Chapter Three: Irigaray’s Fling with the Philosophers: An Amorous Exchange

1. Introduction

Many scholars already agree that Irigaray’s reading of phenomenology grounds her deconstruction and construction of *le féminin*.¹ Just as past phenomenologists have wrestled with the ontological project and assumed significant positions in the history of philosophy, Irigaray reworks a similar heritage, critiquing many of the same commitments, and is thus vulnerable to similar criticisms of Euro-centrism, post-colonial exclusion, the assumption of freedom of choice, and the promotion of self autonomy or realization.² But it is important to locate Irigaray as a feminist philosopher who takes up the question of ontology and the ontological. But rather than pursuing a Heideggerian scrutiny of language, she routes the elements as needed supplements to reveal the appropriate diminution of the singular. Just as Heidegger approaches the question of Being and thinking about Being, Irigaray approaches the question of sexual difference. Both underscore the strategy of nearness, proximity, and distance to attenuate this thinking. Irigaray ‘s substance is often in her approach: proximity, nearness, temporality, and self-limit, namely, the negative.

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In this chapter I suggest that Irigaray’s approach to the question of difference provides a potentially fruitful strategy for Continental philosophy to provide a stability of ethical proximity with one another which is crucial in the development and practice of a wide-ranging Irigarayan ethic. The stability Irigaray offers isn’t the certainty of positivism, nor is it a nihilism or relativism that only leaves ‘will to power’, but it is a refiguration of present terms that asks subjects to affirm differences via a negative dialectic of difference and proximity to the one and the other. Irigaray’s negative permits the best concepts of Heidegger and post-war French existentialism to yield a difference that seeks mutual felicity for and with humans and nonhumans.

Luce Irigaray’s work aspires to make changes at the broadest and most potent levels of ethico-cultural change, but often she turns to the natural or material world to transpose her cultural message given the imperial control of language and the symbolic order with its myopic gaze. The natural evidence that most accords with her theory are the elements that resist the solid, visible, and erect preferences of the male subject economy: the fluid, the invisible, and the amorphous. Her response was a planned tetralogy. Marine Lover directed toward Friedrich Nietzsche engages the element of water. Elemental Passions offers a series of free-flowing meditations (narrative and non-narrative) of the journey of a woman exploring sexuate relations anew, perhaps a celebration of the fecund earth. An unpublished
work directed toward Karl Marx engages the element of fire. Finally, *Forgetting the Air* is directed toward Martin Heidegger and engages the element of air.

The elements offer Irigaray the ability to engage in language/non-language to challenge the material/immaterial and literal/figurative divide by elucidating elements often supposed as immaterial, but doing so in very material ways. The four-pronged Empedoclean schema presents a way to characterize growth and decay that organically attends to a way of becoming that she believes the Western tradition misses. She writes of their dismissed importance: “We still pass our daily lives in a universe that is composed and is known to be composed of four elements: air, water, fire, and earth. We are made up of these elements and we live in them. They determine, more or less freely, our attractions, our affects, our passions, our limits, our aspirations.”

Heidegger also offers his fourfold (das Geviert), as a way of thinking about the world as earth and sky, mortals and divinities. The two schemas represent the structures of thinking that attenuate language, and both challenge the dominance of the Cartesian subject. But each thinker will differ in his or her accent on the thinking and language. It is the unthinking of the less privileged elements (the liquid elements: air, water, fire), often disclosed as immaterial, that Irigaray rethinks in her phenomenology. Rather than being formed via language and the male psycho-social libidinal self, we may begin to rethink an ontology that has material reality, without grounding our truth in a material/immaterial divide, or a

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4 See Irigaray, SG, 57.

5 Ibid.
fact/fiction manner of asserting male phallic language. Rather than master and slave, conqueror and conquered, we may consider differences as interwoven alterities that are born, grow and decay, sometimes reborn anew, presences and absences that are intricately connected. The organic scheme has tones and resonances that accord with Heidegger and I will examine the two comparatively to show the influence and departure from his scholarship. Read with these Heideggerian inflections, I suggest Irigaray posits an ontology that one may not reduce to an essentialism of nature, as I also claimed in the last chapter and that is important in our concern with a global ethics.

Irigaray charges that Western metaphysics, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger have privileged a particular element resulting in an imbalanced perspective that closes, rather than opens, truth and being. In this chapter I analyze her philosophical response to Heidegger and to the existential phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Simone de Beauvoir, in order to show the main philosophical influences upon Irigaray's work and the way she deals with them. I suggest that Irigaray takes seriously the aims and positions of these philosophers, but her intention isn’t to dutifully follow or defiantly debunk these theorists, but to take up the posture of Heidegger's *alètheia*.6

2. *Transforming Metaphysics: Heidegger*

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6 Heidegger identifies *alètheia* as "unconcealedness" drawing attention to the problem of pure translation, that any change in phrase or speech is transported into another truth and clarity, or obscurity. See Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009) 12.
As noted, Irigaray contends, “. . . each age has one issue to think through and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time.” In *I Love to You*, she adds these words, “Our era is faced with the task of dealing with this issue, because, across the whole world, there are only, men and women.” The words resound with the claims of Martin Heidegger and the preponderance of a singular question that each age is able to ask.

Already Irigaray is engaging in her own self-limitation. She is limited in time, task, and sexuate identity. She is limiting herself to think ontologically, as Heidegger has done, shifting the question from the Being of beings, to sexual difference in the world. Not only is Irigaray theoretically indebted to Heidegger, his project contextualizes her own work and orients one to her feminist position. She is willing to forgo the urgency with which feminism demands a flurry of agency or activity, to pursue the thinking of the pivotal issue of her day. In this section I analyze Irigaray’s writings with Heidegger, via language, and consider how her critique extends into the thinking, dwelling, and language of Heidegger on her way to envisioning a full-orbed philosophical ontology and ethics.

2.1. *Between Heidegger and Irigaray*

Heideggerian scholars agree that Heidegger’s abiding topic is “. . . the radically inverted meaning of being, grounded infinitude, which stands over against

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7 Irigaray, E, 5.
8 Irigaray, ILTY, 47.
9 She explains in the preface of *The Way of Love* that her work is faithful to Heidegger’s teaching, but shifts the frame or the emphasis toward a different space. See WL, xii.
the metaphysical ideal of being as full presence and intelligibility.”¹⁰ Yet throughout his career, Heidegger never lost sight of the fact that all his meditations on being, time, and truth were in fact words. One can argue reasonably that the themes of language and being have been two of the most important tropes in Irigaray's academic career, given her work in linguistics and Continental philosophy. It is no wonder that her occupation with Heidegger coalesces and diverges in important ways.

A number of scholars are rightly drawing attention to the philosophical merit of comparing Heidegger and Irigaray's work. One of the first, Tina Chanter suggests, if, for Heidegger, the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition eclipsed not only Being, but also the question of being itself, then for Irigaray also, the absence of sexual difference is already supposed by the question of sexual difference.¹¹ She notes that Heidegger's task in Being and Time was to prepare philosophers to ask the question of Being; likewise, Irigaray's task in Speculum prepares contemporary philosophers to ask the question of sexual difference. As Chanter helpfully suggests, the grounding project of Irigaray's sexual difference isn't a biological essentialism, but the Heideggerian ontological project with its phenomenological commitment to the priority of the lived body. Chanter explains, “That is, bodily experiences in the material world cannot be understood in abstraction from the context and meanings that inscribe experience in all their particularity.”¹² Therefore, there is no pure


¹¹ Chanter, Ethics of Eros, 128.

¹² Tina Chanter, Ethics of Eros, 129.
material biology or matter that *is* fact, but all our “*is*” statements are already tainted with a presupposition of the fact at hand.

Like Heidegger, Irigaray desires to draw attention to the present life, the sensible and concrete aspects which ought to be raised to the level of wisdom, *vis,* philosophy. Like Heidegger, she engages the whole human, not just the mental aspect of the person. Like Heidegger, she attempts to try to find where we could make an experience of speaking.  

13 But unlike Heidegger who found such an experience taking place in poetic language and the articulation of thinking and poetic saying, she posits that it exists in a “present dialogue with an other different from myself.”  

14 In this relation between the one and the other we experience what speaking means. Irigaray comments that descriptive and narrative language fails us when we approach the task of welcoming, celebrating, and cultivating the one with the other and her task is present and future oriented. Like John the Baptist, we must prepare a way for ethical proximity, in us and among us. The *Way of Love* rings almost like the prophet Isaiah,  

15 asking for a cultural scenography or landscape of preparation for the kind of language we would need to accomplish such a task.  

16 Heidegger critiqued the Enlightenment metaphysical tradition as over-representing thinking as positivism. The exemplar of this tradition is René Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum,* a philosophy Heidegger proposed to phenomenologically

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13 In the English translation, she writes in the preface that the dialogue is four-way: the author, the translators, Heidegger, and the reader. She has chosen deliberately to translate language as “*speak,*” “*speaking,*” and “*speech,*” in order to be faithful to Heidegger’s approach to language. Irigaray, WL, x-xi.
14 Ibid., xi.
15 The prophet Isaiah describes the manner in which the land or path that must be prepared to make way for the return from exile. See Isaiah 40:3-4; 62:10-12.
16 Irigaray, WL, viii.
Descartes provided an epistemology for the existence of self, things, and people and believed he ontologically proved the existence of God. According to Heidegger, Descartes distinguishes the “I think” from the “corporeal thing,” placing “Nature” and “spirit” in opposition and positing a subject/object duality, or the “corporeal thinking thing” from the “corporeal substance or nature.” Dasein bridges this opposition by putting us in touch with our “dealings” with the everydayness of things that are at-hand (Nature), such as writing, sewing, or hammering. While Descartes separated the “I” and the “world” and “God,” Heidegger brings the “I” in relationship with the ready-at-hand by highlighting its serviceability, its function to service as “equipment,” rather than a thing itself to be investigated without a function. The obviousness and reliability of the hammer concealed it from the philosopher.

Similarly, Irigaray poses the question of sexual difference as an obvious, reliable, and thus concealed notion. Chanter clarifies that the association between the way in which Dasein exists in the world fails to be analogous to water “in” a glass since Dasein “encounters” objects as already embedded in a system where its projects and tasks are defined. She writes, “The care Heidegger takes to distinguish the container-type relationship, which pertains to objects from Dasein’s mode of existence in its ‘concernful absorption’ foreshadows, albeit faintly, the

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thematic attention Irigaray gives to the ‘place’ woman provides.”  

