewed as attempts to find a way to speak *to* the philosophers as a different, feminine subject. The emerging concern with the elemental (air, water, earth) can be linked to this attempt to define a "second" subject, a subject in the feminine, given that the elemental and material elements of subjectivity have, according to Irigaray's early work, also been repressed in the construction of the "masculine" subject and discourse. Further, the conception of "sexuate rights" is clearly related to the task of defining a second subject, as sexuate

rights are intended to provide a more “objective” cultural place for the feminine subject (ILTY: 2). Nevertheless, the question of how Irigaray deemed it possible to move from a seemingly deconstructive position to a constructive political project remained unclear for some.

The line between Irigaray’s “middle” and “later” texts is somewhat blurred, but given that Irigaray offered the taxonomy previously cited in 1995, and that she already at that time spoke of a “third” stage of her writing that would attempt to define an ethic and a relation between two different subjects, we could perhaps consider *To Be Two* (2001, orig. pub. Italian 1994), and even *I Love to You* to be transitional texts leading into the “third” phase, insofar as each deals with key themes of the “second” phase (the elemental, the concept of sexual rights), but does so in the context of the question of a relation between two sexually different subjects. Irigaray’s work of the late 1990s, then, could in general be viewed as further effecting the transition to her next phase through a continued development of some of the more poetic work of the second (*To Be Two* opens and closes with poetry concerning nature, for instance)—especially insofar as that work focuses on the question of the elemental, the relation of the cultural to the natural, and the spiritual to the material. The question of the elemental (and its preliminary connection to the question of ontology) was already indicated in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, where Irigaray identified, prior to Heidegger’s diagnosis of Western metaphysics’ “forgetting of being,” a forgetting of the elemental air. The “elemental” was also represented in *Marine Lover*, where Irigaray spoke to Nietzsche from the perspective of the ocean, to high noon from the perspective of night. This interest in the elemental, and especially in air, has persisted through “later” texts such as *Between East*

*and West: From Singularity to Community* (2002, orig. pub. 1999), where Irigaray writes of the practice of yoga and the cultivation of the breath, in connection with a simultaneously “corporeal” and spiritual ethics of relationality, and in further writings on breath, spirituality and religion (see *Le Souffle des Femmes* [*The Breath of Women*] [1996, orig. pub. in Italian, 1989, no English translation], for instance, and a series of pieces that appeared in the collection *Key Writings* [2004] on this theme). Additionally, it is important to note that throughout the middle and later phases of her work Irigaray has also published pieces concerning empirical research she has done with schoolchildren in Italy, concerning differences in language use between boys and girls. Some of this research was published in *To Speak Is Never Neutral* (2002, orig. pub. 1985), which also collected some of Irigaray’s earliest (pre-*Speculum*) research in linguistics and psychoanalysis. The more recent studies (also collected in *Key Writings* under the names “The Sharing of Speech,” and “Being Two Outside Tomorrow,”) can clearly be linked to the second two phases of Irigaray’s work insofar as they offer an empirical basis for studying sexuate subjectivity and for framing the possibilities and difficulties of the relation between subjects. All of this work, then, remains subject to the concerns raised earlier about the possibility of speaking straightforwardly about “two” different subjects.

In her works since the turn of the millenium, Irigaray has largely come to focus on what she now almost exclusively calls “sexuate” difference as an explicitly “ontological” difference (“sexuate” [*sexué*] is a neologism intended to resist the idea that sexual difference is primarily bodily or reproductive). The question of ontology, for Irigaray, also involves the questions of the relation of the cultural to the natural and of the spiritual to the material. This line of questioning is developed especially in *The Way of Love*



(2002, not published in French), which considers the question of dialogue between sexuate subjects through an engagement with the later work of Martin Heidegger on language and ontology. *The Way of Love* specifically considers what Irigaray perceives to be a neglect of the question of relationality in Heidegger's work on language, and thus more explicitly introduces her own relational ontology through her dialogue with his work. In 2008, Irigaray published *Sharing the World* (in English), a continuation of her engagement with Heidegger in *The Way of Love* that continues to illustrate her relational ontology, and to link it explicitly with the question of ethics. Within both of these texts, it should be noted, Hegel is also a prominent interlocutor. Most recently, Irigaray has composed a short text on the Virgin Mary, which has only been published in Italian, and has finished the manuscript of a text on Presocratic Greek philosophy, *Au Commencement, Elle Etait*, which is in the process of English translation; the English title of this book is *In the Beginning, She Was*.<sup>vi</sup> A section from this manuscript on Antigone has just appeared (at the time of this writing) in *Interrogating Antigone*, Eds. Wilmer and Zukauskaitė (2010) as "Between Myth and History: The Tragedy of Antigone." In *In the Beginning, She Was*, notably, Irigaray continues to explicitly formulate her vision of human being as, at bottom, relational (including in a short section explicitly titled "The Human Subject as a Being in Relation").<sup>vii</sup>

To many readers (this literature is discussed in more detail in Chapter II) Irigaray has, in her "middle" and "later" work, appeared to be independently proclaiming truths about the "ontological" status of sexuate difference and elaborating a positive political and ethical project on the basis of these claims in a manner inconsistent with the revelations of *Speculum* and *This Sex*. Indeed, having proceeded through the foregoing

summary, we might wonder: if the insights of *Speculum* and *This Sex* are correct, how could Irigaray be justified in speaking as a “subject” or an author in her own right? How, if the feminine is precisely that which has been repressed within the discourse of identity, could she speak in the name of a feminine “subject” about women’s rights and needs, or indeed speak of the ethical possibilities of a relation between “two” seemingly defined subjects? Does such a move not reify sexual difference in precisely the manner of the previously-vilified “masculine” discourse? Further, how could *any* definition of feminine subjectivity avoid reifying patriarchal stereotypes of women? Given these questions, we might further wonder: is the (seemingly deconstructive) philosophical “framework,” such as it is, of *Speculum* and *This Sex*, actually the framework for Irigaray’s later writings? Or has she shifted her allegiances to a more “realist” view, or metaphysics, of sexual difference?

Given these concerns, some readers have accordingly questioned not only the continuity of Irigaray’s work as a whole, but also the feminist utility of her middle and later work. They worry that her more recent work might precisely shore up normative discourses and practices surrounding sexual difference rather than disrupting them, as her earlier texts had appeared to do. A 1998 issue of *Diacritics*, for example, featured a discussion between Pheng Cheah, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Drucilla Cornell titled “The Future of Sexual Difference” in which Cornell (who had previously offered a defense of Irigaray in *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* [1991]) voiced the concern that Irigaray’s ontological privileging of sexual difference and her turn to “sexual rights” were in fact “conservative” moves. Butler worried that Irigaray’s ethics was inherently heterosexist and also ontologically

problematic (Grosz et. al.,19-25). The participants also linked these concerns with the question of a perceived “shift” in Irigaray’s own work from an earlier, more radical, and more disruptive voice to a new, more “conservative” one. Indeed, this linking of concerns about content with concerns about a shift in style is a move made by many contemporary readers of Irigaray.<sup>viii</sup> The discomfort surrounding Irigaray’s middle and later ontological work, then is bound up in the scholarship with the question of a supposed shift in style. This ontological work is also, for Irigaray herself, entwined with the central questions of dialogue and language re-thought in light of a vision of two different sexuate subjects (as evidenced in her most recent publications). Therefore, it seems that at this juncture the interconnected questions of continuity in Irigaray’s oeuvre, and of the status of her claims about subjectivity, ontology, ethics, and language, and the relations between them, are eminently worth exploring. Further, given that Irigaray continues to insist upon the phases of her work as belonging to a continuous project, I believe it is also justifiable and worthwhile to explore the possibility of reading her texts in a philosophically continuous way.<sup>ix</sup>

### *B. The Present Work*

The present work is devoted to such an exploration, although, to be sure, it proceeds in a limited way, always under the (hopefully productive) constraints of certain choices of focus. As the foregoing discussion should indicate, the question of what it means to read Irigaray reading has taken on new complexities in recent years; and in particular, what had at one time become a fairly standard interpretation of her technique as “critical mimesis” has been called into question (Cimitile & Miller, 2006). I suggest here, however, that Irigaray has not simply abandoned her critical, mimetic,

psychoanalytic project in favor of asserting a kind of blatant “ownership” over her ideas. Instead of making such an assertion myself, I ask *how* it is that Irigaray seems to have moved (in a continuous rather than a discontinuous way) from what Whitford initially characterized as the position of the analyst, intervening into (unavowedly) “masculine” discourses in order to reveal the hidden mechanisms that hitherto ensured their domination, to the position of a *dialogic partner*, that is, one who speaks from her own place and offers her own voice as witness to an always situated and partial truth. To speak from one’s own place, this dissertation argues, is precisely *not* to claim ownership over “truth” as a whole, but rather to speak the “truth” occasioned by the status of one’s *relation* to the other at a given time: a truth that depends as much on the other’s ability and willingness to hear a voice different from his or her own as it does on one’s own ability to, in Irigaray’s words, remain “faithful” to one’s own becoming—that is, to not abandon the situated and embodied truth of one’s own particular position and voice (WOL: xi).

Further, in her most recent journal article, titled “Ethical Gestures Toward the Other” (2010), Irigaray states: “I could say that, from the beginning, the aim of my work is to try to favor ethical relations between human beings. A thing that proves impossible in a culture or tradition in which the subject appears as neuter or neutral” (3). Thus, we should consider the possibility that, throughout all three stages of Irigaray’s work, *ethical relations* may prove to be the uniting thread. Notably, in the quote offered above, Irigaray even subsumes the issue of the disruption of masculine discourse and culture to the issue of ethics. The quotation implies that the critique of the culture of “one” male subject must be undertaken precisely *because* ethical relations between humans cannot

come into being, much less thrive, in this mono-logical climate. In other words (and as I will show throughout the next two chapters), Irigaray's early critical work can in fact be taken as a precondition for the constructive thinking of her later work. This is because the positivity of Irigaray's own voice and vision could not be developed without a thoroughgoing disruption of the mono-logical, masculine definition of subjectivity. A provisional answer to the question of how Irigaray might be justified in speaking about a "feminine" subject in light of her critique of masculine subjectivity in her early works, then, is that her work precisely transforms the concept of subjectivity itself; and it performs this transformation in search of a more ethical relation between sexuate "subjects." Indeed, I argue throughout this dissertation that Irigaray's ontological thinking of the relation of sexuate difference a) can actually be glimpsed throughout her oeuvre, and not only in its most recent and explicit exposition, and b) constitutes a thoroughgoing revision of the concept of subjectivity itself, such that we can make no easy assumptions about what Irigaray means in her later work when speaking about either "masculine" or "feminine" subjects. Indeed, I argue that Irigaray's relational ontology transforms subjectivity such that the latter becomes an inherently ethical figure: a figure of what I will call a positive "relational limit" or "relational limitation."

Irigaray's two most recent full-length publications in English (*The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*) will, for the purposes of this dissertation, most explicitly illustrate this relational ontology, as well as bear out my thesis that Irigaray's texts and voice are becoming increasingly dialogic. Indeed, these texts are not at all straightforward "manifestos" but are instead intricate (if often implicit) dialogues with philosophical interlocutors—above all, with Martin Heidegger. The final two chapters of

the dissertation aim to elucidate these texts both in terms of their form and in terms of their content, in particular through connecting them with Irigaray's earlier work (especially *Speculum* and *This Sex Which is Not One*, which are discussed in the second and third chapters) by way of the theme of relationality. Due to their recent dates of publication, scholars are still in the process of identifying the ramifications of these new texts for an understanding of Irigaray's oeuvre, and no full-length work has yet been done on this matter. In my view, examining these texts in detail—and in connection with the earlier work—offers new ways to think about old questions that have plagued not only Irigaray's readers, but also feminists and continental philosophers more broadly.<sup>x</sup>

I utilize the remainder of this introduction, then, to explain further the philosophical concepts that structure this project. In particular I more precisely clarify my use of the terms “ontology,” “language” and ethics,” and indicate how they are interrelated in my reading of Irigaray. I also discuss further the guiding concept of “relational limitation,” with which I have attempted to express the interrelatedness of the aforementioned concepts. This interrelatedness (and thus the use of this phrase itself) is part of the claim that relationality provides a way of thinking about the continuity of Irigaray's work.

## 2. Conceptual Clarification: Ontology, Language, Ethics

### *A. Ontology*

The question of what Irigaray means by speaking about the “ontological” status of sexuate difference, along with the question of how this emerging ontology is related to her ethical and political vision, is perhaps the most pressing question in Irigaray

scholarship today. A recent discussion in the feminist journal *differences* displays this central preoccupation. Mary Beth Mader (2008) writes:

It has been a puzzle to understand how, let alone whether, to reconcile the language of natural sex difference and rhythm with the relational, psychoanalytic account of subject formation, both of which we find in Irigaray's work [...] If sexual difference were a relational difference, as described in the differential relations of boys and girls to their origins, then how could the entire natural world be characterized according to this schema? How could the alleged continuity of human bodies with our ambient and constitutive natural world be established on this relational basis? That seemed impossible and not in a productive way. (129)

In this complex quote we see several questions being raised. Primarily, Mader seems to be asking: what is the relationship of the “natural”—that which is both within and yet excessive to the human—and the specifically “human” expressions of sexuate difference?

In other words, how can relationality, as a human characteristic, and possibly even as an ethical task, be related to “nature”—including to the body as “[continuous] [...] with our ambient and constitutive natural world?” In the article cited, Mader is responding to

Alison Stone, whose 2006 text, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference* offers some proposed solutions to these questions by defending what Stone calls Irigaray's “realist essentialism.” Stone defines “realist essentialism” as “the view that natural differences between the sexes exist, prior to our cultural activities” (19).

Furthermore, Stone believes that this “realist essentialism” has increasingly become a commitment of Irigaray's over time, and that her more recent “ontological” writings evince this commitment more so than do her earlier ones. (22) She thus defends a version of the same thesis of non-continuity as Irigaray's critics, but she supports the alleged “turn” toward realism. Thus, according to Stone, Irigaray's later work proposes a certain “natural” sex difference, understood as the self-differing of nature according to certain characteristic rhythms. The conception of nature Stone attributes to Irigaray (or

reads Irigaray through) is not positivist, but rather draws on the tradition of German idealism, especially the work of Schelling (with whom Irigaray does not explicitly engage). These natural “rhythms,” according to Stone, would then (on Irigaray’s account) function as the basis of *sexual* difference, which must be understood at the cultural level. On Stone’s interpretation of Irigaray, then, “relational,” subjective sexuate difference is linked to the ethical project of *cultivating* sexual difference on the cultural level. (“Cultivation” is a term used by Irigaray throughout her later work, but especially in *I Love to You*, where it occurs in the context of an engagement with Hegel). Stone writes that “Irigaray refers to material bodies which have inherent ‘forms’ that call for spiritualisation or cultivation” (41). Thus, for Stone, sexual difference (as cultural, spiritual, or relational) is predicated upon the prior existence of bodies that exhibit certain “natural” rhythms, which in turn provide the basis and potential for such cultivation. She calls this view an “ontology,” signaling that she views her reading of Irigaray’s ‘realist essentialism’ as one response to the question of what Irigaray means by characterizing sexuate difference as “ontological.”

Indeed, Mader views Stone’s argument (which she refers to in the title of her piece as “Somatic Ontology”) as one attempt to address the problem of how human, relational difference could be founded on a prior “natural” (or ontological) difference.<sup>xi</sup> The quotation from Mader above also displays the concern that a definition of sexuate difference grounded in “nature” is potentially unproductive and reductive—though she believes that Stone has offered a helpful response to this problem. I offer this glimpse of Stone’s and Mader’s discussion in order to show, in a preliminary way, the depth of the problem of the relation between the ontology and ethics of sexuate difference in



Irigaray's work. In asking how Irigaray's psychoanalytic, linguistic account of sexual difference is related to her "natural" one, scholars inevitably raise deep questions of the relations between nature, culture, subjectivity and language.

Further, these discussions show that Irigaray's readers are still searching for a way to understand what "ontology" means for her, and are still in substantial disagreement. Indeed, Stone's attempt to defend what she calls Irigaray's "realist essentialism" stands in stark opposition to the reading of Penelope Deutscher, whose 2002 text *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* argued that, for Irigaray, there is no "fact" of sexual difference that would be the basis of a cultural elaboration or cultivation, but rather that Irigaray's texts serve as a rhetorical reminder of the *non*-existence of such difference, calling us to the task of political transformation in the face of the very impossibility of the realization of her utopian vision. Her major argument is that Irigaray offers neither an argument for equality nor an argument for a "difference" that could be recognized, but rather "a politics anticipating difference" (1). On this reading, "relational" difference would presumably refer only to the linguistic, human level; and there would be no straightforward or independent assertion of "reality" or being in Irigaray's work—rather, such assertions would be rhetorical devices deployed for political purposes. For instance, Deutscher interprets Irigaray's proposed verbal, legal, and religious reforms as "negative [reminders] of just how much cultural change would be necessary for a society to evolve into a culture of sexual difference [...] a rhetorical reminder that we live in a culture in which they are impossible" (41). According to Deutscher, Irigaray does not ask a "question of ontology of the sort, 'Is there sexual difference really?'" (108) Rather, Deutscher interprets

Irigaray's "ontology," as it were, as purely concerning the *potential* for sexual difference: "Her philosophical framework is constructed by taking both these positions, each of which can be argued with equal vigor: that there is no sexual difference; that there might be sexual difference" (108).<sup>xii</sup> The very fact that two such opposed readings of Irigaray's work are possible show that these questions are continually evolving in her work, and beg for further exploration.

Beyond this incongruity among Irigaray's supporters, there is dissent among feminist theorists at large concerning the value of ontological thinking as such (as well as disagreement about what the term "ontology" itself means).<sup>xiii</sup> In the discussion cited above, Stone and Mader both use the term "ontology" to refer to a theory about what "is," independently of human beings' cultural activities. While my full explication of Irigaray's ontology will only become clear in Chapter IV, through a closer discussion of some of the work of Martin Heidegger and Irigaray's interactions with this work, for now I would like to situate my understanding of "ontology" in distinction from the understanding utilized by Mader and Stone.

When I speak about "ontology" in this project, I do not simply mean a theory of beings or of "what is." Rather, I refer to a more specifically Heideggerian sense of the ontological in distinction from the ontic, or what Heidegger sometimes calls "fundamental ontology." Heidegger, says, for instance, that "[o]ntological inquiry is [...] more primordial, as over against the ontical inquiry of the positive sciences. [...] [I]t remains itself naive and opaque if in its researches into the Being of entities it fails to discuss the meaning of Being in general" (1978: 31). I argue in this dissertation that when Irigaray says that sexuate difference is "ontological," she does not (or does not

only) mean that the ontic beings “men” and “women” have a “natural” existence. Rather, she means that the meaning of “Being in general” can only be understood with reference to the question of sexual difference, and vice versa. To uncover all that this interpretation entails would probably require a separate dissertation devoted to an in-depth reading of both Heidegger and Irigaray. This dissertation does offer an in-depth (although limited in breadth) interpretation of their relation in Chapter IV. However, for my present purposes the primary consequences of this specialized use of the term “ontology” are a) that “ontological” cannot be understood to mean the same thing as “natural in essence” (even with caveats about the meaning of “natural” or “essence”), and b) that “ontology,” insofar as it speaks about the question of being, is a way of characterizing the human while always situating it in relation to something greater than, and beyond it—a kind of worldly event that continually gives the human over to itself, in its relation to the world. In his later writing, Heidegger calls this event *Ereignis*, a term which has been translated by Joan Stambaugh as “the event of appropriation.”<sup>xiv</sup> I simply use the term “event.” The event of being, then, is neither reducible to the human nor situated *only* “beyond” the human, but rather it first gives the human to itself as “in” the world and as meaningfully related to that world.

Thus, when I speak of Irigaray’s “relational ontology,” I do not mean a theory of beings as relational (as if beings first “were” in some unthought or generic sense, and then were said to be “relational”). Instead, I mean a theory of being itself occurring *as relation*. In Heideggerian terms, this means that relation is ontological and not ontic. In terms of sexual difference, it means that “women” and “men” are not entities whose definitions precede the relation between them, but rather that the status of the relation of

sexuate difference produces these provisional “definitions” at any given time.<sup>xv</sup> Importantly, however (and with respect to Stone’s discussion), this does not mean that the identities thereby produced are exhaustively a matter of human construction. Rather, the relation of sexuate difference both exceeds the human and is *given* to us as a possibility and a task we are called upon to take up. Thus, I will not propose, like Stone, that Irigaray’s ontology of “natural” sexuate difference is the *basis* of a psychic or subjective “relational” difference (and therefore that relational difference does not concern “being” as such). Nor will I propose, like Deutscher, that this “relational” difference has no “being.” Instead, I will argue that Irigaray re-thinks being itself *as* relation, and further, that “subjectivity” names the self-givenness of this relation. Indeed, the subject is the being that encounters itself as always constitutively limited-by and related-to another, and as called upon to become in and through this relation. Further, the fact that being, for Irigaray, is thought not only as relation but as the relation of *sexuate difference*, will introduce the issue of materiality into the very question of being itself. These points will be clarified in Chapters IV and V. I will also clarify further in Chapter II the way in which this understanding of ontology differs from that of many commentators on Irigaray, and thus can perhaps offer some new solutions to the problems posed by these commentators.

### *B. Language*

This project will also centrally employ the concept of “language.” There is not much literature as of yet on Irigaray’s philosophical thinking of language itself, as this thinking has arguably only explicitly emerged in her most recent publications.<sup>xvi</sup> In my view it is crucial to trace Irigaray’s relation to both Lacan and Heidegger in order to

understand her own thinking on language. While in Chapters III and IV I will explore in more appropriate detail the ways in which Lacan and Heidegger inform Irigaray's use of the concept "language," I will for now refer to these thinkers in a rudimentary way in order to indicate the way in which the concept of language functions within the network of concepts I include under the heading of "relational limitation."

Language in this dissertation, then, is not thought of as a closed system of signs (as structuralist linguistics, and Lacan by inheritance) would have it. I argue in Chapter IV that Irigaray draws heavily on Heidegger's conception of language as not a tool for communication but rather as an environment in which we dwell and by which we are traversed and penetrated. Heidegger writes, for instance, that "[w]e are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud" (1998: 187). To be a "speaking being," for him, is to *belong* to this environment of language, which includes the possibility of speech, but is not limited to its actuality. Heidegger's account of what it means to be a speaking being is at once similar to Lacan's conception—on which we are also constitutively traversed by language, even in silence, namely through the very structure of our psyches—and different from it in that, for Heidegger, language is not reducible to the human. For Lacan, on the other hand, the "symbolic" arises out of a *separation* between humans and the "real," which includes material reality (see Chapter III). Through the very continuity evinced by Heidegger's understanding of language (continuity, that is, between the material world and its articulation, in language, as meaningful) we can see how language comes to be tied to ontology. In fact, for Heidegger language is thought as the very announcement of being itself—that is, as one way in which the event of being (described above) occurs.

For Irigaray, language carries this Heideggerian resonance of reaching beyond the human to denote the occurrence or event of being. Indeed, I argue that Irigaray, like Heidegger, understands the human as a being that most fully comes to itself in language. But, as with ontology, Irigaray also builds upon Heidegger's conception, and pushes it into new, relational arenas. For one, language for Irigaray will reveal itself as always connected to the materiality of the body by way of speech. Indeed, Irigaray often writes of "speech" (*parole*) rather than "language" (*langage*) (a distinction delineated in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*). This is because, for Irigaray, "speech" is the place where language as a system is precisely *opened* to materiality, most explicitly by way of the breath. But it is not the case that this "opening" is secondary (as if language were first a non-material signifying system that is then opened to the independently-existing material realm): rather language has come to be what it is *through* a certain relation between the material and the intelligible. In Chapter V I will discuss the concept of "place" in Irigaray's work (and also with reference to Aristotle) as a concept that destabilizes the traditional opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, and the resonances this has for our understanding of dialogue in Irigaray's project. Irigaray, I suggest, re-interprets the concept of "place" along linguistic lines, such that language, for her, offers us a way to carve out our "place" as subjects. Further, as with ontology, Irigaray crucially reconceives language as *shared*. For her, sexually-different subjects do not relate to "language" (as an environment that offers the possibility of speech) in the same way. Further, this means that they do not relate to being (by way of the occurrence of language) in the same way. This constitutes Irigaray's central supersession of Heidegger in her last two monographs.

### C. Ethics

I utilize the term “ethics” in several senses. On the one hand, I believe that Irigaray’s reformulation of subjectivity by way of relational ontology is “ethical” in the Aristotelian sense that Irigaray thinks the human being as one who must *enact* itself to the fullest of its potential, and in the most “excellent” or virtuous way.<sup>xvii</sup> The event of being as relation, of which I spoke earlier, does not simply announce what “is,” but rather calls upon the human subject to *respond* in and to this relation (as I elaborate in Chapters IV and V). Thus, on the other hand, this vision is also “ethical” in the sense that to become actualized as a subject is to recognize oneself as always already related to *another, different* subject—the sexuate other. As, I argue, Irigaray’s most recent works (in particular *Sharing the World*) explicitly show, this self-actualization of humanity is shared between two subjects who are mutually and continually formed and re-formed as a result of this process. Therefore if the relation between the two is askew—if it is violent, dehumanizing, or otherwise detrimental—our very understanding of human subjectivity and all that goes with it is harmed. This shared self-actualization process is the essence of the concept “relational limitation.” I illustrate this in Chapter V of the dissertation through my exploration of the figure of “place” in Irigaray’s writing. I speak there of place as a dialogical figure that encapsulates Irigaray’s ethical transformation of subjectivity. What it means to be a subject for Irigaray, I argue, is to perpetually move, in language, toward the “place” of the other and back into the “place” of the self, at once motivated and restricted by the “relational limit” that both connects and separates the two. The thinking of this limit, again, encompasses Irigaray’s reformulations of ontology, language, and ethics as interrelated and as *shared*.

With regard to Irigaray's explicitly formulated ethics of sexuate difference, however, some commentators have worried that, in focusing on the "relation" between sexuate subjects, Irigaray's work is only applicable to intimate or sexual relations between men and women. This is the substance of Judith Butler's critique of Irigaray, for instance, in the *Diacritics* interview, where she even quips that Irigaray's work should be filed under "heterosexual studies." However, as I hope my discussion of ontology above has already shown, when Irigaray speaks about the "relation" of sexuate subjects, she does not only mean a specific intimate relation between men and women. Rather, the relation takes place at the ontological level, such that the event of being is already an event of relation between-two, and the "subject" also comes to be re-defined as two: internally limited-by and perpetually moved-toward the sexuate other. As Gail Schwab (2007) notes (and as I explain further in Chapter V), we can thus draw a distinction between an "empirical" relation between the sexes and an "ontological" one. Schwab quotes Irigaray in *To Be Two*, who writes: "Certainly, I can decide to become woman while suspending my empirical relationship with the other gender [...] but [...] to be woman necessarily involves [...] to be in relation with man, at least ontologically." (TBT: 34; Schwab, 32). Schwab interprets this quote to say that "[a]lthough generically, to be woman requires a relation to the other man, just as to be a man requires a relation to the other woman, becoming a woman at the level of the individual is not dependent upon a heterosexual love choice" (32). Thus, while the ethics of relationality proposed by Irigaray would certainly be applicable to empirical heterosexual love relations, it is certainly not limited to this sphere, and instead concerns the relation between male and female *genres* (the French term translated as "genders") as a whole—a relation that, in



turn, affects all of our empirical relations. Thus, as I will discuss in Chapter V, the ethical practice of dialogue as the enactment of a relational limit is applicable to all human relationships. Nonetheless, for Irigaray, it is critical to transform the ontological relation of sexuate difference (a transformation that, I argue, must be pursued through dialogues with *all* sexuate others) first and foremost if these relationships are to thrive.

Stating that the definitions of sexuate subjects are intimately bound up with the status of an ontological relation thus does not mean that we can only actualize as sexuate subjects through entering into specific empirical relations with members of the “other” sex. Instead, it means that there is always an *underlying* ontological relation between “masculine” and “feminine” subjectivity as a whole. This underlying relation may be more or less violently skewed or repressed in a variety of ways, as Irigaray’s work attempts to reveal. And while this underlying relation certainly affects empirical relations between the sexes, the two are not interchangeable. Nonetheless, it is important to note the empirical effects that the repression or skewing of this ontological relation has. Indeed, from Irigaray’s point of view, we can view the oppression of women as the failure of an ethically-enabling relationality—the ongoing erasure of their subjective place as women. As I will discuss in Chapter V, this is manifest in such global problems as domestic violence and unequal division of labor between the sexes. These examples indeed remind us of the force of Irigaray’s vision, in that men and women, on the whole, do have to “share the world” together—regardless of their individual, empirical relationships—and manifestly must learn to do so more ethically.<sup>xviii</sup>

### 3. Relational Limitation: Content and Form

#### *A. Relational Limitation*

Throughout this project, I speak of “relational limitation,” a phrase with which I have attempted to thematize what I perceive to be the underlying unity of Irigaray’s oeuvre for the purpose of conceptual clarification. While the language of “relation” appears throughout all phases of Irigaray’s work, and the language of “limit” appears in several texts (notably *I Love To You*, where it is a re-thinking of Hegelian negativity, and *Sharing the World*, where it is an ethical figure), Irigaray never, to my knowledge, uses the phrase “relational limit”—except for in one instance in the unpublished manuscript of *In the Beginning, She Was*, where she writes that “To be a living someone calls for limits [...] relational limits between humans are provided through genealogy and sexuate difference” (2010). Thus, while this language does not occupy a central position in Irigaray’s own vocabulary, I utilize the phrase in order to orient my reading toward the continuity of Irigaray’s work, in particular as regards the interrelations of the concepts of ontology, language, and ethics. I have found that speaking about a “relational limitation” serves as a useful reminder that, in Irigaray’s work, sexuate difference is not a matter of “beings,” but rather a matter of a constitutive limitation-by and relation-to a sexuate alterity that occurs at the level of being. I thus find it helpful to rigorously employ it and in a certain sense impose its consistency upon Irigaray’s work, in order to draw out an underlying order that, I think, it is crucial to recognize.

It is important to notice, however, that I am not claiming a kind of conceptual mastery over Irigaray’s work with this phrase. I do not mean to claim, for example, that every aspect of her work reduces to the concept of “relational limitation,” nor that this

concept can solve every problem or question raised by Irigaray's readings of philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. Instead, my hope is that the elaboration of this concept throughout the dissertation will create a place for the performative movement of the development of Irigaray's voice to be glimpsed: a place, in other words, for the *form* of Irigaray's dialogues to be glimpsed in its mirroring of the *content* of her most recent writings. In the final chapter of the dissertation, then, I explicitly characterize "relational limitation" in terms of the content of Irigaray's unique ontology (which includes the network of concepts identified above). But I also explore the concept of relational limit throughout the dissertation through the performative movement of Irigaray's work. What does this mean? I believe the ethical task of speech as described in Irigaray's later works is mirrored through her engagement with her interlocutors, in particular with Heidegger. Indeed, by the time Irigaray reaches the point of her recent dialogues with Heidegger, she has provided the interventions and transformations necessary to find a place for speaking "in faithfulness to [herself]" (WOL: xi). Thus, the form and content of this dissertation will also mirror one another, in that while I speak of the unifying thread of "relational limitation," and ultimately elucidate the ontological meaning of this concept, I will accomplish this precisely by way of the staging of more or less dialogic interactions between Irigaray's voice and the voices of her interlocutors, through which we can see how Irigaray progressively and performatively *establishes* this limitation.

### *B. Content*

What, more precisely, is the content of this phrase "relational limitation?" As noted earlier, the phrase describes a relational ontology elaborated in Irigaray's later work, one upon which the "subject" is re-thought as constitutively coming-to-be in and

through its relation to another kind of subject, another kind of unfolding. Furthermore, through my discussions of Lacan and Heidegger, we will see how what is at stake in the language of “relational limitation” is also a rethinking of the notion of *limit* as such. Indeed, by the time we reach Irigaray’s most recent works, “limit” no longer indicates something that arises in response to a “lack,” that is, something beyond which there is either nothing or madness, and which appears only through the process of its own (destructive) transgression—as “limit” seems to mean for Lacan (see Chapter III). Nor does “limit” even indicate something which gives the human to itself as the constitutive concealedness in an event of disclosure, as it might be said to for Heidegger (see Chapter IV). Instead, “relational limitation” is articulated through the movement of Irigaray’s work as that which announces the plenitude and in-finite of a positive relation *through* the very finitude of a limitation. This re-thinking opens up the possibility for subjectivity itself to be re-thought as a constitutively ethical process that occurs in relation to a different, *sexuate other*.<sup>xix</sup>

This vision of relation is furthermore distinct from the one endorsed by those scholars who are coming to be called “new materialists,” both within feminist theory (e.g. Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti) and within continental philosophy more broadly (e.g. Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou). To glimpse this difference, it is helpful to note that Irigaray has always taken a critical distance from the work of Deleuze, who could reasonably be identified as a forerunner of this “new materialism.” As far back as 1973, Irigaray was indicating her critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s psychoanalytic work. In the “Questions” section of *This Sex Which is Not One*, she states:

[...] isn’t a multiplicity that does not entail a rearticulation of the difference between the sexes bound to block or take away something of woman’s pleasure?

In other words, is the feminine capable, at present, of attaining this desire, which is *neutral* precisely from the viewpoint of sexual difference? [...] And doesn't the 'desiring machine' still partly take the place of woman or the feminine? Isn't it a sort of metaphor for her/it, that men can use? Especially in terms of their relation to the techno-cratic? (TS: 140-1; CS: 139-140)

Irigaray thus identifies the persistence of the sexual neutrality or "hom(m)osexuality" that she identified as operative in Freudian discourse in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of "desire" and "desiring machines." In this section, she also continues by offering a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's valorization of "schizophrenia" and of their "body without organs." I cite this passage because it is crucial to understand Irigaray's concerns about philosophies of "multiplicity" in order to understand how she differs from much contemporary continental thinking. As noted above, if philosophy simply jumps into the perspective of "multiplicity," according to Irigaray, without "[rearticulating] the difference between the sexes"—that is, without rearticulating subjectivity as internally limited by its *two*-ness—then it risks remaining *one*, insofar as thought will remain a matter of the *one* who perceives and uses this "multiplicity," possibly even for the purposes of a kind of auto-affectivity. In other words, philosophy would remain a kind of masturbatory act carried out by the neutral (read: male) subject, who would fetishize "multiplicity" or "becoming-woman" as fuel for his rebellion, without entering into a relation with a true feminine other.

In sum, I think that we must read Irigaray in tension with "new materialism." Although it could be argued that these thinkers are also attempting to view being as relation, it seems that the "relation" in question is a multiple *network* of relations, seen from some "outside," neutral point of view. This neutrality is borne out by a widespread rejection of the language of subjectivity and even, in some cases, of the "human." But

for Irigaray, we must crucially remain within a subjective “human” point of view—while understanding this point of view to be irreducibly *limited* by the existence of an other subject. Irigaray’s thinking thus transforms, rather than transcends, the language of subjectivity. This perspective is lacking in those who speak about being as an event of a multiplicity of relations. Although I do not have room to adequately explore this point here, this critical difference suggests that Irigaray’s work would provide an interesting and important addition to contemporary discussions concerning being as relation. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, virtually no contemporary continental male philosophers have engaged her work to this end.<sup>xx</sup>

### *B. Form*

As indicated earlier, at the level of form, this dissertation also shows *how* Irigaray’s voice establishes the place of “relational limitation.” In each case, with each dialogue, we will see how Irigaray’s writing establishes a limitation to a masculine discourse that (it is revealed) had thought itself to be precisely *unlimited*, and that had in fact refused the possibility of relation to a different kind of subject. These masculine voices are the voices of “objectivity,” which Irigaray ultimately reveals to be nothing but “a blind projection of an unrecognized subjective” (WOL: 87). It is important to note that she reveals this projection of an unrecognized subjective even in those thinkers who are traditionally associated with *critiquing* and destabilizing traditional conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity—in this instance, Lacan and Heidegger. Irigaray’s method (throughout her work, in fact) is to begin from a position seemingly “inside” of these discourses, only to reveal that, as woman, as “feminine,” she is in fact “nowhere” to be found within them—there is no place for her within them. Yet her speech persists, and in

its persistence, it opens up a space of exteriority *within* the very terms of the masculine discourse. This space of exteriority within *is* precisely “relational limitation” insofar as it is what announces to us simultaneously our finitude and the possibility of relation. Thus, Irigaray performs the revelation of this relation, and the revelation of the fact that the masculine discourse has refused to recognize it. Indeed, she “dialogues” with those who, at least at first, cannot hear her. Thus it is only over time that her work begins to establish the possibility of a new place—that she opens a place for herself through her writing.

Such an opening could not be accomplished alone, however, and even speaking to one who cannot hear is preferable to speaking as if one were alone in the world, as the solitary “subject.” These dialogues have produced a new place for Irigaray’s voice, the place of what I am calling “relational limitation,” the figure of a new ontology. This figure, again, is not a definitive “answer” to the questions raised by Irigaray, nor to those raised by a reading of Irigaray. It is not a vision of some “thing,” but rather of a process, an ongoing relation to language and to the other. The readings of Lacan and Heidegger that, for me, mark the path toward this vision are also not “answers,” not definitive pronouncements, but rather steps along the path toward this vision of relation. Each of these paradigms must be transcended, just as Irigaray, through her engagement with philosophy, repeatedly transcends herself (by speaking in the voice of the other) and returns to her source (the development of the place of her own voice). She is led to this place by encountering the double-resonance of a limit—the limit of the other and the limit this other places on her. Similarly, I read Lacan and Heidegger from my own place; and I also read Irigaray with and through these other voices as a way of showing the

doubled limitation of each, and as a way toward opening the space of articulation for this concept of “relational limitation.” This vision, as an interpretation of the work of not only Irigaray, and not only of problems in feminism, but also of Lacan and Heidegger, is also of necessity incomplete and open because it, too, always requires interlocutors, and thus it can never assert itself as “truth” *tout court*.

#### 4. Contributions and Limitations

I will now consider more explicitly the question of what this project can and cannot accomplish. First, as I said earlier, my statements about the unity of Irigaray’s work should not be taken as evidence that I see myself as performing an exhaustive reading of this work. To focus primarily on Irigaray’s interlocutions with Lacan and Heidegger is necessarily to exclude many other, highly productive dialogues. Hegel, for instance, is another crucial interlocutor for Irigaray in her process of re-thinking the concept of subjectivity. Further, Levinas could have been chosen as an interlocutor for the development of the ethical aspects of the vision of “relational limitation.” Constraints of space and time prohibit the kind of in-depth engagement that each of these figures calls for, however. One could certainly continue to enumerate all the interlocutors I might have chosen, given the vast scope of Irigaray’s own work. Additionally, my primary focuses are on Irigaray’s earlier and later works, and thus a sustained consideration of many of her important “middle” texts is also unfortunately beyond my scope. However, I believe that the texts and the interlocutors that I have chosen are especially helpful for thinking through the pressing questions of the relations between language, subjectivity, and ontology in Irigaray’s project; and that therefore the



perspective I develop could be fruitfully applied to a reading of other parts of Irigaray's oeuvre.

Furthermore, I do not develop here some of the conceptual resources that would be necessary to give a reading of Irigaray that fully addresses the concerns raised by Anglo-American feminist commentators about her work. This is primarily because to do so would require a substantial development of the question of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory (a distinction which does not have the same linguistic or conceptual status in French as it does in English), upon which many of these concerns are based. As such, it would also require a more substantial consideration of the histories of both Anglo-American and French feminist theory than I am able to give here. Nevertheless, I believe that the reading I offer of Irigaray could certainly be applied to questions concerning the relationship of Irigaray's thinking of sexuate difference to Anglo-American conceptions of "gender" (as seen for instance in the work of Judith Butler, who is often brought into dialogue with Irigaray by feminist scholars [e.g. Stone, Chanter, Deutscher]). In Chapter II I indicate some ways in which I believe Irigaray's work poses a different set of questions than those posed by thinkers operating within the sex/gender framework—a framework which seems to me to be seeking a "definition" of gender (or sexuate difference) and thus not to be posing an ontological question in the same way as Irigaray does. This set-up should indicate—albeit in the most preliminary of ways—the way in which my reading of Irigaray might be applied to these discourses.

I have already indicated some of the ways in which this project makes an original contribution to Irigaray scholarship. Chief among these is the fact that a sustained examination of Irigaray's most recent work has not yet been undertaken. Margaret

Whitford's and Tina Chanter's monographs on Irigaray not only appeared before much of the work that I will consider here, but are also primarily defenses of Irigaray's work, intended to clear the way for future scholarship and to situate Irigaray in the philosophical canon by explicating her work through its relationship to some "traditional" (male) philosophers. My project, then, owes a considerable debt to these commentators for clearing this path, as I am through them enabled to move beyond the task of clarification and defense to develop a positive thesis out of an interpretation of Irigaray's relational ontology. Thus, while my project does, in a certain sense, offer a contribution to the "essentialism" debates, its primary objective is not defense. Furthermore, while I develop my reading of Irigaray in conversation with philosophical interlocutors, my purpose is not only to reveal the ways in which Irigaray subverts and reveals new possibilities within those she engages, but also, crucially, to demonstrate how she develops her own unique position through this process. While Alison Stone's text also gives a reading of Irigaray's own positive position, and in the process offers an important and creative interpretation of Irigaray's thinking of "natural" sexual difference, it does not, to my mind, give a full account of what "ontology" might mean in the later Irigaray; and it ultimately relies on a problematic distinction between "natural" sex difference and relational, subjective "sexual difference."<sup>xxi</sup> I believe it is crucial to engage Heideggerian ontology for the purpose of thinking through the coextensive nature of ontology and ethics in Irigaray's writing (a claim which I will substantiate in Chapter IV). Finally, virtually no work has been done that reads Irigaray in conversation with Lacan and Heidegger at the same time.<sup>xxii</sup> I think that tracing Irigaray's dialogic voice through both

of these interactions sheds a considerable amount of light on the questions raised earlier in this introduction.

In the end, rather than offering a definitive “reading” that would attempt to reduce Lacan and Heidegger to Irigaray’s “readings” of them, or to reduce Irigaray to her “readings” of these thinkers, I hope to demonstrate how the respect for relational limitation might allow the voice of each thinker to come into resonance with *another* voice. This process will also result in a new resonance between the terms ontology, subjectivity, language, and ethics, which will be glimpsed in the final chapter. As I have intimated, this process of establishing a place for one’s voice via a relational limitation is precisely an ethical one in that it asks us to suspend the idea that we are the only “subject” there is, and open to the possibility of our own situatedness. This is not only the process undertaken by Irigaray throughout her work but also the process I try to undertake through my own staging of a dialogue between thinkers and concepts. Thus, throughout, I recognize the partial character of my own claims and my own situation. Paradoxically, it is only through recognizing such limitation can we actually become *open* to the other; and it is only through becoming open to the other that we can find our own distinct voice and manner of being.

