Introduction

Since the 1974 publication of her early philosophical work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray has generated texts whose complexity, ambiguity, and bold critique may be honored deservedly as a dynamic and stunning contribution in the field of contemporary Continental philosophy. Her writings weave artfully the disciplines of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and linguistics in a style that has transformed our thinking, with her now signature ellipses, opaqueness, and deliberate confounding of gendered expectations. Her questioning of the Freudian “feminine” and her cutting analysis of Lacan’s work on the law of the father and phallus instigated her expulsion from the University of Vincennes. Ironically, the agency of writing and speaking as a woman, “écriture féminine” caused a stir that attempted to mute or dismiss her voice. Indeed, the bitterest criticism came throughout the 1980s with the feminist reception of work, dubbed “essentialist,” and worse, a repetition of the phallogocentrism she attempted to disrupt. But as her readership has expanded, feminists argue a more nuanced reading of her work revealing a strategic or political essentialism,\(^1\) calling into question the essentialism/anti-essentialism binary itself.\(^2\)

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2 I discuss in detail the debate over her essentialism in chapter two, section three “Irigaray, Essentialism, and Difference: The Question of Nature and Culture.”
In a sense, the force of her style, to write in her own voice, to speak without a compulsion to obey the stricture of the academy, to expose the androcentric thinking of the discipline itself and its insistence on unity, solidity, and binary thinking in service of a Self-Same, has exposed her to the greatest censure. Yet, I assert it is the places of censure, the exposure of philosophy’s “unwritten” assumptions, and her refusal to obey the master discourse, which has caused her work to be so fertile and fecund. More than just an academic rebelliousness, her work is a burgeoning oeuvre in its own right.

Feminists such as Margaret Whitford, Elizabeth Grosz, Tina Chanter, Penelope Deutscher, and Rachel Jones have reintroduced the academy to the rigor and legitimacy of her work in correlation to the major philosophers she analyzes, particularly for English-speaking audiences, and have demonstrated the profound need to read her work in context, with psychoanalysis and with Continental philosophy. Indeed, the strategy of her mimetic style makes little sense without the dialogue she invokes with these traditions. Indeed several collected works do more than just introduce or resituate her texts, but they engage, extend, and transform the way her work can be read.

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Her work continues to gain traction in a number of regions around the globe and in disciplines other than philosophy. Since 2003, Irigaray has held a summer seminar at the University of Nottingham with researchers completing doctoral degrees in her work. As the seminar website explains,

The participants in the seminar come from different regions of the world, they belong to different cultures, traditions and fields of research – Philosophy, Gender Studies, Religious Studies, Literature, Arts, Critical and Cultural Studies, etc. The themes of their research include, for example: the treatment of personal or cultural traumatic experience; the resources that various arts can offer for dwelling in oneself and with the other(s); the maternal order and feminine genealogy; the interpretation and embodiment of the divine today; the contribution of sexuate difference to personal and social development; new perspectives in philosophy etc. In each of these fields, diverse domains, approaches and methods are represented. To date, the participants have come from Australia, Vietnam, Korea, China, India, Sri Lanka, South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Latvia, France, Belgium, Pakistan, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Iceland, Romania and from different regions and universities of the U.S.A. and of the U.K.5

Clearly, her writings extend globally, as the mounting translations of her works indicate, and her reach continues to expand the borders of her own foci. It is

with the verve of multicultural living, and the potential hope and violence that such living augurs, that I orient the aim and importance of this thesis: toward the furtherance of Irigaray's ethical claims regarding citizenship and issues of gender, poverty, ecological sustainability, and religious tolerance.

Spirituality, ethics, and religion remain important fields of interest in her work and she indicates so in her self-edited work *Key Writings*. Giving the religious dimension its own section, she writes of her growing sense of the importance of religion's cultural influence. She believes it is vital that we explore the religious aspect if we are to situate ourselves with respect to it. She explains, “I am afraid that, by neglecting such a task, we harm our subjectivity and the relations with our cultural environment and with the others(s).” While her early works center on Western themes, figures, and tropes, her later spiritual writings have moved toward the Indian or Hindu tradition (*Between East and West*), particularly focusing on the pre-Vedic era of female and male deities. She observes the spiritual exercises of this teaching through the practice of tantric yoga and writes of its potential to help elaborate the intersubjectivity of her phenomenological critique. Irigaray's project of elaborating sexual difference began within the corridors of Western philosophy, often critiqued for their opaqueness and density, but more recently her writings have become less formal (fewer footnotes), and with a possible effort to be more accessible to general readers and listeners in diverse disciplines, such as law, education, architecture, art, and religion. Her writings on religion may seem