For Heidegger, the network or matrix of relationships that surround a subject’s relationship to its surroundings deserves careful attention. Similarly, argues Irigaray, the male subject’s relationship to the woman/provider/sustainer informs the relationship that defines both. Dasein’s corrective broadened the hermeneutical circle to include, centrally, the question of Being and its clearing or opening. But according to Irigaray, Heidegger’s metaphysics of presence isn’t an opening, but a closing.

As Heidegger says, “‘There is’ [‘Es gibt’] truth only insofar as Dasein is and in so long as Dasein is.” But according to Irigaray, the neutered use of “es/it,” conceals the sex of subjects and thus the lighting of Dasein. Woman is present but symbolically absent in Heidegger’s ontology. As such, metaphysics begins with the man and closes in on his sex.

2.2. From Being to Nearness

From Heidegger’s early work, Being and Time, to his later work in the 1960s, there is a shift that Krzysztof Ziarek identifies as a strategy that moves him away from the project of destroying metaphysics, to abandoning it altogether, from the ontico-ontological project of difference to the event (Ereignis). One can understand this shift as having continuity with his prior claims in Being and Time regarding

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21 Chanter, Ethics of Eros, 137.
22 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, 212/226.
24 The event as a Heideggerian trope is receiving renewed interested as is evidenced in the book Martin Heidegger, Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event), trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).
25 I want to be careful and differentiate what is deemed the turn (die Krehe) in Heidegger’s work and his change in thinking (die Wendung im Denken). From his early work in the 1930s to his later work scholars demarcate a shift in Heidegger’s content and style, observing that it becomes more abstruse
Dasein’s ‘throwness,’ something we anticipate, as Dasein’s being is movement. Dasein’s finite being exists as it anticipates its absence. This anticipated absence gives finite presence, meaning the ultimate source remains intrinsically hidden as it discloses the being of entities. Such disclosure Heidegger calls Ereignis. In typical Heideggerian fashion he plays with the term, typically translated “the event,” and uses it to mean movement, connecting the adjective eigen (“one’s own”) with Ereignung, or movement as the process of being drawn into what is one’s own.\textsuperscript{26}

When beings are claimed by death we are pulled forth into our mortal becoming, drawn into our own absence, and by this way, the world is engendered and sustained, what Heidegger calls Appropriation.

In \textit{On Time and Being} and \textit{Identity and Difference} Heidegger explains “the event as Appropriation,” a way to give metaphysical ideas non-metaphysical meaning. He states that Being had formerly been thought in terms of beings as “... idea, energeia, actualities, will, and now, appropriation.”\textsuperscript{27} According to Heidegger, these terms as interpretations of Being do not leave metaphysics. He urges, “But if we do what was attempted, and think Being in the sense of the presencing and allowing-to-presence that are there in destiny—which in turn lies in the extending of true time which opens and conceals, then Being belongs in Appropriating.”\textsuperscript{28}

Heidegger clarifies that this is not a simple inversion, but time and Being are the


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
gifts of Appropriation. In *Identity and Difference* he states it is a key term in the service of thinking and no longer means what we would otherwise think of as a happening or occurrence. He writes,

> It is now a *singular tantum*. What we experience in the frame as the constellation of Being and man through the modern world of technology is a prelude what is called the event of appropriation. This event, however, does not necessarily persist in a prelude. For in the event of appropriation the possibility arises that it may overcome the mere dominance of the frame to turn it into a more original appropriating. Such a transformation of the frame into the event of appropriation, by virtue of that event, would bring the appropriate recovery—appropriate, hence never to be produced by man alone—of the world of technology from its dominance back to servitude in the realm by which man reaches more truly into the event of appropriation.²⁹

Heidegger’s emphasis on transformation provides a critical opportunity to think in terms that open time, space, and futurity, resisting metaphysical closure via the notions of opening and concealing, presence and absence. Undoubtedly, these are critical terms and notions that Irigaray evokes in order to postulate her notion of sexual difference as an ontology that can organically emerge without the repetition or closure of metaphysics. Ziarek contends that approaching Heidegger and Irigaray on the topic of proximities clarifies the shift in Heidegger’s work and

Irigaray’s important relationship to it, particularly the strategy to analyze Irigaray as a philosopher apart from the identity-difference debate, entangled within the dispute of essentialism. Instead, the rubric of proximity highlights the importance of space-time in both works. It is in this stream that I want to extend Ziarek’s analysis, which also contends that the relationship to space, intimacy, and finitude of self with others offers a profitable way to approach Irigarayan and Heideggerian scholarship together.

To briefly summarize Ziarek’s points, he contends that Heidegger’s themes of ethics, technology, the event, futurity, and poetic language can be surveyed easily within Irigaray’s critiques. Specifically, Heidegger’s revision of his thoughts on being and Irigaray’s response to it yield a new view that can be described as, “a non-metaphysical economy of relating predicated on the ethico-discursive notions of proximity and nearness. . . a new mode of thinking relation: one that would be attuned to nearness rather than difference, to the interval rather than the opposites, and to the transformative opening rather than negation.” According to Ziarek, while Heidegger remains vested in the closure of philosophy and a “new or other thinking” contingent on the reevaluation of language (particularly the proximity between thought and poetry), Irigaray, as argued, is rewriting the symbolic and imaginary, creating space for women to create their own social identities, and inaugurating a futurity of thinking that corresponds with sexual difference. Her style or technique is overtly poetic, lyrical and deliberately disruptive of traditional

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30 She alludes to this re-thinking of space-time in *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 7.
32 Ibid.
meaning as she employs the method of mimesis. But to exceed or abandon metaphysical claims, both seem to suggest thinking about difference via the rubric of proximity or nearness (Nahe). To avoid retracing Ziarek’s incisive paper, I will stray and offer my own interpretation of the critical points of proximity to language and difference that I observe in both Irigaray and Heidegger and what the correspondence might imply to strengthen Irigaray’s assertion away from essentialism and place it within the full context of Continental philosophy.

I recognize her focus on the “interval” as a deliberate and valuable move in her effort away from a binary thinking of opposites. The thrust of the interval is a way to mediate difference via space and time. I will examine her work with Heidegger in Forgetting the Air and in The Way of Love, choosing the latter work in particular given its reference to the concerns of globalization, a central topic of this thesis. I will conclude this discussion with a closer examination of the interval in Diotima’s speech in Ethics of Sexual Difference. I argue that Irigaray uses the strategy and approach of proximity to return to the discussion on identity-difference with a distinctive return to the project of difference, not reinscribing the discourse, but invoking a third dimension, the touch of the one with the other.

Repeatedly in The Way of Love Irigaray uses the terms “approach,” “proximity,” and “nearness” to detail her content, which implies her emphasis is

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33 The book jacket states, “Globalization represents an opportunity but also a danger for humanity. Sameness has been the key to the construction of Western cultures and societies. Difference – beginning with sexual difference – can open up for us an era of inter-communication, from our most everyday exchanges to the universal interweaving of a democratic global community.” Irigaray, WL, second cover; italics mine.

34 Irigaray uses the term 32 times in the text. For examples see Irigaray, WL, ix, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 26, 27, 39, 42.
not only on the distance concomitant with sexual difference, but on focusing on the “interval”\(^{37}\) as the place of proximity, as the in-between place of nearness where meeting in the middle is possible. Her philosophy is current, active, speech making in the present and the future, resisting previous codifications and repetitions. Her speech acts will be encircled with silence and listening-to: “We have 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.”\(^{38}\) Irigaray’s clearing will make space for the other.

Irigaray’s shift from words to proximity or space also dovetails and supplements a sexuate twist with Heidegger’s reflection on space, nearness, and distance. In these sections I will analyze the similarities of both writers and their relationship to thinking as it pertains to difference, language, space, proximity, mortals, and non-mortals. I will be examining two of Heidegger’s essays: “Building Thinking Dwelling,” and “The Way to Language” and Irigaray’s critical responses and supplements and challenges to Heidegger’s claims. Again, I argue that she is not dismissive of Heidegger’s concerns, but a philosopher in her own right who extends or unfolds the horizon of Heidegger’s thoughts. She argues a sexuate subjectivity of the female other in order to subvert metaphysics and gain the one with the other, with which we may refound the project of a futural philosophy.

### 2.2.1. Air: The Unthought Ground of Thinking

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\(^{35}\) She uses the term 23 times the text and devotes a chapter titled, “On the Way to Proximity.” For textual examples see: Irigaray, WL, 18-22, 26, 32, 33, 53, 57, 60, 68, 120, 133, 150-1, 153-4, 159, 166.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., ix, 68.

\(^{37}\) She uses the term five times in this text. See Irigaray, WL, 18, 19, 65, 66, 142. She gives the term/concept particular attention in an *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, specifically the essays, “Sexual Difference,” and “Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, Physics IV.” See Irigaray, E, 5-19; 34-55.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., xi.
In the next sub-sections I will investigate the important connection Irigaray makes with two of Heidegger’s formative works and her critical responses. Heidegger’s early ruminations on art, technology, modern sciences, metaphysics and poetry evolve into later discussions of ‘everyday’ things in familiar locations, such as brides and houses, a notion he calls the fourfold (das Geviert) of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. In “Building Thinking Dwelling” Heidegger suggests that man’s Being rests in his capacity to cultivate and safeguard the earth. Bauen, or to dwell signifies the way “we human beings are on the earth.”39 The German word bauen in all its varieties: buan, bhu, beo are versions for bin, or the imperative to be. In contrast to Descartes; I think, therefore I am, Heidegger will relate thinking (denken) with building and dwelling, via earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Listening to language, rather than language servicing man, Heidegger urges we can hear three things:

1. Building is really dwelling
2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth.
3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.