## 5. Chapter Summaries

In Chapter II, I offer a more comprehensive overview of the existing English-language literature on Irigaray, in order to discover why commentators have tended *not* to see a continuity between Irigaray’s earlier and later works, and in order to more fully understand the problems I introduced in this chapter concerning the question of what

Irigaray means by “ontology.” I argue that commentators have, on the whole, been preoccupied with the question of *what* sexual (or sexuate) difference is, and that they have expected Irigaray’s work to provide a response to this framework. But this “definitional” paradigm, I argue, obscures the fact that Irigaray’s work precisely seeks to transform conceptions of identity such that the question of the “what” of sexuate difference is must be understood, according to Irigaray’s way of thinking, to proceed from within a set of assumptions that are *already conditioned* by the repression of sexuate difference. I substantiate this argument through both my overview of trends in the secondary literature and a close reading of Irigaray’s intervention into Freud’s lecture “Femininity” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Through this reading I not only show that the question of *Speculum* is not primarily the “what” of sexual difference or of the “feminine,” but rather the question of the *relation* of sexuate difference. Indeed, it is precisely the repression of this relation that has *led* to the situation described by Freud, wherein woman is defined merely by her “lack” of male sexual paraphernalia. Thus, this chapter already introduces my thesis that relation holds an ontological priority, for Irigaray, over the question of definition or identity.

Chapter III then illustrates more precisely this repression of the relation between the sexes through Irigaray’s dialogue with Lacan. In fact, through my reading of Lacan I show how this “repression” is in essence a *refusal* of a relation to alterity on the part of what Irigaray calls the “masculine” subject. I first offer an introduction to Lacan’s thought in order to set up my reading of Irigaray. I show how, for Lacan, sexual difference is central to the constitution of meaning and “reality” for human subjects because it consists in differing positions with respect to the “phallus.” The phallus, for

Lacan, is the “privileged signifier” of the symbolic order, which means that it opens and maintains the field of meaning for human beings by ordering the structural system of signs that is language according to its logic. However, Lacan’s writing on feminine sexuality reveals that, due to this privileging of the “phallus,” woman cannot be said to have any “reality” in this symbolic order—that is to say, she is non-representable, since she is non-phallic, and since everything must be understood or represented in terms of the phallus. Thus, Lacan concludes that there is no relation between the sexes, and that this lack of sexual relation is in fact a condition of the functioning of the symbolic, which is to say of the function of value, meaning, and sanity.

I follow this introduction to Lacan with a close reading of Irigaray’s intervention into Lacanian discourse in *This Sex Which is Not One* in order to show how Irigaray performatively reveals that the *limit* constituted by the phallus—that which allows there to be meaning—is a one-sided or *non-relational* limit. This is due to the fact that Irigaray takes Lacan’s discourse on feminine sexuality to be “true”—but “true” in a different way than Lacan intends. Irigaray reveals that Lacan’s system is in fact a self-referential totality, or rather a tautology, that constitutively *refuses* a positive relation to alterity, and in so doing actively sets up a “non-relational” limit. Lacan then reads this non-relation back into the fabric of reality as the “pre-condition” of language itself, when, according to Irigaray this non-relation is rather an *effect* of a certain understanding of language. Lacan’s discourse, then, seen from Irigaray’s point of view, serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the “masculine” discourse—that which reduces all alterity to the economy of the “same,” here figured as the phallus. Her intervention, however, begins to reveal

the limits of this discourse, by suggesting that there may be something (other than “madness”) outside of it.

Chapter IV, then, begins with the following question: How, if Irigaray is correct that Lacan’s discourse is the “truth” of the relation between the sexes (or lack thereof) under patriarchy (or the rule of the “masculine” discourse) is woman to begin to speak? To what language can she appeal? I suggest that Irigaray’s move toward a more sustained dialogue with Heidegger helps us respond to this question, insofar as Heidegger offers an alternative to Lacan’s structuralist thinking of language. Furthermore, Heidegger’s ontological thinking of language helps me to link Irigaray’s earlier “critical” work with her later ontological work, since the latter can be understood as the development of resources necessary for moving out of the impossible situation Lacan’s discourse so paradigmatically portrays. I offer a close reading of Heidegger’s essay “Language,” in order to substantiate my claim that, for Heidegger, language exceeds the human and calls upon us to speak in a manner that would attune our speech to what he calls the “speaking of language”—that is to say, to speak in such a way as to attune ourselves to the structures that condition our existence. I then turn to *The Way of Love* to show how Irigaray substantially develops a Heideggerian ontology, and indeed shares this ontological thinking of language. However, for Irigaray, unlike for Heidegger, to attune our speech to the structures of our very existence means, above all, to attune our speech to the sexuate *other*—thus, her conception of “the speaking of language” is by necessity of a *shared* language: a language spoken in a living dialogue between two subjects.

Chapter V then more explicitly elaborates this ethical vision in response to the overarching question of what exactly Irigaray means by the “subject.” I argue that we can only understand Irigaray’s transformation of this concept through her movement through and beyond both Lacan and Heidegger. Indeed, I argue that Irigaray, like Heidegger, proposes an ontology that escapes the metaphysical conception of subjectivity as a substance. However, unlike Heidegger, she maintains the language of subjectivity in order to denote a *movement* alternately toward the other and back into the self. This linguistic movement produces what I call a relational limit: it carves out a “place” for the subject that is always internally enabled and limited by the “place” of the other. I contrast this limit to the limit provided by the phallus in Lacan’s picture of language (the symbolic). While the phallus determines meaning from “outside,” setting up a network of structural relations, Irigaray’s relational limit consists in a kind of shared obscurity between two “places,” developed through the practice of a language, a speaking that perpetually constitutes and re-constitutes its horizon of meaning in the living relation to another.

In order to flesh out this picture more fully, I discuss the figure of “place,” which can be glimpsed in Irigaray’s work, particularly in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and again in *Sharing the World*, as both a figure of the ontological interdetermination of sexuate subjects and as a figure for the ethical practice of dialogue. I offer the concrete example of domestic violence as an indication of the way in which the domination of the masculine (which, through the establishment of a non-relational limitation projects itself as the subject *tout court*) results in a violent occupation of the “place” of woman. In contrast to this situation, Irigaray’s ethical vision of a new kind of speech would uniquely

allow each subject to constitute itself in reference to its own limits and to those of the other, insofar as limits are shared between the two. I close, then, with a reflection on this ethical practice, and the transformation of subjectivity it entails. I reflect in particular on the question of the priority of sexuate difference understood as two different appropriations of language (thought ontologically). I offer the view that the construction of “relational limitation” as an ethical task applies to all empirical human relationships, not just those between sexually-different subjects. However, I also explain and defend Irigaray’s ontological prioritization of sexuate difference insofar as, without a transformation of this underlying relation (that is to say, a transformation of human subjectivity such that it recognizes the inherent relationality of language), these relations will not be enabled in their flourishing.

## 6. Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Irigaray has, in the past ten years, almost fully transitioned from using the terms “sexual difference” and “sexually-different other” to using the terms “sexuate difference” and “sexuate other.” The term “sexuate,” a neologism coined by Irigaray (*sexué* in the French), is intended to encompass the psychological, relational, cultural and bodily aspects of being a sexed subject, without grounding sex in any one of these (*Conversations* [2008] and personal correspondence). I use “sexuate” in this dissertation except when referring to Lacan’s conception of sexual difference, or when directly referring to writings of Irigaray’s that were composed before she consistently utilized this term.

<sup>ii</sup> Both *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* and *The Irigaray Reader* (1991) edited by Whitford were major reference-points for Irigaray scholarship for many years, not only because of their excellence but also because, at the time of their publication, most of Irigaray’s work was not yet translated into English, and philosophical commentary on her work was as yet nascent.

<sup>iii</sup> The publication of *Speculum* resulted in the termination of Irigaray’s teaching post at Vincennes, as well as her expulsion from the group of Lacanian analysts with whom she had trained and practiced.



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<sup>iv</sup> See *Engaging With Irigaray* for discussions of this “method.”

<sup>v</sup> As Elaine Miller and Maria Cimitile write: “...the focus on the duality of sexual difference caused great consternation among readers who had rejected the essentialism critique and who associated Irigaray with a celebration of multiplicity” (2006: 6). I offer a more detailed discussion of these trends in Irigaray scholarship in Chapter II.

<sup>vi</sup> I received this information via personal correspondence with Luce Irigaray.

<sup>vii</sup> Luce Irigaray has generously shared portions of this manuscript with me to aid in the preparation of this dissertation. As the text has not yet gone to press in either French or English, I will cite it in a limited manner and without bibliographic information.

<sup>viii</sup> For an overview of this tendency, see Gail Schwab’s excellent piece “Reading Irigaray (And Her Readers) in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Returning to Irigaray*, Eds. Cimitile and Miller.

<sup>ix</sup> Irigaray regularly refers to these “phases” in interviews (see *Conversations* for instance), and she re-emphasized their importance to the participants in her seminar at the University of Nottingham, June 2010, which I attended.

<sup>x</sup> In this sentiment, I agree strongly with Maria Cimitile and Elaine Miller, the editors of the recent volume *Returning to Irigaray* (2006). This volume is the only text currently in print to offer a sustained engagement with Irigaray’s recent work and with the theme of relationality as a unifying thread of her work—however it does so through a collection of multiple essays and thus cannot offer what I do, namely, a sustained and consistent reading of the philosophical theme of relation in Irigaray at the level of both form and content.

<sup>xi</sup> This conflation of “natural” with “ontological” is problematic from a Heideggerian perspective, as will become clear through my project, and yet it is easy to superimpose these categories when trying to understand what Irigaray means by asserting the “reality” of sexual difference. Often commentators appear to assume that the term “ontological” means, for Irigaray, some kind of ultimate or natural reality. Stone, for instance, writes: “I have used ‘ontology’ simply to mean a theory of what exists—of what kinds of entities populate the world” (94). She even claims that this is Irigaray’s own understanding, although she does devote a small section to Heidegger’s ontic/ontological and admit that, at times, Irigaray’s usage of the term is more “specialized.” As noted, Stone does offer a nuanced reading of “nature” in Irigaray. Thus, “nature” for her (at least nominally) does not indicate something like the totality of beings or entities, but is rather a principle of self-differentiation. Nevertheless, this seems to me to be at odds with her definition of ontology as a theory of “what kinds of entities populate the world.” Thus, while Stone’s account is in many respects rich, I believe we can better understand Irigaray’s most recent work through Heideggerian ontology rather than through *Naturphilosophie*, as will

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become clearer in Chapter IV. This is also not altogether surprising given that the texts I am to interpret are explicitly dialogues with Heidegger.

<sup>xii</sup> Deutscher uses the term “ontology” when referring to this potential difference on p. 211, footnote 16.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ellen Mortensen (2003) gives a very interesting discussion of feminist theory’s avoidance of ontology, and a compelling argument for a return to this kind of questioning.

<sup>xiv</sup> See, for instance, *Identity and Difference*.

<sup>xv</sup> It should be noted that this relational ontology marks a significant departure from Heidegger, who considers sexual difference (though he barely considers it at all) to be only an “ontic” feature of *Dasein*. See *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Although arguably her thinking has always been circumscribed by the question of language, since her earliest academic research was in the field of linguistics (see *To Speak is Never Neutral*).

<sup>xvii</sup> See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 1.

<sup>xviii</sup> This point about empirical consequences raises another important question about Irigaray’s ethical vision, and my elaboration of it. Some might wonder whether, in advocating for the dialogic space between sexuate subjects as the locus of ethics, Irigaray’s vision (and mine by extension) are not remaining naively blind to issues of power and material circumstance. In other words, are not subjective spaces always constructed by what Foucault would call discursive regimes, that circumscribe in advance the possibilities of relationality and identity? Further, are not these possibilities also underwritten by material circumstances of inequality? To these questions I offer several responses. First, I think that, for women’s liberation to be effected, both “symbolic” and material transformations are necessary. I think that Irigaray would agree with this. However, to the extent that she identifies the masculine subject as having gained control of what is able to appear as “real” (ontologically), she would say that material transformations will not, in themselves, be sufficient to effect such liberation, as they are always underwritten by this ontological oppression or violence. Further, it is important to note that “language” or the symbolic, is in no way separable from questions of power. Insofar as language or at least symbolic activity is paradigmatic of the human’s interpretation or inhabitation of “reality,” we are precisely vulnerable to oppression in this intimate psychic realm. Second, the question posed above is actually similar to the question of whether *Speculum* and *This Sex* could be said to form a framework for Irigaray’s later ethical vision—in other words, does the later ethical vision naively ignore the power of the masculine discourse to effectively construct the feminine out of existence? Here I would reply that, in her ontological thinking, Irigaray precisely appeals to the *possibility* of the positivity of a sexuate relation—a possibility that exceeds the

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categories of discourse at any given time. Thus, dialogue could precisely be a place to discover these other possibilities, a place to glimpse a world beyond that which is constructed by the “dominant” discourse. Indeed, with this new reading of the possibilities of the space between subjects, Irigaray’s ethical project might provide a place in society for what Julia Kristeva (2001) calls psychic “revolt”—that is, a place for subjects to locate power in the contemporary world. In other words, because this place (of “relational limitation”) is, as Irigaray says, “still virgin and to be cleared” (STW: 9), it is never fully determined by public discourse and thus provides a positive source of power for future transformations of relations between subjects. This would then be a striking difference between her account and a Foucauldian one, which, because it views subjects as essentially socially-constructed, would be suspicious of speaking about places that are untouched by public discourse.

<sup>xix</sup> This “positivity” of the limit in Irigaray’s work also indicates what I think is a uniqueness of her ontological vision with respect to other post-Heideggerian accounts of relational being that are currently being developed. Giorgio Agamben (2004), for instance, has argued that Heidegger’s ontology must be re-thought because it opens up the space of unconcealment only *through* the construction of a zone of “concealment” that Agamben links to animal life. He thus believes that Heidegger’s ontology produces as its remainder a zone of “bare life” that we can witness not only in Heidegger’s own discussion of animality, but also in the totalitarian atrocities of the Twentieth Century. He thus speaks about re-appropriating our relation to concealedness and thinking it “outside of being.” I have argued elsewhere (Jones, 2007) that Agamben neglects the question of sexual difference in this discussion. Further, my analysis in this dissertation shows that Irigaray also provides a re-thinking of our relation to concealedness, but does so in a way that opens up the possibility of a relation to a truly other subject on the other side of this limit. For a note on how Irigaray’s vision of being in relation compares to that of Jean-Luc Nancy, see endnote xx in Chapter II.

<sup>xx</sup> Some exceptions are Christopher Fynsk (1998), who gives a brief though sensitive discussion of Irigaray in the context of his own relational thinking of language, and Edward S. Casey (1998) who discusses Irigaray in his work on place. Elizabeth Grosz (2005), however, is in fact one of the few to rigorously bring Irigaray into dialogue specifically with “new materialisms.” I think it is regrettable that these conversations are not more widely encouraged, and I also think it is regrettable that contemporary political theorists like Agamben and Nancy are not, for the most part, interested in the question of sexual difference.

<sup>xxi</sup> It is worth noting that, at the time of this writing, a new monograph on Irigaray is scheduled to come out (June 2011), whose author was generous enough to recently share the text with me. This text—*Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*, by Rachel Jones (no relation)—is a sustained discussion of *Speculum of the Other Woman*. But through her discussion Jones also thematizes the priority of relation in Irigaray’s work, showing how, even in this early text, Irigaray’s concerns with a relational ontology and ethics of sexuate difference were already present. This text thus begins to fill an important gap in

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the scholarship that I also seek to address. Indeed, my project has many affinities with R. Jones'—yet it still offers something different in that R. Jones does not give detailed readings of Irigaray's recent texts, nor does she consider specifically the dialogical movement of Irigaray's work. Further, as should be clear from this introduction, the concept of “relational limitation” is entirely my own.

<sup>xxii</sup> The only piece that I am aware of that has attempted to do this is Krystof Ziarek's article “Love and the Debasement of Being: Irigaray's Revisions of Lacan and Heidegger” (1999).

## CHAPTER II

### MUTED RECEPTIONS

“...it is not a matter of changing this or that within a horizon already defined as human culture. It is a question of changing the horizon itself—of understanding that our interpretation of human subjectivity is both theoretically and practically wrong” (ILTY:20).

As noted in the previous chapter, commentators on Irigaray’s work have predominantly asked questions of the following type: What “is” sexuate difference? Is it natural, cultural, or both? Does the phrase “sexual” or “sexuate” difference mean the same thing as the words “men” and “women?” Is Irigaray’s definition of woman “essentialist?” What does she mean by the terms “ontology” and “ontological?” These questions, while they have at times been productive, have just as often led to many disputes and dead-ends among scholars, because Irigaray’s work seems to shift dramatically on these issues. As Margaret Whitford writes:

[Irigaray] writes that women are the support of representation, that one cannot speak of representation where women are concerned, and yet also that they need images and representations of their own. [...] Or that she is not trying to provide an alternative to onto-theology, but also that women need a religion of their own. (135)

Indeed, Irigaray’s work often inhabits the tension between unrepresentability, indefinability, and the necessity of representation, the necessity of positive feminine definition. Due to this tension, it is difficult, if not impossible, to “pin down” the meaning of sexuate difference for Irigaray. Faced with this fact, many readers have concluded that Irigaray is simply inconsistent: that she shifts her thinking on sexuate difference dramatically, particularly in a move from an earlier, more deconstructive, radical phase, to a later, more positive, and possibly more conservative one (as indicated

in the foregoing chapter). Nevertheless, as previously noted, in this dissertation I explore the possibility of identifying a rigorous philosophical continuity within Irigaray's work. It thus seems important to begin by asking what assumptions in the scholarship might account for the fact that Irigaray's oeuvre has *not* typically been read as continuous. That is to say, why have more efforts not been made to understand the possible *connection* between the two types of statement that Whitford identifies in the above quotation? Why, instead, do many of Irigaray's contemporary readers consistently express confusion and frustration concerning Irigaray's "turn" toward an allegedly more "realist" view of sexuate difference, and propose that it is necessary to simply supplement or even replace her work with alternative paradigms?<sup>i</sup>

A clue comes from reviewing the ways in which Irigaray's work has historically been received in the Anglophone world. As Alison Stone notes, readings of Irigaray throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s usually focused explicitly on the question of her possible "essentialism"—a trend that some read even into her earliest works. While the term "essentialist" is no longer as widely deployed in Irigaray scholarship as it once was, owing to some important interventions, these debates have left in their wake a number of assumptions about how to read Irigaray, and about what kinds of questions to ask when doing so.<sup>ii</sup> Stone writes:

One might imagine this research [e.g. the works of philosophers like Chanter and Whitford] to have decisively superseded discussions of Irigaray's essentialism, which, one might suppose, were insufficiently philosophically framed to yield insight into her work. Actually, though, preceding debates over Irigaray's work have generated a network of now-standard assumptions about essentialism which continue to inform the otherwise diverse ways in which she is currently read. (18)

Stone's own work targets the specific assumption, which she indeed finds in Irigaray scholarship, that no form of realism about sexuate difference is acceptable, and that thus

we must read Irigaray as, at best, a “strategic” essentialist, if not as an anti-essentialist, to be able to conceive of her work as fruitful for feminist thinking. I agree with Stone that the essentialism debates have generated a network of standard assumptions. However, in this chapter I investigate an assumption that is, perhaps, even more deeply rooted than the one identified by Stone. Namely, I investigate the assumption that the crucial question of Irigaray scholarship is the question of the *definition* or the “what” of sexuate difference. This assumption is indicated in the questions cited above, and is borne out by the fact that disagreements within Irigaray scholarship (including “essentialism” debates as well as debates about ontology) are still most often framed as debates about what sexuate difference “is,” or about what men and women “are.”

However, in this chapter I argue that we cannot understand Irigaray’s deeper philosophical project if we focus exclusively on the question of definition, or the “identity” of woman. Indeed, to focus on questions of the type “what is x”—as in “what is woman?” “what is sexuate difference?”—without understanding Irigaray’s ontological project is to remain within a presumptive metaphysics that Irigaray’s work precisely tries to disrupt. That is to say, the question “what is woman?” occurs in a situation that, for Irigaray, is *already* conditioned by the repression of sexuate difference. What does this mean? According to Irigaray, the “feminine” is precisely that which has been repressed throughout the history of Western metaphysics—that which has been relegated to the “outside” of any system of coherence: that which is said to be “other,” and hence not meaningful. (SOW) When speaking about human “subjects,” then, we are typically already operating within a structure of meaning in which “subject” (as unified and “one”) is already coded as “male.” The task of trying to define “woman” thus necessarily

already begins after this move—*after* subjectivity has already been construed on the basis of an erasure of the feminine. This is because if we imagine “women” and “men” as “subjects” whose definitions we can debate, we approach the problem from within a perspective which, in declaring itself to be “objective,” begins with a presumption of subjective unity that is predicated on the foreclosure of the feminine (we imagine that we are “subjects” investigating the world of “objects”). Thus, from Irigaray’s perspective, “defining” women could never uncover the deeper problem of the masculine construction of human subjectivity itself. To read her work as ultimately proposing such a definition would thus risk missing the deeper philosophical contribution of her work, which is precisely to *change* the configuration of subject and object—indeed, to change the very definition of what it means to be a “subject.”

Thus, far from reifying her own revelation that the feminine has been constructed as “outside” and “indefinable” as a fact (or as a new “definition” of woman), I argue that Irigaray’s work aims to allow this allegedly incoherent feminine “outside” to speak by ultimately transforming the very meaning of subjectivity itself. Through the movement of her work, Irigaray transforms the masculine scheme of discourse from within in order to open up the possibility of the coming-into-being of two different subjects, through the perpetually transformative relation between them. This task, I suggest, stands in contrast to the task of defining women’s identity, which could never actually allow for a true relation between two *different* subjects, since it begins after such a relation has already been decided upon—and, according to Irigaray, decided upon in such a way as to foreclose a true relation to alterity. Irigaray’s work then, in sum, presents a case for the ontological primacy of *relation* rather than that of identity or definition. If, as I read her



to be saying, subjectivity has been constructed on the basis not simply of the erasure of the “feminine” (as if the feminine were inherently separate from the masculine), but, more precisely, on the repression of the possible *relation* between two positively-defined sexuate subjects, then the transformative task of Irigaray’s thought is far broader than an exclusive concern with identity or definition would suggest. In fact, the coming into being of this relation would radically reconfigure the “identities” of both men and women. Further, due to the ontological primacy of the relation (or repression/lack thereof), its transformation would be a necessary prerequisite for the transformation of “identities” themselves.

In this chapter, then, I proceed as follows. I first offer a brief historical account of the French and U.S. political contexts at the time of Irigaray’s first philosophical writing. Then, I review Irigaray’s reception (primarily in the U.S.),<sup>iii</sup> in order to show how Irigaray’s Anglophone readers have consistently attempted to circumscribe her work within the limiting theoretical paradigm of definition or identity. This is indicated through a vacillation between readings of Irigaray as an “essentialist” and, alternatively, as a kind of “deconstructionist.” This ongoing vacillation in scholarship points, I believe, to the way in which Irigaray’s work actually exceeds both of these categories because its *primary* question is not identity and whether it must be affirmed or denied. Indeed, both the paradigm of “essentialism” (there *is* a possible definition of woman) and the paradigm of “deconstruction” (there is *no* possible definition of woman) still operate, in this scholarship, *in terms of* definition. This accounts for the difficulty in grasping the unity of Irigaray’s oeuvre. Following this overview, then, I discuss the way in which Irigaray’s work in fact defies this paradigm of identity, and show how we can in fact

understand her primary interest to be the question of *relation*, even in her earliest philosophical works. This will provide the basis for my claim that Irigaray's work is philosophically continuous, borne out through the rest of this dissertation.

### 1. Luce Irigaray: The Philosopher Who Is Not One

Within the theoretical landscape of academic feminism, Irigaray occupies a peculiar position. She was at one time the theoretical darling of so-called "post-structuralist" feminism, since she argued that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine" (SOW: 133), and that "The articulation of the reality of [the feminine sex] is impossible in discourse" (ESD: 206), for it is "the sex which is not one." Such statements led some to view her as a quintessential anti-essentialist. Judith Butler cites her precisely as an ally in this regard, at least in her early work.<sup>iv</sup> On the other hand, as indicated in the foregoing chapter, Irigaray has increasingly throughout her work begun to speak of "two" sexually different human subjects, and this has led some to view her as endorsing a kind of naïve realism or essentialism about both sexual difference and the notion of subjectivity. Before beginning to develop my own reading of Irigaray's work, I will offer a brief survey of Irigaray's reception in the U.S., in order to show how feminist theorists have struggled to contain this work within the theoretical paradigm of definition or identity. The fact that they "struggle" is indicated by a series of vacillations in the scholarship that should, I think, alert us to the possibility that Irigaray's work cannot be contained within this paradigm.

### A. Political Context in France

“French Feminism”—with which Irigaray’s work is usually associated—is a contested category in the United States. A brief re-cap of the political situation that conditioned Irigaray’s rise to fame (or infamy) in France will show why this is so. During the 1970s, a debate had begun among feminists in France that was framed in terms of what one might call a “psychological” (essentialist) versus “political” (materialist) debate (although certainly both sides saw themselves as political). The “psychological” side of the debate was primarily tied up with Lacanian psychoanalysis, while the “political” side was indebted to a feminist re-uptake of Marx and Engels. In 1979, the debate came to a head and the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* formally split into two factions: *Feministes Révolutionnaires (FR)* and *Psychanalyse et Politique (Psych. et Po.)*. The U.S. feminists’ burgeoning interest in a possible collaboration between feminism and psychoanalysis (in the 1980s) can be traced to the influence of *Psych. et Po.* Oddly, in 1974 Juliet Mitchell (in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, the earliest full-scale attempt to bring Freudian psychoanalysis to U.S. feminists) identifies the French *Psych. et Po.* as a “Marxist” group, and she explains their mission as follows:

They argue that psychoanalysis gives us the concepts with which we can comprehend how ideology functions [...] [I]t further offers an analysis of the place and meaning of sexuality and of gender differences within society. So where Marxist theory explains the historical and economic situation, psychoanalysis, in conjunction with the notions of ideology already gained by dialectical materialism, is the way into understanding ideology and sexuality. (xxii)

As Claire Duchon (1986) documents, however, it was actually the *FR* group that primarily saw itself as a Marxist—or at least a materialist—group. Members like Monique Wittig (1992) held a strictly materialist view of sexuality, believing that

categories of “men” and “women” are purely class categories. Wittig writes: “[i]t is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary” (5). Simone de Beauvoir was also a member of this group, and her relationship to psychoanalysis was ambivalent at best. Beauvoir writes: “[a]ll psychoanalysts systematically reject the idea of *choice* and the correlated concept of value, and therein lies the intrinsic weakness of the system” (45). From the perspective of most of the thinkers associated with the *FR*, then, feminism does not necessarily need to explore sexual difference in a positive sense—or, at the very least, psychoanalysis is not the best tool for such exploration. Rather, sexual difference is far better understood as a “difference” constructed on the basis of power relations.

The *Psych. et Po.* group, on the other hand, was fairly antagonistically opposed to the *F.R.* group in that they believed that material, political transformation was insufficient to achieving feminist aims. Heavily influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan, the group’s primary focus was on elaborating a specifically feminine unconscious and on challenging phallogocentric structures of both political power and language. Claire Duchen describes the conflict thus: “The second area of conflict that has existed in France since the early 1970s, is over the existence or not of a specifically feminine difference. The issue is symptomatic of the incompatible approaches in the MLF to the whole question of women’s oppression and women’s liberation” (20). While Irigaray herself was never formally affiliated with either of these groups, her work is often associated with that of *Psych. et Po.*, due to her status as a trained Lacanian as well as the focus, throughout her work, on the potentialities of the “feminine” and the idea of the possibility of a specifically “feminine” subjectivity. This has led to some political tensions concerning her popularity in the English-speaking feminist world, since early

commentators on “French Feminism” effectively erased the scholarship of many members of the *FR* and presented the views of *Psych. et Po.* as “French feminism” *tout court* (in fact, they were often even more restrictive than this in presenting the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous as essentially exhaustive of “French Feminism”).<sup>v</sup> Indeed, Christine Delphy (1995), a member of the *FR*, goes so far as to say of “French feminism”: “[i]t is an Anglo-American invention quite literally: Anglo-American writings that are ‘about’ it *are* it” (170). Delphy believes that “French feminism” is a guise for the spread of anti-feminist ideology within the American academy. While it is true that the American appropriation of “French feminism” is problematic at best, I think this critical view is somewhat extreme. While it is important to note the political conflicts in France and in the U.S., there is no reason, in my view, to believe Irigaray and Kristeva themselves are “antifeminists.” Perhaps a more nuanced lesson to take from these conflicts would be that feminists do not all necessarily share the same ontological views or political goals (as Delphy herself recognizes).

### *B. Context in U.S. Scholarship*

The reception of Irigaray’s work in the U.S. is complex and partially controversial, given the political context outlined above. Early scholars of her work framed her more in a U.S. political context than a French one, which led to some misunderstandings. This context was one in which debates were raging concerning “essentialism.” The Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States was also characterized by nature/nurture debates and by a multiplicity of “factions.”<sup>vi</sup> By the 1980s (when English translations of “French feminism” became widely available), much of this struggle had moved into an academic context, and feminist theorists were in

heated turmoil over the issue of whether or not one could claim a contentful “essence” common to women. The charge of essentialism took on added political force particularly during the “sex wars” of 1980s feminism, in which radical feminists (especially those arguing against pornography like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon) were attacked both for allegedly being “anti-sex” and for falsely universalizing and de-historicizing what it means to be a woman. Bonnie Mann, describing this time period, says: “[p]articularly, feminist theory in its ‘radical feminist’ form was found to be essentialist. ‘Essentialist!’ took on almost battle-cry status in academic feminist circles, and the accusation become one that both shamed and discredited” (12).

Unsurprisingly, given this social and political context, almost all early debates within Irigaray scholarship focused overwhelmingly on the question of “essentialism.” As Naomi Schor (1994) notes, no one is quite sure what this term means, and it appears to be wagered in various strategic ways. She writes:

What revisionism, not to say essentialism, was to Marxism-Leninism, essentialism is to feminism: the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy. Borrowed from the time-honored vocabulary of philosophy, the word *essentialism* has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion. (59)

Basically, the charge of “essentialism” consisted in the claim that certain thinkers were suggesting a content to the term “women” that was fixed, unchanging, and ahistorical. Sometimes critics also believed that these conceptions served to reify patriarchal stereotypes about women from which feminists had precisely hoped to escape. Due to this mania for rooting out essentialists, the initial reception of Irigaray in the English-speaking academic world was indeed less than favorable, and arguably less than productive. Very early on, she was taken to be a “radical,” gynocentric feminist with

much in common with American thinkers like Mary Daly, Robin Morgan, or Susan Griffin, despite the fact that her work seemed to borrow more from Lacan and Derrida, who famously question “identity.” (Young, 1994) Monique Plaza (1978) read Irigaray as, in Margaret Whitford’s words, “an anti-feminist who echoes patriarchy’s recuperation of feminist subversion” (Whitford, 1991: 9). Toril Moi (1985) read her as an “essentialist” in the gynocentric sense—she argued that Irigaray tries to offer a contentful definition of “the feminine” which thus limits her position from the start by making it exclusionary. In Britain, Janet Sayers (1987) accused Irigaray of biological essentialism, while Lynne Segal called her a “psychic essentialist” (1987, both cited in Whitford, 9). The common thread throughout these critiques is the idea that Irigaray is offering some kind of deterministic account of what it means to be a woman: either womanhood is determined by one’s anatomy (biological essentialism) or it is determined by our position within the symbolic order (psychic essentialism). Representatives of both strands of feminist critique agreed in their commitment to liberating women from social roles based on just such determinist ideas.

The first major vacillation in Irigaray scholarship, then, consisted in a move from this “essentialist” or gynocentric reading to one in which scholars unearthed Irigaray’s strong connection to Lacan and Derrida and thus began to frame her as a staunch *anti-essentialist*. These readers re-interpreted Irigaray’s project as one of deconstructing identity rather than one of naïvely asserting it. In this, Derrida was seen as her major theoretical interlocutor, and her goal was seen as primarily to disrupt masculine discourse through the revelation of its inherent instability. Judith Butler (1990; 1991) endorsed Irigaray’s subversion of patriarchal discourse by discovering the feminine as that which is

“constitutively excluded” from discourse itself, and thus from all constructions of identity; Elizabeth Grosz (1994) celebrated the body as a site of inherent instability and lability, and viewed Irigaray as an ally in this endeavor; Jane Gallop (1984) read Irigaray as essentially a Lacanian who believed all identity construction to be framed within a necessarily contingent (and thus subject to disruption) symbolic order; Penelope Deutscher (2001) read her as making a kind of Derridean (seemingly negative-theological) appeal to an inherently “impossible” figure of sexual difference. These readings increased Irigaray’s popularity, since she was now seen as more closely conforming to the orthodoxy of deconstruction. However, over the past decade the scholarship has begun to shift back toward the old “essentialism” critique. Despite the fact that 1990s monographs like Tina Chanter’s *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Re-Writing of the Philosophers* (1994) and Margaret Whitford’s *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (1991) offered invaluable and nuanced readings of her work that explored in depth her multifaceted connections to thinkers such as Lacan, Derrida, Heidegger, Beauvoir, and the Ancient Greeks, Irigaray’s insistence throughout her “middle” (mid-1980s – ‘90s) and “later” (mid-‘90s-present) work on the figure of “two” sexually-different subjects, her proposal of sexuate laws, and her turns toward an ethics of dialogue with the sexuate other and toward the spiritual and religion have not, generally speaking, been well-received among feminist philosophers. Contemporary critics are again worried that Irigaray’s understanding of sexuate difference is “essentialist” in the old sense of a de-contextualized definition of woman, which is analyzed apart from, rather than in intersection with, race and class. Margit Schildrick (1997) writes that “Irigaray’s later work is far more problematic with respect to the charge of essentialism,



and her deployment of sexual difference has seemed increasingly to suggest certain pre-given and determinant qualities of the feminine” (227). Due in part to the ongoing identity debates, the use of a common category of “women,” and a focus on their difference from men, is often viewed as *precluding* an analysis of the differences between and among women themselves, and thus as a move that invalidates a feminist politic. As Alison Stone notes, “[e]ven Penelope Deutscher’s sustained examination of Irigaray’s later thought [...] is premised on the view that her recourse to natural reality is *prima facie* problematic” (2).

Among those who still view Irigaray’s work as productive for feminism, the question of ontology has emerged as a possible locus for responding to some of these concerns. In particular, the discussions surrounding Irigaray’s ontology at times appear to conflate “ontology” with “identity.” In other words, some scholars believe that in asserting sexuate difference to be an *ontological* difference, Irigaray is precisely receding into a kind of essentialism, because she is proposing that men and women have fixed identities. Drucilla Cornell, for instance (although she is to be counted, at this point, as a critic and not a supporter of Irigaray’s) seems to interpret “ontology” this way in the *Diacritics* interview when she says “[w]hat [Irigaray] calls for is a set of sexuate rights appropriate to these entities, these beings, these creatures, who are an ontological universal” (26). According to Cornell this is precisely a politically “conservative” move insofar as it reifies sexuate subjects as “entities.” However, ontology in the Heideggerian sense—to which Irigaray herself repeatedly appeals—precisely does *not* concern entities, but rather the event by which entities are in fact given.

To be fair, Irigaray does speak about characteristics particular to men and women, but the assumption that these identities are “fixed” seems to come from a particular interpretation of her understanding of ontology. Thus I think it is crucial to understand Irigaray’s ontology before evaluating the status of such claims about the *content* of sexuate subjectivity. Even among Irigaray’s supporters, an ambiguity remains surrounding these issues. Alison Stone, who, as I have noted, has most recently attempted a full-scale defense of Irigaray, does so not by denying her essentialism but by affirming it. The key, for Stone, is to re-think the meaning of “essence” according to Schelling’s understanding of nature as a principle of self-differentiation. But in the course of her argument Stone herself subsumes ontology to identity when she writes “I have used ‘ontology’ simply to mean a theory of what exists—of what kinds of entities populate the world” (94). And while she acknowledges that Irigaray also appeals to Heideggerian ontology, which precisely does not concern entities, Stone nevertheless claims that Irigaray’s philosophy is fundamentally a philosophy of natural “essence,” namely, of “kinds of entities” or of what I have referred to as “definition.” Additionally, Stone’s reading perpetuates the idea that the “ontological” aspect of sexuate difference has to do with the body or nature while the relational “subjective” aspect has to do with the psyche and with culture. (Mader, 2008) But to think through sexuate difference at the deeper ontological level would precisely be to throw into question the traditional categories of (and the opposition between) mind and body. Irigaray herself says that “[t]he feminine subject does not relate to the self, to the other(s), to the world as a masculine subject does. This does not depend only on bodily morphology and anatomy or on social stereotypes, as many people imagine. Rather, it is a question of relational

identity that precisely realizes the *original connection* between body and culture” (CV: 77, my emphasis). I contend that if “ontology” is thought as *definition*, this re-thinking of relational identity as preceding the mind/body or nature/culture distinctions will not occur.

Readings of Irigaray, then, seem to have gone from essentialist to deconstructionist and back again. Throughout Irigaray scholarship, many readers relentlessly struggle to place Irigaray on one side or the other of this debate, as if doing so will once and for all reveal her worth as a feminist thinker. Thus, many have been blinded to the deeper unity of Irigaray’s work because they believe her to be either a “deconstructionist,” or a “realist,” or, problematically, both. As evidenced above, readers have, in the past, expected Irigaray’s texts to provide them primarily with a descriptive theory of what women are or are not in some sort of essential (unchanging) sense; and they have often read her statements about sexuate difference, the feminine, and women, and even ontology, to be offering such a theory. When read as a “deconstructionist,” it seems that Irigaray has no way to say what women “are,” because for her there is no underlying subject (*subiectum* from *hypokeimenon*) that could *be* anything—that could possess “feminine” qualities. On this deconstructive reading the “feminine” is precisely that which disrupts substance metaphysics. But when contemporary scholars read Irigaray’s recent work as inexplicably asserting just such an underlying subject/substance—in fact, two of them, “man and woman”—they typically assume she must have made a sharp departure from her earlier use of the term “feminine,” and must now be using it in the essentialist sense. And finally, for those who have attempted more

“continuous” readings of Irigaray’s oeuvre, the “definitional” paradigm seems to sneak in in the way in which ontology is often conflated with theories of nature and identity.

But why do we presume to know the meaning of terms like “subject,” and “ontology” in Irigaray’s recent work? Why would we assume (as critics seem to) that “subject” could somehow have held onto its traditional meaning through the scathing critique waged upon it by works like *Speculum*? In other words, when critics claim that Irigaray has made a “turn” from her deconstructive project to her positive one (as mentioned earlier), they are apparently assuming that when she speaks about “men” and “women” in her later work she intends these as “ontic” terms—despite the fact that she claims sexual difference to be ontological. They thus seem to assume that the language of feminine and masculine “subjects” must refer to these two *beings*. However, as I will suggest in the next section, Irigaray’s philosophical project, beginning with *Speculum*, has always sought to undermine the traditional definition of subjectivity; and, furthermore, it has always been concerned with the question of relation over the question of identity.

## 2. “A Bad (Copy of a) Work of Art”: Irigaray’s Portrait of Woman under Patriarchy

### *A. Recap of Irigaray’s Project*

As noted in the previous chapter, Irigaray’s early works (for instance *Speculum of the Other Woman*, *This Sex Which is Not One*, and to some extent *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*), in her own words, attempt “a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the Western subject.” (JLI: 3) The purpose of this critique is to reveal the mono-logical nature of Western philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and culture. By

assuming a position deceptively “inside” of these discourses (i.e. by taking on the voice of Freud, or by subtly converting statements made by Freud, Lacan, Plato, Kant, and others into questions, and thus begging the question of their underlying conditions), Irigaray reveals an “outside” to these discourses, which she often refers to as “the feminine.” The “feminine,” in this early work, would seem to designate the repression of a possibility, the empty negativity that appears in discourse and theory. For example, it could be said to designate simply the “lack” of the masculine signifier of the phallus for Freud and for Lacan, rather than the possibility of an “other” sex, an “other” relation to language and to embodiment. Thus, on these psychoanalytic readings, woman can only “mimic” the masculine discourse, because she has no positive discourse, no representation of her own sex and subjectivity. However, as Irigaray says in “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”: “If women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere:* another case of the persistence of ‘matter,’ but also of ‘sexual pleasure’ [*jouissance*]” (TS, 76; CS, 75).

As mentioned earlier, some readers feel that Irigaray’s later texts (and possibly even the middle ones) mark a sharp departure from the “deconstructive” focus of these earlier texts. This is because the later texts seem to speak, suddenly, in an overly straightforward or philosophically naïve way, about “men” and “women,” their specific characteristics, and the relation between them. As the foregoing review of “essentialism” debates should have made clear, this understandably causes some suspicion on the part of readers concerning the utility of these texts for a feminist ethics. However, as I have indicated, I do not believe that we can read Irigaray’s more recent statements about

sexuate difference as a species of philosophical naïveté if we understand that they are intimately connected to the *process* of carving out a place for the feminine that was begun in *Speculum* and *This Sex*. Further, I argue that this process, for Irigaray, necessarily already involves the question of relation. In other words, it is not the case that Irigaray, in her second phase, simply “defines” men and women, and then, in her third phase, theorizes a new and more productive relation between these two “beings.” Rather, in my view, her work first performatively reveals the *repression* of the possibility of this relation, and then works to precisely open up a place for its actualization, over time. Thus, her recent work does not advocate setting two previously-defined beings into a new relation with one another; but rather advocates, above all, opening up a *new* relation, a new ontology—one that could truly give rise to the possibility of “two.” This thesis will be borne out through my discussion throughout the dissertation of the ontological primacy of relation. Through this ongoing discussion, we will ultimately see how the opening of the place for a positive sexuate relation is in fact a prerequisite for the very possibility of speaking about “two” sexuate subjects—even as it transforms how we understand the very terms “two,” “sexuate,” and “subjects.”

In a language and a culture dominated by only one subject, only what I will call a *non-relational* limitation is possible. Through this dissertation, we will see this non-relational limitation both in Lacanian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian ontology; and we thus will be able to better understand the depth of the problem identified by Irigaray. Indeed, this non-relational limitation manifests itself in psychic structures, in linguistic structures, in our relation to the natural world, and even in our very conception of reality. I believe that what Irigaray’s work, then, in the face of this problem, tries to establish the

possibility of a *relational* limitation through the opening of a place for sexuate difference. I view this as a unique move, since it at once theorizes being itself as relation—thus proposing a new ontological vision—and gives a specific content to this relation: namely, sexuate difference.<sup>vii</sup> In giving a specific content to her relational ontology, Irigaray’s work also proposes new relations between the categories of the body and language, the natural and the cultural, and the spiritual and the material. This will become clear in the last two chapters of this dissertation, where I discuss Irigaray’s engagement with Heidegger’s thinking on language.