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6 Irigaray, KW, 145
disconnected from her earlier work, but have, I believe, greater impact and clarity when read as an elongation of her philosophical and psychoanalytic works.7

While other works regarding Irigaray have focused on her spiritual theology,8 this thesis points toward the outcome of this spiritual and sexually differentiated humanism—a refashioning of human morality and ethical relations. The thesis offers a general philosophical introduction to her work in order to present her main themes and relate her to the psychoanalytic, philosophical, and religious influences she encounters. I suggest her work in religion has particular importance given the sometimes perceived cultural clash between secularism and religion. Instead of privileging modern secularism and dismissing religion as parochial and anti-feminist, Irigaray offers a feminist re-reading of religion that bridges the concerns of secularism (tolerance) and religious communities (respect for the sacred). I argue that her work has an even broader impact and in this thesis I expand the scope of her work into the fields of ecological feminism, animal


liberation, and the ongoing debate of how a multi-cultural and global public can understand the relation between the religious and the civic.

I will suggest Irigaray’s philosophical contributions can be understood as an ethically enriched and deepened humanist extension of the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and French existentialism, as well as Feuerbach’s humanist project, with the sexual difference twist that is always her signature. I understand her religious writings to transcend any specific sacred tradition or text. Instead, she freely incorporates the ideas, themes, and motifs of the sacred in order to sustain her primary thesis of female subjectivity and human intersubjectivity in an ethically sensitized global context. Therefore, she is ultimately one who seeks the flourishing of humanity in its sexed fullness and believes the ethico-spiritual flowering of a sexually differentiated humanity ought to be an integral component of female self-affection and self-representation, as well as a strategic and affirming self-limitation of the genders. Rather than being bound to a religious tradition, she tightly weaves her content as a critique and engagement with the Western philosophical tradition, unraveling the psychoanalytic symbolic and imaginary that malevolently secures a mono-sexuate culture. As her task is to exemplify the self-affection and self-representation that she seeks, I will note that her writings deliberately employ the psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and existential influences of western culture. Yet she does seek not to reify these positions, but to engage them critically and extend them with a more inclusive sexuate ontology and ethics.

1. Trajectory of the text
In the first chapter I will suggest that Irigaray’s version of sexual difference is directly rooted to three dominant philosophical traditions: psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and phenomenology. I provide an introduction to Irigaray’s work focusing on the three phrases in her work that point toward an affirmation that is paradoxically bound to self-limitation, destabilizing the nature and culture divide, and an active or strategic passivity to one’s gender.

In the second chapter I further introduce Irigaray’s investigation of the psycho-libidinal-linguistic subject whose male singularity and ideal she destabilizes through her critical examination. I will suggest that her opposition has been to a kind of universalism that refuses to share the world, or ethically recognize difference and that the more challenging phase of her work continues to be an elucidation of the difference within difference— a crucial concern as I seek to develop and expand a unique Irigarayan ethic. In this chapter I will also address the charges of essentialism and suggest that despite a poor initial reception of her work, she aids feminists in gaining the freedom and equality women and those deemed “other” have sought politically by questioning the limits of equality and demanding that equality be analyzed via difference, rather than sameness. I will suggest that by refusing to remain confined within the binary of essentialism/non-essentialism, Irigaray keeps open our thinking not only on sex, identity, and human becoming, but also on all the diverse kinds of differences we encounter globally. And by re-examining the constructs of “nature” and “culture” she will advocate for their rethought ethical connection, rather than the domination of nature by culture.
While much has been written elaborating Irigaray’s relationship to psychoanalysis and deconstruction, in the third chapter, I will focus on the existential and phenomenological intersection in Irigaray’s work. I will argue that existential phenomenology and its definitive theorists have been critical interlocutors for her philosophy that integrates mind and body, nature and culture, facticity and freedom, but uniquely focusing upon the question of one’s sex. I will suggest that Irigaray’s contribution to the philosophical tradition and how her distinctive claim of sexual difference extends the embodied critique of philosophers such as Heidegger, De Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. In pairing her work with Heidegger, I will demonstrate how her project is ontological in that she is attempting to think the unthought ground of what is. This chapter demonstrates the ontological aspects of Irigaray’s work and I expand the importance of these claims that Irigaray makes, particularly when applied to ecological feminism, in the last chapter.