Already we can hear sources of many of Irigaray’s concerns: listening, the manner in which we inhabit the earth, and the cultivation of growing things, a sense of the organic representation of essences. Heidegger goes on to say that we are dwellers “on the earth” which already means “under the sky.”40 And he indicates

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40 Ibid., 351
that both of these things also mean, “remain before divinities” and include, “a belonging to men’s being with one another.”41 He concludes by positing a primal oneness of the fourth: earth and sky, divinities and mortals. To dwell means to stay with things, such as bridges, what he calls a site for the fourfold, and by this site we can determine the place and paths by which a space is provided for. Heidegger indicates that space, or Raum, is “... a place that is freed for settlement and lodging. ... something ... freed ... within a boundary.” 42 The Greek term peras for boundary is “... that from which something begins its essential unfolding,”43 such as a horizon. Things, insofar as they are locales, give spaces their essential being. Between these things are measurable distances, the Greek word stadion, which in the Latin, is a spatium or “an intervening space or interval.”44 The term interval will also be a threshold or unfolding for Irigaray, not of Being, but of the one to the other, the unfolding of intersubjectivity. Importantly, Heidegger urges, “Spaces open up by the fact they are let into the dwelling of man.”45 Thus, building is the founding or joining of spaces, a distinctive, letting-dwell. We grasp something, but do not touch its essence. We can bring forth through techne or technique, the Greek concept of letting things appear in this way or that way, as something present among the things that are already present. But Heidegger laments the technology of power misses dwelling and its basic character of Being, in keeping with which mortals exist.

Building and thinking must both belong to dwelling.

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 356.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 357.
Like Heidegger, Irigaray has also offered her own fourfold: air, water, earth, and fire. As Heidegger retraced the pre-Socratics in order to retrieve a proximity to Being, so Irigaray retraces the same thinkers in order to retrieve a proximity between the one and the other, unconcealing the elemental from Heidegger’s own thinking and Being, namely the air, the true opening that remains unthought. Or as Irigaray states regarding Heidegger, “To air he owes his life beginning, his birth and his death, on air he nourishes himself; in air, he is housed; thanks to air he can move about, can exercise a faculty for action, can manifest himself, can see and speak . . . the a priori condition of all his a prioris?”

As she opens her rumination in **Forgetting the Air** Irigaray quickly draws attention to the assumed ground upon which Heidegger walks, the sure-footed privilege of the earth in his philosophy, and inasmuch as he does not leave the earth, so he also does not leave metaphysics. Being and thinking, she asserts, are made of the same element—air. Certain elements are prone to be forgotten in a singular sexuate ontology that cannibalizes the other elements to guarantee its unquestioned status. Particularly the liquid elements of fire, water, and air are forgotten, as Being or philosophy dies of asphyxiation, lack of air.

Heidegger describes his quest toward the question of being, the opening or clearing, and the house of language as a path, implicating the ground as a solid path whereby one may travel. His fetish with the ground (ground of being) offers a vital metaphor whereby Irigaray resituates solidity. The ‘ground’ of sexual difference is

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46 Irigaray, FA, 12.
47 She writes, “. . . perhaps one must remove from Heidegger that earth on which he so loved to walk. To take away from him this solid ground, to rid him of the ‘illusion’ of a path that holds up under his step . . . to bring him back not only to thinking but to the world of the pre-Socratics.” Ibid., 2.
actually ‘groundless’, where no solid border marks or traces a path toward language. Language, prefigured in a psycho-sexual libidinal self, must confront the body from which it speaks, thinks, and writes. If man dwells in the house of language, than language is formed or spoken only through bodies. Irigaray charges Heidegger with forgetting (oblivion) the element of air, a term she deploys as replete with a physical and metaphysical-countering sense.

Air is not only the material substance that humans breathe, but it is also the invisible or supposed neutrality by which metaphysicians prescribe a universal discourse for philosophy. Within the monosexual ontology, Irigaray utilizes air to signify the invisible, the feminine, and the passage from the one to the other. Heidegger’s obsession with Greek arche is ironically missing the arche of all humans: the mother-child dyad. Instead, nature (physis) is mediated via logos, meaning the physical being is also a fabrication of man. She argues, “That the living body as Gestell always leaves traces in these fabrications…. Doesn’t Heidegger’s move amount to making physis out of techne?”

Arche submits to man’s architechné, man’s language, in an artificial unfolding or blossoming of Nature. But according to Irigaray, what mediates this arche is air: “Air would be the arch-mediation: of the logos, of thinking, of the world—whether physical or psychical.”

Thus, when and how is there for Heidegger a clearing (gibt es die Lichtung)?

Irigaray’s exploration of the unthought opening that preconditions thought attempts to delineate a ‘metaphysics of the same’ (language, being, and the psycho-sexual

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48 Ibid., 87.
49 Ibid., 12.
subject-object), and rather than “obliviate”\textsuperscript{50} or negate metaphysics, she attempts to think otherwise, and with it. Instead of positing a ‘there is’ (\textit{es gibt}) she will approach the element that sub-tends the history of metaphysics and Being and beings. As Irigaray explains, when we clear the forest of the trees for Heidegger’s clearing there is still the air: “The meeting that can take place in this clearing is always already an experience ‘in a vacuum’: in a space determined and delimited by the forgetting, the privation of a matter necessary for the existence of living beings.

. . . In a hollow, a hole, an excavation, a location, and a place that are opened up by breaking into nature.”\textsuperscript{51} It is precisely this non-place, invisible to the discourse of Being, language, and logos that Irigaray can subvert and use as a location with which to approach metaphysics. The nothing, remainder, remnant is again her bonus. The negation is her affirmation. As she explains, within this interspace, the emptiness and fullness of movement of going-toward can be commemorated with a silent distance.\textsuperscript{52} Paradoxically, silence permits the nothingness of the elements to speak, and in this vacuum we can approach one another. Words do not mediate; the invisible air mediates.

\textit{2.2.2. The Way of Love; Proximity and Difference}

As we turn to words, silence, and language more directly, I again address Irigaray’s second dialogue with Heidegger, published in 2002, in an English translation titled, \textit{The Way of Love}, that converses directly with his German text,

\textsuperscript{50} Not typically a verb, but a culturally coined term from the French \textit{oblivion} (to forget), Irigaray’s reworking of Heidegger’s attention to a kind of thinking that is forgotten. The mutated ‘obliviate’ first appeared in the Harry Potter novels as a memory charm that causes one to forget. See J.K. Rowland, \textit{Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets} (Arthur A Levine Books: 2001-2005).

\textsuperscript{51} Irigaray, FA, 19.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. 155.
Unterwegs zur Sprache (1959), or in English, “On the Way to Language.” In this work Heidegger begins to unfold his infamous phrase: “Language is the House of Being. In its house man dwells.”53 Heidegger has already declared that language is the clear-concealing of being itself, meaning that being is perpetually coming to or underway to language.54 His interest in the meaning of language demonstrates one of his strongest bonds between analytic philosophy and his academic work.

Irigaray’s engagement with the question of language and being is tinged with her rejection that the collective unconscious or social imaginary has already been defined or closed via the pregiven symbolic, eliminating any genuine emerging present or future. As Patricia Huntington suggests, her thesis has been to take seriously the implication of Lacanian theory “that reality—taken as including the excess, the possible, the unthought—harbors the seeds of genuine social change.”55 Both Irigaray and Heidegger turn away from the metaphysics of language toward poiesis. I suggest that Irigaray, reflecting Heideggerian influence, turns away from the Cartesian-Husserlian subject-master, as well as existential atheistic humanism, toward a future and social imaginary that postures her negative, self-representation, and transcendental gender as richer forms of sociality that bind humans together collectively as a precondition for Sittlichkeit. Thus, Irigaray will argue via poiesis for the unthought, depleted, suppressed, forms of phallocentric symbolization, for Divine Women, not beings who are divine and women, but as productive ways for

54 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, ¶34, 161-64 /203-10.
55 Patricia Huntington, Ecstatic Subjects, Utopia, and Recognition, 137.
women to be “agents and coauthors in the production of meaning.” They need their own divine or world interpreted through female morphology rather than the phallus, recasting matter so that spatio/temporal relations indicate woman as subject and not simply object/other.

2.2.2.1. Poetry

When we speak of truth, Heidegger alerts us to the special relationship of truth and language, particularly averting the closure of a truth through a language of metaphysics. Heidegger’s recovery of truth as the clearing and concealing of beings as Being receives attention through poetic language and Irigaray recovers a similar strategy. She writes, “In 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.”

Both she and Heidegger are immensely concerned with safeguarding. Heidegger will safeguard the provenance of all artwork and all thinking that participates in the strife of the world and earth, “allowing all things the darkness they require and their proper growing time.” Irigaray will safeguard “those components of the mirror that cannot reflect themselves,” “oneself in order to preserve a return an exchange,” and the ‘you’ to whom she approaches. Both

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56 Huntington, Ecstatic Subjects, 138.
57 Heidegger writes, “All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is as such, in essence, poetry.” “Origins of the Work of Art,” Basic Writings, 197.
58 Irigaray, WL, 12.
59 Heidegger, Basic Writings, 142.
60 Irigaray, TS, 151.
61 Irigaray, WL, 53.
62 Irigaray, TBT, 48.
Heidegger and Irigaray believe they are safeguarding the conditions necessary for futural change, disclosure of a concealed truth, providing space and time for the unfolding to unfold.

Irigaray suggests it is not necessary to destroy the existing philosophical corpus, considering it nothing, but instead, assesses the imposition of a sole order, “this truth would have had interest in pronouncing itself only in some coteries.”63 It is logical that she begins with “The Sharing of Speech.” She opens with the subsection, “On the way to Proximity,” indicating her close examination of language with space.

Irigaray’s understands words as already indicating flesh: the flesh of the one to whom words are addressed, the flesh of the one who calls them (the lips), and the invitation for exchange that they make possible. Irigaray’s has been using words and language to open passageways of meaning between the one and the other via language structures of metaphor and re-metaphorization, mimesis, and metonym. These are the excesses of metaphysical language. With Heidegger, she suggests that music or painting could be another way to escape the objectionality of a thing. Of these topics she writes, ‘It would be nothing but an invitation to share. Not yet closed upon some meaning, but opening from the one to the other—a between-two.”64 She speaks of a ‘virginal’ meaning, one that is not a priori communication in an already constituted or coded meaning. Like Heidegger she examines discourse, the Saying, and the said. But her accent is on the exchange with the other that these

63 Irigaray, WL, 12.
64 Ibid., 16.
notions indicate and she insists, “For there to be an exchange, it is essential that the other touch us, particularly through words.”

Heidegger also refers to an experience we have with language touching our “innermost nexus of our existence.” These experience draw attention to our relation with language, which he demarcates from gathering information about language, of which he notes analytic philosophers supply and is metaphysics. Language, he argues, bring us to experiences which we undergo with language, thus language brings us back to itself, not everyday speaking.