For now, however, I will introduce a brief reading of some sections from *Speculum of the Other Woman*, in order to show how, from the beginning, Irigaray’s work does not function within the paradigm of what I have called definition or identity. Further, I will show how, even at this early stage of her work, we can already glimpse an underlying concern with the status of relation in Irigaray’s writing.

### *B. Speculum of the Other Woman*

*Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray’s second doctoral thesis, engages a plethora of interlocutors including Freud, Lacan, Kant, Hegel, and Plato.<sup>viii</sup> The connecting theme of the text as a whole will here be presented through a discussion of the first section, “The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry,” in which Irigaray critiques/parodies Freud’s lectures on “Femininity.” Irigaray’s guiding thesis is that woman, or the feminine, has been historically reduced, through a process of repression and denial on the part of the masculine subject or discourse, to the function of a mirror or “speculum” that would reflect the masculine back to himself, and that would thereby confirm his desire and his identity. Woman, Irigaray suggests, has been denied any

“positive” being because she has been utilized only as the *support* for masculine identity, which is then conflated with identity as such. In order to better understand the way this argument emerges in “The Blind Spot of An Old Dream of Symmetry,” however, we must first understand Freud’s vision of feminine sexuality. Indeed, Irigaray’s text proceeds by way of citing long sections from Freud’s lecture, and interspersing them with her “own” voice. For ease of explication, I will briefly summarize Freud’s lecture, and focus my textual analysis on Irigaray’s own words—although it is duly noted that her very intervention shows the initial impossibility of these words being truly her “own.”

In effect, Freud provides only one model of sexual development: the model centered on the little boy’s Oedipal complex. His discussion of the girl’s Oedipal complex is derivative of this. The story, to put it briefly, goes as follows. The child (both the little boy and the little girl) is originally libidinally attached to the mother. But castration anxiety intervenes in the following way: in seeing that the little girl appears “castrated,” the boy becomes anxious because he believes that the girl’s penis has been removed, perhaps by the father. Thus, the (first) resolution of the Oedipal complex occurs, for Freud, precisely with the boy’s acknowledgement (such as it is) of sexual difference. The fear of paternal authority thereby incurred causes the boy to renounce his love for his mother and transfer it onto another object. The girl, on the other hand, experiences the castration complex with regard to the mother, and her anger about the mother’s lack of the penis (she cannot give it to the little girl) causes her to transfer her desire not only to another object, but to the father, who is a sexually different object. Then, because the father is not an appropriate sexual object for her, she desires the phallus in the form of a (preferably male) child.<sup>ix</sup>



While this story would ostensibly constitute Freud's explication of sexual difference, Irigaray writes that this model actually shows how "the Oedipus complex [does] not serve to articulate the difference between the sexes, but to ensure the passage of the (socio-symbolic) law of the father" (SOW: 31; SAF: 33). Indeed, the girl's "resolution" of the Oedipus complex does not involve her becoming an adult by way of taking her place in a symbolic economy (of the psyche or of culture) as a *woman*, but rather by *rejecting* a woman (the mother), and taking her place in reality, as it were, only by way of the desire to pass on the phallus through giving birth to a male child. Thus, rather than being truly a discourse concerning sexual *difference*, Freud's discourse can actually be read as being about sexual *sameness*, insofar as

we must admit that THE LITTLE GIRL IS THEREFORE A LITTLE MAN. A little man who will suffer a more painful and complicated evolution than the little boy in order to become a normal woman! A little man with a smaller penis. A disadvantaged little man. [...] More envious and jealous because less well-endowed ... a little man who would have no other desire than to be, or remain, a man. (SOW: 26; SAF: 25)<sup>x</sup>

Freud, then, has paradoxically characterized the development of "womanhood" beginning from the masculine position—hence the difficulty he ascribes to women in their process of reaching maturity. Certainly, Irigaray's remarks suggest, becoming a "normal" woman would be quite difficult (and in fact impossible), in a situation where the only model of sexual and psychic development is masculine. Furthermore, Irigaray's text reveals, underneath Freud's analysis, the persistence of a disavowed *masculine* desire—indeed, the desire to keep the feminine as his analogue, his opposite; the desire to have her "prop...up" the "currency" of the phallus, to "collect *hommage* and bring it back to its rightful owner [*Déléguee à la collecte des hommages, qu'elle devra rapporter à qui de droit*]" (SOW: 73; SAF: 87). Within this model there is no suggestion that there could be

anything like a “feminine” desire: the male libido is the only one recognized by Freud.

Thus

[...] woman remains the place for the inscription of repressions. All of which demands that, without knowing it, she should provide a basis for such fantasies as the amputation of her sex organ, and that the ‘anatomy’ of her body should put up the security for reality. [...] She will therefore be despoiled, without recourse, of all valid, valuable images of her sex/organs, her body. She is condemned to ‘psychosis,’ or at best, ‘hysteria,’ for lack—censorship? foreclosure? repression?—of a valid signifier for her ‘first’ desire and for her sex/organs. (SOW: 55; SAF: 63-4)

Rather than becoming a subject, or a place, in her own right, woman is here said to remain the “place” for the inscription of male desire, male repression. Further, her body “[puts] up the security for reality”: it is effectively erased so that “reality” can remain one, can remain coherent and sane. Woman is effectively invisible on the Freudian account. And yet, Irigaray identifies a kind of give-away of the situation in that Freud fails to “recognize” (or perhaps represses) the desire of the *father*—that is, his *own* (inherited) desire to precisely keep the young girl as phallic support, to not *let* her develop her own modalities of desire or becoming. Thus, Irigaray writes that Freud is “himself a prisoner of a certain economy of the logos, of a certain logic, notably of ‘desire,’ whose link to classical philosophy he fails to see,” and that he “defines sexual differences as a function of the a priori of the same, having recourse, to support this demonstration, to the age-old processes: analogy, comparison, symmetry, dichotomic oppositions, and so on,” when (she continues),

as a card-carrying member of an ‘ideology’ that he never questions, [Freud] insists that the sexual pleasure known as masculine is the paradigm for all sexual pleasure, to which all representations of pleasure can but defer in reference, support, and submission. In order to remain effective, all this certainly needed at the very least to remain hidden! By exhibiting this ‘symptom,’ this crisis point in metaphysics where we find exposed that sexual ‘indifference’ that had assured metaphysical coherence and ‘closure,’ Freud offers it up for our analysis. With

his text offering itself to be understood, to be read, as doubtless the most relevant re-mark of an ancient dream of self [*un vieux rêve d'auto*]...one that had never been interpreted. (SOW: 28; SAF 28-9, ellipses in original)

This crucial passage displays both what we might call Irigaray's central "thesis" in *Speculum*, as well as her method. The "thesis" is exemplified in her statement that Freud substitutes an *a priori* of the "same" for a true thinking of sexual difference. In other words, Freud simply inserts the feminine subject into the discourse on (masculine) sexuality, conveniently "forgetting" that this sexuality is already specified as masculine, and thus conflating "masculine" and "neuter." This effectively constitutes an erasure of sexual difference, and instead offers a "sexual 'indifference.'" Further, Irigaray links this sexual indifference to the history of Western metaphysics itself—the "ideology" that Freud never questions—as a discourse that seeks coherence and closure, that proceeds by way of analogy, opposition, dichotomy, and that *exploits the feminine* in order to accomplish this coherence.

The "method" on the other hand is announced when Irigaray says that Freud "offers up" this ancient dream of "one" subject for analysis. She thus suggests that, through a process of psychoanalyzing Freud's text itself, we might uncover the hidden desires, projections, condensations and so on that underlie it. Even if the "feminine" has been constructed so as to not have her own voice, or access to her own "desire and her desire for origin" (SOW: 42; SAF: 47), Irigaray can at least expose the fissures at the heart of this dream of symmetry: she can expose its underlying incoherencies, its gaps, cracks, and inconsistencies. She can, in fact, expose the *specular function* of the feminine in discourse. As a "hysteric" (in Freud's discourse), woman becomes parodic, mimetic—she would be a "*bad (copy of a) work of art*" (SOW: 125; SAF: 156). Irigaray

writes: “Woman's special form of neurosis would be to ‘mimic’ a work of art [...] Her neurosis would be recognized as a counterfeit or parody of an artistic process. [...] Artifice, lie, deception, snare--these are the kinds of judgments society confers upon the tableaux, the scenes, the dramas, the pantomimes produced by the hysteric” (Ibid.). Irigaray reveals, however, that hysteria is woman’s “special” form of neurosis only because she has *already been reduced* to the status of a mirror for masculine discourse. In a more direct reference to the mirror, she also writes that the feminine is “The backside of (self)representation, of the visual plane where [the masculine subject] gazes upon himself” (SOW: 135; SAF: 168). Her fullness, her texture and materiality, have indeed been reduced to the flat surface of a mirror in which the masculine subject always and only finds himself: his analogue, or his opposite.

As noted earlier in this chapter, many readers of Irigaray’s early work focused explicitly on its “deconstructive” tendency—that is, its proposal that the feminine, through its revelation that dichotomic oppositions are founded on a repression, holds the potential to dislodge the presumptive unity of the masculine discourse—and construed this as the ultimate goal of her writing. However, it is important to note that, even at this early stage, Irigaray’s work is already focused on the questions of subjectivity and of relation. In the second essay of *Speculum*, titled “Every Theory of the Subject Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine,” Irigaray shows how subjectivity itself, as construed within Western philosophy, is founded upon what she described earlier as the *a priori* of sameness. She writes of the threat the positive existence of the feminine would thus pose to this self-enclosed, self-same subject:

And even as man seeks to rise higher and higher—in his knowledge too—so the ground fractures more and more beneath his feet [...] at stake here somewhere,

ever more insistent in its deathly hauteur, is the risk that the subject (as) self will crumble away. Also at stake, therefore, the ‘object’ and the modes of dividing the economy between them. In particular the economy of discourse. Whereby the silent allegiance of the one guarantees the auto-sufficiency, the auto-nomy of the other as long as no questioning of this mutism as a symptom—of historical repression—is required. But what if the ‘object’ started to speak? Which also means beginning to ‘see,’ etc. What disaggregation of the subject would that entail? (SOW: 134-5; SAF: 167)

At stake in the subject/object distinction, then, is precisely the repression of the feminine—she who must remain mute, reflective, negative in order for the masculine subject to maintain his self-assurance and the economy of his discourse. Irigaray suggests here, again, that to identify this “mutism” as the *effect* of a historical repression on the part of the masculine, rather than as a simple “fact,” is already to disrupt the scheme of the masculine discourse, and thus to begin to transform what it means to be a subject. Indeed, she writes:

Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character. [*Imaginez que la femme imagine, l’ob-jet y perdrait son caractère (d’idée) fixe*]. As a bench mark that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective. If there is no more ‘earth’ to press down/repress, [(re)fouler] to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one’s own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the existence of the ‘subject’? (SOW: 133; SAF: 165)

The “subject,” then, is only such by “bouncing back” off of some sort of limit—a limit here constituted, Irigaray suggests, by the repression of the feminine and its conflation with the “object,” rather than being understood as another *subject*. This “non-relational” limitation is thus, in a sense, still a species of relation—but the relation is to an “object” and not another subject, and thus it is not a relation in any full or reciprocal sense. Thus Irigaray already identifies that what is at stake in the masculine construction of subject and object (with woman as “object”) is the repression or deformation of a relation.

Further, the above quotation raises a crucial point. If Irigaray's argument is that woman has been reduced to a mirroring or "object" function in order for the masculine discourse to take shape, *and* that it may be possible to disrupt this discourse precisely by proposing her as her *own* subject, then she is clearly not advocating for a simple "destruction," or even deconstruction, of identity or subjectivity. Indeed, she describes the possible deconstruction of subjectivity as follows:

The 'subject' henceforth will be multiple, plural, sometimes di-formed, but it will still postulate itself as the cause of all the mirages that can be enumerated endlessly and therefore put back together as one...A de-struc(tura)tion in which the 'subject' is shattered, scuttled, while still claiming surreptitiously that he is the reason for it all. (SOW: 135; SAF: 168)

Rather than recommending either the retaining of the "traditional" conception of subjectivity *or* its deconstruction, I suggest that Irigaray is, already at this earlier stage of her work, pointing toward the way in which the *limit* of subjectivity must be re-thought in order to accommodate two subjects. Here she indicates that if the subject were to become simply "multiple," this would be tantamount to his remaining one, since in being "endlessly enumerable" the subject would be precisely *unlimited*. Instead, Irigaray identifies the possibility that subjectivity itself (both "masculine" and "feminine") might be altered by the possibility of a positive, reciprocal relation. This concern with a positive relation between two is further indicated in several passages of the Freud essay, where Irigaray already indicates a concern with the *erasure* of the relationship of sexual difference. She writes, for instance, that

The primary set of metaphors for desire would indeed appear to be correlated, according to Freud, with what he calls the 'maternal object.' Not with the father as such, since the father merely suffers the displacement of the libido. Nor with the relation *between* father and mother, a man and a woman, and thus with sexual difference. (SOW: 34; SAF: 36)

And that, for Freud:

Desiring a representative of the ‘opposite’ sex entails, at least for the little girl, rejecting a representative of one’s own sex and, indeed, as we shall see, the representation of one’s own sex. Which will mean no possible cathexis of the relation *between* the sexes? If one loves, desires one sex, one necessarily denigrates, detests the other. (SOW: 40; SAF: 43-4)

Therefore, we might already suspect, from this reading of the first two sections of *Speculum*, that Irigaray’s underlying concern is in fact the way in which the masculine subject, in conflating himself with the “neuter,” and thus conflating sexual difference with sexual *indifference*, has precisely repressed the possibility of a relation between two subjects. While I will substantiate this claim further in Chapter III, where I discuss Irigaray’s intervention into Lacanian discourse in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, suffice to say for the moment that the emergence of this concern in *Speculum* already disrupts the possibility of placing Irigaray within the previously-discussed debates concerning definition and identity. We cannot read Irigaray’s work within the terms of these debates, because she is neither affirming nor denying an identity for “women,” but rather posing the question of how identity *tout court* is constructed in the first place. And even this questioning is not deployed in the service of “definition,” for the underlying problem, we might suggest, is not to find out *what* women are, but to find out *how* a relation between two positive subjects can come into being, since it is only in refusing a positive relation that “identity” (as unified and masculine) is set up. Questions of definition, then, will be secondary to this task.

### 3. Conclusion: Definition vs. Relation

“For the elaboration of a theory of woman, men, I think, suffice” (TS: 123; CS: 122)

In this chapter, we have begun to see how Irigaray’s project cannot be understood as primarily responding the question of “what” sexuate difference is, or of “what” masculine and feminine subjectivity consist in. Indeed, if masculine subjectivity underwrites our conceptual understanding of “identity,” then we cannot break free from this domination without reconceiving of the very fundamental terms of identity or subjectivity themselves. But such “reconceiving” is not simply a matter of *asserting* a difference from the traditional philosophical figures (that is to say, simply defining subjectivity otherwise): as Irigaray’s intervention into Freud’s discourse shows, it is rather a matter of revealing an outside to these traditional figures from a position deceptively “within” them. Indeed, if the feminine is, at present, defined as simply a mimic, a bad (copy of a) work of art, then she must begin from this position “within” in order to reveal it *as* a masculine repression or projection. To do otherwise would be to simply “double” the current masculine conception of identity: to claim that women, as it were, are men too. When readers and critics attempt to circumscribe Irigaray’s work within the paradigm of definition or identity, however, they are thus necessarily led to disagreement and to impasse, because her work precisely exceeds the boundaries of this type of discourse. Indeed, it is not possible to reify Irigaray’s claims about the identity of men or women without understanding how they are framed within a broader conceptual framework that includes her disruption of the presumptions of masculine subjectivity, and her concomitant re-thinking of categories of identity and subjectivity as such as



relational. Therefore, the paradigm of relation has emerged as a promising way in which to thematize the overarching unity of Irigaray's oeuvre.

To conclude, I would like to re-emphasize that Irigaray's work—and mine—will attempt to speak *from* the place of the excluded feminine. This attempt to make speak (and to hear) that which has been excluded from the realm of "reason" is strikingly different from the task of attempting to "define" women, which inevitably begins from *within* the realm of reason, with all of the assumptions that this realm prescribes. Thus, the "relational limitation" of which I will speak is a transformation of subjectivity, and not a (re)definition, because it will ultimately describe the process—always situated, embodied, and specific—of constituting and re-constituting the self in relation to an ever-shifting limit. The *meaning* of the self resists fixity insofar as it emerges each time as a result of this operative principle of the relation. As Irigaray writes, in her most recent monograph:

[...] In order to ethically relate to the other who belongs to another sex, I must gather with myself and present myself as a unity—in a way as oneness, but a concrete, singular, and embodied oneness. This prevents us from appropriating the other or being appropriated by the other, a necessary condition for our entering into presence, communication and relation with a mutual respect. (STW: 22)

According to this vision, I gather myself into a provisional unity again and again through my relation to the other, but the relation underlies and determines this "concrete singular oneness." Thus, this vision of subjectivity is concomitant with an ethical relation: a relation that allows and respects difference.

This ethical vision—toward which, I believe, Irigaray's work is aimed—cannot come about in a culture where one subject (the masculine) has claimed control over "reality." But to focus on the definition of the feminine is precisely to remain within

such a culture. The failure of the masculine subject to recognize the feminine as a subject in its own right is not a failure in *definition* but a failure in *relation*. It is because the masculine subject imagines itself to be the only subject there is—related, perhaps, to objects in the world rather than constitutively related to another human subject—that women are “defined” in limiting ways, or are “defined” as indefinable, or the opposite of the masculine, its deformation.<sup>xi</sup> This failure of relation harms the very being of human subjectivity itself, since, as my reading of Irigaray’s work will ultimately show, each of us comes to be what we are only through the relation to the other—a relation that is, on the traditional model of subjectivity, prevented from its own becoming.

In the next chapter I begin my investigation of Irigaray’s dialogue with Lacan in order to show how the issue of sexuate difference is inextricably linked with the very constitution of human subjectivity, reality, and meaning. Through an analysis of Irigaray’s early work, we will see how she reveals the singular, masculine focus of Lacanian psychoanalysis; and further how this singular focus shows itself in Lacan’s conception of sexual difference as a *non-relational*, rather than a relational, limit. This conception consists in a kind of violence against the feminine itself, as it is either reduced to the “lack” in the symbolic system, or conflated with psychosis.

#### 4. Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Stone, for instance, although she defends Irigaray’s realism, argues that her work must be supplemented by the work of Judith Butler. To summarize briefly, this is because Stone thinks Irigaray’s focus is too exclusively on the “two” of sexuate difference, when bodies also exhibit a “multiplicity” that Butler’s work would ostensibly capture. But given that Butler’s take on “ontology” is radically different from Irigaray’s, even on a cursory reading, it seems to me that such “supplementation” is actually more of an abandonment of Irigaray’s own style of thinking. Other multiplicitous

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“supplementations” of Irigaray’s framework have been found in Deleuze (e.g., Lorraine, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> The monographs of Chanter and Whitford, as well as texts like Schor and Weed’s *The Essential Difference* (1994), and even Fuss’ *Essentially Speaking* (1989) were important interventions into the “essentialism” debates.

<sup>iii</sup> Most of the commentators I cite or have cited so far have been from the U.S., with the exception of Stone and R. Jones from the U.K., and Grosz and Deutscher from Australia.

<sup>iv</sup> That is to say, in *Gender Trouble*. Butler’s reading of Irigaray continues to evolve. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) she interrogates Irigaray’s reading of Plato on the question of matter. Here she is concerned with Irigaray’s tendency to call the constitutive outside to discourse “the feminine,” and would thus seem to be leaning toward the “essentialist” critique. However, in *Undoing Gender* Butler presents a positive reading of Irigaray upon which “Irigaray has in mind an ethics which is not one that follows *from* sexual difference but is a question that is posed by the very terms of sexual difference itself: how to cross this otherness? How to cross it without crossing it, without domesticating its terms? How to remain attuned to what remains permanently unsettled about the question?” (177) This is closer to my own reading of Irigaray in its emphasis on the ethical and open-ended possibilities of Irigaray’s thinking of sexuate difference.

<sup>v</sup> Some examples of this trend are Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) and the collection *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980).

<sup>vi</sup> A “movement book” of the era mentions at least five different factions of the burgeoning Women’s Liberation Movement. See Ware (1970).

<sup>vii</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, has also proposed an ontology of being as relation. But he does not offer a specific figure of what he calls “being-with,” which, I argue, Irigaray uniquely does. For Irigaray, sexual difference would perhaps be the very figure of being-social that Nancy seeks—the very outline or figure for humanity that is “capable of opening onto the ‘with’ as its border, the very limit of its outline” (Nancy 2000: 48).

<sup>viii</sup> Irigaray’s first doctoral thesis, *Le langage des déments* (1973), was prepared for her doctoral degree in linguistics, for which she studied the speech pathology of patients with schizophrenia and senile dementia. It is notable that she returned to empirical research in her later work, in order to substantiate her claims about the differences in language-use between sexually-different subjects.

<sup>ix</sup> See Freud, “Femininity,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>x</sup> Irigaray utilizes a rhetorical “we” throughout this essay, a “we” which she characterizes as a parodic, masculine we: a “We Freud,” as she writes on p. 34.

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<sup>xi</sup> Irigaray writes in the final section of *Speculum*, where she discusses Plato's image of the cave, that "...nothing can be named as 'beings' except those things which all the same men see in the same way in a setup that does not allow them to see other things and which they will designate by the same names, on the basis of the conversation between them" (SOW: 263).

CHAPTER III  
THE SILENCE OF THE FEMININE  
AND THE REFUSAL OF RELATION:  
IRIGARAY IN DIALOGUE WITH LACAN

In the last chapter, I offered a reading of Irigaray's intervention into Freudian psychoanalysis in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Through this reading we began to see how Irigaray's revelation of the repressed feminine at the heart of this masculine discourse destabilizes Freud's purportedly "objective" account of human sexuality. I also introduced this reading as a response to readings of Irigaray's work that focus on the question of the identity of women, in order to show how, if Irigaray's work is circumscribed within this theoretical paradigm, we risk missing the deeper ontological character of her questioning. Thus, I suggested, in a preliminary way, that Irigaray's intervention into Freud's discourse on feminine sexuality must be understood as part of an ongoing intervention into the "objective" discourse not only of sexuality but also of identity itself, insofar as this discourse has always been underwritten by a repression and oppression of the possibility of the feminine on the part of the masculine subject. I also showed how Irigaray's concern, even at this early stage of her work, was not (only) with the repression of the positivity of feminine subjectivity in its own right, but was, even more primarily, with the repression of a positive *relation* between the sexes that this refusal to recognize the feminine reveals. In other words, I argued that Irigaray's work shows that the denial of feminine sexuality and subjectivity in its own right is the *result* of the repression of a relation to alterity on the part of the dominant masculine subject.

Thus, in challenging the discourse of identity, I indicated that Irigaray's work will ultimately also propose an alternative to it, in the form of a discourse of relationality.

In this chapter, an examination of Irigaray's interactions with and interventions into the work of Jacques Lacan will help to clarify two of my overarching claims. First, it will help to clarify my claim that, for Irigaray, the problem of the masculine co-optation of subjectivity exceeds the immediate sphere of questioning concerning sexuate bodies, or even sexuate psychic features, and extends into the sphere of ontological questioning—questioning that concerns the very conditions of reality itself. Although, as I have already indicated, Lacan will not ultimately propose the same understanding of “ontology” as does Irigaray or even Heidegger, Lacanian psychoanalysis nevertheless proposes that sexual difference is at the heart of the subject's relationship to reality and shared meaning. Irigaray also begins from this assumption of the basic character of sexual difference, and in this she is indebted to Lacan. However, as with Freud, Irigaray's work reveals the fact that the alleged “sexual difference” Lacan discusses reduces, at bottom, to a kind of sexual sameness. Given the inextricable connection between sexual difference and the very constitution of “reality” that Lacan's discourse implies, this revelation will push Irigaray's thinking to a deeper ontological level, because it signals that this sexual sameness underlies the very categories through which we understand being, or reality, itself. This, in turn, characterizes the position of exclusion from which Irigaray begins the development of her own positive voice and ontology—a position that dictates the methods appropriate to the development of her vision.

Secondly, this chapter further substantiates my claim that, for Irigaray, the problem of the repression of sexual difference in masculine discourse and culture is, above all, a problem concerning a relation. Indeed, my central claim here is that Irigaray's intervention into Lacan's picture of the (masculine or phallic) symbolic system reveals the fact that the masculine discourse maintains itself through an active and ongoing *refusal*. While earlier I spoke of a "repression" on the part of the masculine subject or discourse, in this chapter I use the term "refusal" to refer to the way in which (as Irigaray's intervention will reveal) Lacanian discourse (as a paradigmatic example of "masculine" discourse) comprises a kind of self-enclosed tautological system that *actively* erases the feminine. Furthermore, this refusal is not simply a refusal of the feminine as a definable being. Instead, I argue, the indefinability of the feminine in Lacanian psychoanalysis is the result of a prior refusal of a *relation* to alterity, of a positive relation between the sexes. Indeed, according to Lacan, there is simply no relation between the sexes. He writes in his Seminar XX : "no relationship gets constituted between the sexes in the case of speaking beings" (1999: 66). This lack of relation between the sexes is a crucial aspect of Lacan's entire understanding of subjectivity, desire, and language. I argue that Irigaray's work, rather than accepting this lack of relation as an incontrovertible fact, exposes it instead as a performative effect of Lacan's system itself—that is, her work exposes the fact that the symbolic perpetuates itself only through an active covering-over of the possibility of relation.

I begin the chapter with a summary of some key aspects of Lacan's theory in order to set up my reading of Irigaray's intervention. In particular, Irigaray's immanent critique concerns the priority of the "phallus" in Lacan's system, and his concomitant

discussion of feminine sexuality. Lacan, combining Freudian psychoanalysis with structuralist linguistics, proposes that the “phallus” is the privileged signifier for human beings. This means that it signifies not some specific “being” or thing, but rather the very meaningfulness of language, and thus, for Lacan, of human reality itself. Given the connection Lacan proposes between language and psychic structures, he also views the phallus as a crucial structural determinant of a subject’s psyche. Indeed, the phallus, according to Lacan, must hold the “proper” place in one’s psychic structure, or else psychosis (a radical break with shared meaning) ensues. The phallus therefore represents a *limit* for Lacan; that is, the limit of the subject in relation to “madness”—specifically caused by the persistence of an unmediated relation to what he calls the “real,” or the immediacy of reality before the mediating processes of signification intervene. The phallus plays this stabilizing role for the subject’s psyche because it ensures the “sense” of the symbolic by symbolizing, in a determinate way, its contingency—its possible *non-sense* and indeterminacy. The phallus thus limits and in a certain sense closes the field of signification: giving meaning to its potential meaninglessness, it cuts both the symbolic and the subject off from their own excess: the possibly destructive force of the “real.” In his seminars on feminine sexuality Lacan aligns feminine *jouissance* (sexual pleasure, or the drive that enables us to invest certain signifiers with meaning) with this limit on meaning, because he proposes that it is impossible for anything to be symbolized at all that is not a function of the phallus. He thus identifies, in a preliminary way, the fact that sexual difference itself constitutes a limitation on human subjectivity. But, because he claims that all subjects must be represented in terms of the phallus, Lacan concludes that this “limit” is unidirectional: there can be no relation between the sexes.



I then move on to discuss Irigaray's intervention into this discourse. Irigaray, as noted, also begins from within this premise that there is no relation between the sexes. But a reading of her dialogue with Lacanian discourse will show the two different meanings of the phrase "there is no relation between the sexes" implied by Lacan's and Irigaray's work respectively. For Lacan, this statement functions as a kind of precondition of the symbolic order. In other words, in order that the phallus do its job (of plugging up the "hole" in the symbolic, covering up its possible meaninglessness, and of successfully separating the subject from the real), nothing may appear within the symbolic that cannot be expressed *in terms of* the phallus. Therefore, in order for the symbolic to function (including the structures of sanity, language, and culture) there cannot, properly speaking, be an *other* sex. However, Irigaray's work reveals a different limit to the Lacanian symbolic than the one-sided limit of the phallus. The phallus limits the symbolic by signifying the "fact" that there is "nothing" outside of it. We thus only see this limit from one side—the inside. However, what Irigaray reveals is that the meaningless "outside" or excess to the phallic order (which Lacan aligns with the feminine) in fact only appears meaningless and inaccessible because of a prior refusal of *a different kind of* limitation, a different relation to what lies outside. That is, the feminine appears as nonsignifiable and meaningless within Lacan's system as a result of a refusal of the possible relation between the sexes, which could have limited the (masculine) symbolic precisely by constituting it *as* masculine, *in relation to* the feminine: a possibility that Irigaray's thinking of relation will precisely unfold.

I thus close the chapter with the suggestion that, on Lacan's own criteria, the phallic limit identified as crucial to the stability of the symbolic system is not actually the

guarantor of sanity, shared meaning, or value. Instead, the phallus actually constitutes the symbolic itself as “psychotic,” in the sense of radically *not* shared, as the result of the refusal of the limitation that could have been represented by the relation between the sexes. In other words, if psychosis arises from a refusal of limitation and consequently shows itself as a self-enclosed system, then the Lacanian symbolic is itself psychotic, because, in its refusal to admit the limitation of the feminine it inscribes itself as the one and only source and guarantor of meaning. Thus, in order for Irigaray to develop her own ethical vision of a transformative, positive relation between two different sexuate subjects, she will ultimately have to transcend Lacan’s understanding both of subjectivity and of language as such, since, on his view of language as a self-enclosed phallic system, there is no possibility of a meaningful relation to the “other” sex: a meaningful relation to that which exceeds, and is other than, the (masculine) subject.

### 1. Lacan on Language, Subjectivity, and Sex

Even beyond the direct connection between Irigaray’s work and that of Lacan, it is important to appreciate the widespread influence and appeal of Lacanian theory, especially during the 1970s, but also today.<sup>i</sup> As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1991) notes, Lacan’s rise to popularity was due in large part to his unique attunement to the philosophical issues of his time. Borch-Jacobsen writes: “Lacan took part in all the battles, all the debates of his times: those of psychoanalysis, of course, but also those of Politzer’s ‘concrete psychology,’ of Surrealism [...] of Hegelianism and anti-Hegelianism, of (French) Heideggerianism, and, finally, of structuralism” (1). The fields of contemporary continental philosophy and feminist philosophy are to this day both deeply intertwined with such debates; and thus Lacan is still a crucial interlocutor for

both. Furthermore, Lacan's theoretical framework, by virtue of its erudition and scope, is uniquely suited to drawing together psychoanalytic and philosophical concerns surrounding identity, subjectivity, sexual difference, and language. As I have already noted, Irigaray inherits a key assumption from Lacan—namely, that the process of subject-formation is inherently tied up with sexual identity, and furthermore, that this process is carried out in large part through linguistic relations. In what follows I set up my reading of Irigaray (reading Lacan) by summarizing key features of Lacanian theory in order to flesh out his picture of subjectivity and his assertion of the primacy of sexual difference.

Lacan sees himself as the direct inheritor of Freud. But he supplements Freud with both structuralist linguistics and Hegelian philosophy. In so doing, he pushes Freud's picture of sexual difference—understood primarily through the story of the Oedipal complex with its affiliated notions of castration anxiety and penis envy—more explicitly into the very fabric of human reality itself.<sup>ii</sup> I first review key structural elements of Lacan's theory here (namely, The Other, the symbolic, and the real), in order to provide the reader with a framework for understanding my arguments.<sup>iii</sup> I also give a detailed reading of Lacan's paper "The Signification of the Phallus," in order to show more precisely how Lacan transforms the notions of castration anxiety and penis envy into *structural* notions that concern questions about meaning and value as such.

#### *A. Structural Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*

To gain an understanding of the basic picture of subjectivity put forward by Lacan, it is perhaps most helpful to review his concept of "The Other." "The Other" in Lacan's oeuvre functions as a far-reaching concept that may refer to the mother, the

Unconscious itself, society, language, the woman, or all of the above. Analyst and commentator Judith Feher Gurewich (2000) summarizes the psychoanalytic contribution of Lacan's concept of the Other as follows:

What Lacan demonstrates is that the psychic life of the individual develops in an intersubjective structure that is *not intuitively or phenomenologically graspable* because such a structure is not merely composed of the drives or affects on the one hand and the social milieu on the other hand. (6)

"The Other," as Gurewich notes, is the name for that which destabilizes subjectivity, that which alienates the subject from itself, and determines him beyond his conscious control. Examples of such determination include the desires and discourse of the mother inscribed in one's subjectivity before one is aware of it; the roles available to one in society before one arrives on the scene; the structure of the unconscious which "informs [one's] psychic life in a fashion akin to the way the laws of language inform the way we speak"

(Gurewich, 9). As Gurewich implies, in philosophical language, the Other might be described as the unthematizable ground of consciousness, the negativity that destroys the illusion of the unity of the subject. We thus glimpse Lacan's connection—though also his break—with Hegel, in that "The Other" marks the negativity that, according to Lacan, can in fact never be recuperated or sublated through "the dialectic of desire," even as it constitutes subjectivity itself. "The Other" also refers to the otherness of society as it is inscribed within our psychic development. Indeed, analyst Lucie Cantin (2002) describes the structure of the subject in the Other this way: "Long before conception, one is born as a subject, subjected to the discourse and desire that resulted in one's conception and birth [...] One's 'place' [...] always precedes one's birth: one is expected there" (37). This, in part, is what it means to speak about the subject or the subject's desire "in the place of the Other," as Lacan does, for instance writing in "The Signification of the Phallus":

It speaks in the Other, I say, designating by ‘Other’ the very locus evoked by recourse to speech in any relation in which such recourse plays a part. [...] It is there [in the Other] that the subject finds his signifying place in a way that is logically prior to any awakening of the signified. The discovery of what it articulates in that place, that is, in the unconscious, enables us to grasp at the price of what splitting (*Spaltung*) he has thus been constituted. (2005: 579)

The “it” Lacan refers to here is desire. Desire speaks *in* the Other—in the unconscious, in the society, in the mother, because needs are alienated and mediated through speech and Other. This alienation is, as Stephen R. Friedlander (2000) notes,

a general human predicament: powerlessness to determine the whole of reality. Lacan’s contribution to psychoanalysis owes much to his insistence that language itself institutionalizes this impotence: By and large, we must use tools forged by others (we do not make up words ourselves), which they may regard as meaning things we never intended to say. (48)

The “splitting” Lacan notes in the quote above refers to the fact that the Other as the unconscious is both created and split from the subject (the ego) in the same moment, with the entry into what he calls the symbolic order. Lacan discusses this process in “The Mirror Stage.” The Mirror Stage also introduces what Lacan calls the *Nom-du-Père* (The Name/No [*nom/non*] of the Father) or the “Law of the Father,” or the “Paternal Metaphor,” which is crucial to understanding Irigaray’s response to his work. “The Mirror Stage” describes an infant’s encounter with a specular image of himself, and the process whereby the body and psyche become unified under the signifier, only through identifying with a specular image—“I am that.” With this identification, a gap opens up between the lived body (the “parceled” body before the mirror) and the unified image that is reflected back to the child. Lacan writes that “the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation [...] and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (2005: 78). This “finally donned armor” is the

subject as a subject-position in language, the “I” of the instance of discourse. This “I” is an essentially alienating identity insofar as, as noted above, the subject of language is constitutively alienated from its own immediacy and must express its drives through the medium of language. The mirror stage has been a crucial reference point for many readers of Lacan because it marks the moment of entry into the symbolic that creates not only the unconscious as Other but also delineates the realms of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, and situates the subject with respect to these structural determinants of subjectivity.

The “real” is especially important for my project and for feminist psychoanalysts, because, for Lacan, it is postulated as the lost primordial (pre-Oedipal) unity with the mother. Even more than the Other, the real is the unthematizable, insofar as it is forever lost, outside of discourse. It thus appears (from within the symbolic) as a kind of mythical, mystical unity: an immediacy, always already lost, and about which nothing can be said. Indeed, because according to Lacan one always already begins from within the symbolic, the “real” cannot be understood as an actual, available experience, but rather is a myth presented from within the symbolic concerning an imagined state of prior wholeness. Nonetheless, Lacan does propose a developmental account (for example, in “The Mirror Stage”) of the subject’s passage from the real into the symbolic. The caveat is that, since we, as speaking subjects, are always already situated within the symbolic, we can only ever encounter the real as an imaginary state or as a “break” with reality.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, for Lacan the symbolic function is a sort of compensation for the unequivocal *loss* of the real. This is why he describes language or the entry into the symbolic as a trauma—a traumatic splitting off from the wholeness of (supposed) immediacy and an

entrance into the mediated world of signification. Lacan (2005) makes much of Freud's example of his young nephew's *fort/da* game with a wooden reel attached to a string (in which the child alternately throws the reel out of his bed and reels it in, saying [what Freud hears as] "fort!" [gone], and "da!" [there]). Freud interprets this game to be a way of symbolizing the presence and absence of the child's mother. For Lacan, in this example, as Gurewich puts it, "we can locate the real as that 'thing' that these two signifiers attempt to control by giving it some signification" (28). The mother's loss is in some sense compensated for by the acquisition of the symbolic function here played out with the wooden reel, but we must realize that "the utterance cannot do justice to the experience of loss and anxiety that the child attempts to control" (Ibid.). Thus, symbols bespeak our primordial relatedness to the mother but at the same time speak (in failing to ever fully or adequately represent the real) of the loss and impossibility of this relatedness. Further, the real in Lacan's work is connected not only with the mother's body but also takes on the broader connotation of materiality at large, from which Lacan believes we are cut off when we enter the world of signification. That is to say, symbolic objects (words, wooden reels) *take the place* of immediate material reality, signifying something "other" than they are, and leaving in their wake an impossible remainder: the real.

The real, then, is precisely what is refused with the "name" or "no" of the father—the law that Lacan says cuts the subject off from its immediate intimacy with the mother. The symbolic, on the other hand, is positively linked to this law through the installation of the envalued signifier of the "phallus." Indeed, to "install" the symbolic phallus within one's psyche is to successfully internalize the "law of the father"—

namely, the limitation that cuts one off from the real and simultaneously inaugurates one into the symbolic. The successful installation of the phallus as a determinant of subjectivity during the development of the child, then, is crucial in Lacanian theory because it is simultaneously what puts us on the path of desire and, through the “paternal metaphor,” orients us with regard to the shared reality of those around us. Indeed, according to Lacan the failure of the paternal metaphor (and thus the hidden persistence of an unmediated relation to the real) results in psychosis—itsself a break with shared meaning and reality. Lacan writes in his analysis of the famous psychotic, Judge Daniel Paul Schreber that Schreber’s psychosis is caused by the “foreclosure” of the name of the father and thus of the phallic signifier: “At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned—as we shall see now [in the case of Judge Schreber]—a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to the lack of the metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification” (2005: 465-6). This “hole” has, for the psychotic, precisely *not* been plugged up by the phallus. It therefore gives rise to a kind of arbitrary shifting of signification and of meaning, one that leads the psychotic to organize a system around a radically different set of signifiers than those shared by others: hence, the development of psychotic delusions.<sup>v</sup>

It is this equation of the father and the phallus with the ultimate values of meaningfulness, signification, and sanity that feminist theorists have criticized as either being simply untrue or as unwittingly revealing a historically contingent truth of patriarchal society.<sup>vi</sup> A closer look at Lacan’s seminal paper, “The Signification of the Phallus” will help us to set up Irigaray’s own immanent critique of his work.



## *B. The Signification of The Phallus*

“The Signification of the Phallus” is the place where Lacan most explicitly formulates his claim that the phallus is the “privileged” signifier. Much can be said about this privileging. For the purposes of my own analysis, it is critical to note that this interpretation of the phallus (and the signifier) arises out of a question precisely about *limitation*. Indeed, “The Signification of the Phallus” opens with a question about castration. Lacan, returning to Freud’s story of the Oedipal complex, asks: “why must [man] assume the attribute of [his] sex only through a threat or even in the guise of a deprivation?” (2005: 575). Why, in other words, does Freud describe sexedness as such as an encounter with a lack, or the possibility of a lack (i.e. through castration anxiety and penis envy)? What is the meaning of the “different” relationships to the phallus evinced by the little boy and the little girl, and why does Freud describe the development of both with reference to the phallus? Lacan’s response to this question shows clearly the way in which he supplements Freud’s story of the Oedipal complex with structuralist linguistic theory, as well as the way in which he links the “assumption” of the subject’s sex with the very constitution of coherent meaning and reality for that subject.

According to Lacan it is possible to inscribe Freud’s psychoanalytic theory within the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. In fact, he writes that, in order to understand Freud’s insight into sexual difference, it is crucial to focus on the signifier/signified relationship, on what it means to be a speaking being, saying:

it is Freud’s discovery [of the unconscious] that gives the signifier/signified opposition its full scope: for the signifier plays an active role in determining the effects by which the signifiable appears to succumb to its mark, becoming, through that passion, the signified. (2005: 578)

That is, the bringing together of psychoanalytic thinking, which is concerned with the way in which the subject is precisely not “master in his own house” by virtue of unconscious drives which are linked to his sexuality, and the structural aspects of this linguistic theory, will, according to Lacan, give a truer picture of the human as both a speaking and a desiring being. A brief review of Saussure’s linguistic theory is therefore in order.

According to de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* a “signifier” (or “sign”) is the mark by which we symbolize some meaning, a “signified” is the meaning as it exists in the mind of the subject. Saussure argues, importantly, that the connections between these components are arbitrary—in other words, that the signifier (symbol) has no motivated connection to the signified (idea): instead, signifiers operate only through diacritical difference—that is, only through their relations to one another (Saussure, 1983: 67). Thus, a word, say, “bat,” gains its significance only through *not* being another word, like “hat” or “cat.” It does not gain its meaning by having some intrinsic connection to the animal itself. What Lacan’s theory essentially suggests, then, is that the “break” with the real (conceived, again *post facto*, as a kind of pure immediacy) is what allows for this arbitrary system of signifiers (the symbolic) to work. The human being is thus irrevocably divorced from “natural” reality, and instead inhabits “reality” as a series of interconnected, yet arbitrary, signs.