In chapter four, on Irigaray’s thinking about religion, I will survey her destabilization of the sacred/secular or the material/immaterial and trace her supposition for divine women, incarnating not a deity, but “God among us.” While the other is not “god” it is the ethical respect for the irreducible alterity between gendered subjects that becomes the sacred material space, which confounds traditional binaries or religious discourses. Her rejection of an absolute transcendental singular God gives way to the possibility of God or the Divine showing up in the experienced mutuality between people. In this section I will focus on Irigaray’s use of the negative as an affirmation of female subjectivity through
strategic self-limitation, and how a spiritual reading of her sensible transcendental
re-reads the Western tradition’s understanding of nature, culture, and sex, infusing
these notions with breath and a horizontal transcendence that reformulates vertical
transcendence. I will use this embodied hermeneutic of the negative to re-read
primary accounts of gender, sex, and religion in the Christian tradition, particularly
in the Hebrew myth of origins and the virginal account of Mary.

In chapter five I show the relevance of Irigaray’s work for ecological
feminism, animal liberation, and a practical expression of religious diversity. As
historically woman’s identity has often been compared with the oppression of
nature (Mother Nature) and the animal body, it is fruitful to take her work into these
fields that so far are less analyzed. While some work on Irigaray and issues of
ecology and sustainability are gaining traction, I would say it a less analyzed aspect
of her work.⁹ Ecological feminism and animal liberation can appeal and perhaps
gain traction with Irigarayan theory in that both are seeking ways of liberation and
flourishing that exceed Western subject-object relations, patriarchal domination,
and hierarchical thinking. I will suggest that her work also offers a theory of ethical
responsibility beyond the framework of a social contract or rights language. I will
argue this ethical framework is vital insofar as “rights” language, when expanded
toward the environment and animals often remain contingent upon the
establishment of “personhood,” which Irigarayan theory may expose as a “neutered
concept” meant to hide singularity of power and privilege. Her work demands that

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we recognize sexuate specificity, Irigaray’s theory most clearly offers effective
critique of how we can rethink rights and responsibility in a sexual specific manner.
I expand that reflection beyond a feminine elaboration and consider how her work
can also help us respect religious difference in increasingly global civil societies.

In this thesis I explore how Irigaray’s critique, theorization, and new socio-
political order can reveal the mono-logic of sexual indifference within the history of
western culture and render a socio-spiritual-political re-reading that permits an
ethics of sexual difference to expose the blind spots, ocular posture, and the rich
possibility of living in a multi-cultural civil society. I will then mobilize this sacred
understanding toward the practical ethical dilemmas beyond human citizenship and
reveal the fruitfulness of Irigaray’s scholarship to address broader issues of civic
and global flourishing such as the environment and animal welfare.

I believe Irigaray’s philosophy provides a powerful and practical impetus
toward the attention to self-limitation, the shared breath of beings who love, and the
cultivation of civil society with global sustainability. I too understand the
phenomenological tradition to provide a wealth of resources for theology,
philosophy, and socio-political ethics, permitting mind and body to form a collective
understanding of the self without bifurcation. Additionally, I have training in
counseling and am attuned to how the human self is more than mere rationality. I


teach at an urban American two-year institution with students who are
predominantly of color, come from low socio-economic communities, with rich local
and indigenous sources of knowledge. I have discovered that students from diverse
backgrounds can read and extend Irigarayan philosophy, and develop and articulate
the need for difference to be cultivated globally and for dominant cultures to limit their ownership of power and the truth. Like Irigaray I believe divinity is enigmatically revealed in the guarding of sacred ethically charged spaces between individuals and cultures. I suggest that Irigaray's valuable contribution brings nature and culture together, the body in play with the mind, and the sexes together in wonder and felicity. Such a bringing together of difference forms a communion that resists facile or naïve associations. Rather, Irigarayan difference asks that we reveal the symbolic, historic, and socio-political areas of oppressions which cannot be essentialized, bringing to scale a fuller democracy for global sustainability that respects the multiplicity of differences in a changing and complex world.