But for Irigaray, language brings us to the other and to the self. She cautions that our present mode of touching with words reduces “… proximity to confusion, to fusion,” and she clarifies the need for an interval or a medium, what she identifies as, “… first of all nature … air, water, earth and sun, as fire and light. Being par excellence—matter of the transcendental.” Her interval sounds in many ways akin to Heidegger’s fourfold. Heidegger’s bridges connect the one and the other and the question of how they dwell together is preconditioned by the landscape of words in which they meet and how their proximity can be safeguarded. Irigaray critiques our current valuation or measurement of how to approach the other and the terms of equality: “In this way it occurs that proximity becomes very easily subjected to political—or scientific—rules which alienate relations between citizens.” We easily slip into relational modes of speech that are paternal, which

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65 Ibid., 18.
67 Irigaray, WL, 18.
68 Irigaray, WL, 19.
69 Irigaray, WL, 20.
most can agree are poor ways to know proximity or approach another. And when we figure the transcendental as the God-man-father, what she terms “meta-man,” we have a theory “. . . compatible with the domination of the world by all technologies which aim to get a general view of it from on high, the most obvious example being that of satellites sent to observe the earth and its planetary system . . . an appropriating mastery . . . a relation of closeness.”

Heidegger notes similar unease, “Metalanguage and sputnik, metalinguistics and rocketry are the Same.” But Irigaray is concerned that even Heidegger’s fourfold uses pre-established measures or dimensions that signify a single way of dancing and playing in this world. She urges, “No saying . . . 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.”

2.2.2.2. Silence

Both Irigaray and Heidegger valorize silence, but how they posture these terms have similarities and differences. In his “A Dialogue on Language,” between the Japanese and the Inquirer (it is interesting that Heidegger also turns eastward to locate a conversation partner) Heidegger records a conversation between two individuals who do not share the same native language. Well into the conversation both agree that even Plato’s dialogues are not true dialogues, in that they miss the important attribute that a dialogue must always remain coming. The Japanese

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70 Ibid., 20-21.
72 Irigaray, WL, 22.
character states, “The course of such a dialogue would have to have all its own, with more silence than talk.”\textsuperscript{73} And the Inquirer responds, “Above all, silence about silence….”\textsuperscript{74} The two refer to talking and writing about silence as “producing the most obnoxious chatter,” while to be silent regarding silence would be “authentic saying . . . and would remain the constant prologue to the authentic dialogue of language.”\textsuperscript{75} With similar concerns but different accents Irigaray writes,

No word can name it once and for all. . . . It is little by little that words can draw near to the transcendental, if they do not close up upon themselves. The transcendental also exists – perhaps? – in the fracture of a word of which each one keeps a part. Meaning is then sensed but never conceived in only one word. \textit{A silence, an impossible to say}, moves each one toward an inappropriable signification. Too quickly occupying this silence—or the between-two—by a gesture, gestures, risks veiling the meaning of it: between the two something exists that belongs neither to the one nor to the other, nor moreover to any word. And this something must, in part, remain indeterminate.\textsuperscript{76}

She directs speech toward the other, but when it reaches the other, it returns back to one's self, richer, allowing us to learn from the other. For Irigaray, speech then removes itself from the computation of the modern day, and focuses on the conversation partner and the exchange that is occurring between-two in the present, communicating and discovering with the other, rather than schooling or

\textsuperscript{73} Heidegger, \textit{On the Way to Language}, 52.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Irigaray, \textit{WL}, 22-23; italics mine.
teaching the other what we mean. On this subject Irigaray and Heidegger are most alike, as Heidegger writes, “a language, which speaks by saying, is concerned that our speaking, in listening to the unspoken, corresponds to what is said. Thus silence, too, which is often regarded as the source of speaking, it itself already a corresponding. Silence corresponds to the soundless tolling of the stillness of appropriating-showing Saying.”77

It is worth noting that for Irigaray and Heidegger the notion of appropriation or movement that draws one forth into one’s own (Ereignis) has similar but nuanced differences. While Heidegger heralds this movement as “the disclosure of Appropriation,”78 Irigaray tends to write of appropriation in a negative sense where one appropriates another. But as Rachel Jones observes, Irigaray positively invokes a sense of Heideggerian appropriation when she writes of cultivating a ‘proper’ or ‘appropriate’ relation to one’s own sexuate kind (genre).79 But rather than understanding one event, there must be an asymmetrical two that correspond to each sexuate gender. It is the between-two that the appropriate or proper is often (con)fused into appropriation of the other, a conclusion she seeks to rewrite. But with Heidegger, she suggests that such appropriative relations to one’s gender allow men and women to be brought into being, which is to be articulated as sexuate subjects. It is the constitutive mortality of the other that discloses the difference.

In this sense I suggest Irigaray’s philosophic work is appropriative or a disclosure of the event of Heidegger’s philosophy. It is an offshoot of its own; a

77 Martin Heidegger, On the Way to Language, 131.
movement from his work, and her growth and cultivation as a philosopher in her own right aligns closely with Heidegger, but distinguishes into its own. The appropriative or proper gender has been analyzed in chapter one and two, and now I turn to the safeguard or guarantee of the proper, the interval or mediator between the two.

3. Dichotomies, Daemons, and Difference

In this section I will attend to the importance of dichotomies, particularly as they relate to her ethics. According to Luce Irigaray, female sexuate identity does not authentically exist (this is of course not to say that females do not exist) because sexual indifference remains the status quo of female identity. As I read Irigaray, she argues that we cannot move on to a politics of recognition, because female sexuate identity does not even exist to be recognized. We must first be concerned with the missing ontology of at least two subjects of difference. Without this primal difference, we are stuck with a sexuate ontology that resists the evidence of the natural, spiritual, and social world. In order to oppose the evidence of two subjects and retain intersubjectivity without difference, Irigaray observes that subject-object relations have become the dominant paradigm for sexual indifference, rather than subject-to-subject relations, or subject-with-subject relations. The sole subject (the male sexual subject) stands in the place for universal identity\textsuperscript{80} and in relation to this subject exists mostly a world of objects.

\textsuperscript{80} For example, Irigaray cites linguistic patterns such as the French masculine \textit{Ils} standing in place for the plural subject they. She also writes elaborate passages using her linguistics background to document the difference in speech patterns between men and women and what these differences could possibly mean to the speaking subjects and to whom they are communicating. See her chapter, “Two of Us, Outside, Tomorrow?” in \textit{I Love to You}, 79-95 and her complete work dealing with the science of language \textit{To Speak Is Never Neutral}, trans. Gail Schwab (New York: Routledge, 2002).
She describes two poles that govern the sensations of this passively lived experience that partitions intersubjectivity: the pole of the subject and the pole of the object. Sensations within this polarity are divided into a dichotomous logic: pleasure/pain, hot/cold, active/passive, masculine/feminine, and she writes, “along with other dichotomies which exile the body from its organization in a whole and from its incarnation through words.” Sensibility, argues Irigaray, has been reduced to sensation, and any sensation that challenges this dichotomy has been rejected.

A second infamous dichotomy that Irigaray works to debunk is the binary of transcendence/immanence. According to a similar binary logic, the transcendental has been the aim of the male subject, much to the detriment of immanence. The Hegelian gesture consciously keeps these poles apart. The celestial must be safeguarded from the terrestrial. Several writers have noted Irigaray’s ‘sensible transcendental’ or her philosophical maneuver that confounds the division material/immanent/terrestrial/woman from the immaterial/transcendent/celestial/divine-man. Specifically, her essay in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, “Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, Symposium, ‘Diotima’s Speech’,” develops a deliberate conflation of these categories. In a paradoxical maneuver, Irigaray creates a path between heaven and earth. Diotima, like the very notion of Eros, is a daemon,

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81 Irigaray, TBT, 23; KW, 18
82 Irigaray, KW, 18.
or an intermediary that connects or keeps in touch, the sensible and the transcendental. As she writes,

Therefore, between knowledge and reality, there is an intermediary that allows for the encounter and the transmutation or transvaluation between the two. Diotima's dialectic is in at least four terms: the here, the poles of the encounter, and the beyond—but a beyond that never abolishes the here. And so on, indefinitely. The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in a state of becoming. And the mediator of all this is, among other things, or exemplarily, love.84

Love resists absolutizing any pole or specific location, but keeps the poles in movement, touching and being touched. Much like her notion of the caress, there is an intertwining of polarities, so they can no longer be figured as a mere dichotomy, or hierarchy of certain location. Conceptually, she constantly moves toward difference between two notions, but difference that doesn't polarize, but rather moves concepts to sensuously touch, to be in touch, to be touchable. This is not an enmeshment of notions, but a way to keep the universal realm of ideas or knowledge in touch with the immediate world of immanence or nature. As iterated in the previous chapter, it is a question of proximity of differences. Immanence is no longer in a subordinate position to the transcendental.

84 Irigaray, E, 21/28.
Irigaray’s work might not be a politics of recognition as much as it is a politics and ethics of mutuality with a redistribution of valuation.\textsuperscript{85} Since women have been assigned to the position of immanence and men to the position of the transcendental, Irigaray challenges the supposed hierarchical value of each position, finding neither point superior, but interdependent, or interwoven. This redistribution doesn’t absolutize the categorization of these terms, such that women should always be figured as immanent concepts. Her work brings this polarization to the fore, redistributing the value of the position and how we value, while questioning and keeping open the threshold between the two. Irigaray’s eros, god, or \textit{daemon} isn’t a guardian to keep nature in its place and the divine unsullied by nature; rather, Irigaray’s notion of an intermediary works to keep difference in touch, while challenging the way we figure such a chasm between the two. She works to develop these concepts of intersubjectivity (despite the fact that Western logic up to Hegel had previously rendered these concepts as dichotomous), revealing that the masculine/female binary logic falls prey to the same subordination of position as subject object relations. She concludes that subject-to-subject intersubjectivity has been unthought. Western philosophy and psychoanalysis have been so caught up in the ontology of sameness, our sensible perception (to employ a phrase from Merleau-Ponty) has perceived according to a logic of sexual indifference. We have created a sensible world, depriving it of true

\textsuperscript{85} I realize this is a term used commonly with concepts of economics and while I do not want to make an overt connection between sexual difference and economic issues in this section, I do want to point out how Irigaray’s work reorders and subverts traditional hierarchical claims of subjects from a top-down approach to a horizontal plane of intersubjectivity, where subjects are with other subjects in alterity, difference, and equity, which is not the same as equality or sameness.
difference, since any acknowledged difference has been conceptualized only as the subordinate to the dominant sensation or claim. Difference ought to give way to greater differences. Irigaray isn’t out to destroy sameness, merely divest it of its singularity as the centric location of all. Irigaray suggests that the second pole is not the subordinate pole, feeding and sustaining the dominant pole; it is a pole of its own that must emerge from the shadows to provide a wholly other sensibility or rationality to our logic. Without this redistribution of true difference, we miss being the bridges or mediators for a ‘sensible transcendental’ that not only waits for god to come, but as she describes, conjures god up among us and with us.  