And yet, we are not necessarily unproblematically lodged within the symbolic, without remainder. There is a kind of gap, to which we risk succumbing, between the symbolic and the real (I mean this latter term now in the broader sense of “material reality”) by virtue of the arbitrariness of the relation between the two. The symbolic field

lies “over” the real as it were, but there is an emptiness, a negativity, between them. Lacan aligns this gap or emptiness with Hegelian negativity and he situates the subject precisely there, in the moment of negativity, the moment of disappearance. In other words, the subject is he who is not a thing, a signifier, but he who is *subject to* signifiers, and who is continually disappearing into the gap caused by the arbitrariness of signification itself. As Lacan writes in the “The Subversion of the Subject and The Dialectic of Desire” in response to Freud’s famous statement that *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* (“Where Id was, there shall Ego be”):

But the French translation says: *Là ou c’était...* [there where it was/was being] ... Let us take advantage of the distinct imperfect [tense] it provides. Where it was just now, where it was for a short while, between an extinction that is still glowing and an opening up that stumbles, *I can [peut] come into being by disappearing from my statement [dit]*” (2005: 678; my parentheticals).

Indeed, this is the structural meaning of the “I”—it is that which withdraws from the saying, that which can never fully say itself. “I is an other,” as Arthur Rimbaud wrote.<sup>vii</sup>

This withdrawal of the self, according to Lacan, is where the priority of desire comes in for the human being (and this thinking-together of human desire and the arbitrariness of signification constitutes his wedding of Freud with Saussure). Desire is constituted precisely in the gap between the real and the symbolic, because desire, for Lacan, is occasioned by a lack—a constant not-having or a wanting-to-be, a *manque à être* (lack of/to being, a term used throughout his work). Nevertheless, non-psychotic subjects do not simply wallow in this “lack” or allow it to appear as an emptiness. Instead, they consistently work (consciously and unconsciously) to valorize signification (despite its arbitrariness) in a variety of ways. In other words, in order not to succumb to depression or other neuroses we must act as if we *can* attain our desire, we must attach

our desire to certain objects, and to certain signifiers. This process deeply forms our psyches. Lacan writes:

This passion of the signifier thus becomes a new dimension of the human condition in that it is not only man who speaks, but in man and through man that it [*ca*] speaks; in that his nature becomes woven by effects in which the structure of the language of which he becomes the material can be refound; and in that the relation of speech thus resonates in him, beyond anything that could have been conceived of by the psychology of ideas. (2005: 578)

The human is a “subject,” then, by constantly being *subjected* to the force of the unconscious, which operates by way of arbitrary chains of signification that are nevertheless linked to our most intimate desires and grandest plans. We are the “material” of the structural language of the unconscious: in fact we might go so far as to say that the subject is an effect of the unconscious. We thus are never really in control of ourselves, and never really know what we are doing, because we are motivated by connections that are, strictly speaking, inexplicable.

The symbolic phallus, as Lacan specifies, will play a critical role in our ability to orient ourselves, despite this constitutive self-diremption, to the shared reality of the symbolic. Lacan implies in “The Signification of the Phallus” that the symbolic phallus<sup>viii</sup> is closely related to the previously-mentioned *Nom-du-Père*—that is, the *limitation* or interdiction provided by the father that allows the subject to enter into the symbolic through a separation from the nonthematizable real.<sup>ix</sup> We can understand this role of the phallus through a parallel with Freud’s Oedipal complex and the question of castration. The phallus, as Lacan formulates it here, is the symbol of what the mother desires. That is to say, it symbolizes the father—though it might symbolize anything that captures the mother’s attention and detracts attention from the infant: another woman, a job outside the home, the fact that she, too, has needs and desires. As in Freud’s story,

Lacan's child begins to realize, especially through the Oedipal drama, that the mother is "castrated"—that is to say, previously thought to be whole, even all-encompassing, the mother is now revealed as lacking. She is unable to provide the phallus for the little girl; and for the son she appears, frighteningly, to have been divested of the phallus (a fact he associates with the threat of castration). For Lacan this realization of the mother's lack is a moment of maturity because it signifies the realization that the parent is not some godlike figure who possesses the "whole" of reality but rather is *also* alienated from immediate self-presence in the symbolic order. He writes: "...it is the Other's desire as such that the subject is required to recognize—in other words, the other insofar as he himself is a subject divided by the signifying *Spaltung*" (2005: 582) That is to say, to resolve the Oedipal complex, the subject must recognize that the (m)Other, insofar as she is castrated (as all human beings are, in being cut off from the "wholeness" of the real), is also subject to the dialectic of desire in which we only ever *contingently* symbolize our excessive drives.

But to call this situation one of "castration" is already to accord a presumptive privilege to the phallus. Indeed, in being the signifier that Lacan uses to symbolize this "cutting" between the real and the symbolic, the phallus takes on the role of the privileged signifier *tout court*. He writes:

[The phallus] is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier. (2005: 579) [...] [I]t can play its role only when veiled, that is, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, once it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of the signifier. [...] The phallus is the signifier of this very *Aufhebung*, which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. (2005: 581)

Thus, the phallus symbolizes both itself and its opposite—castration—and, as such, it becomes the "signifier of the signifier." Indeed, in standing for both presence and

absence, it opens up the difference at the heart of the process of symbolization itself. The very structure of a signifier is, on this (post)structuralist view, one of presence and absence—it stands in for a perpetually “lost” object, never saying what it *is*, because of the arbitrariness of signification. For Lacan, then, the structure of the signifier *is* the structure of human desire, and indeed “[t]he phallus is the privileged signifier of this mark in which the role [*part*] of Logos is wedded to the advent of desire” (2005: 581). The phallus is the signifier of the *splitting* between the real and the symbolic; and, in veiling itself, it becomes the signifier of that which is perpetually sought-after but never found—the signifier of signification *per se* and of desire.

Further, Lacan indicates that the function of the phallus is both an explanation of the way in which we valorize and inhabit the field of signification as such *and* an explanation of the relation between two “different” sexes. He writes that “...one can indicate the structures that govern the relations between the sexes simply by referring to the phallus’ function” (2005: 582). Thus, we might suspect that sexual difference itself—insofar as it is constituted by one’s relation to the phallus—will also concern the ways in which subjects relate to shared reality and meaning. Indeed, Charles Shepherdson (1995) writes:

[Lacanian theory] suggests that, contrary to most phenomenology, sexual difference is indeed as fundamental as ontological difference. Where the philosopher might be tempted to regard the ‘subject’ as neutral or neuter with regard to sexual difference, thereby construing sexual difference as a derivative, secondary or merely ontic matter [...] psychoanalysis would appear to suggest that sexual difference is as fundamental as death—that indeed the ‘body’ is constituted only insofar as *both* death and sexual difference have been registered, not accidental or merely ontic ‘facts,’ but as constitutive of the body itself. (449)

We can further understand the link between the phallus and shared reality by looking to its function as the guarantor of shared meaning. Indeed, as I have already noted, since

the phallus stands for both presence and absence at once, it plugs the “hole” in the Symbolic that is due to its very *contingency*—namely, to the fact that the subjects in a given society are libidinally invested in the signifiers of the culture for no God-given reason. The phallus names (and thus gives meaning to) this contingent relationship to the law. In “The Subversion of the Subject in the Dialectic of Desire,” Lacan describes this fragile, contingent relationship as follows:

Let us begin with the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus. I formulate this by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) comes forward to make up for this, he does so as an impostor. (2005: 688)

Thus, while the phallus is “the signifier of the signifier,” it is only so in a contingent manner, since there is no guarantee of authority that could come from anywhere outside the locus of “The Other,” that is, the locus of the Symbolic or speech itself.

This raises the question for Lacan’s readers, then, of just why it is the phallus in particular that has the privilege of being the signifier that best communicates the structure of signification as such. As Borch-Jacobsen asks: “Why does the negated-annulled-lost-castrated-symbolized-raised *penis* play the role of the signifier ‘on pointe,’ if all signifiers are equal and interchangeable with respect to the absence that they signify?” (211)

Borch-Jacobsen discusses the circle in which Lacan seems to enclose the phallus, on which it is impossible to ever explain its priority, and on which it becomes a kind of “‘zero symbol’ that can signify anything because it signifies nothing in particular” (214).

He ultimately concludes, however, that the privilege of the phallus stems from its imaginary function as that which is visible—the visible object that symbolizes the

subject. This response on the one hand conflates the imaginary phallus with the symbolic phallus (i.e. the image of the subject, or his ego-ideal, and the *signifier* of desire that belongs properly to the symbolic); and, on the other hand, is somewhat facile, especially as a response to feminist critics, who suspect that more is at stake in Lacan's privileging of the phallus than a simple equation of visibility (or erection) and subjecthood. Instead, feminist authors (Irigaray among them) have suggested that this privileging is rather a mark left by patriarchal societal organization upon both psychoanalytic theory and human subjectivity itself. Indeed, Irigaray writes that

psychoanalysis needs to reconsider the very limits of its theoretical and practical field, needs to detour through an 'interpretation' of the cultural background and the economy, especially the political economy, that have marked it without its knowledge. And psychoanalysis ought to wonder whether it is even possible to pursue a limited discussion of female sexuality so long as the status of woman in the general economy of the West has never been established. (TS: 66-7; CS: 62-3)

The priority of the phallus, then, which Lacan refers to above as a "destiny," from this point of view actually reveals an ancient inheritance: namely, that Lacan (like Freud) inherits assumptions about reality, language, and subjectivity themselves that cause him to posit the "phallus" (understood as a male signifier) as privileged and the woman as impossible to represent within the symbolic. Nevertheless, Irigaray herself will not begin her critique from a position simply "outside" of psychoanalysis, insofar as she believes it to simultaneously produce and expose a real truth about this "general economy of the West." Thus, as we have already begun to see in the previous chapter, she begins her own "detour" into this "cultural background" with an immanent critique of psychoanalysis. In order to understand Irigaray's immanent critique of Lacan, however, we must first understand more clearly the way in which Lacan circumscribes his own understanding of sexual difference within this discourse concerning the phallus. In the



next section, I thus briefly review Lacan's Seminar XX (on the question of feminine sexuality) before discussing Irigaray's critique of this seminar in *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

## 2. God or the Jouissance of the Woman: Irigaray and Lacan on Sexual Difference

### *A. Lacan's Seminar XX*

We might say that there are two levels to Lacan's theory of sexual difference.<sup>x</sup> On the one hand, Lacan is similar to Freud in viewing sexual difference as a matter of "being" versus "having" the phallus. Despite the null reality of the phallus (again, it stands for everything and nothing, and no one can ever truly possess it, since it is that which places us within the never-ending "dialectic of desire"), the child ultimately orients him or herself as either he who will be expected to "have" the phallus and give it to another, or she who will be expected to "be" the phallus as the object of desire. However, this is an illusory quest for both sexes, since the phallus symbolizes precisely that which is ever-elusive: the object of desire as constituted by lack. Thus, as Willy Apollon (2002) puts it, "...both masculinity and femininity must be understood as subjective positions taken up in language with regard to *jouissance*, instead of being misunderstood as biological givens" (51). Sexual difference, on this account then, is always and only inscribed under the heading of the phallus (as the signifier of signification and *jouissance*), rather than naming a pre-social or pre-linguistic state. However (as we will see) this inscription under the sign of the phallus ultimately renders the relationship between the two different desiring positions impossible. Lacan writes that sexual relations "...revolve around a being and a having which, since they refer to a

signifier, the phallus, have contradictory effects: they give the subject reality in this signifier, on the one hand, but render unreal the relations to be signified, on the other” (2005: 582). These “unreal relations” point to the second meaning of sexual difference for Lacan, which he develops in his Seminar XX.

In this Seminar, titled *Encore*, Lacan identifies sexual difference with the real itself when he thematizes the woman as the subject who experiences “non-phallic *jouissance*.” Lacan famously asserts that “[the] woman does not exist” (1999: 73), and that woman is the “not-all” of phallic *jouissance*. This is because, if the phallus is the signifier of signifiers, and “existence” is aligned with positing oneself as a speaking and desiring subject, then she who experiences “non-phallic” *jouissance* can neither speak this *jouissance* nor does she exist within the symbolic. This is why Lacan bars the article “*la*” in “~~*la*~~ *femme*.” Woman, according to him, cannot be designated as a particular position within the Symbolic because her very existence speaks only of the *lack* within the Symbolic. In “God and ~~Woman’s~~ *Jouissance*,” Lacan formulates the “not-all” of feminine *jouissance* even more dramatically with the symbolic formula  $\sim\forall x\Phi x$ —“not all  $x$  is a function of the phallus,” (with the negation placed on the quantifier), where  $x$  is *jouissance*. The full citation interestingly reads:

One of the following two things is true: either what I write has no meaning at all—which is, by the way, the conclusion of the short book [discussed earlier: *La titre de la lettre*, by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe], and that is why I beg you to have a look at it—or when I write  $\sim\forall x\Phi x$ , a never-before-seen function in which the negation is placed on the quantifier, which should be read “not-whole,” it means that when any speaking being whatsoever situates itself under the banner “women,” it is on the basis of the following—that it grounds itself as being not-whole in situating itself in the phallic function. (1999: 72, my parentheticals)

So either Lacan is meaningless or women speak only by not-speaking. For Irigaray, this will ultimately amount to Lacan's admission that the masculinist discourse, within psychoanalysis as much as philosophy, relies on a certain silence of the feminine for its very supposition of meaning. For Lacan, what this means is that within the phallic scheme (the scheme, again, that covers the "hole" in the symbolic by valorizing signification in various normative ways), she symbolizes the negative excess, the structural "not-all." Thus the woman, like the real, stands for some kind of unnamable excess. This excess is, to be sure, incapable of ever being registered *within* the signifying economy governed and limited by the phallus. It thus can only show up as the negation placed on the quantifier (not-all)—that which negatively limits the symbolic itself, by carving out a hollow within it.

For Lacan, then, because the feminine can only be inscribed as the "not-all" of the masculine, there can be no relation between the sexes. In other words, because relations, for Lacan, must occur within the symbolic, but woman, strictly speaking, cannot be inscribed within the symbolic except as structural lack or excess, a relation between man and woman cannot be forged. While Lacan (somewhat facetiously) laments this lack of relation in his seminar, he nevertheless accepts it as a precondition for the functioning of the symbolic. That is to say, Lacan, because of the way he understands the functioning of language (as a self-enclosed symbolic system oriented around the privileged signifier of the phallus) can only inscribe woman at the *limit* of his picture of subjectivity: as a kind of mystical figure about whom one can say nothing.

Irigaray, on the other hand, while she writes that "[p]sychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth" (TS: 86; CS: 85), ultimately reveals this truth

not as an apodictic certainty, but rather as a “truth” performatively produced by the phallic symbolic system itself (which she aligns with patriarchal language and culture). As we will see in the next section, his changes our understanding of “truth” itself, and opens up the possibility of speaking otherwise than as a phallic subject.

### *B. Irigaray’s Intervention*

“What modifications would [the social order] undergo if women left behind their condition as commodities...and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? Not by reproducing, by copying, the ‘phallogratic’ models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire?” (TS: 191; CS: 185)

Irigaray’s piece “Cosi Fan Tutti,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, constitutes her most explicit engagement with Lacan. Similarly to the opening section of *Speculum*, which presents a critique/parody/reappropriation of Freud’s lectures on feminine sexuality, “Cosi Fan Tutti” is a sustained reflection on Lacan’s Seminar XX, in which he formulates the claim that woman is the “not-all” of the symbolic system. Irigaray begins her piece with the claim that “[p]sychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth. A discourse that tells the truth about the logic of truth: namely, that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one” (TS: 86; CS: 85). Already in these opening lines, we can glimpse Irigaray’s subversive gesture. With her invocation of “truth,” Irigaray echoes Lacan’s own discourse on feminine sexuality that links it to “truth” itself, or, as the subtitle of his seminar indicates “language, love, and the limits of meaning.” However, this passage already indicates that Irigaray views “truth” otherwise than does Lacan, for she states that this truth is not static but has a *logic*; and furthermore that this logic is deployed in the service of masculine subjectivity only. For Lacan, as we

can imagine from the foregoing summary of his work, it would be nonsensical to speak of “masculine subjectivity *only*,” because for him there *is* only masculine subjectivity—it could not be understood as limiting something *else*. That is to say, while Lacan agrees that there is only “one” sex, he views this fact as a curiosity to be examined—and possibly lamented—but not as a contingent situation that could be altered. Indeed, even when Lacan raises the question of the feminine as limit, he describes her as the limit *of* the masculine system—that is, as belonging, in the mode of not-fully belonging, to the phallic symbolic (*not-all* x is phallic). How, then, does Irigaray expose the *other* limits of this system? How does she reveal the active limiting power of the masculine, or the possibility that the feminine is understood as “not-all” only from a certain position—a masculine position—and that there might indeed be other positions from which to view sexuate difference?

Irigaray’s key move, it seems to me, is to reflect the limits of masculine discourse from a place that this discourse depends upon but continually obscures for the sake of creating the illusion of a totalizing unity. Indeed, “masculine” discourse is, for Irigaray (at least at this early stage of her work), the discourse that claims “to *reduce all others* [all that is other] *to the economy of the same* [*réduire tout autre dans l’économie du Même*]” (TS: 74; CS: 72, my parentheses). Thus, in other words, Irigaray reflects the limits of the masculine discourse not from a place that exists *outside* the phallogocentric system, but from a place that remains hidden within the “logic” of the masculine system itself. This method alone can show the *conditions* of the logic espoused by the masculine system, rather than accepting the “logic of truth” as the unquestioned premise of the system (as either embracing it or rejecting it outright would). This subversive

method is therefore uniquely able to reveal the way in which the masculine system perpetually and actively obscures these conditions in order to make itself appear as the sole purveyor—even the victim—of the “truth” about the lack of relation between the sexes. Indeed, Lacan repeatedly portrays himself as a victim of the unknowability of the feminine in his seminar: he claims that his theory suffers for lack of knowledge of her pleasure, her *jouissance*. For instance:

The plausibility of what I am claiming here—namely, that woman knows nothing of this *jouissance*—is underscored by the fact that in all the time people have been begging them, begging them on their hands and knees—I spoke last time of women psychoanalysts—to try to tell us, not a word! We have never been able to get anything out of them. (1999: 75)

Irigaray, on the other hand, rather than viewing the lack of sexual relation as a lamentable fact, angrily writes of Lacanian psychoanalysis as an “... encircling projective machinery” from which “no reality escapes unscathed. Alive” (TS: 88; CS: 86). The masculine, she thus suggests, is a machine for producing and re-producing itself and its logic; and it produces itself *at the expense of* the feminine, which it eats alive. Indeed: “...it is inasmuch as she does not exist that [the woman] sustains the desire of these ‘speaking beings’ that are called men” (TS: 89; CS: 87). That is to say, she must *appear* as nothing, so that he may be some-thing, and so that things may be (so that the subject-object relation may be set up). However, the masculine all but successfully erases this destructive move by which it *requires* the disappearance of the feminine, by claiming that the feminine is a natural limit within the phallic order itself, a “not-all” within its ranks—in other words, from its/his point of view, an impossibility. However, what I mean by “naturally” here is not what is usually meant by the term, as should be clear from the fact that Lacan does not speak about “nature” *tout court*, because he believes that reality is

irredeemably mediated by signification. In fact, he writes that phallogentrism “is, of course, entirely conditioned by the intrusion of the signifier in man’s psyche and strictly impossible to deduce from any preestablished harmony between this psyche and the nature it expresses” (2005: 463). However, as we have seen, Lacan views this “intrusion of the signifier into man’s psyche” to be irreversible, and in some sense non-negotiable. Further, the feminine absolutely *must* be unrepresentable in order that signification function—this is as close to a “natural” limit as Lacan gets. The feminine must be outside of the signifying system if it is to function in the arbitrary symbolic way Lacan describes (which, as we saw earlier, is linked with the function of meaning and sanity as such).

Thus, as Irigaray writes, “[t]o the objection that this [masculine] discourse is perhaps not all there is, the response will be that it is women who are ‘not-all’” (TS: 88; CS: 86). The definition of woman as “not-all,” for Irigaray, rather than amounting to a recognition of the “fact” of sexual difference, exemplifies the “projective machinery” spoken of earlier. It is nearly impossible to critique the phallic system (as Borch-Jacobsen also noted), because it encircles itself in a kind of tautology: it is the whole, because anything that is not it is simply “not-whole.” The system thus relies upon an elision between two senses of the word “is” to work: either something *is* or it *is* not (but this “is” is normative): if it “is” not, however, this is not because of any activity on the part of what “is” (which now simply “is” in a passive or descriptive mode)—and yet, nevertheless, mysteriously, not everything “is.” Irigaray writes (referring to Freud) that “In short, [women] are deprived of the worth of their sex. The important thing, of course,

is that no one should know who has deprived them, or why, and that ‘nature’ be held accountable” (TS: 71; CS: 70).

The only way to critique such a system, then, is to reveal its own internal logic, its own elision of the normative and the descriptive. This internal logic of conflation looks something like this: In insisting (seemingly descriptively) that we are always already caught up within a symbolic system that is only arbitrarily related to the “real,” the masculine logic in fact normatively *creates* this category of the real (which is aligned with materiality, the mother, the woman, and so on) as a contrast to its own “meaning,” which it in turn takes on only through the *negation* of this supposed immediacy. Caught in a situation of pure “mediation,” then, that is, of indeterminacy, the masculine logic then utilizes the phallic symbol to represent mediation itself—both meaning and lack thereof—and to anchor what Lacan calls the “sliding” of the signified under the signifier—the fact that, on this picture of signification as arbitrary, meaning is constantly shifting.

Irigaray’s critical move, then, is to hear the echo of this logic in Lacan’s allegedly descriptive claims about the feminine as the not-all of the phallic system. Indeed, Irigaray, echoing Lacan, writes that woman “...resists all adequate definition. [And] [f]urther, she has no ‘proper’ name” (TS: 26; CS: 26). But for Irigaray this is not simply a state of affairs, dictated by some sort of logical necessity. What dictates the “fact” of feminine unrepresentability in fact has a logic of its own—a particular, masculine logic. Indeed, “her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*. The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ [...] the penis” (TS: 26; CS: 26). The unrepresentability of the feminine is a conditional *effect* of



masculine logic, rather than its precondition. *If* (for example) the penis is the only morphologically designatable organ, *then* woman is, in this sense, unrepresentable. Lacan, however, has performed a reversal upon which it appears that the feminine *must* be unrepresentable because the first premise (the privilege of the penis/phallus) is *a priori* true.<sup>xi</sup> The feminine is unrepresentable because she is “castrated”—but castration only takes on meaning in opposition to the supposedly unifying properties of the phallus, which, in turn, is only unifying because of the “lack” of castration. This “must”—the feminine “must” be unrepresentable—is understood by Lacan as a logical requirement rather than a specific desire on the part of the masculine to remain the privileged subject. But Irigaray reveals that the feminine is constituted as a lack precisely in order to *preserve* the singular, masculine point of view, and its concomitant privileged position as subject. In other words castration is *produced* (both in the sexual sense and in the sense of our general “split” from reality) in order to confirm the necessity of the phallus as unifying instrument. As evidence of this point, Irigaray cites the fact that to the objection that there may be something outside, something other than the masculine system, this system simply reabsorbs the category of “otherness” and presents it *from its point of view*. She writes that:

Female sexualization is thus the effect of a logical requirement, of the existence of a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies, which would necessitate, in order—nevertheless—to become incarnate, “so to speak,” taking women one by one. Take that to mean that woman does not exist, but that language exists. That woman does not exist owing to the fact that language—a language—rules as master, and that she threatens—as a sort of “prediscursive reality?”—to disrupt its order. (TS: 89; CS: 87)

Psychoanalytic discourse on feminine sexuality, then, is no “neutral” description of facts, but rather *a* logic requiring a certain compliance (to the point of non-existence)

on the part of the feminine. The feminine must be sacrificed in order that the phallic order acquire meaning by way of the negation of prediscursive, pure immediacy or materiality. The connection then is clear here between the non-linguistic existence of woman (which is, in the Lacanian framework, tantamount to her non-existence *tout court*) and the existence of “a” language—namely, the masculine language—that takes its support from this very erasure of her reality. That Irigaray transmutes “language” into “a language,” furthermore, alerts us to her effort to reveal the one-sided nature of the masculine. Although it claims to be “language” as a whole, it must be understood as “a language,” that is, we must understand that there might be others. Indeed, there might be another language, another subject, that has been refused in order that the “subject” thought of as neutral, and the language thought of as “neutral,” can appear. Thus, “[m]astery clearly acknowledges itself, except that no one notices it” (TS: 94; CS: 91).<sup>xiii</sup> Indeed, Lacan’s discourse essentially admits the situation described above, but it does so in so convoluted and self-assured a manner that many simply accept his declarations concerning reality and the unrepresentability of the feminine, rather than noticing the underlying logic of the “projective machinery” that has produced this truth. Irigaray, however, concludes:

In this perspective, we might suspect the *phallus* (Phallus) of being the *contemporary figure of a god jealous of his prerogatives*; we might suspect it of claiming, on this basis, to be the ultimate meaning of all discourse, the standard of truth and propriety, in particular as regards sex, the signifier and/or the ultimate signified of all desire, in addition to continuing, as emblem and agent of the patriarchal system, to shore up the name of the father (Father). (TS: 67; CS: 63)

### 3. The Persistence of an “Other” Possibility?

The question, however, now is: once we have noticed the “mastery” at stake in the phallic system, what are we to do? In other words, if we agree that Lacanian

psychoanalysis reveals (if unwittingly) the projections, repressions, and exigencies of a patriarchal mode of language and culture, how are we, as feminists, to *alter* this culture? This task appears especially difficult from a perspective, like Irigaray's, that believes Lacan and Freud to be describing a reality, "an actual state of affairs" (TS: 70; CS: 68)—namely that phallogentric culture really does appear to those living in it as a kind of ultimate reality identified with shared meaning and sanity, and that the persistence of anything "other" is aligned with psychosis or madness. Indeed, given that Irigaray's work reveals that this structure is not particular to psychoanalysis (as if we could simply reject psychoanalysis as "false" and locate or create a non-patriarchal reality somewhere else), but rather is the "logic of truth" itself, how should we proceed?

This returns us to some of the debates cited in the preceding chapter, where feminist commentators worried about how Irigaray was going to speak about a feminine subject in the face of her *prima facie* acceptance of Lacan's claims about feminine unrepresentability. How to valorize the unrepresentable feminine? Irigaray's readers have often turned to her suggestion of the possibility of an alternative, feminine symbolic (e.g. Whitford, 1991), accomplished through alternate understandings of genealogy and language. This notion of an alternative feminine symbolic or unconscious also fits well with the ideas espoused by the *Psych et Po* group in 1970s France—ideas that led to the development of *écriture féminine*, the practice of women's writing advocated by authors like Hélène Cixous and Michele Montrelay, that was supposed to help liberate women's psychic structures from phallic dominance, and with which *This Sex Which is Not One* has sometimes been aligned.

The development of an independent feminine symbolic is undoubtedly a crucial strand in Irigaray's work. Yet, as noted earlier, Irigaray's advocacy of a feminine symbolic has come under question from some readers, particularly as regards the question of its connection to the "earlier" phase of her work (to which the present analysis of Lacan belongs). The question, most basically, is this: if Lacan's discourse is the discourse of "truth," how is it possible to propose a feminine symbolic? Either the symbolic is masculine, in which case a "feminine" symbolic or subject would also be masculine, or else the feminine really is strictly unrepresentable, in which case it is hard to see how woman might have agency.<sup>xiii</sup> An understanding of Irigaray's philosophical framework of relation helps to respond to these concerns. Indeed, my reading of Irigaray suggests that we must focus on the *relation* between the sexes that is denied by Lacanian discourse rather than on simply the denial of the positivity of the feminine (as if we could re-instate the feminine without altering the masculine as well). Only in this way can we conceptualize the changes that will have to occur to *both* the feminine and the masculine in order for a symbolic order that respects and represents sexual difference to come to pass. That is to say, we can understand Irigaray's advocacy for a feminine symbolic only as a moment within her broader re-conceptualization of subjectivity along relational lines. Only in this way, furthermore, can we understand agency outside of the paradigm of "identity"—which has been seen, through Irigaray's analysis, to be irredeemably phallic. Instead, we will be led to rethink agency, with Irigaray, as relational.

My reading of Irigaray's critique of Lacan has already proposed a focus on the question of relation by emphasizing Lacan's claim that there is no relation between the sexes, and Irigaray's refusal to accept this claim as a "fact," which leads her to expose it

as instead a product of the phallic system. The key point to be noted here is that it is not merely that woman must disappear for man to take the stage of subjecthood, but, more importantly, that *the relation* between the two must be erased in order for man to accede to the position of (the only) “speaking subject.” I say that this point is more important because recognizing it underscores the fact that, were the relation recognized, *both* the feminine and the masculine might appear differently in some kind of new, shared relation to meaning.

As explained earlier, for Lacan the lack of relation between the sexes is a fact of reality that constitutes meaning itself; and furthermore, it constitutes meaning and desire in and as *lack*—the constant dual presence and absence of the signifier of desire: the phallus. But for Irigaray this “fact” is only described as such because it is necessary to prop up the phallic discourse of psychoanalysis (and of reality) itself. She writes:

But the fact that the sexual relation is in that respect incapable of articulation is what allows him [Lacan/the subject] to keep on talking: “the practice of speech makes no allowance for the relation between the sexes, even though it is only from that starting point that what fills in for that relation can be articulated.” *So if the relation were to come about, everything that has been stated up to now would count as an effect-symptom of its avoidance?*” (TS: 91; CS: 89, my emphasis).

This striking last sentence shows clearly how Irigaray views the lack of sexual relation not as a condition but rather as an effect of the symbolic—indeed she suggests that there is no relation *because* the symbolic refuses it. This conditional “if” (which would surely be refused by Lacan) reveals a fascinating possibility: *if* there were a relation between the sexes, it would turn out that all of the previous perversions of that relation, all of the ways in which men and women had been defined (especially, but perhaps not only, by psychoanalytic discourse), would turn out to be effects of the *avoidance* of a possible

relation. That is to say, if the relation as a possibility were given ontological priority (as it will be in Irigaray's own work), the symbolic order itself would have to be seen as the effect of the refusal or avoidance of this ontological relation. The symbolic (as the realm of human meaning and language) would thus open itself to significant transformation.

This refused relation is seen further in "Cosi Fan Tutti" with Irigaray's description of the psychoanalytic discourse of femininity as a kind of negative theology. Lacan himself invites such a comparison with his alignment of "God" with "the woman." In "God and Woman's Jouissance" he indeed hails woman's pleasure as the great unknown, and thus as the irretrievable, mystical limit of masculine subjectivity. Irigaray writes:

From this point on, does not that ineffable, ecstatic pleasure take the place, for men, of a Supreme Being, whom they need narcissistically but who ultimately eludes their knowledge? Does it not occupy—for them—the role of God? With the requirement, for them, that it be discreet enough not to disturb them in the logic of their desire. For God has to be there so that subjects may speak, or rather speak about him. But 'He' has, for 'His' part, nothing to say on this/to these subject(s) [*rien à dire à ce(s) sujet(s)*]. (TS: 97; CS: 95)

Most importantly, here, the alignment of the Other with God precisely means that the relation between subject and Other can only ever be a one-way relationship. Further, Lacan writes that "[t]his Other...must have some relationship with what appears of the other sex" (1999: 69). Irigaray's analysis reveals what is at stake here. "God has to be there so that subjects may speak, or rather speak about him"—the guarantor of meaning has to be there so that signification can be libidinally invested, and shared among men—"But 'He' has, for 'His' part, nothing to say on this/to these subject(s)": that is to say, "he" (who is really "she," since the woman is being used as the stand-in for God, presence and absence of phallus at once) must remain silent in order for the subject to articulate himself. He cannot articulate himself as sole subject of discourse and reality if

other voices interfere in his monologue. Thus, he utilizes the woman as a narcissistic prop: “Phallicism compensates for this discursive crisis [that is, that the Other escapes discourse], sustaining itself upon the Other, nourishing itself with the Other, desiring itself through the Other, even without ever relating to it as such” (TS: 98; CS: 95, my parenthetical). Irigaray reads Lacan’s continual invocations of the “elsewhere” or unknowability of feminine pleasure in terms of this narcissistic utilization: “[Woman] is even granted, provided that she hold her peace, a privileged relation with ‘God’—meaning, with phallic circulation. So long as, by remaining absent as ‘subject,’ she lets them keep, even guarantees that they can keep, the position of mastery” (TS: 95; CS: 93). As long as the woman remains good and quiet, she will be allowed this “mystery” of her desire, her pleasure—which is, of course, not actually hers, but the “elsewhere,” the “mystery” produced by the phallus’s projection of its own negation, its own negative.

Irigaray writes that:

What remains, then, would be the pleasure of speaking of love. [...] But of what? Of whom? And between whom and whom?

An impertinent question: pleasure could never be found in a relation. Except in a relation to the same. The narcissistic pleasure that the master, believing himself to be unique, confuses with that of the One. (TS: 103; CS: 100)

With this, she quite clearly reveals her deepest philosophical concern to be about the difference between a relation that can be revealed as only a relation to the same and a relation that grapples with alterity. I have described this as the difference between a non-relational and a relational limit. Lacan’s discourse on feminine sexuality, in the end, displays only a *non*-relational limit to subjectivity: in other words, the relation turns back on itself, utilizing a category—“the feminine”—as the limit around which it accomplishes this turning. It is crucial to note this concern already within Irigaray’s early work—

namely, *This Sex Which is Not One*—given that, as discussed in the previous chapters, many readers believe that Irigaray has made a sharp “break” in her more recent work, which discusses precisely the possibility of a positive relation between sexuate subjects. Here we see, however, that her critique of masculine subjectivity has always already been inflected with this concern, insofar as the masculine here is revealed to define itself as the singular subject only through its refusal of the possibility of such a relation.

In my view, it is therefore not only possible but also important to read the other essays that constitute the text of *This Sex Which Is Not One* with the understanding that Irigaray’s project here is to disrupt the “projective machinery” of psychoanalytic discourse that, through its refusal of a relational or shared reality, attempts to violently erase the possible reality of the feminine. While this text served as an early locus for debates about Irigaray’s “essentialism,” and then, paradoxically, for readings of her deconstructive tendencies, we can read it in a slightly different light if we acknowledge the paradigm of relation as more primary than the paradigm of identity in Irigaray’s writing. For instance, while Irigaray’s invocations in “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” “This Sex Which is Not One,” and “When Our Lips Speak Together” of specifically “feminine” ways of speaking might, at first glance, be viewed as appeals to an independent feminine reality, she states in “The Power of Discourse” that the function of this proposed linguistic work is

*to cast phallogentrism, phallograticism, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine would no longer be ‘everything.’ That it could no longer, all by itself, define, circumscribe, circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything. That the right to define every value—including the abusive privilege of appropriation—would no longer belong to it” (TS: 80; CS: 77).*



Thus, the attempt at “feminine” speaking is not, strictly speaking, divorced from the masculine, because this feminine speaking would *return the masculine to itself as masculine*. That is to say, it would return the masculine to itself as transformed, as limited by an “other” place. *Both* masculine and feminine subjectivity are subject to deformity under patriarchal conditions—that is to say, under a situation of enforced non-relation between the two. However, because the “masculine” is the subjectivity that, historically, maintains a position of power in this non-relation, since it occupies both terms, its deformity expresses itself as the (performative) assertion that it is the whole of reality. Therefore, Irigaray’s project is “not a matter of toppling [phallogratic] order so as to replace it—that amounts to the same thing in the end—but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallogratic law” (TS: 68; CS: 67). Irigaray’s own essays could be viewed as doing precisely this: in making claims about woman’s uncountability (i.e. in “This Sex Which Is Not One”), claims about the economy of her speech and of her pleasure that show how it cannot be fully inscribed within the masculine, Irigaray attempts, through the persistence of her own feminine voice, not to define the feminine once and for all, but rather to reveal a limit to the masculine—and thus to begin to transform it. She attempts to reveal, in other words, that the masculine is only the whole of reality because it takes itself to be such—and because it represses and oppresses other possibilities.

Further, essays such as “This Sex,” which focus specifically on female sexual pleasure and embodiment, must be understood, in light of the foregoing analysis of Irigaray’s engagement with Lacan, to be about feminine *jouissance* at large: a category which exceeds any kind of biological determinism and instead refers to the question of

woman's desirous relation to signification and meaningful reality as such. For example, Irigaray writes (and Catherine Porter translates):

However, in order for woman to reach the place where she takes pleasure as woman, a long detour by way of the analysis of the various systems of oppression brought to bear upon her is assuredly necessary. And claiming to fall back on the single solution of pleasure risks making her miss the process of going back through a social practice that *her* enjoyment requires. (TS: 31; CS: 30)

But the original French reads:

*Mais, pour que la femme advienne là où elle jouit comme femme, un long détour par l'analyse des divers systèmes d'oppression que s'exercent sur elle est certes nécessaire. Et prétendre recourir à la seule solution du plaisir risque de lui faire manquer ce que sa jouissance exige comme retraversée d'une pratique sociale.*  
(my emphasis)

This could be more literally retranslated as follows: "But, in order that woman arrive there where she comes (sexually) as a woman, a long detour by way of the analysis of the diverse systems of oppression that exert their force over her is certainly necessary. And pretending to fall back on the single solution of pleasure risks making her miss that which her *jouissance* requires: re-tracing, revisiting a certain social practice." Irigaray, then, is here playing on the technical term *jouissance* in the Lacanian register and its elision with the more typical usage of the verb *jouir*, to come. She is suggesting that woman's *jouissance*—understood both sexually and as the possibility of women's investment in symbolic meaning—is not possible without a prior social critique. To claim that woman's physical pleasure somehow *in and of itself* presents a form of resistance to the masculine discourse is, she (notably) claims, insufficient. Irigaray thus emphasizes that, for the possibility of women's very *psychic wholeness* to come about (given that *jouissance* is linked with the more and less adaptive ways in which we inhabit the symbolic system), a thoroughgoing social critique is necessary. This, again, is not simply

a claim about sexuality, but a claim about the ways in which meaning and representation occur for masculine and feminine subjects—a claim about the ways in which we symbolize to ourselves the very fact of being human beings in a meaningful world. Thus, Irigaray’s oeuvre will eventually turn more explicitly to ontological questions, insofar as these present a path through which to accomplish the thoroughgoing detour she here identifies as necessary to the constitution of a feminine *reality*—itself a key feature of the overall project of a *co*-inhabitation of reality, a constitution of reality as shared. As she states: “[I]t is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt*, inasmuch as this discourse sets for the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse” (TS: 74; CS: 72). I hope to have shown here how Irigaray is pushed toward this deeper ontological questioning through her engagement with Lacan, for whom questions of sexual difference already open onto questions of reality as such.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Psychosis of the Masculine

In this chapter, I have offered an interpretation of Irigaray’s critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I argued that what is at stake in Irigaray’s critique is not simply the question of the definition of feminine sexuality, but the question of shared reality as such—a claim I have substantiated through a review of basic claims of Lacanian theory as well as through a reading of Irigaray’s interventions into this paradigm. Indeed, Irigaray’s invocations of “feminine” pleasure in the remaining essays of *This Sex Which is Not One* (for instance in the title essay itself as well as in widely read pieces like “When Our Lips Speak Together”) must be understood not as an appeal to a biological

pregiven (as if having a woman's body were enough to situate oneself outside of the masculine symbolic), but rather as appeals to a different relationship to reality itself. We might say that, insofar as Irigaray has, with these texts, revealed the possibility of a persistence of woman's *jouissance*, she reveals the possibility of a whole new relation to meaning. This new relation to meaning will express itself through her later work through the transformation of the symbolic (and indeed the transformation of language and meaning themselves) according to a *positive*, ontological relationship between the sexes.

In Lacan's system this new relation would be placed under the heading of madness, because the improper installation of the *limit* of the phallus leads to psychosis. However, as I have shown, Lacan's conception of limit itself is, according to Irigaray, irredeemably one-sided. Thus, we might suspect that, from an Irigarayan point of view, it is actually the *masculine* system that is "psychotic" (in the sense of failing to respect limitation and installing itself at the center of reality) rather than the "feminine" that lies "outside." Indeed, we can conceive of the masculine system as psychotic by way of its own refusal of the possible limitation that a *relation* between the sexes would constitute—that is, a relational limitation. It is in refusing this limitation that the phallic system becomes a kind of monstrosity. Exceeding the particularity of its own position with regard to language and desire, it projects itself as the subject *tout court* and destructively internalizes the possible alterity of the feminine. Indeed, in *Speculum*, Irigaray writes:

The system structuring paranoia—and theory too perhaps—seems indeed like a play to achieve mastery through an organized set of signifiers that surround, besiege, cleave, out circle, and outflank the dangerous, the embracing, the aggressive mother/body. A set that has passed and passes, now and forever, in and by language. Oral. Language which, like and yet quite unlike the mother's

breast or her milk, is able to nourish but also to kill, rape, or poison the sexual body of the child. (SOW: 37; SAF: 40)

Lacanian psychoanalysis psychotically attempts precisely to achieve mastery through “an organized set of signifiers,” and these signifiers surround and devour any possible positivity of the feminine, including the mother, and including the body (thought outside the system of language). For Lacan, indeed, the body as well as the mother and the woman in general, are both lost with the transition from the real to the symbolic, and thus none are given any “reality” within the phallic signifying system so constituted.

Further, while Lacan defines sexual difference as a limit, his is a *non-relational* limit, because it refers to a negativity on the other side of which there is nothing but madness or the meaninglessness of discourse. I ultimately suggest that Irigaray’s own view of subjectivity as the encounter with a two-sided, relational limitation not only recasts our understandings of language, embodiment, and sexual difference themselves, but also allows for a new ethical space to emerge between two subjects who are other to each other. Unlike the Lacanian picture upon which the subject uses the Other as a God-like figure, Irigaray will present a picture upon which subjects communicate with each other via a horizontally transcendent relationship of alterity, rather than a vertical one (as the God-relation suggests). However, in order to reach this vision, Irigaray must develop her own voice out of the negatively-defined situation she finds herself in (as a feminine speaker) in taking seriously the revelation that the “speaking subject” is paradigmatically a man. Indeed, given this assumption we are left to wonder: how is it possible to escape from the machinery of this discourse that is said to be inescapable? The path toward positive articulation, for Irigaray, is marked by her engagement with the ontological thinking of Martin Heidegger. In the next chapter, I will suggest that this is because

Heidegger, unlike Lacan, allows for the persistence of a kind of potentiality or possibility that remains in excess to human discourse. Rather than thematizing that which is “outside” of discourse as merely negative or as a lack (as Lacan does), Heidegger thematizes the limits of human being as a kind of hiddenness of possibility—an obscurity, to be sure, but one that is productive rather than one that threatens madness. Thus, Heidegger’s ontological thinking will bring us a step closer to the articulation of Irigaray’s relational limitation.

## 5. Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Irigaray trained in psychoanalysis at the Lacanian *Ecole Freudienne de Paris*, and studied under Lacan himself. After the publication of *Speculum*, she was forcibly alienated from this circle.