If a sensible transcendental grants incarnation, the Christian notion of God among us, then an Irigarayan sensible immediacy focuses on the question of this ‘us.’ Who is the ‘we’ that God is among? Historically, the Christian God has been one that is removed or mediated to women via men. For Irigaray, the answer is clearly a ‘we’ that embraces radical sexuate alterity.

Irigaray has not often employed the term ‘sensible immediacy’ in her work and its sparse use probably indicates its correlation to other concepts in her writing. I suggest that her later development of the term ‘sensible immediacy’ corresponds with her earlier study of the elements, such as *Marine Lover, Passions élémentaires*, and *L'oubli de l'air*. I propose this isn’t a new concept, but a continuation of her earlier work. In her later work on intersubjectivity, Irigaray grounds her ethics in a sexuate ontology that questions the material existence of the natural world and how

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86 See Irigaray, E, 129/124.
87 This term seems to appear later in her writing, specifically in the essay, “The Wedding Between Body and Language” in *Two Be Two* and in the same essay also appearing in *Key Writings*. 
we have perceived it. The notion or philosophical development of terms like ‘sensible’ and ‘immediacy’ has a rich context within the phenomenological tradition of philosophy, and Irigaray’s writing indicates that she is well-versed in the conversation. One her greatest strengths is her evident breadth of reading and her careful scrutiny of Western philosophy.

Given the diversity of phenomenology, Irigaray will extend her own theory of the sensible over and against other claims that articulate subject-object relations. In this section I will select the French existential philosophers whose work parallels and explains Irigaray’s key differences: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Simone de Beauvoir.

4. Existential Phenomenology

At first glance, existentialism and phenomenology, particularly the later emergence of French existential phenomenology associated with Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Beauvoir, seem “to constitute one of those rare strands of modern Western philosophy that converge productively with feminism.”88 Existential phenomenology has gained philosophical interest from feminists like Iris Marion Young who note that this strand of philosophy offers a unique approach to theorizing subjectivity, aiming to speak from a point of view of the constituted subject’s experience.89 These two strands, originally two distinct traditions, later meshed together by Heidegger, form a tradition that opposes abstract, rationalist thought, and instead, explicates concrete, “lived experience,” and importantly for

feminist philosophers, the experiences of embodiment and emotion, key tenets for developing personal politics. While acknowledging many of the second-wave feminist concerns, feminists, like Irigaray, critique the idea that the canonical figures remain ensconced within a masculinism that unquestionably accepts the generic accounts of “human existence” which are in fact, tacitly, male experiences. Irigaray’s engagement with each of these existential and phenomenological writers can be understood as interest and lament as she explicates and affirms her central thesis of sexual difference vis-à-vis their work and how it has been obscured or denied.

Irigaray’s dance with each of these theorists has differing outcomes, but her honed attention toward this most fruitful tradition can be observed.

Yet the question remains, how should we understand Irigaray’s contribution of sexual difference with the account of existential phenomenology? After carefully surveying her interaction with Heidegger, one must also wrestle with her dealings with existential phenomenology, its humanistic orientation toward freedom and choice, and its impact on feminism. How does she maneuver the Heideggerian and Sartrean streams of Continental philosophy? How does Luce Irigaray’s account of sexual difference via the tradition of existential phenomenology differ from other feminist accounts? In particular, how does her theory establish a branch of its own that has promise for envisioning and developing a global ethic in which diverse creatures can be affirmed and honored in a planetary wide co-partnership, as opposed to a monosexual anthropocentric hegemony? I will examine these issues and conclude with my reading of how her philosophy can aid in moving toward such an ethic.
Historically Luce Irigaray developed as a philosopher in the context of these thinkers, and living in the same environment of post-war Europe means the cultural climate and intellectual atmosphere forms and shapes her thinking. With this in mind, I suggest that it is not so much that this particular tradition is one with which she has chosen to contend philosophically, but rather, she relates intellectually and culturally to the thinkers that she has learned to philosophize from, and with whom many of us are still thinking. Her intellectual contribution permits her and us to make sense of the Continental phenomenological-existential project and shape it anew.

In these sections I outline briefly her interaction with Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Lévinas, two thinkers whose focus on language, bodies, and ethical relations run parallel to her concerns. I conclude with a portion devoted to Simone de Beauvoir. Her chief critique of existential phenomenology will be the critique of the history of philosophy, the primacy of thinking within a male morphology, or the imperatives of the male body. Irigaray’s interactions with these philosophers will reveal how she can philosophize with and beyond this paradigm. Her work will signal the ways a female morphology has existed, been suppressed, and returns in ways that phallogocentrism deems “unspeakable.” She will reveal the exploitation of the female body as the philosophical building material of ontology and will give language, voice, and philosophical entrée to such an ontological “she,” or a topology of le féminine within this intellectual stream. My aim is to uncover how the ontological project of thinking being has emerged through the existential-phenomenological stream and how Irigaray’s participation in these traditions
affirms her continuation of this intellectual tradition. By reading these thinkers with Irigaray, we can discern what may advance feminist philosophy and how Irigaray’s contribution clarifies her role as a feminist and a Continental philosopher in her own right.

4.1. Merleau-Ponty

Irigaray’s important interest in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology became evident in her early essay that appeared in *Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle* (1984), “The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, ’The Intertwining—The Chiasm.” What is noteworthy in her explication of Merleau-Ponty is her attention to French existentialism early in her career, and her choice to address Merleau-Ponty directly, rather than Sartre or de Beauvoir. It could be read that her attention toward his work might have been directed with the hope of finding greater synergy and traction given his attention to the flesh or embodied experience and their common aim to break the constraint of oppositional thinking and reshift thinking away from empiricist, rationalist, idealist, and physiologist reductions of the human self and experience. What seems apparent in the criticism of Irigaray is not what Merleau-Ponty did say, but the lack of sexual specificity he offers the ontological projects, the invisible, and what remains unanalyzed in his work and the work of masculinist philosophy. Is he, as Elizabeth Grosz queries, “misogynist through neutralization,” a person who refuses to see sexual specificity, a result of strategic blindness or explicit denunciation?90

With theorists like Grosz, I argue that his work and Irigaray’s concerns and criticism can point toward a productive feminist theorization. In fact, Grosz implies the greater possible theorization between Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray as she explains:

It is significant, however, that in the case of Irigaray at least, her comments regarding Derrida and Deleuze are scathingly critical. She seems deeply disturbed by the metaphorics of becoming-woman that is pervasive in their writings, functioning as it does as a general emblem of political and theoretical radicality, untethered from any connection with women in their concreteness, that is, in terms of femininity as it is lived by women. Her relation to Merleau-Ponty is considerably more “amorous,” more in keeping with her stated project of “having a fling with the philosophers.”

According to Grosz, Merleau-Ponty’s work offers feminists three critical notions that can advance feminist theory. First, the ability to adjudicate experience, not relying upon it as an unexamined source of truth, but as a product of social-political-historical entities that can be constructed and affect these same entities, a notion that is simultaneously active and passive. Second, by making experience the touchstone for analysis, the object by which to begin analysis, he then makes experience the very subject of philosophy’s theorization, moving it away from private caprices and psychological musings, to the very substance and platform for assessing theory. Third and finally, he locates experience as the intermediate

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91 Ibid., 39.
position between mind and body. In Grosz's words, "He links the question of experience not only to the privileged locus of consciousness, but demonstrates that experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject’s incarnation."  

Alison Jaggar’s early work, Feminist Politics, explains the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s insights, as she offers her critique of radical feminist epistemologies that fail to distinguish between the description and explanation of women’s experiences. While we are indebted to radical feminists for bringing these experiences to the fore, we must also, Jaggar argues, situate women’s feelings and emotions within the social constructions they are framed within, scrutinizing and examining these experiences. Merleau-Ponty’s account offers feminists this valuable theorization. With Merleau-Ponty’s necessarily embodied subject, he moves accounts of knowledge away from ideological determination or mere physiological materialism, toward an account that offers each subject a perspectival and limited account, partial access of subjects to objects, in short, suggesting the question, does the body of knowledge that we possess broadly, actually reflect the sexual specificity of men’s interests and pursuits? Implicit within this observation is the very negative that Irigaray highlights in her work, the inability to make absolute transcendental claims of sexual universality or neutrality. Human experiences are not universal with secondary experiences of race, age, ability and so on. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s account suggests that embodied specificities of the subject “… inform the type of subject it is, constituting the very contours, nature, and features

92 Ibid., 41.
of that subject.”94 The malleability of the subject to the objective and the objective world to the subject are exchanged much more fluidly.

4.1.1. The Chiasm

Merleau-Ponty’s key term “flesh” in his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible: The Intertwining—the Chiasm* (1959, trans. 1968) marks a significant disruption in binary thinking of mind and body, inside and outside, subject and object, or self and others. As the title suggests, the body is figured as a chiasm, from the Greek term *chi*, signifying a crossing-over of subjective and objective experience. The work itself is a crossing over; originally intended to be a book on truth, he converted it into a work on perception (visible) and truth and language (invisible).95 In this work he examines the reversibility of flesh revealing the ambiguity of sight and touch—the indeterminate boundaries of these senses.

His favorite exemplar of this doubling or folding over of flesh and being is the example of two hands touching, where people can experience the sensation of touching and being touched, the reversibility of subject and object, where the body is both phenomenal and objective at the same time. Both subjects and objects share flesh, and visibility makes us aware of this ability we have to shift our reflection. In a critical gesture he moves beyond Sartre’s gaze, suggesting a crisscrossing of perception and touching: the seer can be seen touching, and the seen can also see and touch, offering a critically subjective stance that is not solely controlled by the original subject. The body, he posits, is two-dimensional, the body as sensible and

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94 Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray,” 42.
sentient (objective and phenomenal body), double belonging that he says teaches us that “each calls out for the other.” But this notion of flesh seeing and touching is not isolated to humans; in a radical shift he declares that objects in the world can also see and be seen. The crossing over between outer and inner, between subject and objects, between mind and body, is a reversible, ambiguous chiasm. As he says,

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh. 

In this account Merleau-Ponty articulates how two senses alert him to the body’s unique position as a thing among things: seeing and touching. The body touches and sees and it is seen and touched, thus indicating how the being of one body participates with the being or flesh of the world. He explains, “… each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the

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97 Ibid., 249.
things as the world is universal flesh."\textsuperscript{98} The visible seer (the sensible) and the invisible (the intelligible) are fluid, non-identical, and moving movements, their distinctions are evident, but they are not precise locations, as much as they might be gradations. The hinge or access point is the flesh. He describes flesh as “not a thing, but a possibility, a latency,”\textsuperscript{99} arguing there is no term in traditional philosophy to designate it. He suggests it is not “matter,” or “psychic material,” nor a fact or a sum of facts.\textsuperscript{100} Instead of matter or mind, he turns to the old term “element,” which he understands to be that midway point between the spatio-temporal body and the world of ideas. In his words flesh is “an ‘element’ of Being.”\textsuperscript{101} The flesh is not an obstacle between seer and the seen, it is instead, “their means of communication.”\textsuperscript{102} He explains this in the following: “The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.”\textsuperscript{103} He knows this flesh is not object as it suffers when wounded, removing flesh and body from the category of instruments. The universal flesh of the world with the flesh of the body do not envelope one in other, but as he says, they are intertwined: “There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.”\textsuperscript{104} This reciprocity or intertwining of flesh, sensuous as it is sensed, with the theorization of a return to the elements ought to make Merleau-Ponty’s account a paramount theory for Irigaray’s advancement of the female sexuate body/self/subject and her theorization for

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 256.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. 252.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 253.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 255.
intersubjectivity. The return to the elements of water, air, earth, and fire as an incarnate principle of Being should make Merleau-Ponty a promising philosophic partner.

4.1.2. Reading Irigaray with Merleau-Ponty

But her essay in *Ethics* can be read as critical of Merleau-Ponty’s visual dependence (a central marker of phallogocentrism which she describes at length in *Speculum*). She charges Merleau-Ponty with two important critiques: first, he theorizes that subjectivity, and hence intersubjectivity, is solipsistic, and second, he mistakenly conflates the senses of the visible with the tactile.

The first charge of solipsism can be read as a charge that his phenomenology is the sensuous experience of a single male seeing and touching the world. Thus, the conclusions he makes have entrée as a universal theorization of subject-object relations. As can be read from her early work in *Speculum*, Irigaray has labored to draw attention to the speculative economy and she argues that the two senses do not obey the same “laws or rhythms of flesh.” They cannot be part of the same chiasmus because as she critiques, the visible needs the tangible, but the tangible does not need the visible, they are not reciprocal senses. The criss-crossing is nullified by touching’s primacy, which the maternal-feminine subject and other demonstrate as well as the doubling of lips that women embody. The tactility of the womb is a precondition of sight.

Other feminists have noted similar critiques of Merleau-Ponty’s work. In her notable essay, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body

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105 Irigaray, E, 162.
Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” Iris Marion Young suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s lived body is a description of the masculine experience with no recognition of the difference a woman’s body and gender connotes. Similarly, Judith Butler argues that Merleau-Ponty’s occlusion of sexuality from human experience makes sexuality co-extensive with existence. Particularly, she critiques his ocular heterosexual bias: “Viewed as an expression of sexual ideology, *The Phenomenology of Perception* reveals the cultural construction of the masculine subject as a strangely disembodied voyeur whose only sexuality is strangely non-corporeal. Significant, I think, is the prevalence of visual metaphors in Merleau-Ponty’s description of normal sexuality.” In a similar manner, Irigaray’s critiques of Merleau-Ponty have resonance with these feminists. Elizabeth Grosz understands Irigaray’s three basic critiques of Merleau-Ponty as the following: 1) he privileges the dominant place of vision in his writings that overpowers all other perceptual models, and accords with a phallic economy in which the feminine figures as a blind spot or lack, 2) he associates notions of flesh with attributes of femininity, and 3) he seemingly ignores the maternal body and experience. Like Butler and Young Irigaray uncovers a masculinist assumption in a work that addresses perception and embodiment through the eyes and experiences of a heterosexual male, ignoring the issue of sexual difference in phenomenology.


In another essay, Irigaray faults Merleau-Ponty for remaining within the same master-slave paradigm as Sartre.\textsuperscript{108} Specifically, she writes that Merleau-Ponty’s development of perception does little in “acceding to the other as other.”\textsuperscript{109} She charges that he considers sexuality an ‘ambiguity’ and ‘indeterminancy,’ and challenges that his notion of sexuality does not ‘. . . favour the emergence of intersubjectivity but, rather, maintains a duplicity in subjectivity itself in such a way that all of its actions, its sentiments, its sensations are ambiguous, murky, and incapable of being turned towards an other as such.”\textsuperscript{110}

Much of this criticism centers on his discussion of the phenomenology of sexuality. Irigaray understands his theory of perception to reinscribe a dichotomy between subject (self) and object (the other), while she, in contrast, theorizes a dialectic between subject and object that considers proximity, nearness, and intersubjective exchanges that are sexually differentiated. She seems to read Merleau-Ponty’s use of perception as a means to objectify the other and she urges, “Perception represents a possible path for sensing the other, respecting this other as subject, and it also allows me to remain a subject while perceiving the other. Perception can establish a link between the reception of a fact exterior to me and an intention toward the world, towards the other.”\textsuperscript{111} Rather than cultivating a society where ‘sensible perception’ can flourish, through a tradition of the sensible and exchange of words between those who love each other,\textsuperscript{112} she posits, “This

\textsuperscript{108} See Irigaray, KW, 4, and “The Wedding Between the Body and Language,” in TBT, esp. 20-22, and KW, 15-17.
\textsuperscript{109} Irigaray, TBT, 22; KW, 16.
\textsuperscript{110} Irigaray, TBT, 21; KW, 16.
\textsuperscript{111} Irigaray, TBT, 22; KW, 17.
\textsuperscript{112} Irigaray, TBT, 23; KW, 18.
elementary economy of sensation is too abstract for the life of the flesh, for its
harmony, for intersubjectivity, and causes intersubjectivity to decline into simple
‘experience.’” Sensibility for Irigaray is bound to a culture of subjectivity and
intersubjectivity. Whether the notion is the other, perception, or Lévinas's caress,
she is adamant that sensibility must be focused on the task of intersubjectivity,
sensing the other as a true other, and not as ambiguous sexual other (à la Merleau-
Ponty) and immediacy, the pole given to woman, no longer be the suppressed
object, but a subject in her own right.

The critiques from Irigaray, Butler, and Young question the subjective
specificities of Merleau-Ponty’s subject, if that they are not, in fact, the sexual
subjective specificities of men and their lived experiences and corporeal relations.
But this should not cause us to be dismissive of Merleau-Ponty’s claims, especially
with Irigaray’s notion of sexuate difference. As Margaret Whitford observed early in
Irigarayan scholarship and Irigaray testifies to herself in the beginning of “The
Invisible of the Flesh,” she and Merleau-Ponty share common aims: “Like Merleau-
Ponty, Irigaray is interested in pre-discursive experience . . . and how
conceptualization of experience bring with it certain ontological commitments.”
Irigaray writes quoting him,

Up to this point, my reading with interpretation of the history of
philosophy agree with Merleau-Ponty: we must go back to that
moment of prediscursive experience, recommence everything, all the
categories by which we understand things, the world, subject-object

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113 Irigaray, TBT, 22; KW, 18.
divisions, recommence everything and pause at the “mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity”.\textsuperscript{115}

It seems that her criticism of Merleau-Ponty is a pushing or advancing of his phenomenology, not a dismissal of its original aim, intent, and scope. She notes objections that signal missteps, perhaps, in the dance, rather than a failed dancer. I believe Merleau-Ponty’s insights with Irigarayan scholarship are powerful theoretical discernments in at least three ways.

First, by respecting the laws, logic, and rhythm of the tactile sense, Irigaray expands his argument away from conflating these two senses and provides theoretical difference distinguishing sight and touch. She signals failure to theorize tactility as a forgetting of the maternal-feminine, and hence, the co-origin of all subjectivity. And by expanding subjective experience or flesh to include sexual difference, she offers a way that multiple bodies can en-flesh the subjectivity and its reversibility with the phenomenal world. Her charges of murky ambiguity seem to be targeted at his understanding of the flesh of the subject with another subject, not so much the notion of flesh as a critical theoretical mid-point. By allowing difference in flesh to be further theorized, the mid-point or “element of Being” still offers a robust theory of human ontology and epistemology that refuses a generic rationalist, empiricist, or materialist account alone. In many ways she is positing a more profound notion of the flesh than even Merleau-Ponty could envision.

\textsuperscript{115} Irigaray, E, 151.
Second, it seems the murkiness of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh is also the very condition of possibility for her to distinguish how this flesh could be different sexually. As Grosz again notes, Merleau-Ponty’s flesh functions within feminist theory much like “Lacan’s phallus,” “Derrida’s différance,” or “Deleuze’s becoming-woman,” and she calls these concept-metaphors that allow feminists to investigate and challenge prevailing notions of metaphysics by providing the tools of destabilization and openness that they have needed to attack patriarchy.\textsuperscript{116} But feminists’ very utilization of these metaphors may in fact efface feminist interests as they reinscribe them with priority, reinforcing phallogocentrism. What Irigaray’s project offers is a mode for feminists to self-represent these interests in ways that also challenge patriarchy, remain open, but are sexually differentiated to, for, and with women’s theorization. This ambiguity of the sexual female other who is also subject appears to be the precarious dance that she herself is maneuvering, demanding women exist in some specificity that augers theorization at the level of universal ontological claims, but refusing to posit that notion essentially. But it is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh as overcoming mind-body duality that provides Irigaray with a unique co-challenger, allowing body-subjects to be living fluid beings whose attributes of sex no longer remain physiological facts about them, as Grosz notes, like one’s eye color,\textsuperscript{117} but these attributes are in fact alive with agency or ‘flesh’ of their own, nature and culture together, a central thesis of Irigaray’s claims. Again, the rhythm of these differences sounds the cue that escapes the notice of the

\textsuperscript{116} See Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray,” 53.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
speculative economy, which might signal why a heterosexual male body-subject would omit their difference.