<sup>ii</sup> The case could certainly be made that Freudian theory already concerns the ways in which we come to inhabit reality in a meaningful way (through developing particular psychic structures and habits). For the purposes of my analysis here, suffice to say that Lacan at least brings this aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis more explicitly to the forefront.

<sup>iii</sup> I don’t delve deeply into the question of the imaginary, as it is not crucial to understanding my point. However, Whitford gives a good explication of the role of the imaginary in Irigaray’s reading of Lacan. For more thorough discussions, I refer the reader to the following helpful texts on Lacan: Borch-Jacobsen (1991); Grosz (1990); Fink (1996; 1999), as well as Whitford’s (1991) discussion of Lacan and Irigaray.

<sup>iv</sup> Commentators like Slavoj Žižek, for example, affirm both that the “real” is a myth *and* identify it with bodily drives, madness, and pre-Oedipal experiences. In *The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek writes of “the passage from psychotic madness to the word” (1996: 33) as the passage from unsignifiable bodily drives to shared signification. Nevertheless, Žižek makes clear that this passage is always *represented* after the fact. For a different take on the relation of the real and the symbolic, see Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), in which she proposes the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” as co-constitutive of language. For Kristeva, the semiotic (largely related to the physical properties of language) would be something like the operation of the real *in* signification, thus, she does not believe the experience of the real to be fully “lost” with the acquisition of the symbolic function.

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<sup>v</sup> See “On a Question Prior to Any Treatment of Psychosis” in *Écrits*. This gloss is only a broad summary of this extremely dense piece of writing.

<sup>vi</sup> Since at least the 1970s, psychoanalysis has been seen by many feminists as a resource for discussing questions of gender and sexual identity, and in particular as a resource for explaining the psychic effects of being situated as a “woman” within patriarchy. However, psychoanalysis has also come under attack from many feminists who view it as simply a justification for patriarchy—an agent of its reinforcement rather than an agent of liberation. In this vein, psychoanalysis was by and large discredited by most U.S. feminists during the 1970s Women’s Liberation Movement. Shulamith Firestone (1970) perhaps came closest to endorsing Freud, but argued that he missed the root of the issue, namely, the division of labor between the sexes resulting in women’s situation as the “sex class.” Instead, she claims that Freud and his followers postulated “absurd” universal principles in order to explain psychic formations that were actually contingent on material power relations (See “Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism,” in *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 38-65). Juliet Mitchell’s book *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1974) is widely viewed as the first major attempt to introduce a Freud who would be useful for feminist purposes to English-speaking audiences. Mitchell sees herself in opposition to most feminists of the day, and she believes that Freud has been widely misinterpreted. As Jane Gallop (1984) notes, Lacan is a kind of haunting presence in this early work on feminism and psychoanalysis, but Mitchell gives very little discussion of his influence.

Gayle Rubin’s (1975) essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” was extremely influential in introducing both “French theory” and psychoanalysis to English-speaking theorists. Rubin’s essay provides an original and cohesive collaboration between Levi-Strauss and Freud, in which she argues that Freudian theory fleshes out the psychological dimensions of the kinship structures discussed by Levi-Strauss. According to Rubin, women occupy the position of the “gift”—that is, according to Levi-Strauss, an object whose circulation secures social ties between men. Because women occupy this position, they themselves are not party to the deal—men have “rights in women that they do not have in themselves” (37). Freud’s theory of the Oedipal complex, according to Rubin, is actually a striking feminist insight (unintentionally, of course) in that Freud precisely recognizes the difficulty the little girl has in shifting her love-object from her mother to her father and thus becoming herself an object of exchange in the politico-sexual economy.

<sup>vii</sup> “*Je est un autre*,” quoted from Rimbaud’s *Lettre à Paul Demeny: Charleville, 15 mai 1871* (See Rimbaud, 2004). Kristeva is particularly fond of this citation as a way of explaining subjectivity within a Lacanian-influenced framework.

<sup>viii</sup> Lacan differentiates the symbolic phallus from the “imaginary” phallus, but for ease of explanation I only discuss the former.

<sup>ix</sup> He writes elsewhere that “[t]he signification of the phallus [...] must be evoked in the subject’s imaginary by the paternal metaphor” (2005: 464).

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<sup>x</sup> This is my own interpretation.

<sup>xi</sup> Judith Butler (1993) gives an interesting reading of both Freud and Lacan in her essay “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” in which she identifies a similar structure in both authors: the privilege of the phallus, in both cases, operates as a kind of suppressed first premise that is then subsequently “discovered” or derived through the science of psychoanalysis.

<sup>xii</sup> This “except that no one notices it” is a parody of a line of Lacan’s in his Seminar XX.

<sup>xiii</sup> Karen Green (2002), for instance, voices this worry, claiming that, for Irigaray, subjects are “determined” by the symbolic order of the cultures in which they live, and that thus Irigaray’s theory lacks resources to conceptualize feminine, or feminist, agency.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE HEARING OF SILENCE AND THE SPEAKING OF LANGUAGE: IRIGARAY IN DIALOGUE WITH HEIDEGGER

In the last chapter, I discussed how both the feminine and material reality itself are subject to erasure in Lacan's symbolic system due to the unsignifiability he attributes to the real. We also saw how this erasure leads Lacan to a certain conception of subjectivity's *limits*—namely a conception that I have named a “non-relational” limit. This non-relationality occurs because the real, as what is “other” to the symbolic, is never truly understood in this system as meaningfully *different*, but is instead understood as a non-signifiable limit against which subjectivity brushes in order only to turn back upon itself. This understanding of subjectivity and its limits, however, is only possible and necessary due to Lacan's conception of language. As discussed in the last chapter, Lacan views language, or the symbolic, as a *replacement* for the (forever lost) real. Indeed, the notion of a radical separation from the real is part and parcel of Lacan's conception of language as a self-enclosed system of arbitrary signs, which gain their significance through their relations to one another rather than to any material reality. Because of this “arbitrary” character of the signifier, Lacan posits an *emptiness* or negativity at the heart of signification itself. Further, he posits the phallus as the privileged signifier of this structure—as that which both denotes the emptiness of signification and simultaneously operates as the guarantor of meaning for the symbolic order itself. By inserting itself into the space opened up by the break with the real, the phallus organizes the arbitrary system of signs according to its logic.

However, Irigaray's intervention has showed us that these basic premises of Lacan's thought are not merely "descriptions" of reality, but are rather performative utterances that *produce* the "truth" of a certain non-relation to alterity by actually capturing and obscuring (under the banner of non-signifiability) the possibility of a real relation. In the last chapter, I referred to this maneuver as the masculine discourse's "refusal" of a prior limitation that could, according to Irigaray, be found through a relation between the sexes. Thus, I suggested that Irigaray's intervention into Lacan's discourse actually exposes this conception of subjectivity as one that has monstrously *exceeded* its limits—that has in fact resorbed all forms of alterity by casting them as "negativity," and that has postulated "limitations" that are only projections of its own phallic categories. But if this is the case, then we must raise the possibility that language itself must be re-thought, since Lacan's very conception of language is intimately bound up with this picture of a "monstrous" subjectivity—a subjectivity that claims to be the only "one," or at least the only one capable of being signified. We can also suspect, then, that a re-thinking of language will, in turn, prove to open up alternative possibilities for subjectivity. Indeed, as I have intimated, Irigaray's later works will suggest that we must alter language and speech themselves in order to accomplish such alternative possibilities.

However, if Irigaray is also correct that the picture of subjectivity presented by Lacan has a profound truth to it—that is, the truth of subjectivity as such under a patriarchal culture and system of meaning—then how is she, and how are we, to break out of this system? After all, to what alternative can we appeal, if phallic meaning is in fact a totalizing, self-enclosed, and possibly psychotic "machinery?" In other words, if

we are already operating within this system, due to our inheritance of philosophical assumptions concerning language, subjectivity, and reality, is it not impossible to break out of it, since (if we accept the system's basic premises) nothing lies "outside" except madness? Further, if woman is equated with this unrepresentable "outside," as she is according to Lacan's system, how could she speak in a distinct, meaningful way? Indeed, from *where* is it even possible to speak about the possibility of a positive relationship between two different subjects, when "difference" is equated only with the negative?

It is not incidental, in my view, that Irigaray's last two published monographs, *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*, are in large part encounters with the work of Martin Heidegger. I believe that Irigaray's engagement with Heideggerian ontology significantly helps her to formulate her own understanding of the "elsewhere" from which woman might speak, the "elsewhere" that might provide the possibility not only for the disruption of the phallic system, but also for the constitution of a new, inherently relational understanding of subjectivity. In other words, Heidegger offers Irigaray a new paradigm for understanding language and meaning—which, as I suggested above, is critical to escaping the grasp of the totalizing masculine discourse. This new paradigm can be seen through Heidegger's understanding of poetic language, developed in his later work, with which Irigaray primarily engages. Indeed, while Heidegger will not provide *all* of the resources necessary for Irigaray's re-thinking of subjectivity, her engagement with his thought will—like her engagement with the thought of Lacan—allow her to accept certain truths while pushing beyond other basic assumptions of Heidegger's

thinking, to expose another side to it, and thus offering a further possibility for the thinking of being.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in this chapter I offer my own reading of Heidegger's ontological understanding of language. I believe that a careful reading of Heidegger's work on poetic language can significantly illuminate our reading of Irigaray's later works—not only because she explicitly engages Heidegger there, but because an enhanced understanding of Heidegger's later thinking in its own right ultimately allows us to grasp Irigaray's own ontology more clearly. More specifically, I show here that Heidegger understands language not as a self-enclosed system of signs (as does Lacan) but as an event of meaning that exceeds the strictly human world. This Heideggerian understanding of language, I suggest, allows Irigaray's thinking to access a transformative potential beyond human cultural systems of meaning and exchange (beyond, for instance, a patriarchal or phallogocentric organization of meaning). For Lacan, human culture and language are "grounded," as it were, on the emptiness of a separation (that is, the separation of the symbolic, and the subject, from the "real"). For Heidegger, on the other hand, human reality (including culture and language) is enfolded within a prior enabling event—namely, the event of being, or what he calls in his work on poetic language, the "speaking of language." Thus, for Heidegger, human language names a *relation* to this enabling event, which exceeds the human, rather than a constitutive separation. This connection to that which exceeds, furthermore, provides the possibility of transformation, since Heidegger suggests that it is only in *responding* to the call of a prior event of meaning, which remains in excess to our systems of meaning and value, that human language takes shape. That is to say, because Heidegger does not posit a

meaningless “outside” to human language and culture, but rather an event that itself always contains or announces possibilities for future meaning, his understanding of human language as responding to this event enables us to glimpse the possibility that our experience of subjectivity could be otherwise. Thus, while (as we saw previously) Lacan makes the phallic symbolic appear to be simply a description of a state of affairs, Irigaray, because she inherits these basic assumptions of Heidegger’s thinking, will be able to conclude that the phallic symbolic system is only one possible system of meaning; and furthermore that it is one that has actively covered over a prior potential—the potential contained in the event of being or the “speaking of language.” Thus, by drawing on Heidegger, Irigaray is able to break free from the seemingly “necessary” self-enclosed character of Lacan’s phallic subject, and arrive at her own vision of an experience of subjectivity as constitutively related to something that exceeds it.

But how exactly does Irigaray accomplish this breaking-free? I suggest here that my reading of Heidegger’s later work allows us to read Irigaray’s own emerging “ontology” of sexuate difference as, at bottom, Heideggerian. That is to say, I believe that the question of sexuate difference *is* the question of being for Irigaray. This means that “sexuate difference” does not name an identity or set of identities (nor indeed “subjects” in the metaphysical sense of underlying substances), but rather, like “being,” it names the occurrence of an event that gives what Heidegger would call *Dasein* over to itself as one appropriation of an event of meaning. With her invocation of “sexuate difference” as ontological, however, Irigaray will ultimately argue that the event of being (and language) occurs as a related-ness *between two*. Herein lies her supersession of Heidegger, who does not think the living relation of dialogue as part of the call or the

event of being. In thus pushing Heidegger further, Irigaray connects the body, the elemental, and the unfolding of living speech to the occurrence of the *event* of being thought as sexuate and hence relational. Although this constitutes a move beyond Heidegger, its deep rootedness in Heidegger's thinking means that we cannot take Irigaray's invocation of a dialogue between sexuate subjects or of an ethics of sexuate difference as *ontic* tasks, or as versions of identity politics. Instead, we must try to understand the way in which Irigaray invokes ontological thinking precisely at the place where it risks being forgotten—in the moment of a living relation to a concrete other.

This interpretation of Irigaray's work, however, raises several terminological questions that should be addressed from the outset. The most obvious concern that will have struck any reader of Heidegger by now is that Irigaray constantly utilizes the language of "subjectivity," and even imposes this language upon Heidegger himself (arguing, for instance, in *The Way of Love* that he prioritizes the relation between "the subject" and language rather than the relation between two different "subjects.") One might wonder, then, if Irigaray actually misunderstands Heidegger, since he explicitly rejects the language of subjectivity as a vestige of the metaphysics of substance. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is indeed not a subject with affects, nor does it possess a consciousness, a will, or "agency" in any traditional sense. It is instead a "being there," a particular mode of the self-giving of being for which being itself is at issue (as he formulates it in *Being and Time*, e.g. on p. 167), and which experiences itself as attuned in different ways to this calling of being.

However, given that (as we have seen) Irigaray is equally committed to the "destruction" of metaphysics—that is to say, she is equally committed to the

deconstruction of mind-body dualism and of substance metaphysics, particularly insofar as she understands the “subject” of Western metaphysics to be coded as masculine (in the “non-relational” sense previously discussed)—surely she cannot intend the word “subject” in this way. Is this usage merely a vestige of her psychoanalytic inheritance then? But, as I have been discussing all along, Irigaray identifies the necessity to transform the concept of subjectivity both in the history of metaphysics and in psychoanalytic discourse, due to its constitution only on the ground of the repression of the relation of sexuate difference. Thus, what can she mean by invoking the term “subject” in her recent works? I will address this point more substantially in Chapter V, but for now I would like to indicate that by “subject” Irigaray will ultimately mean something quite similar to Heidegger’s *Dasein* in the sense that the subject is not a “being” endowed with a will but rather it is that which is called upon through certain attunements to respond to the call of being. However, as I have already indicated, what specifically marks the “subject,” for Irigaray, will be a responsive movement to the call of being *as relation to the other*. This prioritization of relation is not a rejection of Heidegger’s ontology so much as a concretization and a doubling of it—a further thinking of being in terms of human relationality.

Thus, to return to the question of terminology: in this chapter I primarily use the term *Dasein* when speaking about Heidegger (in faithfulness to his language). When speaking about Irigaray I occasionally must use the term “subject,” but I would like to defer the full meaning of this term to Chapter V. Finally, I also occasionally use the term “human” or “human beings.” This may sound an alarm for some, but I do not intend by this term a metaphysical concept of humanity. Instead, I mean to indicate (in faithfulness

to what I perceive to be Irigaray's own usage) the human subject as that which is called upon to respond to the call of being, and, for Irigaray, to respond to the announcement of an ontological relation that opens up the possibility of an ethical task.<sup>ii</sup>

I proceed here as follows. First, I briefly turn to the question of the relationship between Irigaray and Heidegger, and review the ways in which this relationship has been taken up in Irigaray scholarship, in order to situate my reading with respect to what has gone before. I then offer a close reading of a key later piece of Heidegger's, namely his essay titled "Language." Through my reading of this essay we can see Heidegger's ontological thinking of language more clearly, and also glimpse the contrast with Lacan's structuralist conception of language.<sup>iii</sup> Following my reading of "Language," I introduce Irigaray's project in *The Way of Love*, focusing on the way in which we can see her enacting a kind of Heideggerian ontology of her own, upon which the "call" of being or language is precisely *relational*. I further explain how, through her vision of dialogue, Irigaray shares Heidegger's understanding of the event of being and language as prior to and excessive of the human. I show how she draws on this excessiveness in order to arrive at the "elsewhere" of the phallic symbolic. Finally, I suggest that my reading of Heidegger's essay may allow us to understand the status of the words "men" and "women," and the language of sexual difference in Irigaray's work not as descriptions of ontic beings, nor as invocations of "nature" construed as a static state of affairs in the world, but rather as calls for a response: as calls to take up the task of the transformation of humanity, ultimately in dialogue with sexual others. Irigaray's proposal of this task, then, cannot be understood as an "identity" politic in any usual sense of the term. Thus, it becomes clear how Heidegger's ontological thinking helps Irigaray to formulate a



positive ethical project (taken up more fully in the next chapter) in the wake of her critique of the “subject,” without for all that falling back into a problematic conception of identity.

### 1. Irigaray’s Heideggerian Inheritance

Several commentators have discussed the relation between Irigaray and Heidegger, although the major commentaries pre-date the publication of *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*, texts that explicitly frame themselves as dialogues with Heidegger, and on which I will focus here. Nevertheless it is helpful to briefly review the development of this scholarship in order to situate my own reading of the relationship between Irigaray and Heidegger with respect to it.

Tina Chanter’s *Ethics of Eros*, itself an elucidation of Irigaray’s specifically philosophical influences (published at a time when many commentaries on Irigaray came from literary and psychoanalytic paradigms), offers a helpful discussion of the relation between the two, focusing on both *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. Chanter’s primary focus is on the similarity of Irigaray’s and Heidegger’s respective philosophical *strategies*—a similarity that, she argues, should permit us to realize Irigaray’s deep Heideggerian influence despite her explicitly stated “critical distance” from him (131). Indeed, Chanter suggests that Heidegger’s way of thinking provides a “model” for Irigaray (129). What she means by this is that, just as Heidegger wants to pose the “question of being,” a question that, he believes, has been obscured by the history of Western metaphysics such that it now appears as at once most near to us and most far away, so Irigaray poses the question of sexual difference, equally

“near” to us (a question seemingly obvious and yet “irrelevant” for certain feminists, according to Chanter) and “far,” in that it is, for Irigaray, the repressed ground of Western metaphysics itself. Thus, she suggests that Irigaray’s engagement with the history of philosophy parallels Heidegger’s in that “Irigaray seeks to expose the limits of philosophical systems that conceal or ignore the question of sexual difference, and at the same time to suggest how the inclusion of this question significantly reshapes philosophical discourse” (129). Chanter links this strategy of at once exposing the limits of metaphysical thinking, while not simply leaving it behind in search of something “else,” with Heidegger’s strategy for the thinking of the question of being.

Thus, while Chanter admits that Irigaray significantly distances herself from Heidegger—especially in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*—she notes that

even the strategy [Irigaray] uses demonstrates the impact of Heidegger’s approach, for she achieves her distance by incorporating Heidegger into the very tradition he sought to overcome—in much the same way that Heidegger incorporates (after learning from them) Hegel or Nietzsche into the history of Western metaphysics. (131)

I agree with Chanter’s structural assessment of the Irigaray/Heidegger relationship—especially this last point about how Irigaray supersedes Heidegger with what in fact turns out to be itself a Heideggerian move. However, Chanter’s explicit statements about the relation between the two thinkers are limited to comments about the parallelism of these two thinkers’ *strategies*. I wish to push the connection between Irigaray and Heidegger further than this in suggesting that the question of sexual difference *is*, for Irigaray, the question of being itself, and is not merely a “parallel” to it. Chanter’s analysis gestures toward this point, but stops short of explicitly stating it. (Again, this is likely due to the fact that Irigaray had not substantially developed what I see as her positive ontology at

the time of Chanter's writing). As already indicated, I believe a detailed discussion of Heidegger's ontological thinking in terms of its content as well as its form is invaluable for understanding Irigaray's work; and further, I believe Irigaray's thinking of the question of sexual difference *is* a thinking of the meaning of being itself (rather than being "like" or analogous to the question of being). That is to say, it is a thinking *from* the question of being as opposed to a thinking that begins from within a metaphysical framework. Indeed, this is precisely why Irigaray's supersession of Heidegger must itself be read as a gesture inherited from Heidegger, insofar as (even without her more explicit critiques) the very suggestion that sexual difference is an ontological question *already* implies that Heidegger has in fact not fully thought through all that the question of being itself entails.<sup>iv</sup>

Ellen Mortensen's books *Touching Thought: Ontology and Sexual Difference* (2002) and *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray With Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1994) are the only full-length works to substantially discuss *The Forgetting of Air*. In *Touching Thought*, Mortensen argues that feminist theory is in need of a return to ontological questioning, in the midst of what she perceives as the domination of a "technological episteme" (4). Mortensen believes that debates about essentialism have foreclosed ontological questioning for feminist theory and made feminists wary of it. However, it is necessary, for her, to re-open the question of being if feminists are to think through the question of freedom. I agree with Mortensen's basic premises, and believe that we need to appreciate and take seriously the ontological aspect of Irigaray's thinking if we are to properly understand her view of the place of relationality in human life.

Mortensen also offers a substantial critique of Irigaray (from a Heideggerian point of view), which she wages in both of the above-mentioned books. She argues that Irigaray misappropriates or misunderstands Heidegger on several crucial points. Mortensen argues that Irigaray, unlike Heidegger, believes the forgetting of air, and along with this the “forgetting” or repression of the operation of the feminine in discourse, to be a “subjective error,” whereas for Heidegger concealment is ontologically primary—it is part of the twofold self-giving of nature (or being) as *lethe/aletheia*. Further, Mortensen argues that Irigaray herself forgets the ontological difference, because she conflates the ontological (being as the event of clearing) with the ontic (the air). (Mortensen 2002: 94; 1994: 86, 141) I disagree with both of these critiques, and my explicit elaboration of Irigaray’s positive ontological vision of sexuate difference both in this chapter and in the next chapter will ultimately show how these critiques are misplaced.<sup>v</sup>

Finally, Maria Cimitile’s recent piece “Irigaray in Dialogue with Heidegger” (2007) traces Irigaray’s engagement with Heidegger beyond her early critique and into *The Way of Love*. Cimitile perceives a deep kinship between the two thinkers, and even writes that “Irigaray allows us to grasp what Heidegger would have said had he applied his questions and concerns to sexual difference” (267). Cimitile also discusses the transformation of the figure of air from its invocation in *The Forgetting of Air* to its invocation in *The Way of Love*. She writes:

In [...] *The Forgetting of Air*, Irigaray applies the deconstructive tools she learned from Heidegger to his own thinking such that we find that there is a hidden element in Heidegger’s thought that acts as the condition for the possibility of language, namely, air. The lyrical and pointed encounter with Heidegger shows that the materiality of air, symbolic of woman, remains covered over and invisible in the same way that Heidegger, before her, demonstrated the covering over of presencing. The interesting move in Irigaray’s thinking is when we find that, in *The Way of Love*, she again takes up the symbolic of air and its attachment to

language [...] but is transformed into the symbolic of the third that is both created by and makes relationality between two possible. (269)

This suggests, *contra* Mortensen, that the “air” is indeed not an ontic figure: as a figure for that which subtends two and makes their relation possible, air is not *a* being but, like Heidegger’s “being,” that which precisely gives beings to themselves—here, as constitutively related. I discuss this point later in this chapter. Further, in Chapter V, I utilize the figure of “place” to explain more clearly how Irigaray weds Heidegger’s thinking of being with the “concrete” and elemental. Finally, while Cimitile’s article also suggests that Irigaray’s and Heidegger’s thinking are “analogous” (272), she comes closer than Chanter does to asserting that the question of being and the question of sexuate difference are one for Irigaray. As mentioned earlier, I think this point is critical to grasping what Irigaray means by saying that sexuate difference is “ontological”—above all, it is critical to understanding that this does not mean sexuate difference is some kind of natural “essence” in any facile understanding of the term. Thus, as I proceed through my discussion of Heidegger’s thinking of language, and Irigaray’s deep kinship with this thinking, my accent will be on the ontological understanding of language, and ultimately (for Irigaray) of dialogue between-two.<sup>vi</sup>

## 2. Living Within Language as a Call to Respond: A Reading of Heidegger’s “Language”

### With a View Toward the Future

“Language *speaks*. This means at the same time and before all else: *language* speaks. Language? And not man? ...Are we, in addition to everything else, also going to deny now that man is the being who speaks? ... We deny this no more than we deny the

possibility of classifying linguistic phenomena under the heading of “expression.” But we ask, “How does man speak?” We ask, “What is it to speak?”(Heidegger 1976: 195-6)

At least two insights are brought to light in the first paragraph of Heidegger’s essay “Language,” which serve to frame the reflections unfolded in the remainder of the piece. Both insights can be found in the resonances of the opening statement, “Man speaks” (1976: 87). Heidegger interprets this to mean that “[w]e are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud” (87). Language, he suggests, should not be thought only as the utterance of discrete statements by human beings. To speak does not (only) mean to make the choice to verbalize our thoughts, as though language were the externalization of some internal set of concerns, or even an instrumental, communicative tool. Instead, “we are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word.”

This suggests that language is an environment or “neighborhood” (Ibid.) within which we live, in which we are enfolded and by which we are penetrated. “We speak when we are awake, and we speak in our dreams” (187). Indeed, Heidegger tells us that the human world is infused with language such that “speaking is natural to us. It does not first arise out of some special volition” (Ibid.). To *be* a speaking being as such is not the decision of any particular human being. Rather, it is only on the basis of having always already spoken that we are able to make a decision to utter this or that particular statement. The relationship between this “always already” of language thought as environment and the discrete phenomenon of the speech act is a guiding concern of Heidegger’s essay insofar as it opens up the question of what it means to be a speaking being in a new way, a way not thought in the formulation *zoon logon echon*.<sup>vii</sup> For

Heidegger, the question of what it means to be a speaking being is primarily the question of what it means to be a being that *comes to itself* in language, a being that somehow accomplishes itself in speaking.

But what does this mean? As Heidegger proceeds to try to think the essence of language as enabling condition and task for humanity, he is led to modulate the statement “man speaks” into the statement “*language* speaks.” The speaking of language—language as occurrence or event—which is irreducible to the event of human speaking, is the surrounding environment, the “always already” of the world as spoken and speakable.<sup>viii</sup> We are both given to ourselves in language and given to ourselves as a task for accomplishment—the task, that is, of speaking. But unlike for Lacan, for instance, this “always already” of language is, for Heidegger, not reducible to the always already of human culture and history. Language, for Heidegger, is simultaneously a non-human phenomenon and the place of the occurrence of the human being precisely *as* possibility and task. As Heidegger says: “To discuss language, to place it, means to bring to its place of being not so much language as ourselves: our own gathering into the appropriation” (188). And further he writes: “To reflect on language means—to reach the speaking of language in such a way that this speaking takes place as that which grants an abode for the being or mortals [...] a dwelling place for the life of man” (190). But if language gives us to ourselves, if it grants us a dwelling place, it is because it calls upon us, in some sense, to speak. As we will see through an examination of Heidegger’s reading of a poem by Georg Trakl, it calls upon us to offer an account of ourselves and of our being in the world that remains attentive to the enabling structures of our own occurrence, which Heidegger here thinks under the heading “the speaking of language.”

Thus, in a preliminary way, we could say that human speech, if it is attuned to the event of the speaking of language, can let the “truth” of this speaking resound in its own speech. Heidegger will find this attunement in poetry.

Further, it is this “speaking of language” that most sharply delineates Heidegger from Lacan, to whom he might otherwise appear similar. Through a tracing of Heidegger’s reading of the poem, we will gain a clearer sense of what he means by the “speaking of language,” and of how this speaking remains excessive to, while still related to, human speaking. I furthermore focus in particular on the relationship to *potentiality* and future temporality implied by this excessiveness—the relationship to the future as potentially different from the past—as this point will eventually become crucial for Irigaray’s adoption of Heidegger’s thinking for her own thinking of sexuate difference as an ethical task.

#### *A. The Calling of Poetic Language*

Heidegger’s essay offers a close reading of a poem by Georg Trakl called “A Winter Evening.” This reading discovers in the poem key features of Heidegger’s own understanding of language. The poem reads as follows:

##### *A Winter Evening*

Window with falling snow is arrayed,  
Long tolls the vesper bell,  
The house is provided well,  
The table is for many laid.

Wandering ones, more than a few,  
Come to the door on darksome courses.  
Golden blooms the tree of graces  
Drawing up the earth’s cool dew.

Wanderer quietly steps within;  
Pain has turned the threshold to stone.



There lie, in limpid brightness shown,  
Upon the table bread and wine. (Trakl, Qtd. in Heidegger, 192-3)

The first thing Heidegger tells us about Trakl's poem is that "[w]ho the author is remains unimportant here, as with every other masterful poem" (193). If language is neither primarily an activity of human beings nor an expression of inner states, as Heidegger tells us, then we must read the poem in a radically new way, a way not concerned with Trakl's particular biography nor with his intentions in composing the poem. Furthermore, we are here attempting to "hear in a poem something that is spoken purely" (192)—something, that is, that in being spoken carries along with it the "speaking of language," or allows this more original speaking to resound throughout its own speech. How does the poem do this? Heidegger suggests that the key is not to hear the words of the poem as referential—as naming present beings, or as describing what the poem purports to speak of in its title, that is, "A Winter Evening." Rather, he speaks about the poem's mode of speaking as a "calling":

This naming does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word. The naming calls. Calling brings closer what it calls. However this bringing closer does not fetch what is called only in order to set it down in closest proximity to what is present, to find a place for it there [...] the call, in calling it here, has already called out to what it calls. Where to? Into the distance in which what is called remains, still absent. (196)

Calling, then, involves an interplay of presence and absence, a tension between nearness and farness. What is called becomes precisely proximal, near, and at the same time it must be *called*—that is, called in from the distance, where it nevertheless remains. What is called to presence in the speaking of the poem is never purely present, but always stretches out into a beyond. What does this mean?

It is helpful here to refer to Heidegger's understanding of essence (*Wesen*).

Francoise Dastur offers a clear explanation:

Heidegger breaks...decisively with Platonism (and goes in this way “beyond the Greeks”) in thinking the “essence”—in German *Wesen*—no longer as *quidditas*, as genus, but as the unfolding of the being of something...*Wesen*, understood no longer in its nominal, but in its verbal sense, cannot refer to the permanence or invariability of the εἶδος but only to the duration of the unfolding of the being of something. (Dastur in Sallis, ed., 1993: 364)<sup>ix</sup>

If a thing, in its essence, is thought not as a present being but rather as a kind of processual unfolding, it will always be arriving from out of a distance or a mystery and will never be present all at once, in all its aspects. Indeed, Heidegger elsewhere describes “nature” (reflecting on Aristotle's invocation of *physis* in *Physics* B I) as follows:

While the ‘plant’ sprouts, emerges, and expands into the open, it simultaneously goes back into its roots, insofar as it plants them firmly in the closed ground and thus takes its stand. The act of self-unfolding emergence is inherently a going-back-into-itself. This kind of becoming present is φυσικς. (1998: 195)

Essencing, then, thought as a process, rather than as a static form, consists in alternately emerging from, and returning into, a kind of hiddenness that is in fact the *source* of a being itself, the source of its perpetual growth and transformation. Thus, returning to the work of poetic language: “...the call does not wrest what it calls away from the remoteness, in which it is kept by the calling there” (196). The peculiar presencing allowed by poetic language is here shown always to shelter or accommodate an absence. In this way, perhaps, the language of the poem speaks the “truth of essence” insofar as it understands beings as needing to be “called,” but at the same time never capable of being fully revealed, insofar as they are indeed understood as a perpetual unfolding of (and out of) possibility.

But the poem's "pure speaking" does not lie only in the fact that it calls beings into a kind of presence in absence. Rather the poem itself somehow evokes the complex structure of the event whereby the world is revealed as meaningful (*as* world) to human beings—"mortals"—and indeed it has much to say about our own role in the speaking of language. That is to say the poem speaks the way in which the human and the world are given to themselves in a relation such that meaning (and thus human speech) are made possible. In "Language," Heidegger speaks about the event of meaning topographically: "The place of arrival which is also called in the calling is a presence sheltered in absence. The naming call bids things to come into such an arrival. [...] It invites things in, so that they may bear upon men as things." (197) This "place of arrival" is what Heidegger calls elsewhere the "clearing" of being, which is called, along with the things in the poem, as the space wherein they would be enabled to appear *as* beings and as meaningful to us—enabled, that is, to "bear upon men as things." As we will see, the relationship between "world" (or the clearing) and thing is in fact exactly what is at stake in trying to think the speaking of language to which the "wandering mortals" of Trakl's poem are uniquely attuned. But what exactly is the role of poetic language in "preserving" this relationship of world and thing?

The first stanza of the poem goes as follows: "Window with falling snow is arrayed/Long tolls the vesper bell./The house is provided well/The table is for many laid." Heidegger has already told us that this stanza "calls things into their thinging, bids them come" (192). But because it simultaneously calls them from an absence in which it also leaves or shelters them, it also "[commends] them to the world out of which they appear" (Ibid.). Thus, it calls "world" as well as things, in that it names the "place of

arrival,” that place out of which and into which things are set as individual beings—in this case, a window, snow, a bell, the “winter evening time” (196). This stanza also calls the mortals, as Heidegger notes, but it calls them as “the many who belong as mortals to the world’s fourfold” (197), that is, it calls them as aspects of the world and not yet as those whose task is to preserve the truth of the occurrence of meaning.

It is only in the second stanza, which begins with the lines “Wandering ones, more than a few,/Come to the door on darksome courses,” that the mortals are called as those who are somehow asked to complete this task. Heidegger reads these wanderers as those mortals who are “capable of dying as the wandering toward death,” and who are thus unlike the many, “because the many think that if they only install themselves in houses and sit at tables, they are already bethinged, conditioned, by things and have arrived at dwelling” (198). This suggests that the task the poem is attempting—to call things to “bear upon men as things”—will not be accomplished by an unreflective dwelling in language (if we may take the figure of the house and the table as a figure for language itself as environment)—a “sitting at the table” that does not ask how it got there, nor what this presence of things to itself implies. Rather, a kind of wandering is required, a wandering through darkness, in order to come to the illumination of the lit table with a greater sense of possibility and a truer understanding of the conditions of its appearance.

But what exactly is the task that we are speaking of? What is it that the wanderers know that the “many” don’t, and why would the wandering toward death point to a kind of salvation for the many, as Heidegger suggests when he says that the wanderers must tread this dark course not only for themselves, but “for the many” as well? (Ibid.) In a

sense what the wanderers are aware of is the happening of truth itself. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger tells us that “art is the setting-into-work of truth” (1976: 74). It is important here to note that “truth” does not, for Heidegger, denote the truth of a proposition corresponding to a set of affairs in the world, but rather refers to the very *event* of disclosure or of being itself, which he connects with the Greek word *aletheia*, or unconcealment. In “The Essence of Truth,” he writes:

if we translate ἀληθεια as ‘unconcealment’ rather than ‘truth,’ this translation is not merely ‘more literal’; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings. (1998: 144)

Furthermore, Heidegger suggests that we must appreciate the privative character of *aletheia* (the *a* in Greek being a privative prefix), such that the word literally denotes *unconcealment*, a bringing out of an original concealment. Concealment itself, or *lethe*, would then be even more primary than *unconcealment*. Heidegger writes “Concealment deprives ἀληθεια of disclosure yet does not render it στερησις (privation); rather, concealment preserves what is most proper to ἀληθεια as its own” (148). The happening of truth is thus, for Heidegger, a twofold process of concealment and unconcealment that first allows beings to be encountered as such.

This means, then, that artworks—especially poems—are able to somehow bring to light the essence of truth as this twofold process of *lethe* and *aletheia*. Thought in terms of the “speaking of language,” *aletheia* would be the movement whereby the separating, gathering, and structuring of things is enabled, such that we could begin to speak of them. In his analysis of Trakl’s poem, Heidegger suggests that the lines “Golden blooms the tree of graces/Drawing up the earth’s cool dew” evoke the “strife” of “world” (clearing or unconcealment) and “earth” (hiddenness, concealment) that he

invokes in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” These two lines, we are told, “call world to the things” (199).

Heidegger states this crucial relationship between world and thing as follows: “Things bear world. World grants things.” (Ibid.) As John Sallis (1990) notes, commenting on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” this does not mean that “world” or truth as clearing temporally *precedes* “things,” but rather that “truth and its establishment in a being *belong together* [...] truth is nothing apart from its coming to be established in a being” (180). Nevertheless, truth—or world, or being, or the enabling condition that is the speaking of language—does not, for all that, dissolve into the “thing,” the being, or the human word. The tension between earth and world prevents this collapse. Thus, world holds itself apart from thing, but not as a separate entity or being itself: this is precisely the meaning of the ontic/ontological difference. The event of *aletheia*, or being, only ever takes place as the happening of this or that particular thing, and yet *the happening itself* is not a thing. This is why Heidegger tells us in “Language” that in the interdependence or “intimacy” of world and thing “division prevails: a *dif-ference*” (199). This division, the strife between earth (concealment) and world (unconcealment), which precisely allows the “thinging” of the thing (in and as this tension) and the “worlding” of the world, Heidegger also names the “peal of stillness,” which is another name for “the speaking of language” (205). I will return to this figure, which again names that which Trakl’s wanderers hear, but first I want to make a brief foray into to the question of the role of poetic language in “preserving” the truth of this relation between world and thing.

### *B. The Pain of Naming and the Naming of Pain*

Through the foregoing analysis, we can begin to see more clearly why Heidegger insists that we must think the language of the poem as non-referential, and as a kind of “calling.” If what the poem names is precisely the relation between world (as event of disclosure) and thing—a relation that is not itself a thing—then poetic language cannot be referential or even metaphorical in the strict sense. As Robert Bernasconi (1985) writes, in a reference to Heidegger’s citation of Hölderlin’s naming of “the holy”:

How could Hölderlin do this? What kind of naming is it? The naming of this place is not a naming of something that is present. The name does not even call something absent into presence, for it is the naming of that which itself gives and withholds. (61)

The naming of what Heidegger here called the “place of arrival,” or the naming of *Ereignis*, the “event of appropriation,” still presents a puzzle since it is not clear—even with our understanding of poetic “calling”—exactly how one might name something that is itself a process, an originary event, by whose occurrence (always partially veiled) naming is first made possible. And further, as we have already been told, the task of poetic language is not “naming” as such, but instead it is the figuring of the call of being as the play of *lethe* and *aletheia*. Thus, if Trakl’s poem attempts to somehow figure the movement by which human language becomes possible as the “clearing” of being, it is not clear (with respect to referential theories of language) how we are to characterize poetic language. It could not, strictly speaking, be considered “metaphorical,” “allegorical” or “figurative,” since it does not refer to anything that exists beforehand as a present being. Rather, we should consider that such language is in fact performative, re-enacting, as it were, the event of meaning through the form of its occurrence as well as through its content.

The difference between world and thing, then, is not a relation that takes place between two present beings. Rather, it is that by which thing and world are able to be at all. “The difference does not mediate after the fact by connecting world and things through a middle added on to them. Being the middle, it first determines world and things in their presence, i.e., in their being toward one another, whose unity it carries out” (200). To return to the Trakl poem, the difference is spoken, Heidegger tells us, in the third stanza, which “bids the middle for world and things to come: the carrying out of the intimacy” (201), which is also a kind of rending apart, a holding separate. This carrying out is, in part, accomplished by the figure of the wanderer in the following lines: “Wanderer quietly steps within/pain has turned the threshold to stone.” Through a kind of doubling, both the threshold itself and the crossing-over of the wanderer come to figure the intimate difference between world and thing—that which allows the world of things to hold together in a meaningful way. Heidegger tries to think through Trakl’s characterization of the threshold as “pain” and as “stone,” since, at least for the poem under consideration here, “[i]t is only in turning to stone that the threshold presences at all” (Ibid.). He reads the evocation of “stone” as signaling that “the settling of the between needs something that can endure, and is in this sense hard.” (Ibid.) This speaks of the way beings are held still and revealed—the way in which they are “settled” such that they have a particular character and particular relations to one another. The stone of the threshold—that which belongs properly to neither world nor thing but which enables both—holds things still such that they may be encountered. But this is only possible, we are told, because “pain has petrified it.” (Ibid.)



What does this mean? Heidegger's suggestion is that pain is precisely a separating that gathers: while pain itself is "the rift" (202), it is not simply a disordered dispersion. The rift is a crack or dehiscence that pulls meaning to itself, like a magnet, just as pain, while emanating from a separation, refuses total dissolution precisely by remaining present, "unflagging in the threshold, as pain" (201). But what separation is spoken of here? The wanderer, we will remember, comes to the light—perhaps not for the first time, but for the first time *as* possibility—only in crossing this threshold. The brightness only shines, Heidegger tells us, "[o]n the threshold, in the settling of the pain" (203). Thus, it is, in a certain sense, only on the basis of a kind of painful separation—like that of birth, the crossing of a painful, unflagging threshold into a world—that beings presence as beings for the wandering mortals. It would be tempting to view the bread and wine that are offered inside the room in the last lines of the poem—"There lie, in limpid brightness shown,/Upon the table bread and wine"—as thus, in a sense, recompenses for this separation. This reading would place Heidegger in line with Lacan's vision of the symbolic function as a "replacement" or compensation for the loss of the real. But crucially, for Heidegger, what is "lost" here is not permanently lost—it is not a mere negation, as it were, because it still presences as the "speaking of language" *through* our own words. Language speaks out of and as the pain of a separation but it is not a separation to be mourned. It is only on the basis of such a separation that we are offered sustenance—bread and wine and words. Furthermore, the separation itself is *primary* (that is to say, Heidegger posits no hypothetical original "wholeness"). It is the connection/separation itself that *is* the event of being for Heidegger, whereas for Lacan one might say that "being" is split between the real and the symbolic, and the one (pure

presence) is always already negated in favor of the other (pure absence, or signification). For Heidegger, though, there is a perpetual interplay of the two: it is only through the accomplishment of the *dif-ference in intimacy* that meaning is gathered and it is only through the encounter with beings in the clearing of being that the speaking of language as this “settling of pain” can resound.

### C. *Sounding Out (of) The Peal of Stillness*

Heidegger calls this sounding or resounding of language “the peal of stillness” (205). In part, this names the way that the dif-ference “stills the thing, as thing, into the world” (204): allows it to appear as having a stable character and sets it off against the backdrop of the world. The “peal” is also, we are told, the gathering of the world and thing together: it figures, again, the trace of an enabling event that resounds through the structure of our world. The peal of stillness sounds out, and it is precisely that to which we belong as speaking beings. Heidegger’s essay culminates with a crucial passage that illuminates what we have been trying to think: namely, the “always already” of language to which we belong, and which is excessive of the human:

The peal of stillness is not anything human. But on the contrary, the human is indeed given in its nature to speech—it is linguistic. The word “linguistic” as it is here used means: *having taken place out of the speaking of language*. What has thus taken place, human being, has been brought into its own by language, so that it remains given over and appropriated to the nature of language, the peal of stillness [...] Only as men belong within the peal of stillness are mortals able to speak in *their own* way in sounds. (205, my emphasis)

The belonging-within the peal of stillness as the speaking of language—its ringing—is exactly what the wanderers recognize that the many don’t. To belong within the peal of stillness is to realize that I speak only because I myself am sounded-out, articulated, appropriated by this sounding. It is to recognize that the enabling event of the happening

of meaning, as the joining rift of world and things, is accomplished by my own dwelling-within language as a being “appropriated to the nature of language, the peal of stillness”—in other words, as a being for whom being itself is at issue, for whom the world appears and coheres as distinct and meaningful and, furthermore, as the very *occurrence or possibility of possibility*. Indeed, to recognize the enabling of meaning in an event as opposed to a being is precisely to open ourselves up to the possibility that things, including ourselves, might be otherwise. If the event of being happens as a strife between concealment and unconcealment, the preservation of concealment is also the preservation of *possibility*, because concealment names the fact that being or nature is never revealed once and for all, in its totality: it is alternately moving out of and into itself. There is no determinate being or master signifier (phallus) that governs the production of meanings in the economy of our speaking. And yet this speaking does not disperse into meaninglessness, for it is precisely appropriated by “the peal of stillness”: it belongs to an occurrence of coherence: the drawing together of world and thing. Nevertheless, an attunement to this structure offers us no more, and no less, than our very nature *as possibility*. In other words, for Heidegger our own being is a worldly event, the nature of which is possibility and the future of which is undetermined. The speaking of language does not offer us concrete directives. But the very possibility of the future sounds in the trace of a prior enabling.

Thus, Heidegger’s analysis, while on several points appearing quite similar to Lacan’s, opens onto a strikingly different picture of language. While for both thinkers to be a speaking being is to inhabit the tension between an environment of language and the individual utterance, this space is for Lacan a space of pure negativity, while for

Heidegger it is the space of silence in which a call (which is excessive to the human) rings out. But nevertheless, for Heidegger, the human “takes place out of the speaking of language”: although this speaking is excessive to us, it also gives us to ourselves. Furthermore, it gives us the possibility of being attuned to the event of being or language *through* our own speaking.

How then would this difference between Lacan and Heidegger impact the thinking of sexual difference? For Lacan the entrance into the symbolic function necessarily *erases* a posited prior wholeness, and must symbolize it as simultaneously its binary opposite in order to orient the field of meaning in a determinate way. Therefore the speaking being is always marked by what Lacan calls castration: inability to say his desire, his reality. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter III, nothing can be symbolized that lies outside of what Lacan calls the phallic function: thus the feminine on his account becomes only its lack, its “not-all”—yet another symbol of the cut that separates the subject from the real. In short, the feminine becomes another phallus. Heidegger, on the other hand, understands the event of meaning to exceed the human. This already indicates that, for him, there is no need to posit a sharp break between some sort of “reality” (even if it is hypothetical), and signification, which would be a negation of that reality. Instead, the play of presence and absence that makes meaning possible takes place, for Heidegger, through a worldly event: “the speaking of language,” which can also be aligned with “the clearing of being” and “the peal of stillness.” It is owing to the fact that we *belong within* this event—rather than to the fact that we are constitutively cut off from the world—that Heidegger says we are to be considered “speaking beings.” I have also shown the way in which belonging to this event means precisely being attuned

to the structures that condition the possibility of our speech: in particular, being attuned to the way in which beings come to presence only in a kind of absence: not the absence of negation but the absence of potentiality—the possibility that things might be otherwise. It is this aspect of Heidegger’s account of being and language that, I believe, will ultimately allow Irigaray to develop the notion of an “elsewhere” from which the feminine subject might speak.

### 3. Irigaray Hearing Heidegger

#### *A. Irigaray’s Ontology*

As noted in Chapter I, Irigaray’s readers noticed a shift in her writing style as early as her 1984 text *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Critics wondered what philosophical assumptions were leading Irigaray to speak about “men and women” in a seemingly positive sense in this work, when she had previously invoked these labels only with reference to the products of a patriarchal logic that postulated the masculine as “one” and the feminine as “lack.” As discussed earlier, many discussions followed of Irigaray’s possibly “strategic” essentialism, or even of her possibly conservative “realism” concerning sexuate difference. However (as Tina Chanter also points out), it is notable that Irigaray invokes Heidegger at the outset of *Ethics*, when she states that “[s]exual difference is one of the major issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only” (7). This should suggest to us that, already in the 1980s, Irigaray’s interaction with the work of Heidegger was providing an ontological framework for her understanding of sexuate difference. Indeed, although some commentators read Irigaray’s invocations of ontology as appeals

to some kind of ultimate “reality,” I think it makes more sense to read them as statements of an inheritance of Heideggerian thought. This thesis gains support from the fact that Irigaray’s most recent works explicitly present themselves as dialogues with Heidegger—for instance she writes that *The Way of Love* remains “[f]aithful to the teaching of Heidegger in a way but [shifts] the emphasis into a frame or space in which Heidegger did not venture” (xii). This suggests that *The Way of Love* will indeed be an Irigarayan elaboration of the ontological thinking of language just discussed.

Indeed, commenting at the outset of *The Way of Love* on Heidegger’s injunction (in *On the Way to Language*) to pursue an “experience” of language—a task which, as we saw, he pursues through a reading of poetry—Irigaray writes that she discovered that “if such an experience can take place in poetic language and in the articulation of thinking and poetic saying, it first of all exists in a present dialogue with an other different from myself” (xi). She thus indicates that she perceives herself as remaining faithful to a Heideggerian paradigm, but that in pursuing his own line of questioning she has uncovered a truth that must, for her, be affirmed: namely that the question of the relation with a different other is central to the question of being as such. She writes:

I discovered that we cannot be *–être* (Being) –without such an “être” (Being) becoming an essence, or falling back into a simple substance, outside of a being in relation with an other who is different, and first of all with the other of sexual difference. (xiii)

Thus, we can expect that Irigaray will re-write Heidegger’s own ontological expression of “the speaking of language” or “the calling of being,” to apply to the interval between two different “subjects” (as she calls them), precisely in order to accomplish what he himself seeks: the destruction of the history of metaphysics, which, according to Irigaray, has heretofore functioned based on the repression of a positive relation between sexuate

subjects.<sup>x</sup> This relation, then, will occupy the place the term “being” occupies in Heidegger’s vocabulary: it will name the event that, distinct from “beings,” first renders them available to *Dasein* as such.<sup>xi</sup>

Indeed, Irigaray writes that: “Man as humanity comes to presence through his capacity for entering into relation” (85). This suggests that the way in which the human is given over to itself is irreducibly structured by the possibility—the announcement of the possibility—of entering into a relation with another. She further writes:

The light that then reaches us [in recognition of the relation] illuminates the world otherwise, and discloses to us the particularity of our point of view. It says nothing in a way, pronounces no word but makes clear the limits of a horizon, of a site of thinking, of existing, of Being. (164)

The horizon of meaning for Irigaray—that which is announced through the “speaking of language”—will be the *particularity of our point of view in relation to the other*. It is this particularity, this “limit” that, for Irigaray, names the “dif-ference” that stills the world into a meaningful coherence. Just as Heidegger spoke of the “dif-ference” at play in the strife of earth and world, a dif-ference that allowed things to “bear upon men as things,” Irigaray speaks of a difference between two human beings, that first allows them to be as such, and to encounter the world through that relation. Crucially, just as for Heidegger, this dif-ference did not “mediate after the fact,” so for Irigaray the difference between two (the sexuate difference) is not pre-defined:

In this dimension of ourselves where Being still quivers, identity is never definitively constituted, nor defined beforehand. It is elaborated in relation-with, each one giving to the other and receiving from the other what is necessary for becoming. The base and the horizon of the relation to the same are from then on questioned as a stage of History which masked Being as a relation to or with the other. (93)

With this invocation of “Being as a relation to or with the other” Irigaray explicitly states that, for her, the question of sexuate difference *is* the question of being: and it is this question that has been repressed throughout the history of Western metaphysics. Therefore, uncovering it must of necessity involve precisely what Heidegger’s uncovering involves: a thinking that is not metaphysical, that is not based on identity, a thinking that attempts to think *from* the event of being to the human, rather than imposing metaphysically-determined ideas onto being—or, in the case of Irigaray, onto the relation. Therefore, we must realize that Irigaray’s invocation of a new dialogue between sexuate subjects, throughout *The Way of Love* (as well as in *Sharing the World*) is not an invocation of a dialogue between two “identities” already formed, but an invocation of a dialogue that would remain attuned to the giving of being as relation, and that would thus result in the coming into being (according to Irigaray, for the first time) of a positive relation between the two. But if, for Heidegger, being occurs as an interplay of *lethe* and *aletheia*, or what he sometimes calls “world” and “earth”—and it is, crucially, only in the tension between these two that beings come to presence—where, for Irigaray, is the *lethe*, the hiddenness of “earth” that allows for emergence? Where can we locate the constitutive withdrawal that is critical to Heidegger’s ontological thinking?

In fact, “earth” is present throughout Irigaray’s later work, primarily in terms of what she calls the “elemental,” which marks the limit between the two “subjects” of which she speaks. Indeed, Irigaray’s re-thinking of the question of being *as* the question of the other also allows her to think the question of being as precisely elemental and concrete, yet simultaneously transcendent. She writes:

An interval must be provided, a neither the one nor the other where each finds oneself again and finds the other again while avoiding the one simply overturning



the other through what is revealed of them. This interval—and this medium—is first of all nature, as it remains left to itself: air, water, earth, and sun, as fire and light. Being par excellence—matter of the transcendental. (19)

Thus, for Irigaray, being thought as two is already being thought as three, because in order to be two without “one simply overturning the other,” or without the opposition between two being “overcome” in a unifying third, an interval must subtend and hold in tension two that are *different*, yet not opposed. Irigaray here refers to this interval as “nature”: elsewhere she refers to it as “the elemental,” “air,” and “silence.” In this last iteration—“silence”—we can certainly hear the echo of Heidegger’s “peal of stillness.” Indeed silence as this interval names precisely a differential gathering, a relational moment of withdrawal that constitutes sexuate “subjects” as themselves a process of call-and-response, a to-and-fro motion that opens in (at least) two directions. Irigaray writes (commenting on Heidegger’s invocation of ‘the fourfold’):<sup>xii</sup>

There is then neither a single round dance nor a single play of the world but a constitution of subjectivities that try to dance or to play together through—and despite—different unfoldings and refoldings. In this sense, an unfolding that would be only peaceful cannot exist, including ecstatically, except as a suspension of the movement toward proximity. Only in such a movement may ecstasy be concrete, giving rise to the world as it is, or letting it be while giving it a horizon where a human can dwell. *This silent constituting pause is not without connection to the speaking that has to allow it to be, including through its withdrawal, its partial, thus non-universal, character:* appealing for or awakening energy without capturing it with words—naming, appropriating, immobilizing meaning. No saying, in fact, guards in its said the parts of the world in their proximity. Each pronounces a part of it and it is in calling for alliance with the other that a saying is created in which silence becomes essential. (22, my emphasis)

Thus, we begin to see that what constitutes *lethe* for Irigaray, the withdrawal of being into itself, is precisely the *finitude* announced by the relation to the sexuate other: what I have called (and will explicate in more detail in Chapter V) the *relational limitation* of the sexuate other. The silence here referred to is said to be the saying in its very

withdrawal: the silence of speech for Irigaray denotes the irreducibility of the event of language (the event of relation) to what is said. Silence bespeaks not only the air as that which cannot be “spoken” and yet which is borne by that which is spoken, but also the fact that to be a speaking being is to encounter oneself as *partial*: one cannot “say the whole” not only because we are not transparent to ourselves but also because this lack of transparency constitutes the call of the other: the call to engage with another who relates to language differently and who thus presents another appropriation of the event of being.

Thus, in Irigaray’s vision of dialogue between-two the words of the one take on their full resonance only in both difference and similarity with the words of the other. That is to say, I am not speaking in a living way if I am speaking without a gesture toward the other, without a certain openness to that transformation, and without a respect for the limitations of my own language: limitations that in fact allow there to be language at all. If I do not speak in cognizance of this limitation, my speech will not be attuned to its own enabling event, namely the event of being as relation. Thus, while for Heidegger it was important that Trakl’s wanderers were attuned to the threshold, and to the “settling of pain” in that threshold, Irigaray is concerned that we be attuned, in our speaking, to *the threshold that the sexuate other represents*: the way in which this threshold opens in at least two directions, two different appropriations, two different ways of speaking, and of hearing. While Heidegger’s thinking evokes a kind of solitude in which “mortals” are attuned to their own limitation as the “wandering toward death” and the settling of pain in the threshold, Irigaray’s thinking turns this threshold into a productive (yet still self-hidden) interval between two human beings. This re-thinking of finitude and limit as

*relational* allows her to develop her project (and her understanding of “subjectivity”) along ethical lines—while still not abandoning ontological thinking.

*B. Language:*

However, we might wonder, since Heidegger is speaking specifically about poetry, and Irigaray is invoking a dialogue, if the two really mean the same thing when they speak of speech or language. How exactly does Irigaray inherit Heidegger’s thinking of not just being, but *language*, as I have suggested? In fact Irigaray, like Heidegger, invokes language as at once an event beyond the human and as a place of human becoming—a place where we may take up the task of negotiating what it means to be a human being. Importantly, this means that language does not only operate through “naming” objects in the world, but rather it must attend to the deeper ontological structure, to the event whereby meaning itself is given, in order to actively *create* new possibilities for humanity. For instance in her introduction to *The Way of Love* Irigaray writes:

The book, in fact, does not speak about something or someone who already exists and for whom a language and representations are somehow available, previously codified. Rather it tries to anticipate, notably through a certain usage of language, what could or ought to exist as loving between us, to prepare for a wisdom of love between us. (vii)

And further: “it is certainly not thanks to naming that I will succeed in entering into a relation [with the other]” (65). Like Heidegger, Irigaray is not speaking about a kind of language that is only a tool for communicating, for designating objects and for expressing inner states. Instead, she speaks about a language that could bring about a new vision of humanity itself. In other words, Irigaray too understands language as an environment that calls upon us to become who we are—and possibly to transform who we have been.

She writes that “descriptive and narrative languages...are no longer appropriate” (viii) to the task of seeking a new way of being, and that we need to discover “another relation with language, a relation which favors the act of speech in the present, and not a language already existing and codified” (ix). Further, “[i]t is a question of making something exist, in the present and even more in the future” (viii). This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s poetic “calling”: an experience of language that would be a kind of “pure speaking,” and that would thus cut through the codified system of meaning to reveal the (self-concealing) event that had enabled it, with the futural possibilities that this entails. Further, this invocation of a new kind of language must also be applied to Irigaray’s own work—perhaps she is not “describing” nor “naming” a certain state of affairs concerning sexuate difference, but rather invoking a particular experience, a particular, embodied, point of view, in order to “[make] something exist, in the present and even more in the future.” Thus, like Heidegger’s poetic language, the dialogic language Irigaray invokes would also remain attuned to the “truth” of being precisely through remaining attuned to its partial character—precisely by remaining attuned to the constitutive withdrawal, represented by silence, the elemental, and the air, that bespeaks the fact of my relatedness to the other.

Further, according to the way I have interpreted Heidegger’s “Language” essay, we might ask ourselves to encounter the language of sexual difference in Irigaray’s work—the language of “men,” and “women,”—precisely as calls to give an account, as tasks for the future. Irigaray’s invocations of sexual (or sexuate) difference—indeed perhaps even in her earlier works where we heard about the possible “elsewhere” of the feminine—can, from this perspective, be seen as calls for a response, even as they are

responses to a call. That is to say, we can perhaps understand Irigaray as a poet of sexuate difference, as well as understanding her statements as dialogic in the sense outlined above: as attuned to their own hiddenness and limitation. They are, perhaps, responses to the call of the task of articulating the structures of being for *Dasein*, of inhabiting them in a potentially transformative way. But they are simultaneously calls for a response from us, the readers, to take up and inhabit these terms more ethically—for instance, to inhabit them in a way that does not forget our partiality and that thus does not monstrously claim ownership over the whole of reality. Indeed, if we recognized, with Irigaray, that part of the “there is” of humanity is the call to be sexually different beings—but sexually different beings understood precisely as a possibility and not as a fully determined actuality—this would drastically alter the public discourse, not to mention the public sphere itself.<sup>xiii</sup> That is to say, it is a question of how we are to be attuned, through our language, to the question of sexuate difference, which, for Irigaray, is the question of the relation to that which is other. Nevertheless, in this shift to a political and ethical register, Irigaray’s thinking does not lose its ontological character, nor does it reduce to an identity politic. To return to Heidegger’s reading of poetic “calling,” the language of “man” and “woman” could, as invoked in Irigaray’s work, be said to call beings in from a distance, where they always remain partially sheltered, undetermined. They remain sheltered because, for each of us, to speak is to speak from a place defined by the limitation given by the event of being as relation. That is to say, the twofold play of *lethe* and *aletheia* is or should be, for Irigaray, at work in the speaking of each “subject,” since each is hidden from itself by its constitutive related-ness to something other. And yet this hiddenness calls upon us to respond to it, just as

Heidegger's "speaking of language" seeks a "dwelling-place for man." Irigaray's language of sexual difference, then, rather than describing a static (and stagnant) state of affairs, thus presents us with the task of confronting sexual difference in our becoming, and in our speaking. To understand "men" and "women" as beings of unfolding possibility, always partially veiled in mystery, indeed opens the possibility of accomplishment of sexual difference as a task, perhaps for the first time.

Furthermore, through this understanding of the language of sexual difference as at least partly performative rather than strictly descriptive, Irigaray is able to develop what I have called her dialogical voice. That is to say, while in her earlier engagements with Freud and Lacan it was not clear (even within her work) how the feminine could speak, since Irigaray's own work was immanent to a system that excluded the feminine, the discovery of something *beyond* this human, patriarchal system liberates Irigaray to speak of "men and women" without the assumption that this language necessarily functions within the phallic symbolic. In other words, it liberates her from the assumption that to set oneself up as a speaking being *per se* is to set oneself up within the self-enclosed symbolic. Instead, to be a speaking being means, for her, (at least partially) to belong within what Heidegger called the speaking of language.

Indeed, Irigaray's proposal of new forms of language itself (she emphasizes the verb in *The Way of Love* due to its active capacities), particularly as regards its physical qualities—air, sound, touch—corresponds to her own inhabitation of a different voice, one that is in the process of developing its own place, its own ground on which to stand in dialogue with another. Rather than viewing this inhabitation of a different voice as a radical shift, however, we can see it as the progression of the process that was begun in

Irigaray's analyses of Freud and Lacan. That is to say, it is only by beginning from within the patriarchal symbolic and revealing its own hidden performative capacities that Irigaray is able to arrive at a different place—a place from which one might be able to enter into a dialogue with a different other. This could not be accomplished under a phallogocentric system of meaning, where both the feminine and the material are negated and thus no possibility of such a place exists. However, we have seen here how Heidegger is a crucial dialogical partner for this movement of Irigaray's work insofar as he does offer the possibility of this place, this "elsewhere" of the phallic symbolic.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the way in which Heidegger's ontology, particularly as it manifests itself in his writings on language, allows Irigaray to develop her voice beyond the critical voice of her engagements with Lacan. Because Lacan's system constitutively refuses the possibility of the feminine voice (and because such refusal is also a symptom of patriarchal culture more widely speaking), Irigaray is at first required to intervene in the "masculine" discourse through a subtle technique of mimesis—revealing the performative character of a truth that was said to be descriptive, namely the "truth" that there is no relation between the sexes. However, the revelation of this performative truth pushes her into another realm entirely—the realm of what lies before culture, before the culture that refuses the feminine. I have argued that Heidegger thus provides Irigaray with a crucial resource, insofar as he proposes a kind of thinking that allows for an outside to culture thought not as a mere negativity but rather as the very event of self-giving (and self-hiding) of being or language itself. Furthermore, he

proposes a strikingly different view of language than does Lacan, as he views the event of the “speaking of language” as the very way in which the possibility of meaning unfolds, and proposes that human beings belong within this event of meaning. Irigaray too views language as an event to which we belong, and to which we must respond in attempting to actualize our human potential. However, she locates a kind of solitude in Heidegger’s thought, in that the hiddenness of being he describes—the limitation, as it were, of meaning—is not located between two speaking subjects or human beings but rather is located in “being” itself, seemingly thought of as unitary. In other words, “being,” for Heidegger, is divided insofar as it presences only through a twofold process, but it is not *further* divided into a communicative relation between two ways of concealing and unconcealing, two *different* manners of its unfolding for the human. To remain attuned to the self-giving of being, for Heidegger, is not necessarily to remain attuned to the difference of the other. This (as explained further in the next chapter) is the way in which Irigaray will push Heidegger further, and furthermore, the way in which she will develop her thinking in a more explicitly ethical register.

Irigaray’s focus, then, will ultimately lie not with the relation between world and thing but with the relation between two “subjects.” Between the two, a difference also prevails, much like the rift that Heidegger speaks of in his reading of Trakl: an ungrounded ground of the disclosure of each, impossible to put into speech, but that precisely remains generative of their utterances. Like Heidegger, Irigaray urges us to be attentive to this relational enabling structure of our subjectivity when we speak. Indeed, this is the only way to speak in a way that remains faithful to our own becoming as subjects, both irreducibly relational and irreducibly material. She says:



Communicating, which wants to speak to the other, unfolds starting from this impossible to say. An irreducible flaw in the saying which cannot be treated lightly on pain of speech losing its meaning, and unfolding without saying anything—except a certain forgetting of what should ground. (2002: 23)

This “impossible to say” is also thematized as *silence*. Like the peal of stillness that rings out as the prophecy that I *will speak* because I have already been spoken by language, Irigaray’s silence prophesies that I will speak *with the other* because I have been precisely appropriated to the event of a world held in common between two—with all the limitation and complexity that this implies. She writes that: “What safeguards the between-two as a place available for the entering into presence is the limit that each imposes upon oneself in the fidelity to self and to the space-time open through the respect of the other as such, of their irreducibility” (2002: 79).

Irigaray, then, will supplement Heidegger with a relational account of subjectivity and with the important acknowledgement that, if I am called to speak, to give an account of myself, I am called not (only) by language, but by the irreducible presence of the other. But she is only able to do this due to the possibility of setting herself up as a dialogic partner for Heidegger. In other words, Heidegger’s thought offers the resources for Irigaray to develop her unique ontology *in relation to* his. Similarly, Irigaray’s assertions about the primacy of sexuate difference must be understood in relation to Lacanian discourse, even as they substantially exceed it by placing this difference at an ontological level and by theorizing a meaningful “outside” or elsewhere to the totalizing masculine system that attempts to resorb all alterity and render it only in terms of its own categories.

In the next chapter, I discuss Irigaray’s relational ontology in its own right, drawing on the resources developed throughout my discussions of Lacan and Heidegger.

We will see how Irigaray incorporates the insights gleaned from these interlocutors into her own distinct vision of a relational limitation—an interval between-two that precedes and exceeds them, and that calls upon the two to become who they are in relation to, and in dialogue with, one another.

## 5. Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Although Heidegger (and his translators) at times capitalizes “Being” in order to distinguish it from “beings,” I have chosen not to do so. Irigaray’s English translations are capitalized, but her original manuscripts are not. She uses the infinitive “*être*” to refer to “being” and “*étant*” to refer to “a being” or “beings.” In the dissertation, I use “being” (un-capitalized) and “beings” (plural but also un-capitalized), to indicate the ontological difference.

<sup>ii</sup> It is also not out of the question that this term has Heideggerian resonance for Irigaray as well, given the translation of *Dasein* as “*réalité humaine*” (human reality) in French. Additionally, I sometimes use “human beings” where Heidegger says “man.”

<sup>iii</sup> The underlying question of the difference between structuralist theories of language and Heidegger’s work on language is a pressing one, nevertheless an adequate treatment of this question in its own right lies outside of the scope of this dissertation. I do gesture toward possible answers to it with both my readings of Heidegger and of Irigaray. But as my ultimate goal is to elucidate Irigaray’s own ontological and ethical vision, my investigation of the implications Heidegger/Lacan contrast in its own right must of necessity remain limited.

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, already in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, Irigaray performs a Heideggerian reading of Heidegger himself, attempting to show that, just as Western philosophy has always already covered over the question of being when setting itself out as metaphysics, so Heidegger himself remains inattentive to that which makes his own thinking possible—namely, the materiality of the air. This forgetting of the air is especially dangerous, according to Irigaray, insofar as it is precisely the air that allows us to live. Further, the forgetting of the air implies a forgetting of the elemental as such—the elemental as that which gives us to ourselves and simultaneously prevents us from ever being completely self-possessed—from having control over the very event of our self-giveness. In this connection, Irigaray writes that

[t]o question what has been forgotten in [the] meeting between man and the Greek *physis* is perhaps thus not a groundless task. It is dizzying, however, for one who

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draws his power from submitting matter to claims that reduce it to nothingness, or who works it out with inappropriate techniques. (11)

Irigaray's claim here is that Heidegger's understanding of being as a clearing—"the there is of the clearing" (1)—is predicated on a conflation of materiality with nothingness. This would suggest that Heidegger's conception of *lethe* (hiddenness, forgetting, concealment) is, in reality, a negation of the positivity of matter—much as Lacan's conception of negativity within the subject is predicated on an erasure of the positive relation to the body of the mother. With this critique, Irigaray is interestingly close to Giorgio Agamben's (2002) critique of Heidegger's understanding of animality in his *The Open: Man and Animal*. Agamben argues that Heidegger's *lethe* is really an erasure of "bare life," and that this erasure or enslavement is the condition of possibility for the "open region" itself. Agamben writes:

...the *lethe* that holds sway at the center of *aletheia*--the nontruth that also belongs originally to the truth--is undisconcealedness...the not-open of the animal. The irresolvable struggle between unconcealedness and concealedness, between disconcealment and concealment, which defines the human world, is *the internal struggle between man and animal*. (69)

While for Agamben this "not-open of the animal" is the constitutive outside to the "clearing" of being, for Irigaray it is the material element that inhabits this outside. The forgetting of this element is, in essence, a forgetting of the *between* that, for Irigaray, constitutes the possibility of the relation to the other. Thus, her early critique of Heidegger is directly related to the later concern with Heidegger's insufficiency for a philosophy of dialogue.

<sup>v</sup> To give a brief forecasting here: in Irigaray's later work, where her own ontology is developed, we will clearly see what Mortensen would call a more "primary" concealment emerging—namely, the *limit* constituted by the recognition of the sexuate other. This limit is also, in this later work, closely tied to the elemental as that which simultaneously disrupts the autonomy of the human subject by reminding him of his irreducible relationality and ensures autonomy by safeguarding the limits of the subject. In *The Way of Love* (2002) Irigaray writes: "Air is what is left common between subjects living in different worlds. It is the elemental of the universe, of the life starting from which it is possible to elaborate the transcendental" (67). This "elemental" is *itself* a kind of concealment or *lethe*—this is the point that Mortensen misses—in that it delineates the different worlds of two sexually different subjects and provides an internal limit to subjectivity. Thus, Irigaray's critique of Heidegger's "forgetting" of air is not a critique of the notion of concealment as such—as if all will now be "revealed." Instead, the air, for Irigaray, names that elemental *life* which precisely allows my connection to the other, and which thus gives me to myself (but never as a self-possessed subject or being). Thus, the elemental is *not* "ontic," and nor is the relation between-two proposed by Irigaray. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter V she will refer to it as the "groundless ground of communication" (ILTY: 46): an event that gives us over to ourselves, in relation to beings, but that is not itself reducible to *a* being.

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<sup>vi</sup> Anne van Leeuwen (2010) has also recently suggested that the question of being and the question of sexual difference are one for Irigaray. She calls them “indissociable gestures.” In addition, Rachel Jones’ forthcoming book (2011), referred to in the notes for Chapter I, offers a nuanced consideration of the relation between Irigaray and Heidegger.

<sup>vii</sup> As Heidegger discusses in “Letter on Humanism.” I take this also to mean that the relationship between language and life/the living has not been properly thought.

<sup>viii</sup> Questions may arise about the status of Heidegger’s claim that we are “always already” in language. After all, do we not learn language at a particular developmental moment? There are several points to raise in response to this. First, Heidegger’s claim is phenomenological, and thus in one way can be related to the fact that we do not experience the entrance into language (in this he is similar to Lacan, although unlike Lacan he does not propose any mythic developmental accounts of how we got “into” language). But secondly, for Heidegger, as will become clear through my analysis, “language” names something beyond human sign-giving. It names the way in which the world (and we) are given in a relation such that there can be meaning for us: such that it can cohere. Speaking then, in the sense of signification, is derivative of this event of meaning. As we can see from this, Heidegger does not hold a structuralist view of language upon which signs are only related to one another. He believes that “being” gives itself as potentially say-able. This is the meaning of his phrase “the speaking of language.” For more on these points, see *On The Way To Language*. For a commentary on Heidegger’s thinking of language that explains it in reference to more mainstream theories of reference, see LaFont (2002) *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure*.

<sup>ix</sup> Incidentally, I have no idea why Dastur thinks “the Greeks” did not have a concept of essence as “the unfolding of the being of something.”

<sup>x</sup> The question here may arise as to Irigaray’s similarities with and/or differences from Derrida in his discussion of Heidegger and the question of sexual difference in *Geschlecht I: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*. For an interesting discussion of their possible similarities, see Anne van Leeuwen (2010). I would indicate, however, this one major difference: that while Derrida seems content to locate in the sexual “neutrality” Heidegger attributes to *Dasein* (as neither male nor female) the possibility of a *multiplicitous* understanding of sexual difference, Irigaray would remain suspicious that “neutrality” could be coded as anything other than masculine. Put simply, rather than thinking the multiplicity of the event of being, Irigaray will re-think this event as a relation between-two, because she believes that otherwise we risk remaining within “one,” in opposition to the “many.” Nevertheless, this does not mean that she reverts to the “standard” definitions of “male and female”—as these are precisely *not* thought of as “two” but rather as “one” and its opposite.

<sup>xi</sup> Further, although Irigaray critiques Heidegger on the grounds that he does not explicitly think the relation to the other, we should note that this critique, while at first

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appearing quite similar to that of Lévinas, for instance, maintains this crucial distinction: that while for Lévinas “being” is a totality, and the other must be understood as *outside* of this totality (that is, transcendent in a vertical sense), for Irigaray, the “other” must be thought from within and as being itself, thus she still proposes an ontology as a crucial aspect of her ethical vision, and does not suggest, like Lévinas, that ethics must *supplant* ontology.

<sup>xii</sup> E.g. in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”

<sup>xiii</sup> Carol Bigwood (1993) also suggests that Heidegger’s discussion of the relation of world and thing and his notion of essence as presencing provide a compelling way to think about sexual difference. She writes that “[p]resencing, for Heidegger, is not the property of presence in present objects but is a verb that denotes genesis as difference” (29). Bigwood uses this notion of presencing to thematize categories of “man” and “woman” as beings “having lasting presence of some sort but that [are] not ... atemporal unchanging [essences]” (Ibid.)

## CHAPTER V

### THE ENUNCIATION OF PLACE

“If any meeting is to be possible between man and woman, each must be a place, as appropriate to and for the other, and toward which he or she may move”  
(Irigaray, ESD: 40)

In the last chapter, I showed how an examination of Heidegger’s thinking of poetic language deepens our understanding of Irigaray’s recent work. Indeed, I even suggested that Irigaray, in her invocation of dialogue as a place for the accomplishment of humanity, can be read as proposing a Heideggerian ontology. For Irigaray, as for Heidegger, the self-givenness of the human is enfolded within and structured by the event of being, which nevertheless exceeds it. However, I also suggested that an examination of Irigaray’s own ontological thinking reveals that she believes Heidegger has not fully responded to what he names the “call” of being. Irigaray locates a profound solitude in Heidegger’s thought, due to the fact that he does not consider the event of being as taking place, constitutively, *between* two “subjects.” She believes this solitude indicates that Heidegger has not gone far enough in his thinking on language because he fails to consider a living relation between two as the place of the call of being or language. In this respect, Irigaray suggests, Heidegger’s thinking has in fact not fully received the meaning of the human, nor, moreover, the meaning of language itself.

In the wake of this discussion, then, we are left with the question of relationality and its connection to the event of language. How, more precisely, does a thinking of language as fundamentally relational allow Irigaray to supersede the solitary character of

Heidegger's thinking? As I have suggested, Irigaray's thinking of *shared* language as the place of the call of being—the place where the human may become attuned to and respond to the structures that enable it—leads her to propose a new understanding of human “subjectivity,” insofar as subjectivity has previously been defined in and through a singular way of inhabiting language. Indeed, in Irigaray's recent works she proposes a re-thinking of “subjectivity” such that it denotes the human as that which arises in response to the call of being or language given *as* relational. This means that the “subject,” for Irigaray, is not only a response to the call of *language* (as the human is for Heidegger), but simultaneously a response to the call of the *other*: the possibility of being a speaking being as such is bound up in the possibility of relating to another.

It is thus worth revisiting a question raised in the last chapter, namely: if Irigaray supersedes Heidegger through a consideration of the relation between two different “subjects” as the place of the call of being—and yet, as I have suggested, she can also be understood to be proposing a kind of Heideggerian ontology—then what, more precisely, does Irigaray mean by the “subject?” After all, Heidegger explicitly rejects the language of subjectivity because, for him, this language is bound up with a metaphysics of presence and its elaboration of metaphysics as a question of substance. Thus, one could object that Irigaray must misunderstand Heidegger if she believes a relation between two “subjects” to be the place of the call of being. However, as I have already intimated, in Irigaray's work the term “subject” comes to take on a meaning outside of the metaphysics of presence. In her recent works, as we will see here, it ultimately refers to an event, or a movement, that responds to the call of being (or language) *as* alterity. But what exactly does this mean, and how, more precisely, does this thought move beyond Heidegger's?

While Heidegger views the human as being given to itself in the event of language, Irigaray claims that this thought does not yet say enough about the experience of language—it does not yet receive the truth of what it means to be a speaking being. Heidegger’s *Dasein* is a singular, sexually-neutral occurrence: a way of being “there” that lacks concrete, embodied specificity. Irigaray, I suggest here, introduces the issues of *place* and of *sexuate difference* into the thinking of the event of language, and in so doing she lends both a concrete and a relational dimension to this thinking. Through this thinking of place as the concretization of the call of language, then, Irigaray is able to propose that there is more than one way in which this call occurs. Indeed, for her, “sexuate difference” names this very differential structure of the call of language; thus it names two different appropriations, and two different (yet related) ways of responding to this call. Finally, then, both “place” and “sexuate difference” can be understood to name the way in which subjectivity, for Irigaray, is both concretized and always internally *limited* by the announcement of another kind of subject. Indeed, Irigaray even suggests that it is possible to think about sexuate subjects as themselves interrelated “places”: each, according to her, would (or should) cultivate a place for themselves, and, within this place, a place “for” the other (ESD: 48). This figure, when interpreted according to the thinking of language outlined above, will provide us with an image of the mutually-limiting and enabling structure that I have referred to as a “relational limit.”

Nonetheless, while being or language calls upon the human to articulate itself as *sexuately-differentiated*, according to Irigaray, unless our response to this call is attuned to and respectful of this structure of the relational limitation between two *sexuate* “subjects,” we will not fully come to presence as the beings that we are. That is to say,



the movement that characterizes subjectivity for Irigaray is simultaneously a *task*—it is a movement that can be cultivated, aided, stunted, misdirected, or indeed prevented, because (through the constitutive relationality of language and subjectivity) each sexuate subject ultimately depends, for its own movement, upon the movement of the other. Thus, the ontological question of sexuate difference is, for Irigaray, simultaneously the ethical question of the *cultivation* of sexuate difference insofar as we must *respond* in some way to the possibility of relation perpetually offered us by the call of being/language. And indeed, we can respond in more and less ethically-enabling ways to this call. But what does this mean?

Again, “place” will help us to thematize this point. In fact, as Irigaray discusses in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, the feminine subject has precisely been *deprived* of her “place,” and thus of the fullness of the event of her becoming, by the masculine’s incessant refusal to take up the task of relation and concomitant projection of himself as the sole subject, largely through language.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, at the very level where human meaning and value are negotiated (the level of grappling with the call to become a speaking being in such a way as to remain attuned to the enabling structures of our being), *one* subject has heretofore dominated, thus obscuring precisely the fundamental relation that lies at the heart of the possibility of language itself. Irigaray’s thinking of the question of place, then, is coextensive with the project of rethinking subjectivity and its limits in order to allow for a *sharing* of language that would correspond to a more ethical relation between the sexes. In particular, this is to be a thinking that enables us to think sexuate subjects as *two* different places, and the cultivation (particularly through dialogue) of the relational limit between them.

In order to develop these connections between the ontological and ethical registers of Irigaray's rethinking of subjectivity and language, I proceed here as follows. I first introduce in greater detail Irigaray's articulation of what I have called relational limitation (illustrated primarily in her most recent works) paying particular attention to the way in which language figures in this vision. Secondly, I make a brief detour into Aristotle's *Physics* (on which Irigaray draws in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*) in order to deepen the significance of the figure of "place" for the thinking of relational limitation, and to clarify the connection between "place" and the event of being or language. This thinking of place allows me to segue more directly into the question of sexuate difference as an ethical task. Thus, following my discussion of Aristotle, I consider the concrete effects of the domination of the relation of "subjectivity" by only one subject, and I offer the example of domestic violence as one concrete example of the erasure of woman's "place" under patriarchy. I then reflect, in closing, on the question of what it means to cultivate relational limitation as an ethical and dialogical task for humanity.

### 1. Relational Limitation: A "Double Loop" of Places

"If this *one* does not exist, limit is therefore inscribed in nature itself." (ILTY: 36).

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray proposes this vision of an ideal relation between sexuate subjects:

[...] each returns to his or her place to find his or her cause again and then returns toward the other place, the place of the other. Which would mean that, at each phase, there were two places interdetermining each other, fitting one in the other. (ESD: 40)

This image of a reciprocal intertwining of places, on which the limit of each place is constituted by a motion toward the other and back into the self, provides us with a preliminary image of what I have called a “relational limit.” According to this image, the “limit” or boundary between the two places is doubled: because they are intertwined, there is the boundary insofar as it is “my” boundary, and there is the boundary insofar as it is “your” boundary. In other words, if I have, within myself, a place “for” you, this means that my “own” place is delimited precisely *by the fact* that I am in relation with you. Further, the sharing of this boundary is precisely what allows for a relation between the two: it establishes “a chiasmus or double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself” thanks to the inter-determination of the two places—or, in other words, thanks to the fact that each place contains a place for the other *through* its own limited nature (ESD: 40).

Irigaray’s most recent texts—in particular *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*—can be read as largely continuations of this thinking of sexuate subjectivity as two inter-related places, which inherently delimit themselves through their participation in a shared boundary. Although Irigaray does not always explicitly use the language of “place” in these texts, the image she puts forward of a mutually-constitutive relation between two different subjects is a repetition of the figure of intertwined places cited above. These texts expand this thinking and develop it in terms of both the experience of language and the question of ethics. In what follows, then, I draw out the theme of relational limitation in these works.

### A. Non-relational vs. Relational Limit

In her most recently published monograph (at the time of this writing), *Sharing the World*, Irigaray writes:

[...] for each one and for the two, the *impetus and the limit*, which ensures the return to the source of the self, are safeguarded. Thanks to the respect for the transcendence of the other as irreducible to one's own, each discovers, at each moment, a new impetus toward the in-finite—or infinite—*through the recognition of the finiteness of one's own world*. The in-finite can again become the horizon of the intention of each one thanks to accepting that the totality of the world that is one's own is, for its part, necessarily finite. (xv, my emphasis)

Indeed, we see here an echoing of the vision put forward in *Ethics*, insofar as Irigaray speaks of a relation between two worlds in which each would be able to advance toward the other while simultaneously ensuring (through the respect of a certain *limit*) “the return to the source of the self.” The key claim here is that each subject must respect the *finiteness* of the world (or the place) of each subject. Historically, Irigaray's oeuvre suggests, masculine subjectivity has failed to do this. Although he has often believed himself to have thematized his finitude (by contrast, for instance, with an “infinite” God, or, similarly, through a consideration of his mortality), the masculine subject actually perpetually invokes a *non*-relational limit, and thus remains in a certain sense *unlimited*. But we must discuss in more detail what this means before being able to understand the alternative vision Irigaray puts forth in the quote above.

How, then, does the “masculine” subject (which, we will recall, has been taken to be the subject *tout court*) constitute himself by way of a non-relational limit? In *The Way of Love*, Irigaray offers the example of God. According to her, God is an “infinite” projection of the self-same masculine subject, and thus a means of assimilating alterity to a horizon of sameness. In this way, the experience of alterity is projected into a

“beyond,” but it is never encountered in the here and now. She writes that: “...our culture has favored verticality, the relation to the Idea allegedly at the summit of approximate reproductions, the relation to the Father, to the leader, to the celestial Wholly-Other” (WOL: 145). Furthermore, Chapter III of this dissertation explored Irigaray’s concerns with Lacan’s understanding of woman as “not-all,” which, indeed, essentially reduces the feminine to this sort of God-figure: a negative figure for the limitations of the phallic system. In other words, the feminine for Lacan is essentially the *opposite* of an all-knowing God—rather than the perfection of masculine categories she is their complete lack. However, these are merely flipsides of the same coin: in each case, the masculine projects *itself*: either as everything or as nothing. Indeed, since, for Lacan, the phallus stands for everything and nothing, it is able to encompass both “God” (everything) and “the woman” (nothing) into its binary structure. But Irigaray here explains that this type of projection of a Wholly-Other (whether of a God figure or of woman as “not-all” and lack) merely returns the masculine subject to himself, rather than truly opening him to an experience of alterity: “In a relation to a Wholly-Other extrapolated from its world, it is still itself that the human most often seeks [...] The relation to the other, present here and now beside or in front of me on the earth, has been little cultivated as a horizontal dimension of human becoming” (Ibid.).

Given that this projection of a “Wholly-Other” in order to return to the self names the structure of non-relational limit, to think *relational* limit, we can say, would be to think a kind of limit that does *not* function negatively: that is, that does not propose that I am “this” *because* you are “not-this,” or vice versa. That would be to seek “oneself” in the other, either by way of analogy or negation. Instead, to think relational limit would be

to think the alterity of another who is *not* merely an instrument for seeking the self-same subject. As such, this would precisely be to open oneself up to the possibility that one is not the only kind of subject there is—that not everything (or everyone) can be understood with reference to the categories and experiences that constitute one’s own world. But given that, as Lacan’s discussion of the phallus shows, the very meaningfulness of our language has often been centered around just such a totalizing gesture (or totalizing signifier), in order to approach this new kind of limitation we will have to approach a new relationship to meaning: one upon which meaning itself is perpetually shifting, and is precisely not decided in advance. Irigaray writes: “[t]he gestures and words that we have to invent will be appropriate therefore to an opening outside the horizon of the identical, of the similar, of the familiar to one alone” (153). That is to say, meaning will now reside not in a single envalued signifier that (tautologically) determines the structural relations of language from the outset, but rather in precisely this movement of opening outside of one’s horizon, of perpetually opening and re-constituting that horizon as a result of the ongoing development of a relation with another.