Third, the abyss of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm seems to be similar in intent and scope to the bordered protection of the interval in Irigaray's schema, or the “to,” which Irigaray further develops in *I Love to You*. Like Merleau-Ponty, she desires a way for these two subjects to cross-over without fusion or fission. She and Merleau-Ponty share a theoretical concern to allow a profound space to be present, and Irigaray moves that space toward intersubjective relations and this theorization of space and proximity with body-subjects and the world seems a mutual notion. Irigaray will include that distinction between subjects and other subjects, particular sexual subjects and the return of woman to herself.

4.2. *Lévinas*

Irigaray’s exchange with existential phenomenology includes Emmanuel Lévinas’s essay on the caress, as found in his chapter “Phenomenology of Eros” in *Totality and Infinity*. Like Lévinas, she is concerned that we think eros prior to the same ontological overlays that defines and frames the discussions of the erotic today. 118 To reconsider love Irigaray and Lévinas reflect on the notion of a radical “other.”

4.2.1. *The Other*

The other for Lévinas is “forever unknowable” and signifies an excess, opening, which even in our attempts to kill or control, the other remains elusive to the parameters of subjectivity, thus the Levinasian ethical prohibition to kill the

118 Irigaray, E, 185.
other. For Lévinas we are hostage to the responsibility to welcome the other with our ethical action, prohibiting hurt, and adding a second layer, a call to help the other.

Irigaray’s relation to the other, as delineated in I Love to You, and her response to Hegel’s articulation of the dialectic, is postulated negatively. The negative or self-limit of a subject is what enables her or him to go towards the other as other. The very alterity of each other draws them to each other: “I go towards that which enables me to become while remaining myself”119 and she will advocate the couple as the basic social cell.”120 Ethical relations of the couple have largely remained within heterosexual erotic discourse (as in Hegel’s discussion of the ethical) or completely ignored for homosexual lovers (as in Plato’s Symposium). But within Lévinas’s writing a reader can discern immediately, as he states, “Love aims at the Other,”121 how love relations signify the theorization of an ethical and ontic other. Irigaray’s first essay directed toward Lévinas appeared also in Ethics of Sexual Difference, in the essay, “Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas” and is read as broadly generative and critical.122

Irigaray’ chief critique, as already eluded, is Levinas’s masculinist language in theorizing the ethico-ontic other. Indeed, as Krzysztof Ziarek observes, Levinas’s rhetoric reveals his masculine assumptions, articulating an ethics of the other as “obsession,” “hostage,” and “responsibility.” Whereas, Irigaray’s language “… places

119 Irigaray, ILTY, 104.
120 Irigaray, “Flesh Colours,” KW, 113
122 See especially Tina Chanter, “Levinas and the Question of the Other,” in Ethics of Eros, 170-224; Jones, Irigaray, 214-16,
the emphasis on the potentiality unfolding from the other’s difference, so that the other’s invisibility does not only ex-posit the subject but, primarily, enables both the one and the other to become, to ‘be two.’ Alterity is thus expressed through feminine rhetoric, which foregrounds change, potential, and a new economy of sexual relations.”123 Critical to Irigarayan scholarship is the insistence that this sexual distinction grounds ethico-ontic relations. The female other, too often rendered invisible, makes visible the relationship “between us.” If sight does not clue us to the ethical female other, how can we be two? As previously stated, her work elaborates the sense of touch or tactility as positing or signifying the maternal-feminine. She describes the sensual pleasure of birth as evidence to our origin: “Still carnal. Voluptuous without knowing it. Always at the beginning and not based on the origin of a subject that sees, grows old, and dies of losing touch with the enthusiasm and innocence of a perpetual beginning.”124 Before the solipsism of subject-object relations in the masculine, one that seeks to control its objects, she understands sensual pleasure as a way to “reopen” and “reverse” this conception and construction of the world.125

In *This Sex*, Irigaray suggests that the logic of the visible perpetuates women’s lack or absence, but women’s erotic pleasure is alternatively apparent via touch. She writes, “Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form is particularly foreign to female

124 Irigaray, E, 185.
125 Ibid.
eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching that from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation.”

With Emmanuel Levinas she will find a philosophic partner whose focus is the wholly other, whose theorization of the invisible, and concern for proximity will offer potential collaboration and critique from her.

4.2.2. The Caress

Given her theoretical interest in erotic touching as a disruption to the scopic economy, it is unsurprising why she is alert to Lévinas’s theorization of the caress. If touch alerted Merleau-Ponty to texture, to the palpable, Lévinas frames touch as a caress; it does not turn me toward an intra-psychic sense of subject-object relations, but toward the wholly other. Unlike a grasp, the caress thwarts subject-object relations displacing the unquestioned “I.” In contrast, the fragility or tenderness of the caress turns me toward the other or ethical subject relations. For Lévinas desire points me toward the exteriority of the other, a desire beyond satisfaction, that does not posit an absolute transcendental Other, but the irreducible other. He explains, “. . . the caress seeks what is not yet, a ‘less than nothing,’ closed and dormant beyond the future, consequently dormant quite otherwise than the possible which would open to anticipation.”

This play of time and space means I cannot possess an other or an object, and he states that the caress seeks neither person nor thing, thus confounding the former oppositions and telos of philosophy's past.

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126 Irigaray, TS, 25-6.
127 Lévinas, Totality and Infinity, 258.
128 Ibid., 259.
will guarantee ethical proximity, a Heideggerian trope Irigaray carefully details in her work, and as I have already elaborated, extends notions of ethics with a rethinking of the metaphysics of space and time. Lévinas explains, “In the caress proximity remains proximity... Sight is... an openness and a consciousness... is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye.”

Levinas takes the ethical posturing of touch and suggests vision may also have this ethical posture of proximity. In this way Levinas recasts vision, hearing, and touch as the awakening of the approach of the neighbor.

The notion of the caress as proximity means that sensibility will be interpreted as proximity rather than knowledge possession. We have language “contact,” and logos is not the thing to be claimed, but will instead harken to a “beyond the visible.” The caress is not an attribute of existence, but “a way” to a no man’s land between being and non-being. The caress dislocates the certitude of Descartes’ “I” with the question of the “non-I.” He differentiates that caress from the body-object of physiology or the action of the “I can,” it is sensible, but denuded of form, offering itself as “erotic nudity.” In this fragile state the other, the Beloved, is beyond object, face, and “existent,” abiding in what he terms “virginity.” The “Eternal Feminine” is recast as the virgin who will signify a fleeting, ungraspable, reconfiguration of the master-slave dialectic. Instead of conqueror and conquered,

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131 Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.
the virgin will be both untouchable and desirable, “... a fragility at the limit of non-being wherein is lodged not only what is extinguished and is no longer, but what is not yet.”

Irigaray begins her essay in *Ethics* to Lévinas by expressing the differences between his phenomenology of the caress and the one she is attempting to think. She faults Lévinas for framing the caress from the subject standpoint of himself, as a man, and not two in reciprocity. Second, she claims that her gesture of caressing bears no resemblance to the demonstration of carnal love that Lévinas develops. While Lévinas writes that the feminine is essentially ‘violable and inviolable’ like a notion of the fragile ungraspable virgin, Irigaray disputes,

*I think of virginity, instead, as your repose with yourself, in yourself, you as irreducible to me, irreducible to what is common in community. Rather than violating or penetrating the mystery of the other, rather than reducing his or her consciousness or freedom to passivity, objectuality, animality or infancy, the caress makes a gesture which give the other to himself, to herself, thanks to an attentive witness, thanks to a guardian of incarnate subjectivity.*

What permits intersubjective relationships, the call or welcome to use Lévinas’s term, is difference. Proximity acts as the kind of safeguard that Lévinas intends with the caress, when differences between the two are acknowledged, self-limitation from the onset. The attraction between the two is not hetero-erotic, it is the eros of “energy,” mystery, and sensibility that must be sexually differentiated

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132 Ibid.  
133 Irigaray, TBT, 27; KW, 21.
between these others. The conditions of possibility for the caress are imbued within her negative: “...this negative allows me to go towards you.”

Irigaray’s constant criticism of phenomenology shouldn’t cloud her enthusiasm for an existential phenomenal subject, but rather, indicates that this subject is presumed to be one, instead of two. She is critical of Lévinas’ portrayal of this caress as a male lover caressing his beloved, a woman. The unending deferral of the lover and his virgin beloved, she suggests, fails its ethical intention: “The caress does not attain the more intimate dwelling place,” because the first dwelling place of woman is elided. She writes, “No nudity brings back to light the intimacy of that first house of flesh.”

The potential that Lévinas elaborates in this fecund encounter with a female beloved, falls flat as another disappointing allusion to woman as child, animal, or virgin. The potential of his touch “that goes beyond touching” has lost the memory of flesh. She is faceless and veiling herself from visibility and night. The act of love is greater than the she and actually swallows her up, virginity and violability remove her from the state of innocence that attaches the beloved to her mother, ethics cannot be reversed nor has it a way to think this reversal back to the maternal.

Where is the trusting, fragile, agency of the female lover in Levinas’s account? Irigaray imagines, “There the female lover is not subjected to alternations of fire and ice—mirror or frost that the male lover would have to pass through to reach the beloved. Given back to her own movement... she revives herself in her own flame.

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134 Irigaray, ILTY, 104.
135 Irigaray, E. 188.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid., 191.
and does not simply receive it from the other.” A woman is not a passive flower waiting for her bloom to be plucked, in order for the lover to contemplate, but as she says, “Both contemplate and bloom.”

I observe two important critiques that Irigaray will develop from this initial dance with Lévinas. First, with Lévinas, Irigaray will herald a rethinking of the visible and its potential to reframe ethical relations. What is surprising in this essay is her positive connotation of the visibility of the female other and her critique of Lévinas’s faceless beloved, a facelessness she reads as woman’s continued absence in subject-to-subject relations. Such lack of visibility has allowed the female other to be annexed in order to be captivated, depriving relations of true intimacy and growth that Lévinas purports as the basis of ethico-ontic thinking. From her early work which rejected the visible as referential to the scopic economy, Irigaray begins to reconceive the visible with a material sensibility. In her work on Heidegger, she conceives of the “density of air,” and her attention to the elements in *Elemental Passions* and *Marine Lover*, as Kelly Oliver notes, moves vision from the service of patriarchy, offering it as a materiality that may give us new ways to think about the visible from a feminist perspective. The look or Sartrean gaze will become a look of love, and Levinas’s caress as “the way” will later become for Irigaray her titled project, *The Way of Love*.