In *The Way of Love*, Irigaray offers a key passage that helps us understand this point further. She writes:

The relation between those who are same and different weaves a groundless ground. It corresponds neither to the abyss nor to nothingness but results from *an act of grounding which does not end in any ground*. The ground is not equivalent then to a multiplicity of interweavings where man already stays and where he dwells—where he is both safeguarded and enclosed. The two perhaps going together for a masculine subjectivity, to the point of having to provide a ground for the groundless through the existence of God, the unique One capable of securing the unity of the whole. Dominating it from an outside and by a capacity to serve as a ground for all relations, being self-satisfying, *causa sui*. God from then on *is necessary for the subject constituting himself, and not that toward which he grows as toward a beyond [...]* God programmed by man and not really transcendent to him. (72, my emphasis)

It is instructive to examine Irigaray's explicit re-thinking of limit or negativity here. The relation between two in difference, she says, "corresponds neither to the abyss nor to nothingness," and nevertheless it is not a "ground," not a being. Importantly, she states that the relation is an "act," a practice "which does not end in any ground": in other words, this "groundless ground," or unground, is a dynamic, unfolding *activity*—not an already constituted being or signifier. It is, indeed, precisely the ongoing *activity* of constituting and re-constituting my horizon or limit in relation to the other. Further: "[t]he ground is not equivalent...to a multiplicity of interweavings": it is not equivalent to a network of signs in which the human subject has heretofore ensconced himself (which would recall the Lacanian conception of the Symbolic). Therefore, Irigaray states, the groundless ground of relation is not the onto-theological "ground" of a God. Indeed, "God" here again names a non-relational limit: a category or a law imposed from the "outside" (that is, not growing organically from a relation between two). "God" is the paradigmatic projection of a subject who believes himself to be the only one: the "law" names the domination of this unitary belief. Further, this law, or this "God," *paralyzes* the becoming of the two, because, in proposing an onto-theology, it would "ground" the relation between two subjects in a *being*, and thus lose its connection to the self-concealing (ungrounded) event of its very occurrence. As Irigaray suggests, proposing this sort of ground is proposing God as something the subject *uses* in order to constitute himself as unitary (precisely as Lacan's subject uses the feminine, reduced to mere nothingness, in order to constitute the phallus as the privileged signifier): a non-relational limit rather than "something toward which he grows as toward a beyond," as the transcendent, yet finite, other would presumably be.<sup>ii</sup>

In light of the fact, then, that “God”—the supposedly ultimate signifier of alterity—is actually only a signifier of the self-same, Irigaray suggests that we must think a new kind of horizon of meaning, one that would arise between two subjects who are each *finite* in relation to one another: not one that arises between one and its own projection or opposite. To be finite in relation to one another means to be limited by the fact that one cannot fully understand the other, and yet to be enabled to become what one is in one’s specificity by this very same fact. In other words, the unknowability of the other is, on this vision, no longer simply a projection of my own categories (as if the other is “unknowable” in some objective sense) but rather it is something with which I grapple in and through my own recognition of my finitude. Indeed, as Irigaray writes: “To include the other in my universe prevents meeting with the other, whereas safeguarding the obscurity and the silence that the other remains for me aids in discovering proximity” (WOL:151). This quote suggests that it is through a “safeguarding” and a respect for the limitation that the other places upon me—the limitation that indicates that my universe, my place is not the only one—that, paradoxically, “proximity” can be found. That is to say, relation is only possible with a *mutual* recognition of limitation and finitude. Indeed, “the in-finite [can] again become the horizon of each” only through the respect of this unknowability, this transcendence of the other that is irreducible to the transcendence of a God or “Wholly-Other,” since it remains reciprocal, finite and concrete.

But what, more precisely, is this event of relation, this “act of grounding that does not end in any ground,” and how is it related to language as the event of the self-givenness of the human? This brings us to Irigaray’s specific elaboration of *dialogue* as



the place where this relation is negotiated and unfolded. She writes in *The Way of Love* that “[o]ur rational tradition has been much concerned with ‘speaking about’ but has reduced ‘speaking with’ to a speaking together about the same things. Which supposes a common universe and conversations about a third without real exchange between ourselves” (7-8). To speak “together” has, according to Irigaray, too often meant to speak together with those who are the same as us (or who are assumed to be the same as us) and who see, and say, things in the “same” manner. But this presupposes a “common” world or place, and a relation between a “single” subject (or a group of “same” subjects) and this common world of objects, rather than a relation between two distinct, yet interrelated, subject-places. As I have already intimated, Irigaray responds to this situation by invoking a new kind of speaking that, she believes, helps to escape the grasp of both the limiting structural formulation of language found in Lacan and the solitude implied in Heidegger’s thinking of language. But what does this new speaking entail?

### *B. Language and Relational Limitation*

First, while Lacan’s conception of language requires a rupture between materiality and meaning (he is led to place both materiality and femininity on the side of the purely “unknowable” in order to preserve the privilege and unity of the “phallus”), Irigaray’s conception of dialogue emphasizes a shared sense of language that proceeds from a connection between meaning and materiality, and a non-opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. Indeed, it is precisely through this connection between meaning and materiality that, according to Irigaray, sexuate difference can come to expression in language—that our language may be attuned to this difference. In

particular, this attunement requires a reconsideration of the relation to the mother that, for Lacan, is understood as a mystical fusion that escapes the representative power of the symbolic order. Irigaray, on the other hand, writes:

In order to think [relation], it is necessary to return behind oneself as same, and to consider the first constituting relation of subjectivity, the relation with the mother, where the body and the spirit remain present and often mingled. The so-called law of the father—which acts in onto-theology, particularly through its conception of unity, of Being, of thinking, of the same—will separate the logos from its carnal taking root, and above all from its anchorage in the relation with the other. (WOL: 74)

In cutting us off from the “real,” Irigaray suggests, Lacan’s law of the father (which she here extrapolates into any kind of onto-theological thinking—thinking, that is, that would ground the meaning of language and being in *a* being or master signifier) separates us from another way of inhabiting language. That is to say, it cuts language itself off from “its carnal taking root”—its connection to materiality by way of the body: speech, breath, desire, and, crucially, relation. Indeed, Irigaray here suggests that language is “anchored” in the relation with the other, as evidenced through the “first constituting relation of subjectivity”—that with the mother. But exactly what role does the relation to the mother play in Irigaray’s ontology of sexuate difference?

As we can see in *The Way of Love*, for Irigaray, unlike for Lacan, the mother-child dyad is a real *relation* rather than a mythical fusion projected from within the symbolic order. Further, Irigaray elsewhere suggests that sexuate difference is precisely manifest in the way in which boys and girls experience *different* relations to the mother.

For instance, she writes in *Key Writings*:

The first relational situation is [...] very different for the boy and for the girl. [...] The girl immediately finds herself in a relation between subjects of the same gender [i.e. with the mother] that helps her to structure a relation to the other,

which is more difficult for the boy to develop [...] The subjectivity of man and woman are structured starting from a *relational identity* specific to each one. (4)

Thus, one way of understanding what it means, for Irigaray, to say that the call of language is ontologically sexually-differentiated is to say that it is precisely through a particular relation to the mother that sexual subjects are constituted as differently embodied, speaking beings. However, our analysis of Irigaray's ontological thinking should reveal that the relational difference to which she appeals here cannot be understood as a biologically-determined one, nor as a question of a purely ontic "identity." That is to say, we must not understand sexual identity on the model of a supposedly neutral "subject" (or substance) that would possess certain traits depending on its sex. Instead:

[S]exual difference does not only result from biological or social elements but from *another way of entering into relation with oneself, with the world, with the other(s)*. The first and most constant link or bridge between nature and culture will be constructed in a specific manner by a feminine or a masculine subjectivity [...] The relational identities of the boy and the girl, of the man and the woman, are not the same. (Ibid., x, my emphasis)

Sexual difference as expressed in differing relations to the mother is indeed not an ontic difference (that is to say, a factual or quantifiable difference that results purely from biology, for instance), but an ontological difference in the sense that it occurs at the level of one's very horizon of meaning: it continually gives the possibility of meaning and relation in different ways depending on one's sexual specificity. This, then, is perhaps what it means to say that language calls in different ways for the human (insofar as "the speaking of language," for Heidegger, names the gathering of the world as meaningful): language here is internally-differentiated by the relation of sexual difference. Indeed, in

her forthcoming book, *Irigaray*, Rachel Jones interprets the “ontological” status of sexuate difference for Irigaray in precisely this way:

[F]or Irigaray sexuate difference is ontological insofar as it concerns an originary *relation*: if Heidegger asks us to recall the ontological difference between Being and beings, Irigaray asks us to remember that the relation between Being and beings unfolds in two different ways, disclosed in our differing relations to the mother through whom we are brought into being: for in being born of a mother who is also a woman, each of us is born from someone either of the same or of a different sex to ourselves. (2011: 202)

Although it is beyond my scope to go into detail on this point here, through this interpretation of sexuate difference as an ontological difference disclosed through differing relations to the mother we could also connect Irigaray’s empirical studies of the language-usage of boys and girls (which she herself often connects with their differing relational situations with respect to the mother) with her specifically “ontological” work, insofar as we can say that it is precisely *through* the differential structure of the call of language that these empirically-observable differences are able to take shape. This, then, means that we should view these studies as precisely subtended by Irigaray’s thinking of a relational ontology—the differences she identifies between sexuate subjects’ language-use are not in fact static phenomena, but rather results of the underlying (and ever-shifting) relation of sexuate difference, played out as the internal differentiation of the call of language.<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, Irigaray suggests that one’s relational structure precisely depends upon one’s sexuate specificity, first seen through this relation to the mother that gives rise to language. However, as we have seen through Irigaray’s intervention into Lacan, if this sexuate difference is repressed (e.g. by a conception of language that grounds itself with reference to a single signifier and rejects the relation to the mother *tout court*) then the

relational and linguistic differences between sexuate subjects are prevented from reaching their full potential. This repression therefore affects not only ontic relations between subjects of “different” sexes but also those between subjects of the “same” sex, insofar as both of these relations depend upon sexuate difference understood as a basic linguistic and relational difference—a difference that could only be retrieved through a reconsideration of language as embodied and as connected to one’s relation to the mother. I will return to the question of the relation between these ontic relations between sexuate subjects and the underlying ontological relation of sexuate difference in the concluding section of this dissertation. For now, I continue to elaborate Irigaray’s vision of a new kind of dialogue in light of this connection between meaning and materiality and the concomitant different relation to meaning found between sexuate subjects.

Returning to *The Way of Love*, then: in the relation(s) to the mother, Irigaray suggests, language has not yet become divided by opposition: body and spirit, meaning and material, are mingled. Thus, she suggests, if our language is not to repress the ontological relation of sexuate difference expressed through differing relations to the mother we need to return to this mingling of spiritual and material, in order that the relation not become grounded in (or indeed obscured by) an abstract signifier. We must not forget the “carnal requirements which ought to take part in the elaboration and the passing on of the sense” (WOL: xx); indeed, we must remain attentive to our most intimate, tactile spheres, when speaking, in order to preserve and communicate the specificity of our own place with respect to that of the other to whom we wish to relate. For “[i]n this world otherwise lived and illuminated, the language of communication is different, and necessarily poetic: a language that creates, that safeguards its sensible

qualities so as to address the body and the soul, a language that lives” (WOL:12). Rather than communicating itself by way of already-established categories, hierarchies, oppositions, analogies and the like (which are all conditioned by the dominance of the phallic signifier) this new language actively *creates* meanings in the interval between two: it works performatively to return each to him or herself with an enhanced understanding of him or her self, his or her possibilities. But to do this we cannot rely on already-sedimented meanings, and must open up the language to which we are habituated to the vicissitudes of our material becoming. Precisely because we (inheritors and inhabitants of “masculine” discourse) have constituted our language on the basis of a *repression* of embodiment—and on the basis of a non-relational limitation—we have not allowed the relational difference Irigaray identifies to reach its full expression in language.

Thus, Irigaray writes that the development of a new, dialogic way of speaking is:

the most indispensable and the most sublime task for the human subject, and the one able, beyond our oppositions and hierarchies, to recast the categories of the sensible and the intelligible in a rationality that as a result becomes more complex, more accomplished for human becoming. We enter then into a new epoch of the relation to language [...] Speech no longer speaks with itself through the objects that it names and the mediation of a subject that has become its servant. It confronts other tasks, where it undertakes to speak what it has left in a still undifferentiated silence or opacity. It penetrates into other dimensions of Being, other spaces and other times, opens or un-covers other clearings where it has to make its way differently. (43-4)

Not only does this quotation indicate the way in which Irigaray thinks language as inseparable from materiality, it also reveals again her relation to Heidegger’s thought. She clearly appeals here to what Heidegger calls “the speaking of language,” suggesting that *speech itself* will occur differently when received by the human as fundamentally relational.<sup>iv</sup> The reception and practice of speech as fundamentally relational is related to

the practice of speech as material and embodied, because it is in recognizing the limitation placed on me by the existence of the sexuate other (in his or her specific relation to meaning) that I fully realize my own concrete, embodied specificity in its *connection* to language. This task stands in stark contrast to that of constituting “language” (as a system of arbitrary signs) through of the very *rejection* of concrete, embodied specificity and the setting up of a disembodied “limit” that would guarantee the meaningfulness of my speech. Indeed, precisely through an avoidance of already-sedimented meanings, and through an attentiveness to the present, living, embodied moment of its occurrence, the above quote suggests, speech will no longer speak “with itself” in this tautological manner. It will no longer simply be returned to itself as self-same, but will instead unfold as internally differentiated—self-hidden through the fact of its occurrence in two different manners. Thus, if we can receive the call of language as the call to “speak” not only the materiality of our specific situatedness in (sexuate) body and place, but equally the concomitant *relationality* that language offers us, we will open ourselves up to a true respect of alterity: a true experience of being and of language as relationally differentiated. Therefore, if, for Heidegger, developing a poetic relation to language names the way in which the human might become attuned to the enabling structures of its existence, for Irigaray, truly developing such a poetic relation to language can only fully be accomplished in dialogue with another, insofar as it is only there that we become fully attuned to the relationality that is constitutive of the call of language itself.

Thus, Irigaray suggests, it is in the relation between two subjects that the human is most fully opened to itself as a dialogic task for the future. She writes that “the dialogue

between two living subjects opens and closes again at each moment the question of what Being is” (83). But in order for this to take place, we cannot constitute ourselves in relation to a non-relational limit as the ground of discourse and meaning. Rather than forming ourselves in relation to an imaginary perfect other, or a negative version of this, we must form ourselves in relation to a *concrete, finite* other. In *An Ethics of Sexuate Difference*, Irigaray proposes what we could view as the initiating dialogical question: “...we [should] look at the other, stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. *Who art thou? I am and I become* thanks to this question” (ESD: 74). It is instructive to compare this inherently dialogical question—“who are you?”—with Lacan’s understanding of the relation to the Other, expressed through the transference dynamic in psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the Other is the one who “knows,” the one who I presume has all the knowledge. In this sense he is a kind of God-figure, as described above. Reflecting on this point, Lacan writes in “The Subversion of the Subject in the Dialectic of Desire”:

This is why the Other’s question [*la question de l’Autre*]—that comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects an oracular reply—which takes some such form as “*Chè vuoi?*” “What do you want?,” is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire, assuming that, thanks to the know-how of a partner known as a psychoanalyst, he takes up that question, even without knowing it, in the following form: “What does he want from me?” (2005: 688)

Thus, for Lacan, the subject constitutes himself, and locates “the path of his own desire,” by *imagining* this question—“what does he want from me?”—to proceed from the place of the “Other.” But this “Other,” as we have seen, is only a projection of the subject himself. The subject expects an “oracular” reply from the Other, because he has invested the Other with meaning *tout court*; the Other is, he imagines, the very meaning of



discourse. To be sure, this is an illusion, but it is nevertheless, for Lacan, the way in which we are first able to come to ourselves: to find the path or place of our own desire. It is by *using* this idea, this limitation, of the Other that we come (back) to ourselves.

For Irigaray, on the other hand, the question “who art thou?” is addressed to a *real, finite other*. Rather than assuming that the Other “knows,” or that the other *doesn’t* know (again, the flip-side of Lacan’s Other is woman, who “doesn’t know what she is talking about”),<sup>v</sup> Irigaray’s questioning seeks to *open* to the other: to find there a new horizon of knowledge, of desire, even of language. Indeed, the “who art thou?” for Irigaray, comes from another, concrete *place*—not an imaginary place of infinite knowledge, or an equally imaginary place of pure exclusion. And as Irigaray says, this question uniquely *allows* me to become: it offers me a boundary toward which to move: my response is not a statement “I am this,” but rather it is in my very process of becoming. It is in fact the “who art thou,” the “who are you?,” that sets me on the path of “my” desire, insofar as my path is bound up in the path of the other—insofar as it also depends upon his or her manner of approaching me. This process of becoming, then, unlike Lacan’s, would precisely seek to hold open the interval between the two insofar as that interval would be seen as critical to the development, to the path, of each. Thus, Irigaray’s practice of dialogue would remain true to her ontological vision of language arising out of relation. Through this questioning of the other that respects both his or her concrete finitude and my own, I would uniquely receive the meaning of language for the human: which is to say, I would uniquely receive the fact that, if there is meaning, or language, it is only because there is first of all relation (understood both through the relation to the mother and through the relation between two different ways of carrying out

this relation). This questioning, then, also returns me to “myself,” but it returns me there *differently* because I will have opened to a real, concrete alterity rather than simply reflected my own, self-same desire off of an imaginary Other. In so doing, it returns me to myself as *more* myself, since the truth of “self,” or the truth of “subjectivity” is bound up in the movement of relation figured in the dialogue.

Therefore, the dialogue Irigaray proposes grows out of the idea that, through a new kind of speech that remains attentive to the boundary or interval between them, two human subjects can connect with their fundamental relational identities and thus most fully develop themselves and come to be who they are. She writes that

[t]o search in the representative of an absolute difference for the image of oneself or an ideal of oneself is not the most cultivated gesture to which a human can aspire. It remains on several accounts childish, naive, unconcerned about the relation with the other that it is incumbent upon humanity to live in a conscious [...] manner. [...] The human then does not practice the renouncing to be the whole that opens the way to an alliance with the other. And that provides oneself and one’s world with limits. (WOL: 146)

What is at stake here is clearly the self-givenness of the human as itself a task for accomplishment. In this sense, Irigaray’s vision resonates with Heidegger’s understanding of what it means to be a “speaking being.” But while for Heidegger it is crucial for the human to try to attune its own speech to the “speaking of language” in order to hear there the truth of being, Irigaray suggests that it is critical to be attuned to the way in which this speaking of language delineates us as *limited* by our relation to the finite, embodied other.

What this attunement looks like is in large part yet to be explored by undertaking to speak in respect of the alterity of the other: so far I have suggested that it must involve an abandonment of already-sedimented meanings, metaphysical categories, and stock

phrases.<sup>vi</sup> We can also glimpse nascent examples of the attempt to hear this speaking of language through Irigaray's own writing. For instance, in Chapter III I discussed the way in which Irigaray intervenes into Lacanian discourse by alternately speaking in the "voice" of Lacan and destabilizing the truths of his system, by speaking the "same" words from another place. Thus, for instance, we saw how the phrase "there is no relation between the sexes" resonates differently depending on whether it comes from Lacan's place or Irigaray's. In fact, coming from Irigaray's place, this phrase precisely *shows us the limits* of Lacan's place, insofar as it reveals that he has constituted this place on the basis of a refusal of a relation to another place. Irigaray performs this destabilization by reinscribing the "same" phrase in a different context—often also with different punctuation—so as to subtly reveal its performative function. She thus reveals that we can no longer view Lacan's place as a neutral source of "truth." Irigaray's speech then offers the limits of the masculine back to itself with (the possibility of) an enhanced understanding of itself. Further, this practice also allows Irigaray to re-invigorate certain terms (in this case "relation," "between," "sexes") and *change* their meanings. Indeed, these terms operate quite otherwise in Irigaray's oeuvre once she has wrested them from Lacan's singular discourse—a task which, if she had truly remained within the system established by Lacan, would not have been possible. However, I say that this example is "nascent" because it only involves *one* party's attempt to hear the structure of relationality in the call of language (i.e. by re-appropriating words and phrases to show their specific operation, and to show another possibility for that operation). We can only imagine that if *both* dialogue partners remained attentive to the limitations and specificities of their place—rather than remaining convinced that their own specific

inhabitation of language dictates the “terms” of the conversation—then each would each return the other to themselves, each would open and re-constitute their horizon of meaning in light of the dynamic relation between the two.

Indeed, this is precisely the meaning of the dialogue Irigaray proposes: only if we can speak to one another in a way that respects the finitude and alterity of each can we each return the other to him or herself with a greater consciousness of his own borders, her own limits. In this way, indeed, the two subjects are ontologically intertwined, because each depends, for its very becoming or presencing, upon the willingness of the other to “renounce [being] the whole,” and to engage in a dialogue that remains attentive to the limits thereby provided.

At this point, however, we may wonder: how, more precisely, does Irigaray understand these two different “worlds” or “places,” of which she speaks: places that, it seems, grow and develop out of the very practice of dialogue outlined above? That is to say, if a dialogue that respects the finitude of each subject progressively constitutes and re-constitutes a limit between-two, it also constitutes and re-constitutes the *place* of each. Thus, I indicated earlier that Irigaray’s thinking of place indicates the concretization of the question of the call of being or language, particularly through figuring it in and as the relation of sexuate difference (understood as two different appropriations of language). But what, more precisely, does it mean to think place as a question both of language and of sexuate difference, or sexuate difference and language as questions of place? What is the force of speaking about two different sexuate “places” rather than two different sexuate beings? And what does it mean that they are “two?” To approach these questions, it is helpful to make a brief foray into Aristotle’s *Physics*, as Irigaray first

explicitly invokes “place” in dialogue with Aristotle. Following this I will explain how Irigaray takes insights gleaned from Aristotle’s discussion of place and imports them into the register of her thinking on language as an ontological question. Understanding what is at stake in this utilization of the thinking of “place” will deepen the picture I have already put forward of Irigaray’s vision of relational limitation.

## 2. Place and Sexuate Difference

In *An Ethics of Sexuate Difference*, Irigaray writes that “[today]...a nontraditional, fecund encounter between the sexes barely exists” (6). Furthermore, she suggests, it is “only by passing back through the definition of place” (37) that such a relationship could possibly be developed. But what is “place?”

### *A. Aristotle on physis and topos*

While much could be said about Aristotle’s thinking of place in its own right, I would like to focus on selected aspects of his account that show the way in which Irigaray creatively borrows from him for her own thinking.<sup>vii</sup> These aspects are, in particular: the aporetic quality of the question of place as reducible to neither matter nor form, the excessiveness of place to any one “being,” the notion of place as a “boundary,” and the concrete particularity of place. I first identify these aspects in Aristotle’s account itself, before showing how Irigaray incorporates them into her thinking of the relational limitation between sexuate subjects.

First, place (*topos*) constitutes (at least momentarily) an *aporia* for Aristotle. Indeed, because place can be assimilated to neither form nor matter, Aristotle states at the outset of Book IV of the *Physics* that it confounds our intuitions about nature such that “it

is necessary to be at an impasse not only about what [place] is, but even about whether it is” (Aristotle, *Physics*, line 209a30). That is to say, place is question-worthy precisely because it cannot be reduced to matter or form, and because it marks the fact that matter and form cannot be reduced to each other. In order to understand why *topos* is noteworthy in this way, then, it is helpful to contextualize the thinking of place within Aristotle’s overall investigation into the question of nature—a question that he himself approaches by way of a particular understanding of *motion*.

Indeed, in distinction from Newtonian physics, for example, which primarily considers motion as externally-determined, Aristotle views nature as both the source of motion and the visible expression of this motion.<sup>viii</sup> He writes at the outset of the *Physics* that “each of [the things that are by nature] has in itself a source of motion and rest, either in place, or by growth and shrinkage, or by alteration” (192b10). That is to say, “nature” (*physis*) on the one hand names those things that are self-moved (in distinction from those things that are only moved externally, as “a bed or a cloak” [ibid.] is). On the other hand, *physis* also names the *principle* or source (*arche*) of this motion: “nature is a certain source and cause of being moved and of coming to rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not incidentally” (192b21). Nature, then, names that which possesses within itself its own source of growth *as* the being that it is. Motion (*kinesis*) for Aristotle then designates phenomena like the growth and development of a plant or a child, as well as the externally-driven motions to which Modern physics is more likely to appeal (the example of billiard balls hitting one another, for instance). In fact, the growth of plants and children would be, from Aristotle’s viewpoint, paradigmatic examples of the self-movedness of *physis*. Insofar as nature is primarily

characterized by motion, then, the *Physics* as a whole can be understood as an attempt to explain nature as the source of motion understood in this broad sense.

Aristotle focuses this discussion of motion in Book II by positing the categories of matter and form: “nature is twofold...and is both form and material” (194a11), and suggests further that perhaps form draws matter into motion, and that this is how things grow and develop: “the growing thing, insofar as it grows, does proceed from something into something. What then is it that grows? Not the from-which, but the to-which [the form]” (194a19). It is in this context that the *aporia* of place in Book IV of the *Physics* reveals that the previously-discussed categories of matter and form are not enough to explain motion. A third, namely “place,” is required, for, as Aristotle writes: “everyone assumes that beings are somewhere” (202a27). Yet, what is place? Aristotle writes: “It is not without an impasse [...] if place has being: what it is, whether some sort of bulk of body or some other nature” (209a8), and: “[Place] has magnitude, but it is not a body. But the elements of sensible things are bodies, and out of intelligible things no magnitude comes about” (209a18). Place seems to be reducible neither to the material (sensible), nor to the intelligible, therefore it is not reducible to either form or matter; nevertheless place must somehow account for the interaction of the two. Thus, *topos* is precisely linked to the question of nature as a whole insofar as it names the “place” in which the self-propelled growth and motion of *physis* would occur. But what does this mean?

It is important to note that Aristotle’s introduction of *topos* as a third term in his discourse on nature does not simply “solve” the problem of the interaction of matter and form. Instead, as Aristotle proceeds with his inquiry, *topos* might be said to persist as an underlyingaporeitic moment. This is because in eluding or (un)grounding the distinction

between form and matter, the thought of *topos* actually throws into question the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible that underwrites Modern Western conceptions of body, mind, and language, according to which materiality and meaning are opposed. Indeed, while *topos* names the fact that matter and form (or sensible and intelligible) are not one, its persistence as a third, underlying term precisely prevents them from forming such an opposition in Aristotle's thought. We can glimpse the underlying radicality of *topos* even through Aristotle's settled-upon definition of it. Aristotle ultimately defines *topos* as "the first motionless boundary of what surrounds" (212a22). With this definition, Aristotle's inquiry seemingly moves forward, but the *aporia* mentioned above actually remains in play, subtending the matter/form distinction. *Topos*, as "the first motionless boundary of what surrounds," is curiously located as at least potentially particular to a given being, but not quite *part* of the being—not reducible either to its matter or its form. The boundary, while "motionless," somehow orients the growth or movement of the being that is "in" a place (place is also a source of motion) and furthermore marks it off from what is "other" to it—what is "outside" of its place. Yet it performs this function while remaining irreducible to the categories of form and matter, and furthermore, by being irreducible to *a* being.

This irreducibility, then, indicates the ontological resonance of *topos*. Indeed, Aristotle notes: "place seems to be different from all the things becoming present and exchanging with one another" in nature (208b6); and it can be neither matter nor form "[f]or the form and the material are not separated from the thing but the place can be" (209b20). Thus, *topos* seems to provide a kind of there-ness, a clearing for the emergence of the beings in nature, without being reducible to any one of those beings.



Furthermore, *topos* can also be understood to escape metaphysical oppositions such as those between mind and body, meaning and materiality. It names instead an event ontologically prior to these oppositions, that (un)grounds them: that is, that allows them to emerge, while also rendering them structurally impossible, since it persists as a “third.”

But if *topos* is to be thought of in this way, as a figure for the event of presencing, then does anything in fact differentiate it from the category of “being” or “*physis*?” Why speak about “place,” in the context of the current project? As mentioned above, for Aristotle, *topos* names a boundary that is not part of a being but that, in some sense, orients its becoming and marks its specificity. Through this specificity, through its belonging (and yet not fully belonging) to a particular being, “place” carries with it the implication of a *concrete particularity*—without for all that becoming reducible to the material. Ed Casey writes:

Place is the phenomenal particularization of ‘being-in-the-world,’ a phrase that in Heidegger’s hands retains a certain formality and abstractness which only the concreteness of *being-in-place*, i.e., being in the *place-world* itself, can mitigate. (1993: xv)

This quotation shows the connection between the thinking of the event of being and the thinking of place, but it also suggests that “place” concretizes ontological thinking and brings to it a certain *specificity*. That is to say: if place is the boundary between a being and what surrounds, it also marks off what is “in” one place from what is “outside” of it: thus marking, so to speak, identity and difference. Nevertheless, this marking does not create an *opposition* between a supposedly unified “identity” and a purely negative difference. It indicates (through its function as a boundary and as simultaneously a source and destination for movement) a particularity, without reducing this particularity to the “identity” of a static substance.

## B. Sexuate Topography

Throughout both *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and her most recent two texts (*The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*), Irigaray uses the language of place, boundary, threshold and motion. I have introduced the above aspects of Aristotle's account to clarify the way in which I think we should hear Irigaray's invocation of these categories. Thus, when Irigaray speaks of the "motion" or "growth" of sexuate subjects, we must understand this as a motion that is neither purely material nor purely intelligible—in short, we must understand it as a reference to the *event* of the presencing of sexuate subjectivity: an event that, as I have discussed, is always unfolding as a relation between "two." Furthermore, this unfolding takes place in and through the event of language understood as equivalent to the event of being—thus, if "place" names a way of thinking about this event that is simultaneously concrete yet neither sensible nor intelligible, it also corresponds to Irigaray's ontological thinking of language as itself an event that ungrounds these oppositions and that, furthermore, announces a relation between two manners of its own unfolding. These "two" places, then, are not two defined or fully-constituted beings, but rather they are delineated as two ways of unfolding, two ways of presencing in language. As indicated earlier, the progressive unfolding movement of each arises out of the constitutive withdrawal of the event of language that, for Irigaray, marks the fact that language is *relational*. This withdrawal, in other words, is productive insofar as it simultaneously serves as the source of motion *and* as the limiting boundary for each place. The "limit" named by this obscurity is relational. That is to say, the limits of each place are progressively produced precisely through a movement into and out of a shared obscurity that marks the shared boundary between the two.

Therefore, we should note that the “two” of place precedes the “one” of each. In other words, since the relation between the two is what allows for the presencing of each, each is only “one” as arising out of a two. Thus, we must take Irigaray’s “two” of sexuate difference, above all, as an indication of the way in which being, or presencing, is internally divided by a limit—and the way in which this limit is precisely what allows for the event of being at all.<sup>ix</sup> Further, we should take this invocation of “place” to denote that, like language, sexuate difference cannot be understood as in any way defined through traditional oppositions such as that of mind and body or meaning and materiality. That is to say, sexuate difference cannot be thought of as a “biological” *or* as a “cultural” difference, but rather, as Irigaray says, articulates a relation between the two, much as place, in its (un)grounding motion, articulates a relation between matter and form without allowing them to form an opposition.

Thus, it seems that Irigaray has taken Aristotle’s physical consideration of place into a linguistic register. We can see this by recalling our foregoing discussion of her vision of a new kind of dialogue between sexuate subjects. Indeed, we said there that a dialogue that respects relational limitation is precisely one upon which each subject-place attempts to speak in a way that respects the *boundaries* of the other: that thereby offers them a limitation toward which to grow, a limit with which to orient themselves as the beings that they are. Thus we see that Aristotle’s discussion of place, as that which subtends the growth of a being, clearly bears upon Irigaray’s own thought, insofar as it provides her with a framework to consider that which subtends the growth of a *subject*: subjective “place,” then, is that which is progressively carved out through an experience and practice of language, and which can then serve as a source for the movement of the

subject as well as a reminder of his or her concrete, embodied finitude. From this perspective, then, the term “subject” must now be considered as a continual self-gathering and presencing (primarily in language) in relation to another mode of self-gathering and presencing. With Irigaray’s invocation of language as neither purely material nor purely intelligible, we are able to see the connection between language and place: to develop one’s place through language is precisely the task of a dialogue that would attempt to respect relational limitation, since such a dialogue, as we have seen, involves above all attention to boundaries and limits construed as sources of motion. Thanks to the articulation of these boundaries, the enunciation of place is enabled in the movement of each “subject” alternately toward and away from the other, alternately toward and away from the mutual obscurity that divides and simultaneously connects the two, in the mutually-respectful dialogue Irigaray envisions. Like the lines created on a beach by the shifting of the ocean tides, the movement of each subject toward and away from the other iterates and reiterates this shared boundary between them that allows each to be what they are.

However, what happens when one of the subjects does not, in its movement, respect the boundary between the two? Although she does offer us a positive vision of two interdetermined places in *Ethics*, Irigaray also thematizes there the topography of sexuate difference under patriarchy—a topography that looks quite different from the topography of relational limitation, given that the mutual becoming of sexuate subject-places has in fact been severely stunted by the projection of the masculine as “the whole.” Indeed, insofar as the masculine subject has insisted upon constituting himself in relation to a *non*-relational limit, rather than a relational one, he has effectively prevented the

growth and motion of the feminine: prevented the development of her place. What does this mean? Because woman is denied the possibility of being a “subject” proper (through the conflation of the masculine and the neuter), she is unable to presence as the being that she is in language and, therefore, in “reality” construed as the shared task of becoming human in a society. In other words, if language is the place of the reception of the human—the place where we negotiate the value and meaning of being human as an ongoing task—and woman has been deprived of her own particular experience of language (precisely through the masculine’s refusal of the inherent *relationality* of the event of language), then woman is unable to find her “place,” to articulate her own boundary and thus to use it as a protective envelope: that is, to safeguard, through her place, the specificity of her own mode of presencing in relation to that of the masculine. The result of this ontological oppression is that woman remains effectively excluded as well from the public domain in which “human” values are constructed. For Irigaray, then, the variety of material oppressions women face under patriarchy are actually a *result* of this ontological suppression of woman’s place by way of denying her the possibility of subject-hood in language and culture.

Thus, Irigaray writes that, under patriarchy, woman lacks place for herself and instead serves as a “container” for man. This can be seen from the fact that “woman” *as such* has no place: she has “place” only in the superficial sense that she is understood as a category in the world of the masculine subject—either by way of being woman-as-mother, or woman-as-(heterosexual) lover. Neither of these designations, as currently defined, allows a place for woman-as-*other* (to man). Irigaray writes: “The maternal-feminine remains the *place separated from ‘its’ own place*, deprived of ‘its’ place. She is

or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other who cannot separate himself from it” (ESD: 10). Indeed, woman serves as “place” for a child in pregnancy, for a man in sexual intercourse, and, more figuratively speaking, as the “place” for the reproduction of (masculine) identity, on a patriarchal genealogical model. This means that her meaning and value is derivative of meanings and values that he defines: her body is reduced to its significance as the “vessel” for *his* child, and she and the child bear his name, which is the marker of his “identity” and which indicates his connection to and participation in the “public” world of politics, law and history. While he has a “place” there, she does not. Thus, the ways in which the “two” subjects, woman and man, are defined under patriarchy, are based on the prior constitution and definition of “identity” as a (masculine) “one.” According to this logic, it is the addition of these “ones” together that makes “two.” The “two” of man and woman under patriarchy, then, does not name two different *places*, but rather it names the constitution of one “being” or substantial identity only on the basis of a *suppression* of a more originary movement of and as “two.”

Further, this suppression involves the appropriation of “place” as the backdrop or container for the masculine “one.” Indeed, the fact that, as Irigaray here indicates, the masculine subject is incapable of “separating” from the feminine as place indicates that he *uses* woman as a place for himself but does not allow her a place of her own: instead of respecting the originary relation that first gives rise to identity (the “one” for Irigaray only arises out of a prior co-belonging as “two”) he constitutes his identity by a *rejection* of this relation. Woman then remains his “envelope” while he never becomes hers. But what does this mean? The historical expectation that women will tend the house and prepare there a place for men, to which they may return from their public dealings, is a

clear example of this utilization of woman as simply an envelope or a tool for constructing masculine identity. In this case, women do not occupy a “place” in the public society—and possibly not even in their own homes, since their specificity is not affirmed, and their projects in the home are not, in the end, *for* themselves, but for the sake of another. Women are, in this situation, merely auxiliaries to men, working to ensure the physical survival of those “subjects” who alone can legitimately participate in public affairs. Indeed, the very definition of legitimate “labor” such that it excludes women’s work in the home (which is viewed as illegitimate, as indicated by the fact that it is unpaid) is an indication of this utilization of woman as place for man. Just as materiality and femininity were together cast outside of Lacan’s “symbolic,” so the material upkeep of the home is cast outside of the sphere of “legitimacy” in patriarchal society: a problem that contributes to the gendered dimension of a vast inequality of wealth across the globe.<sup>x</sup>

Given the material and psychological ramifications of this situation, then, Irigaray writes that: “...woman always tends *toward* without any return to herself as the place where something positive can be elaborated” (ESD: 9); and that: “if [woman] is unable to constitute, within herself, the place that she is, she passes ceaselessly through the child in order to return to herself” (ESD: 35). This invocation of the “child” recalls the fact that the expectation for a woman’s particular way of participating in society is by giving birth to a “son.” Such an expectation indeed reflects a societal failure to stabilize and create a place for woman. (Freud and Lacan, we will remember, interpret the desire for a child as the appropriate adjustment of a woman’s desire to the exigencies of society: she cannot “have” the phallus for herself, but she can give birth to it in the form of a child.)<sup>xi</sup> Thus,

Irigaray suggests, we must rethink the very definition of place itself in order to think the relation between sexuate subjects insofar as “place” has been appropriated to a masculine model on which there is only one subject—a subject who is “in” place, who utilizes a woman-place as a container, but who does not consider the possibility of *another* place as a concrete alterity: another place as the “boundary” of a different “subject,” namely, the feminine. It is this underlying refusal of the limitation or boundary between two different places that results in the material conditions described above.

But what could it mean for woman to become a place *for herself*, to “be inside herself” (ESD: 41)? Irigaray writes:

[Woman] lacks, notably, the power to fold back around her the dwelling which she is. The power to clothe herself not only in the garments of seduction for the sake of man, or any other, but also in something that would speak her jouissance, her sexuate body, and would offer her the clothing and protection *outside* of that home which she is *inside*. Tradition places her within the home, sheltered in the home. But that home, which is usually paid for by man’s labor (this is the law of the land, as well as the religious law) encloses her, places her in *internal exile* [...] unless she is able, in some other way, to take on the envelope of her ‘own’ desire, the garb of her ‘own’ jouissance, of her ‘own’ love. (ESD: 65)

Recalling Aristotle’s discussion of place, for woman to lack her own place means to lack her own limit, her own boundary, her own “envelope.” It is also to lack a source of motion. In her reading of Aristotle, Irigaray writes:

The independence of place in relation to matter and form may be understood [...] to mean that place itself is that toward which there is locomotion. When separated from place, the thing feels an attraction to place as a condition of existence. If I may return to the parallel I have been drawing between the issue of place and the issue of sexual difference, I shall affirm that the masculine is attracted to the maternal-feminine as place. But what place does the masculine offer to attract the feminine? (ESD: 39)

While the masculine moves toward—to the point of fully occupying—the feminine, he does not offer woman a place toward which to move, a limit toward which to strive, in



order that she may constitute her identity like an envelope around her. As a result, she remains either “sheltered” in a home that is *his*, or clothed in the “garments of seduction”: attempting to attract him to her place—but this place is not really “hers” insofar as it is only a place *for* the other. In order for the feminine to be able to be a place for herself, then, it is above all the relationship between the two that must be altered, since he does not offer her a place toward which to move; and furthermore, by incessantly occupying her place, he does not permit its distinct development, its particular character. This means, then, that the *boundary* or limit denoted by place must also be rethought, since, if place is appropriated to a masculine model, that is, if the masculine does not also offer a place for the feminine, there is only a non-relational limit or boundary currently in play.

But how, more concretely, can we illustrate this occupation of woman’s “place?” In the next section, I offer the example of domestic violence as at once a concrete illustration of what it means (ontically, as it were) for man to occupy woman’s place *and* an example of one of the most widespread effects of the underlying, ontological suppression of the place of the feminine, and the refusal of the relation of sexual difference. Indeed, in domestic violence we see one particular result (and an especially deadly one) of the fact that masculine subjectivity, in patriarchal society, erodes and suppresses the place of the feminine precisely by failing to respect the relational limitation between the two. At the same time, the practice of domestic violence reinforces and perpetuates this underlying situation through its own specific tactics—tactics that, in large part, mirror those of the masculine subject as described by Irigaray.

### 3. Domestic Violence and the Erasure of Woman's Place

Domestic violence is clearly a gendered crime. The most recent national report on the status of women reads: "Intimate partners were responsible for 5 percent of all violence against males and 26 percent of all violence against females in 2008" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011: 53). Another statistic states that 95 percent of intimate partner violence is carried out by men against women (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2009). Further, domestic violence is a problem shared by women across the world (of all races, economic classes, and nationalities), and it is astonishingly widespread. Abuse counselor Lundy Bancroft (2002) writes:

Abuse of women in relationships touches an unimaginable number of lives. Even if we leave aside cases of purely verbal and mental abuse and just look at physical violence, the statistics are shocking: 2 to 4 *million* women are assaulted by their partners *per year* in the United States. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared that attacks by male partners are the *number one cause of injury* to women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. (5)

At the extreme, domestic violence kills women: Bancroft also reports that one-third of all female homicide victims in the United States are killed by an intimate partner.

Domestic violence is not just physical battering. It involves an ongoing pattern of acts by which (typically) a man exercises power and control over (typically) a woman. The "pattern" of domestic abuse may include episodes of physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse and coercion that, over time, reduce a woman's sense of self, reality, and personhood. Indeed, researcher Evan Stark (2007) argues that domestic violence must be understood as "a course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with [...] intimidation, isolation, and control" (5), rather than as a series of isolated physical incidents (which is the way it is treated by police departments and

courts of law). Furthermore, Stark suggests that domestic violence constitutes a human rights violation insofar as it is the erosion of a woman's very "personhood."

According to the vision I have been exploring, we could say that domestic violence is in fact a result of the denial of woman's place under patriarchy: a result of the underlying refusal of a relation to alterity that we have been discussing, at the same time as it is an example of the perpetuation of this refusal. Indeed, we could see domestic violence as the logical result of a situation in which the masculine subject has constituted his identity only through the appropriation of woman as a place *for* himself. An abuser's belief that it is appropriate to subject a woman to any number of controlling tactics in order to maintain her as merely a prop to his own identity and to prevent, above all, her becoming a subject in her own right—a subject who would confront him as a real other—makes sense from this point of view as an inheritance of the ontological situation of patriarchy (upon which a real relation between two is constitutively refused). Thus, domestic violence results from the prevention of woman's place in language understood ontologically, and it also perpetuates this underlying situation through the practice of cutting a woman off from the possibility of a positive bodily, linguistic dwelling, and thus from her becoming as a subject. In fact, domestic violence takes what should be a paradigmatic locale for the cultivation of one's "place"—one's home—and renders it actively antagonistic to a person's very becoming, to her very movement and growth as a "subject." But again, this is only possible because of an underlying reality of patriarchal society—namely, the reality that the "subject" is paradigmatically taken to be masculine and "one," and the corresponding fact that he *uses* alterity as tool to constitute his own sense of mastery, his own "unity" as a subject. The tactics of domestic violence then

appear to be in a cyclical relationship with the underlying ontological structure of patriarchal reality, whereby they are simultaneously manifestations of this structure and active agents of it. But how, more precisely, can we see this structure in a case of domestic violence?

Domestic violence works as a cycle of power and control, as noted above. This includes a wide variety of forms of manipulation that both exploit and perpetuate the subordinate position of women in society. Perhaps most relevant to the current project are certain types of psychological abuse (which almost always accompany physical abuse) that illustrate the precise way in which domestic violence can be understood as the very deprivation of a woman's own *reality*. For instance: a common tactic among abusive men is to make women feel crazy (and/or appear crazy to others). Lundy Bancroft reports on the tactics of several men in his Batterer Intervention Program:

Kenneth admitted that he used to dim the lights and then insist to Jennifer that nothing had changed, trying to make her feel crazy [...] James told me that he sometimes would hide something his partner was looking for, such as her pocketbook or car keys, wait for her to become frantic and frustrated looking for it, and then put it back out in plain view and insist that it had been there all along. Mario measured the distance from his house to the supermarket, and when his wife reported going out to shop during the day, he would check the odometer of her car to make sure she hadn't gone anywhere else. (19)

In my own experience counseling women in domestic violence situations, I have heard many additional examples of "crazy-making" behavior, along with typical controlling tactics: for instance, a man who repeatedly switched similar kitchen ingredients (such as flour and baking soda), and a man who utilized an internet program to make calls to a woman's cell phone under a variety of aliases—her mother's number, her brother's number, her own number—so that she became terrified of her phone. (Not incidentally, a local judge rejected her argument that this was a violation of the restraining order she had

placed against him). In addition to these more extreme examples are countless cases of men who perpetually tear down the self-esteem of their partners, criticizing them at every turn for their driving, their parenting, their friends, their sexual abilities or lack thereof, and their very understanding of the world, as well as physically intimidating and/or assaulting them. When combined with isolation (that is, in the absence of any supportive conversational partners) these tactics are equally crazy-making.

Why is it that abusive men would want to make their partners distrust their own sanity? Most often, an abusive man does this so that the woman will not trust her own perception of reality, and so that he can therefore control her. Through this control he can impose his own version of “reality” onto the relationship. When a woman has been systematically deprived of intersubjective confirmation of her reality—deprived of a living relationship—she no longer trusts her own perceptions. She is more likely to believe the abuser when he says, for instance, that it is her fault that he is hurting her—that she has provoked him to violence. Further, by isolating her from other relationships (with friends, with family, with community members), her abuser creates the illusion that he is in fact the one who is *supporting* her—he both creates *and* “resolves,” her pain, so she becomes indebted (even addicted) to him. Furthermore, because he controls the “reality” of the relationship (and because women, at large, are not taken to be trustworthy “subjects”), it is likely that others will not believe her reports of abuse, even if she does manage to make them. Indeed, it is notable that domestic violence itself was not, before the 1970’s, recognized as a “public” issue: according to arcane laws that supported the idea that a wife was the “property” of her husband, a woman experiencing domestic violence had no legal recourse and, effectively, no public voice. And this situation

persisted until relatively recently. Marital rape, for example, was not recognized as a crime in the United States as recently as 1976, and to this day some states regard it as less “serious” than other cases of rape (U.S. Department of Justice: 2006). This is a clear indication of woman’s lack of “place” under patriarchy: as “wives” women have historically lacked legal recourse *as women* to hold their abusers accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, it is notable, with respect to my discussion in the rest of this chapter, that many of the tactics of domestic violence function largely through manipulations of language (and that most violent physical tactics are accompanied by verbal and psychological tactics). Isolation, for example, primarily works through the prevention of *conversations* with others that would allow the woman to access different points of view on her situation, and to return to it with a greater understanding. At the extreme, an abusive man will move a woman to a foreign country (or take advantage of the fact that she is already in one) where she does not speak the language, thus insuring that he will be her only conversation “partner.”<sup>xii</sup> In these cases as well as in less extreme cases of isolation, the abusive partner remains a woman’s primary (in some cases her only) conversation partner; and since his conversation is aimed not at respecting her boundaries and allowing her to develop but rather at controlling her, this effectively reduces her “place” and stunts her subjective growth and motion. For instance, verbal manipulation tactics such as withholding (an unhelpful kind of silence), twisting her words, or using *anything* she says as an excuse to criticize or mock her, create confusion and disconnection between a woman’s speech and her desires: when she finds that

communication seems not to be occurring, she is likely to question her own ability to speak effectively, and even to question her own sanity.

But these specific abusive tactics are not truly the root of the problem. As Bancroft himself notes, the roots of abusive behavior lie in *beliefs about reality* on the part of the abusers (18): he further notes that, for counselors, the only way to help abusive men change is to make these beliefs explicit and then to question them. Building on this point from the Irigarayan perspective we have developed, we could say that abusive men are taking advantage of a real underlying situation: a situation in which women are *already* denied a place. That is to say, since, on the whole, subjectivity has been construed as masculine, it is not surprising that so many men inherit the belief that it is appropriate to use women as objects to control—to use them as instruments in order precisely to “prove” their own mastery. Furthermore, the reason that women are especially vulnerable to the tactics described above is that, at a more basic level, women are *already* denied a place in patriarchal “reality” by way of the fact that they are not legitimate subjects and are deprived of their specific relation to language. Thus, it is not difficult for men to convince not only the surrounding community but even the women themselves that their version of reality is the “real” one. In the absence of a recognized feminine place within language and (through this) in the public realm of meaning and value, women are more likely to fall victim to these controlling tactics. From this perspective, then, domestic abusers are taking the lack of women’s place under patriarchal reality to some of its most chilling logical conclusions.

Thus, there is a cyclical relation between the specific situation of a woman in an abusive relationship, and the overall situation of woman under patriarchy as Irigaray has

described it. In both cases, woman lacks the relational limitations required to become the being that she is. In the absence of a discourse that understands the ontologically inter-related nature of two subjective places, women in abusive situations often believe that they are to blame, for how could another person so fully deprive us of our own becoming? In order to break out of such a situation, then, a woman must be able to establish a place of her own: she must trust that there *is* something outside of this masculine-constructed reality, and she must cultivate this dwelling-place for herself. But this is not possible on one's own. As we have already seen throughout our reading of Irigaray, one's place can only be constructed in relation to others. Indeed, this is precisely why isolation and crazy-making tactics are so effective: one person *can* erode another's place, even without physical violence. Because the human comes to itself in language, and in particular in language as an event between-two, we require living relations and dialogue in order to fully become who we are. Thus, in order to emerge from a domestic violence situation, a woman must be able to have dialogues with others: possibly advocates, friends, supportive family or community members. These people must above all believe in her reality and empower her to take control of it: in other words they must provide limitations that return her to her own place in a productive way rather than imposing their reality (or their desire for control) onto her, as her abusive partner is doing.

But if, as Irigaray's work suggests, masculine subjectivity has all along attempted to actively nullify the reality of the feminine in order to *use* her for specific functions, especially that of shoring-up the illusory "unity" of the masculine subject, then the systemic problem of domestic violence cannot truly be solved in the absence of a new



relation to language and to the other such as Irigaray proposes. While I don't mean to suggest by this parallel that either Irigaray or I believe that all men are abusive in the sense described above, this parallel does suggest, in fact, that domestic violence is a more direct expression of an underlying belief about the structure of reality that holds sway in patriarchy: that (as Lacan bluntly stated) women do not *exist*—that is, they are not real “others” by whom masculine subjects are confronted. Thus, it seems that according to Irigaray's vision of interdetermined subjects, we are faced with a choice of how to respond to the call of language or being as relational: we can exploit one another on the basis of our very need for relation, out of defensiveness, or for purposes of control, or we can, through productive dialogue, attempt to enable one another's becoming. However, it should be noted that masculine subjects are, at present, faced with this choice more clearly than are feminine subjects, since they remain the subject in power. It is, in a very real sense, up to masculine subjects to initiate a real change in the patriarchal situation upon which women are perpetually physically, psychologically, and sexually abused.

Indeed, although many of us (both men and women) may wish to change the situation outlined above, the problem, as Irigaray sees it, is that because “subjects” have been assumed to be masculine or neuter, strategies for improving relations between people have also been sexually neutral. Therefore, according to Irigaray a new, nonviolent, relation between the sexes can indeed only be found through a new dialogue that transforms what it means to be a subject in such a way that we can think (and allow for) the coming-to-presence of *two* subjects. This would be accomplished through the masculine subject's recognition of its own limits and through the feminine's concomitant development of her own place (which has heretofore not truly existed). These ethical

tasks cannot truly be accomplished one without the other, again, since the becoming of each affects the becoming of the other, and since the boundary between the two is constitutively shared.

#### 4. Return to Place

In conclusion, we are now fully in a position to understand what Irigaray means by the “subject.” To appreciate this vision, let us return for a moment to Aristotle’s vision of *physis* as movement. Heidegger writes that, for Aristotle: “Φύσις is the self-productive putting-away of itself” (1998: 227). This means that nature emerges into the open only by going back into its own ground, as for instance a mature tree produces seeds that return into the soil, only to prepare for a future emergence. Since both the “ground” (i.e. the source) and the visible “manifestation” are *physis*, *physis* alternately moves out of and back into itself. Heidegger thus writes that, for Aristotle, *physis* is “a ‘going’ in the sense of a going-forth toward a going-forth, and in this sense it is indeed a going *back* into itself; i.e., the *self* to which it returns remains a going-forth” (Heidegger: 224).

Irigaray’s vision of subjectivity is similarly focused on the question of motion. For Irigaray, we might now say, each subject remains a going-forth (in language) *toward the other* and a return to the self. But the self to which it returns is determined and delineated in part by the existence of the other and the very necessity to return toward his or her place. So the self indeed remains a sort of “going-forth,” insofar as it is constitutively called upon by the very existence of language *to venture toward the other*. Indeed, this is what it means to say that language is, at base, relational and that

subjectivity is the movement of co-presencing in language. In *The Way of Love*, Irigaray writes:

*This motion* is what, in its going and its return, constitutes the subject, marking him with an imprint that he imposes upon himself but in which the other is present. [...] This subjectivity is essentially relational. (80, my emphasis)

What constitutes a subject for Irigaray, is the very *motion* of dialogue, the process of alternately going-toward the other and returning-back into the self. But, as she states here, “the other is present” in this motion, in the boundaries of one’s identity that are thereby delineated. This means that one’s subjectivity—one’s ever-evolving “place”—is never independent of the other’s. Thus, as the example of domestic violence shows us, the being (and well-being) of each will depend on the ever-shifting relation between the two. If one imposes itself as the sole subject (and backs up this imposition with physical, linguistic, political, financial, and emotional force), the “place” of the other will be damaged, and possibly even destroyed.

Therefore, in her own ethical vision of dialogue Irigaray is not speaking about “men” and “women” as fully-formed and present beings, whose relation to one another is in question. This would be to think “one” as the condition of “two” (thus, not a real “two”). Instead, she writes:

Speech does not a priori have to assign to each, man or woman, an identity. This identity has to be built. Being cannot simply be in the past, it is still future. Otherwise the human itself becomes a thing of speech, and of a speech virtually already constituted. (WOL: 82)

Sexuate difference does not name two parts that make up a “whole” (say, humanity as a whole). Instead, sexuate difference names the way in which the question of what “humanity” *is* is a question posed in an interval, a between, a boundary between interdetermined places: a boundary that perpetually delineates these two places. The

dialogue Irigaray proposes is precisely a question of developing the ever-evolving interval of this relation, and therefore a question of how to approach this relation in the most ethically-enabling way.

Irigaray writes, in *Sharing the World*:

Entering into communication, then, requires the limits, always effective, of a single discourse that would intend to say the whole, requires access to a silence thanks to which another world can manifest itself and its own meaning take place. Assenting to one's own limits is the condition for opening to the other as other, for receptiveness to a different language, for the discovery of a still-unknown world in which performance and mastery do not simply impose their law on us. Each subjectivity henceforth has before it a source of words and meaning foreign to that in which it dwells. The matter is no longer of opening a space or an interval in a language that is already shared, but of opening the horizon of each world beyond their own limits. (10)

Sexuate subjectivity for Irigaray is experienced as the linguistic development of place in relation to an ever-evolving limitation on each person's viewpoint. The limitation, at the same time, speaks of the possibility of its own progressive transgression and reinscription: as the possibility of changing the self as we learn from another, from a "still-unknown world." This quote also says that assenting to one's limits is what allows for a productive relation to the other at the same time as it is this very relation that provides us with these limits. No "single discourse" can "say the whole." Rather, to recognize the relationship of sexuate difference is to recognize it as what I have called a "relational limitation"—a structure that provides us with limits at the same time that it announces the possibility of opening beyond those limits through a *relation* to a different "subject." "Subjectivity" here does not refer to a fully-constituted human being, rather, it refers to the very process (marked by limitations and productive silences) of assenting-to and opening-beyond one's own world—to the process of realizing that this world is always formed by way of the relation to another world that one can never fully inhabit.

Only through such a recognition of relationality, Irigaray argues, can we fully respect each other's differences and build together a more ethical future. In her most recent, as-yet-unpublished work, she writes:

[...] The two different worlds do not have to confront each other in order to resolve, cancel or overcome their difference but have to integrate into their ethical duties the task of forming a new world, taking into account the fecundity of their different belongings. In other words, sexuate identities are to be taken into consideration to engender a relational culture, and their specificities are not to be ignored so that they unconsciously remain at work in our elaboration of truth and in our practices. (2010)

If the "relation" between sexuate subjects is assumed to take place *after* the construction of human subjectivity has already been performed along masculine parameters, then masculine values will continue to be unconsciously (or even consciously) put forward as the singular "truth," the singular "world," even the singular "language." If, on the other hand, we can transform the meaning of "subjectivity" to reflect the ongoing linguistic relation between two "worlds," two "places," (which always constitutes and re-constitutes their distinct belongings to language, their distinct modes of linguistic becoming) then we stand a chance of understanding and undertaking the ethical project proposed by Irigaray—that of "forming a new world," largely through the development of shared forms of speech.

Irigaray writes:

Silence must be preserved before meeting the other as a place in which his, or her, otherness can be welcomed. Silence must intervene in a dialogue with the other, as the condition for an exchange between two discourses to take place, without domination or submission of one discourse with respect to the other. (STW: 10)

The silence Irigaray appeals to here, importantly, is not the silence of one who is not allowed to speak, the silence of one who has lost (or been denied) the ability to speak and to constitute a place for herself. Instead, it is a new kind of silence: a silence that

announces the possibility of a future, precisely because it indicates the cessation of the “same” speech: the cessation of the speech that reduces everything to a measurement of the same, including alterity, and that thereby prevents the coming into being of a new kind of relation. In other words, it is the silence that the masculine discourse, above all, must initiate, as the dialogue Irigaray envisions cannot be effected by woman alone. Thus, to begin again, in the face of the failure of the relation between the sexes under patriarchy, is to begin from a silence in which we could again learn to hear the call of language—and this time, to hear it in its full, relational and embodied sounding. Irigaray, therefore, invokes a silence that would ring out with the possibility of a new, nonviolent future between the sexes: a silence that should, according to her, perhaps be broken only by the simple question: “who are you?”

## 5. Concluding Remarks

### *A. Summary of Arguments*

In this dissertation I have offered a preliminary response to the question of what Irigaray means by identifying sexuate difference as an “ontological” issue. I have taken up this task primarily in response to questions in Irigaray scholarship (identified in Chapters I and II) about the meaning of “ontology,” and about the relationship between the ontological status of sexuate difference and Irigaray’s explicitly ethical project (which dominates her most recent writings). There is a major concern in this scholarship about *what* sexuate difference is, and about whether, and how, it can be said to form the basis or foundation for Irigaray’s ethics and politics. There is also a related concern about whether Irigaray, through the movement of her work, has in fact shifted her philosophical

allegiances from a deconstructive approach to sexuate difference to a kind of naive realism concerning it. On this reading, the realist or essentialist view of sexuate difference that Irigaray allegedly embraces in her later work would be the “basis” of her political and ethical vision.

I have argued here, however, that Irigaray’s ethical project and her ontological one are actually indissociable, and furthermore that we cannot fully understand either without a prioritization of the question of *relation*. I have also argued that examining the priority of the question of relation reveals a unity to the movement of Irigaray’s oeuvre that shows us that it is not the case that she has changed her philosophical “framework,” as it were. Instead, the movement of Irigaray’s work performatively reveals the enactment of its content insofar as she demonstrates, through her dialogue with certain male thinkers, the process of attempting to carve out a place for the feminine within the masculine reality of philosophical discourse; and through this development creates a place out of which to speak as a dialogic partner with these thinkers. At no point does Irigaray speak as a self-same, neutral subject who would “own” her perspective, or who would claim to have “defined” sexuate difference once and for all. Thus I have suggested that Irigaray’s explicit thinking of a new, ethically-enabling dialogue between the sexes can be glimpsed both at the level of the content of her work, and at the level of its form; and that this priority of dialogue destabilizes the possibility of identifying Irigaray’s “definition” of sexuate difference. How have I explored these points?

In Chapter II, I clarified my approach by suggesting that we cannot fully appreciate Irigaray’s project if we remain within a questioning that relies on identity. In other words, if we approach Irigaray’s work with the *primary* question of the “what” of

sexuate difference in mind, we will miss both its depth and its unity. This is partly because we will be led to overlook the priority of the question of *relation* in this work. While “relation” has become a more explicit concern of Irigaray’s beginning with *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and continues to be so in her most recent writings, I showed that this question can actually be traced throughout her earlier work as well. I introduced this point in Chapter II by showing how Irigaray’s reading of Freud in *Speculum of the Other Woman* reveals that her primary concern is not with the “definition” of the feminine, but rather with the way in which the “masculine discourse” has repressed the possibility of a positive *relation* between sexually different subjects. It is this repression of the possibility of a relation that has created the situation upon which woman appears (in psychoanalytic discourse) only in reference to the male, as a “castrated” version of him. Therefore, I suggested, Irigaray’s work, from its beginning, identifies the necessity of transforming our notions of subjectivity—and indeed of “identity” itself—insofar as they are underwritten by the repression of a positive relation to alterity.

In Chapter III, I identified this repression of a positive relation to alterity with the notion of a “non-relational limit.” I discussed the way in which Irigaray’s intervention into Lacanian discourse revealed his constitution of the subject only by way of this non-relational limit, and thus by way of a *refusal* of relation. I showed how Lacan’s statement that “there is no relation between the sexes” possesses a strikingly different resonance within Irigaray’s work and Lacan’s work respectively. In Lacan’s oeuvre, this statement is made to appear as a simple (though unfortunate) “truth,” and as a condition for the establishment of the symbolic order, governed by the signification of the phallus. As such, the lack of relation between the sexes also appears as a condition (perhaps even *the*



condition) for the constitution of subjectivity. Irigaray's intervention, however, shows that this "truth" is in fact performatively *produced* by Lacan's conception of the symbolic system, with its focus on the phallus as the privileged signifier. Irigaray shows how the priority of the phallus is founded on a tautological move whereby the feminine is precisely *erased* from the symbolic in order to function as its "outside," and therefore in order to shore up the priority of the phallus by allowing for an opposition between "meaning" and materiality.

As we saw, however, Irigaray is able to reveal this move neither by setting herself up as a "subject" (either within or without the Lacanian system) nor by simply claiming that Lacan's theory is "incorrect." Instead, because she believes that Lacan's discourse on feminine sexuality is in fact "the discourse on truth" insofar as it *is* the truth of the (non)relation between the sexes under patriarchy (that is to say, in a situation where the masculine has claimed to be the subject *tout court* and thus constructed both subjectivity and identity in a non-relational and singular manner), she begins from a position "inside" of these truths, and yet speaks in a way that reveals them to be the performative projection of one *particular* logic of truth. In other words, Irigaray's writing reveals, through an immanent critique, that the Lacanian system produces its "truth" through a movement that consists primarily in the refusal of a relation.

I thus suggested that Irigaray's earlier works leave us with the question of how woman is to find her voice and her place in this situation, if her "reality" and her place are denied by a masculine projection of itself as the sole "subject" of language and truth. The feminine (and feminist) response to this situation, according to Irigaray, cannot be to simply assert the reality of the feminine, nor to develop a "definition" of subjectivity in

the feminine. Rather, Irigaray's intervention takes place at a deeper level—at the level of what *underlies* the masculine conception of subjectivity. This, then, I suggested, is how Irigaray is pushed into the realm of Heideggerian ontology, as it is through her dialogue with Heidegger that she develops the resources for articulating the question of sexuate difference as an ontological question. The fact that sexuate difference is an “ontological” question, I argued, means that it *is*, for Irigaray, the question of being insofar as it is the question of an enabling event that has been covered over by the history of metaphysics in its elaboration of subjectivity as a question of substance.

Further, while both Lacan and Heidegger prioritize the question of language for a thinking of the human, Lacan's conception of language, as I showed in Chapter III, is not germane to a thinking of sexuate difference insofar as it is precisely based upon the construal of the feminine and of the material as *outside* of the symbolic order. In Chapter IV, then, I examined Irigaray's engagement with a Heideggerian thinking of language, which connects language with the event of being: an event which must be understood to subtend oppositions such as materiality and meaning, and that also escapes a metaphysical determination of subjectivity. Indeed, for Heidegger, language exceeds the human, as the event that gives it over to itself. This conception of language, I suggested, offers Irigaray the possibility of pursuing a thinking that would escape the constraints of patriarchal culture, since it allows access to a kind of hiddenness of possibility. If we can remain attuned to the very concealment and withdrawal of the event of language, Irigaray suggests, we will be able to uncover alternative possibilities for humanity, alternative ways of becoming attuned the call of language or being.

Finally, I suggested, Irigaray's thinking ultimately opens up a new place of thought, one that supersedes both Lacanian and Heideggerian paradigms. In Chapter IV, I indicated that Irigaray locates a problematic solitude in Heidegger's conception of the event or call of language and the human's reception of this call. In Chapter V I suggested that she supersedes this solitude through thinking the event of being or language as irreducibly *relational*. In this way, I proposed that Irigaray's ontological thinking of the event of language as relational is inseparable from her ethical thinking of a new kind of dialogue between sexuate subjects, insofar as the meaning of the term "subject" in her work denotes the progressive development of a "place" in and through language, especially language practiced dialogically. Using the figure of "place," then, to thematize the way in which Irigaray concretizes the question of being as the call of language and links it to the question of sexuate subjectivity, I offered a reading of the figure of sexuate subjects as two different "places" in Irigaray's work, in order to thematize what I have called "relational limitation." The thinking of relational limitation stands in contrast to the non-relational limitation previously invoked (e.g. in Chapter III), in that it names the way that the subject, for Irigaray, constitutes and limits itself in language not by precluding a relation to alterity but by precisely recognizing its own finite character in relation to another, finite alterity. Thus, the image of two interdetermined places is at once an ontological vision of the event of language as internally-differentiated; and is simultaneously an ethical vision that calls for each subject-place, in its growth and motion, to respect the limitation provided by the motion of the other. Indeed, when this does not occur (as Irigaray suggests it, for the most part, has not in the history of Western philosophy) the "place" of one subject (namely the feminine) is eroded and even

violently occupied by the other. I offered the example of domestic violence to concretize such occupation, and to present a concrete parallel to the repression of the feminine place that we saw, for instance, with Lacan's non-relational limitation.

### *B. Movement of the Project*

Throughout this project I have attempted to allow my own textual analyses to function as a place for Irigaray's voice to be received in its resonance with the voices of others. I have tried to do this not by dominating her work under the unifying sign of my "own" interpretation, but rather by placing her voice next to the voices of those with whom she engages, to see where tensions and resonances emerge. Through this process, I have attempted to follow the *movement* of her thought, in order to glimpse not only its content but also its structure. In the end, a resonance has been revealed between these two, insofar as Irigaray speaks both of and *as* a woman seeking her place, attempting to construct a voice for herself as a subject in a masculine-dominated reality. This project reveals the fact that one's place cannot be constructed except in relation to the place of the other—thus, the project of finding the feminine place is also the project of limiting the masculine place, and of constituting each in relation to, and in respect of, the other. This is a task that is incumbent for all sexuate subjects, I have suggested, if we hope to create a less violent relation between us, and if we hope to accomplish our unfolding as the human beings that we might be. It is also the task of Irigaray's own writing. She reflects on this task in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*:

In order to distance oneself, must one be able to take? To speak? Which in a certain way comes to the same thing. Perhaps in order to take, one needs a fixed container or place? [...] Mourning nothing is the most difficult. Mourning the self in the other is almost impossible. I search for myself, as if I had been assimilated into maleness. I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of a disassimilation...Rise again from the traces of a culture, of works already

produced by the other. Searching through what is in them—for what is not there. What allowed them to be, for what is not there. Their conditions of possibility, for what is not there. (10)

In searching through the productions of masculine subjectivity for “what is not there,” Irigaray searches for a *place*—not a “thing” or a being but the place that enables these things, these productions, to be. She enacts this search through her dialogue with masculine thinkers, alternately speaking “in” their voices, and from her “own” place (progressively delineated throughout these dialogues). That is to say, Irigaray speaks alternately “in” the voice of the other (invoking truths located in Lacan and Heidegger) and in an emergent voice that could be called her “own” only in relation to these other voices. This practice allows her to simultaneously adopt certain ways of thinking from these philosophers, while revealing their *limitations*, precisely by speaking from a place that is decisively outside of their systems—a place where the foremost concern is with the possibilities of a living relation to the other. In order to reveal this structure, it has been necessary for me to listen both to Irigaray’s own words and those of her interlocutors in order to find the ways in which they resonate with one another: that is to say, the ways in which the “same” words (e.g. “being,” “relation,” “subjectivity,” and even “sexual difference”) carry different shades of meaning in the work of Irigaray than they do in the texts in which she first finds them. This shifting of the meaning of words is precisely indicative of Irigaray’s own proposed vision of a dialogue that enables rather than paralyzes the becoming of human beings.

Thus, Irigaray’s thinking of a positive relation between sexuate subjects is in fact a development enabled by her dialogue with psychoanalysis and philosophy: in particular, as I have discussed here, with Lacan and Heidegger. However, at the same

time, her work calls out for a response: it resounds, over and over again, as an appeal for a new dialogic partner: one who would respect the limitations of his own subjectivity provided by the movement of the feminine place. That is to say, if Irigaray returns Lacan and Heidegger to themselves *as* masculine—by precisely revealing that their supposedly “neutral” claims about language and reality actually proceed from a *particular* place that has misconstrued itself as the universal—her work also requests that masculine subjects attempt to do the same: that they attempt to return the feminine to her place rather than dominate her place through their belief that humanity and masculinity are one. She calls for this through the vision of a dialogue that begins with the silence of a new possibility, the silence of a new approach: one in which sexuate subjects could encounter one another “as though for the first time” (ESD: 13).

### *C. Thoughts for the Future*

Through the movement of this project, “relational limitation” has emerged as an ethical practice—namely, the practice of reminding ourselves of our finitude in relation to a concrete other and of allowing this limitation to destabilize and re-constitute our horizon of meaning, our very way of inhabiting language and of responding to its call. This practice presents itself as applicable to and useful for all human relations. After all, we are never the “same” as another, and we would all certainly benefit from recognizing the productive limitations and connections between us. However, given that I (and Irigaray) have specifically thematized the ontological question of relation by way of sexuate difference, is there not a tension between relational limit construed as applicable to any relation and the ontology of relation understood as primarily concerning sexuate

difference? Indeed, what, more precisely, does it mean to prioritize sexuate difference in this way?

As I discussed earlier, Irigaray identifies sexuate difference as a difference in relational identity exemplified through a differing relation to the mother on the part of the boy and the girl. I have interpreted this difference in Heideggerian terms as the differential calling of language taken up by two different human “subjects,” who are themselves understood as places produced by the progressive movement of their relational selves. As such, then, the differential structure of sexuate difference has a kind of ontological priority because it conditions the very way in which meaning occurs for sexuate subjects (language being understood as the occurrence of meaning). This point is further illustrated by the fact that, if the relation of sexuate difference is repressed—that is, if the different relations to the mother evinced by the boy and the girl are covered over by an interpretation of language that reduces it to a single signifier and that rejects materiality *tout court*—then neither masculine nor feminine subjects can come to be the beings that they are. Indeed, this is because the becoming of each depends upon the formation of a relational limitation in language. If language is constituted with reference to a single privileged signifier, however, then it is effectively constituted via a *non-*relational limit, and cannot provide the limits necessary for the cultivation of sexually-different relational identities. Instead, in this case, language itself is understood to operate according to a unitary model: the model of one subject, sexually “neutral” insofar as it refuses a relation to embodied alterity. In the face of the domination of this unitary language, Irigaray’s suggestion is that to change the status of the relation of sexuate difference we must return to the relational differentiation given in the call of language as

sexuately-different, and attune our speaking to this embodied relational difference. This involves an attentiveness to materiality and a rejection of previously-coded information, hierarchically organized according to oppositions, as well as the ethical practice of “relational limitation,” which, as I have described it, involves a willingness to open oneself beyond one’s boundaries and to constantly re-constitute these boundaries in recognition of the irreducibility of the other.

However, the question remains: does this interpretation of the relation of sexuate difference as conditioning the possibility of meaning and relation for human subjects inherently privilege the *ontic* relation of sexuate subjects (that is, relations between women and men) *over* relations between those who are the “same” sex, either ontologically or ethically? In other words, does the claim that sexuate difference conditions meaning effectively colonize same-sex relations under the heading of “sexuate difference” by interpreting *all* relations according to this model? Or, on the other hand, does it hierarchically privilege sexuately-different relations over relations between those of the same sex? Does such privileging, indeed, imply that ontic relations between men and women will be more important to the task of constructing an ethics of sexuate difference than relations between those of the same sex will?

It seems to me that the response to these important concerns lies in the fact that the question of the ontological relation of sexuate difference is different from the question of the ontic relations between sexuate subjects. But what do I mean by this? First of all, to say that sexuate difference conditions the possibility of meaning for each subject is *not* the same thing as to say that a specific relationship with a sexuately-different other conditions the possibility of meaning. In fact, the cultivation of the



possibility of sexuate difference (ontologically speaking) could take place through dialogues with any sexuate other. This is because the cultivation of sexuate difference, as we have said, involves an attunement to one's relational specificity by way of an attention to the connection of embodiment and language and the progressive delineation of one's boundaries in light of the fact that one is not the only kind of subject there is. But this attunement can certainly be pursued through dialogues between those of the "same" sex: those between women as well as those between men. In fact, transformative dialogues between men might be particularly germane to an ethics of sexuate difference insofar as men, having inherited the belief that their subjectivity is the only one, need precisely to discover their own internal limitation and sexuate specificity in order to respect the other. If men were to dialogue with this aim they may well learn new truths about their own specificities. The same is true of women, many of whom have indeed already begun such dialogues.

The point I am making, then, is not that men and women can only discover their sexuate specificity in *ontic* relations with each other, but rather that what it means to be a "man" or a "woman" is ontologically conditioned by the relational differentiation of language. In other words, "man," for Irigaray, names a particular relational structure that can only become manifest in language through the recognition of language's inherent sexuate duality. Thus, a recognition of the ontological relation of sexuate difference *is* necessary in order for sexuate subjects to become what they can be. However, the development of this recognition, the practice of attempting to attune one's own speech to this inherent duality of language can—indeed must—be undertaken in dialogues with *all* sexuate others. Furthermore, same-sex relations will not present the same relational

structures as differently-sexed relations will, but this does not make one kind of relationship “better” or “worse” than the other. Instead, both kinds of relation will be precisely necessary to the development of an ethics of sexuate difference, insofar as each sex needs to cultivate its own place in relation both to those who are “same” and to those who are “different.” While dialogues between men and women are surely necessary to an ethics of sexuate difference, they will therefore not suffice to bring about such an ethics on their own, without dialogues between men and men, and between women and women. The reverse is also true—same-sex dialogues will not, in and of themselves, be sufficient for such an ethics either.

We can thus say that ontic relations between those of the “same” sex and those of “opposite” sexes are *equally* important to the development of an ethics and culture of sexuate difference. Irigaray’s vision does not dictate, then, that women must form our primary relationships (intimate or otherwise) with men.<sup>xiii</sup> What it does dictate is that, within all of these ontic relations, our focus must remain on developing a new kind of language that corresponds to a new kind of relation to the other: a kind of language that does not ground itself in a single disembodied signifier but that (un)grounds itself in an ever-developing relation. To the extent that our ways of inhabiting language itself are differentiated by the relation of sexuate difference, then sexuate difference will be present (in some form) in *any* relation, including one between women—insofar as what it means to be a “woman” is precisely conditioned by the ontological relation of sexuate difference: the fact that meaning occurs in two different ways for the human. The underlying differential structure of *language*, then, is what constitutes the ontological priority of sexuate difference. The priority is not of an ontic relation between man and

woman, even as these relations would certainly be improved by the recognition of the underlying structure of sexuate difference, as the example of domestic violence has shown.

In the end, if the masculine persists in claiming to be the only “subject” (a claiming that occurs through a certain interpretation of language) then the places of sexuate subjectivity simply cannot fulfill their full potential, since sexuate difference itself is repressed on this model of subjectivity. Indeed, the place of woman undergoes particular violence in being subjugated to the “singular” model of subjectivity that is effectively a monstrous projection of the masculine. Again, however, this does not mean that each individual woman must forge an intimate relation with a man to fulfill her full human potential, or vice versa. It means instead that subjectivity and language themselves must be changed on a systemic level; and further that this change would revolutionize not only relations between men and women, but also relations between women and women, and relations between men and men, since the places of each would, through the establishment of relational limits, finally be enabled to grow and to thrive. This change would certainly need to encompass multiple levels: material, linguistic, genealogical. But insofar as it is through language that we develop our subjective place, Irigaray suggests, it is through dialogue that such change may first be sparked, as the interpersonal (which is not reducible to the “intimate”) is precisely the place where new values may be created—values precisely irreducible to the self-authorizing, and totalizing, value of the phallus. I would thus like to close with a quote from Irigaray’s recent paper “Ethical Gestures Toward the Other” (2010) that emphasizes the open-ended potential of her vision of a new style of communication:

Listening to the other is not only to hear some information from him or her. Rather it is to listen to the words of the other as to something unique, especially irreducible to my own world, as to something new and still unknown. [...] Such a listening requires me to listen to the other as to the revelation of a truth that has yet to manifest itself, this of the other and of their world (sic). Instead of hearing this truth as something which already belongs to my past, the question is of opening myself to a future that has not yet happened and that I venture to welcome.

In fact, this constrains us, at each moment, to a double listening: to the language in which we already dwell, but also to the saying that the other addresses to us. Our coming into presence with one another can only happen through the intertwining of this double listening, that builds a place in which we can approach one another [...] If it is not so, that which is heard might give voice to the one or to the other, or even to a discourse grounded in a lack of consideration of the one and the other and of their being in relation. Such a saying has dominated our culture for centuries and it is difficult to overcome it so that we might hear what the other is saying to us. (11-12)

I hope that what I have offered here may indeed set us anew on the path of hearing what Irigaray is saying to us: that of hearing the emergence, in the present and the future, of her unique voice, rather than that of hearing this voice, this truth, as something which “already belongs to [our] past.”

## 6. Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This projection, as we saw in Chapter III, is accomplished in large part through language; and in particular through an interpretation of language that refuses a relation to alterity by casting both materiality and the feminine as its “outside.”

<sup>ii</sup> The reader will note, of course, that this particular expression of God seems to be specific to monotheistic traditions. For Irigaray’s own explorations of alternative expressions of God (and the possibility of a God in the feminine), see “Divine Women” in *Sexes and Genealogies, Between East and West*, and the “Religion” section of *Key Writings*.

<sup>iii</sup> Irigaray carried out the studies to which I refer in primary school classrooms in Italy, and reports of the data as well as Irigaray’s interpretations can be found in the collection *To Speak is Never Neutral*, edited by Gail Schwab, as well as in *Key Writings* and *I Love To You*. While an in-depth consideration of this work falls outside my scope, I hope that the current project indicates the way in which we might see the differences in language-

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use that Irigaray discovers (e.g. the tendency of boys to speak in the first person, to speak of subject-object relations and the tendency of girls to favor subject-subject relations and the second and third person) as at once indications of a differential relation to the mother experienced by sexuate subjects *and* as also subject to (some) change based upon the status of the relation of sexuate difference itself. That is to say, if masculine subjectivity were to cease projecting itself as the whole of reality then these linguistic differences themselves might appear differently. This point is substantiated by the fact that Irigaray indicates that relational, sexuate identity is not static and unchanging—it must precisely be modified in order to bring about a more ethical relation between the sexes. In *Conversations*, for instance, she says that “*both* man and woman must modify their relational identity” (14) in order to bring about a culture of sexuate difference, and suggests that each sexuate subject might in fact learn from the other. However, certainly she would not suggest that they can or should change so radically as to become the *same* as one another: an irreducible difference will always obtain, and should be preserved in our speaking, insofar as sexuate difference precisely names the ontological event of the self-differentiation of language.

<sup>iv</sup> It should be noted that Heidegger’s *On The Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*) was translated into French as *Achiment vers la parole* (On The Way Toward Speech). Thus, Irigaray’s use of the term ‘speech’ (*parole*) should not necessarily be seen as a departure from Heidegger’s usage of *Sprache*, as it might be for an English or German speaking reader.

<sup>v</sup> “Woman cannot but be excluded [*il n’y a de femme qu’exclue*] by the nature of things, which is the nature of words, and it must be said that if there is something that women themselves complain about enough for the time being, that’s it. It’s just that they don’t know what they’re saying—that’s the whole difference between them and me” (Lacan, 1999: 73).

<sup>vi</sup> She emphasizes, for instance, in the short piece “Towards a Sharing of Speech” in *Key Writings* that we must learn to speak “outside the language used to designate objects [...] outside a subjugation to meanings defined already independently of us” (79).

<sup>vii</sup> It should certainly be noted that Irigaray’s treatment of Aristotle is (not surprisingly) unorthodox. Further, it vacillates between criticism and appropriation. However, it seems to me that her utilization of certain moments of Aristotle’s account—in particular the aporetic quality of *topos* and the definition of it as a kind of boundary—is faithful to his thinking. Thus, I focus specifically on these moments. For more textually complete explorations of the way in which Irigaray engages Aristotle see Casey (1998) and Bianchi (2010).

<sup>viii</sup> I examine in greater detail the relation of both Aristotle’s and Plato’s accounts of “place” (*Topos* and *Chora*) to Newtonian physics in a forthcoming article entitled “The Nature of Place and the Place of Nature in Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s *Physics*,” (forthcoming in *Epoché*, Spring 2012). I further explain how, although contemporary

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physics has rejected Newton, his conceptions of Absolute Space and Time still hold a certain intuitive sway.

<sup>ix</sup> The question of the use of the number “two” has been raised by feminist commentators as potentially restrictive insofar as it might be seen to reduce sexual difference to its traditional iteration as “male” and “female.” A full consideration of this issue would require covering theoretical ground that is beyond the scope of this dissertation (in particular, the question of the relation of Irigaray’s work to the sex/gender distinction in Anglo-American feminism). However, I do intend my reading of *place* to offer a preliminary destabilizing of the possibility of reading “two” in this traditional way. First, the definitions of “man” and “woman” that currently hold sway are the products, according to Irigaray, of the repression of a real relation to alterity, and thus these “subjects” are clearly not the “two” to which she refers. Furthermore, the possibility of counting itself is destabilized through Irigaray’s ontological thinking of subjectivity as an event of becoming in relation to another—*not* as a unified substance or being. What I would like to indicate, then, as a direction for future exploration, is that the question of whether Irigaray’s “two” (or “at least two”) is restrictive cannot be properly approached until we have understood the question of *place* as the indication of a two that *precedes* the constitution of a “one.” For some existing discussions of the issue of “two” that appreciate the complexity of the question, see Stone (2006) and Grosz (2005).

<sup>x</sup> Indeed, even as women have (fairly recently) gained the right to participate in public affairs in many countries across the globe, the deep-rootedness of the expectations concerning a gendered division of labor in the home remains. Feminists continue to discuss the problem of reproductive labor—which is not counted as “work” proper and which remains primarily a woman’s responsibility, even as she may be working outside the home equally as much as a male partner. See, for instance, Hochschild, 2003. For statistics on the gendered division of wealth across the globe, see the United Nations report on the status of women (UNIFEM, 2008).

<sup>xi</sup> It is also worth noting that Lévinas hails the birth of the “son” as a prime ethical moment in *Totality and Infinity*, while simultaneously denying that the feminine is a real ethical “Other,” since she merely dwells within the elemental “home” and prepares there a place for the subject.

<sup>xii</sup> A surprising number of women whom I have counseled on the crisis line at a domestic violence agency in Eugene, OR, for example, have been non-native English speakers from Russia, Thailand, or China (this is surprising given that Eugene is not a place of great cultural diversity). At the extreme, some of these women could barely speak English and were being completely economically, linguistically, and physically controlled by men. They nevertheless called the hotline in rare moments when the men had left the house and they had access to a telephone, or they would call while hiding in a closet with the phone.

<sup>xiii</sup> As Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell worried in the 1998 *Diacritics* issue.

## APPENDIX

### ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS BY LUCE IRIGARAY

SOW: *Speculum of the Other Woman*

SAF: *Speculum de l'autre femme*

TS: *This Sex Which Is Not One*

CS: *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*

WOL: *The Way of Love*

STW: *Sharing the World*

ESD: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*

CV: *Conversations*

ILTY: *I Love To You*

JLI: "Je- Luce Irigaray" (Interview)

TBT: *To Be Two*

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