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138 Irigaray, E, 194.
139 Ibid.
Second, Irigaray will not depart from Levinas’s erotic concerns, she will provide their fundamental sexuate difference to make the fecundity generative and proximate. She, like Levinas, will theorize proximity, but proximity will include sexuately differentiated subjects, in order to safeguard the wholly other. This safeguarding of a female subject will also suggest the question of a female transcendental figure. While the call of Levinas’s transcendental Other keeps the lover from enmeshment or fusion with the beloved, so Irigaray will theorize a transcendental figure that will help women discern the difference positively and anew. If for Levinas the encounter with the Other calls the individual into being, meaning ethics precedes ontology, then for Irigaray she will theorize a transcendental other as well as immanent other that respects the difference between these sexuate subjects. But I agree with Rachel Jones, that for Irigaray, the caress is the more fruitful origin for this transcendental other, as carnal beings reveal the incarnation of ethical fidelity within and between them.\textsuperscript{141}

Her re-reading of phenomenology is not intended to dismiss this tradition, but reveal what is being covered, namely, a sexuate ontology of at least two subjects, which permits true intersubjectivity to flourish. Sensibility that is reduced to experience without an account of sexuality that concedes difference misses the locus of meaning that phenomenology was intended to reveal. As she writes,

\begin{quote}
For this reason, the sexuate body and the sexual relationship are not bewitchment or possession, submersion and nausea (as Sartre writes in \textit{Being and Nothingness}), they are not ambiguity (according to the
\end{quote}

language of Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, 'The Body in its Sexual Being'), and the feminine body, or of the feminine, is not equivocation (as Lévinas maintains in *Totality and Infinity*). Such bewitchment, possession, ambiguity and equivocation signify a two which expresses both the existence and absence of two subjects as well as of intersubjectivity.\(^{142}\)

Irigaray establishes her notion of sensible immediacy within the context of the phenomenological tradition, which takes seriously notions of the ‘sensible’ and ‘immediacy.’ She evidences concern that sensibility not be reduced to mere ‘sensation’ or ‘experience,’ but that sensibility remain sensuous, in touch with the subject of a wholly other in order to maintain the regeneration and renewing of the wholly other Lévinas intends. Her criticism or addition to the conversation is that sexuate ontology reveals a sensible immediacy that signals two subjects that make intersubjectivity possible and dismisses the pseudo-intersubjectivity of subject-object relations, where the female subject-object remains an ambiguity, object, animal, or virginal figure on the brink of dissipation.

She is trying to think of sexual relations outside of the exchange-value economy she outlines in *This Sex and conceives of a proximity and nearness where woman can be in relation to herself and the other without fear of being owned, violated, sacrificed, or entombed. She also lifts immediacy out of its subservient position and redistributes its value with the polarity of transcendence. In many ways, Irigaray’s writing about the immediate or natural world reveals the

\(^{142}\) Irigaray, TBT, 28; KW, 22.
transcendence she believes occurs within this pole, confounding its oppositional stance to the transcendent. In much of Irigaray’s writing, transcendence is not found in another plane apart from earth and its natural domain, but transcendence becomes incarnate amongst us, a sensible transcendental, when we acknowledge an ‘us’ as the guiding ethic of the world, and not a one.

4.3. Simone de Beauvoir

Sartrean existential phenomenology came under attack, particularly in the 1980s, from the poststructuralist or “postmodern” turn in philosophy and feminism, but has recently regained interest as theorists seek insights from the tradition to move beyond the impasses that postmodernism seems to present to some.143 Feminist critiques of existential philosophy identify key limitations of each philosophy for feminist purposes. First, existential philosophy’s exemplar, Jean-Paul Sartre famously argued that human consciousness is free, choosing its actions, characteristics, and emotions,144 and that existence precedes essence.145 The focus on freedom and choice can be a difficult assertion for feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, who must also show how women are constrained and require emancipation from the tyranny of patriarchy. Critics debate her entanglement in the

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143 See, for example, Sonia Kruks, Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics (Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, 2001); Debra B. Bergoffen, Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologists, Erotic Generosities (Albany: State University of New York, 1997).


seemingly contradictory claims that women are free, but at the same time, culturally not free.\footnote{146 For the complexities of Beauvoir’s relationship to existentialism see, Penelope Deutscher, “The Notorious Contradictions of Simone de Beauvoir,” \textit{Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction, and the History of Philosophy} (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 169-193.}

Initially one may read Irigaray as having a critical stance toward Sartre, and de Beauvoir by extension. For example, she suggests that Sartre, in \textit{Being and Nothingness}, identifies the body of the other as a ‘facticity’ that he can see and touch, or a consciousness transcendent to the body. Within this scheme, she critiques, “... the only possibility of entering into a sexual relationship would be—he writes—to enchant the other, to make their consciousness descend into the body, to paralyze their liberty in the factuality of the body.... Touching the other, caressing the other, then becomes a means of appropriating their liberty in the factuality of the body.”\footnote{Irigaray, KW, 4.} The other for Sartre, according to Irigaray, must be trapped within the sensibility of body, in order to protect the subject from the other. Instead of mutuality arbitrating a relationship, fear and control become the dominant motifs. Irigaray’s critique of Sartre’s notion of sensibility reveals her own belief that the body of the self or the other need not be subsumed with only one winner.

A reader may also observe how little of Simone de Beauvoir’s work is actually cited within Irigaray’s work. Although \textit{Speculum of the Other Woman} may be understood as a continuation of de Beauvoir’s project, particularly the question of the woman as the Other, but Irigaray indicates her development of the other is in direct opposition to de Beauvoir’s. She explains, “Rather than refusing, as Simone de Beauvoir does, to be the other gender, the other sex, I am asking to be recognized as
really an other, irreducible to the masculine subject. I can now see just how much the subtitle of *Speculum* may have irritated Simone de Beauvoir: *Of the other as woman.*”

Both Irigaray and de Beauvoir will grapple with the notion of subjects and objects, but their methodology, assumptions, and view of transcendence will reveal important and divergent shifts in Irigaray’s thinking as an existentialist and phenomenologist. While opposites on the question of the Other, I suggest she and de Beauvoir share critical concerns as they remain theoretically different. I will briefly sketch de Beauvoir’s notion of subject-object relations and will demonstrate how Irigaray relates to it. For the purpose of this thesis, this section is important to indicate why Irigaray’s ethics may be particularly useful to ecofeminists, or groups whose political interests rely on respect for issues outside of a male-dominated ideal of political freedom and transcendence, such as animals and ecologies.

4.3.1. Feminism and Language

De Beauvoir’s reception as a philosopher has often been unrecognized due to her choice to reflect her thoughts in essays and metaphysical novels, exemplified in her inaugural 1943 work in this genre, *She Came to Stay.* Many believe her 1946 *Literature and the Metaphysical Essay* and her 1965 and 1966 *Que Peut la Littérature* and *Mon expérience d’écrivain* reflect Husserl and Heidegger’s emphasis on the lived experience and the way language reveals meaning. If for Heidegger it was poetry that challenged the privileged position of abstract discourses, then it was ethical and political literature for de Beauvoir. But for de Beauvoir she

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148 Irigaray, DBT, 125.
challenged not only the philosophical status quo, she also challenged the patriarchal status quo. It is unsurprising that Luce Irigaray, reading Husserl, Heidegger, and de Beauvoir would also highlight similar reflections on the lived experience and pit similar challenges toward discursive philosophy and patriarchy. Many have critiqued Irigaray’s *féminine écriture* as reflecting an essential notion of feminist writing, but, understood within the legacy of Heidegger and de Beauvoir, one may also understand it as a way to destabilize the privilege of abstract philosophical discourse as the discourse par excellence with which to convey meaning about our world.

4.3.2. *Freedom, Will, and Choice*

De Beauvoir’s philosophy emerged at a time in post-war Europe where freedom and a person’s subjectivity could be radically oppressed by a political occupying other. Her work appears at a time of national violence, gender violence, and religious decline. In *She Came to Stay* she dedicates with the words of Hegel “each consciousness seeks the death of the other.” The question of a subject’s freedom, of the Hegel’s master and slave relations, is put to the question, can another truly limit my freedom, impinge on my ability to choose in a meaningless and absurd world devoid of traditional mores? For de Beauvoir the question can be understood in her work, *Ethics of Ambiguity* where she leans on the Cartesian distinction between one’s outer versus inner self, a protected inner self that no external presence can truly touch. She writes,

It is rather well known that the fact of being a subject is a universal fact and that the Cartesian *cogito* expresses both the most individual
experience and the most objective truth. By affirming that the source of all values resides in the freedom of man, existentialism merely carries on the tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, who in the words of Hegel himself, “have taken for their point of departure the principle according to which the essence of right and duty and the essence of the thinking and willing subject are absolutely identical.”

She explains that man is not placed in a world given to him, a world that is foreign to him, but rather, “it is the world willed by man.” She scorns Hegel’s loss of the individual for the collective “Life of Mankind.” Rather, she asserts again Sartre’s definition of man in *Being and Nothingness* as “that being whose being is not to be, that subjectivity which realizes itself only as a presence in the world, that engages freedom, that surging of the for-one-self which is immediately given for others.” She cites Husserl’s phenomenology as a way to limit any “errors of dogmatism” or absolute understanding of the external world given the nature of flesh and bone and one’s existential passion, instincts, desires, stating that the genuine man will reject any foreign absolute. She notes, “He will understand that it is not a matter of being right in the eyes of a God, but being right in his own eyes.” But challenging Dostoyevsky’s claim, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted,” she clarifies that the existentialist project is one that takes on the seriousness and responsibility of one’s freedom and will. Her project does not dodge the weight of

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150 Ibid.
151 Ibid., 3.
152 Ibid., 9.
153 Ibid., 14.
human action behind the contingency of an inhuman objectivity outside of man and his freedom. She is not transcending the empirical body for Kant’s universality, or the right of the individual for Hegel’s ethical sustainability. Instead she counters that the right of one individual man is not the totality of value, but rather, “… the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself.”\textsuperscript{154} She submits that her ethics of ambiguity will “… refuse to deny \textit{a priori} that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.”\textsuperscript{155}

Embedded within this distinction of particular individual freedoms and collective law seems to be the crux of Irigaray’s claim. Should this discernment of particular concrete groups be sexuately differentiated? Would the embodied, languaged experience of sexuate others offer substantively different ambiguities as groups seek to define aims and goals that refuse to transcend beyond the empirical body, the temporal moment? If human wills are, as Marx alluded, not apparently free, but reflections of the objective condition by which people are defined, should the revolt also consider the negation of sex? For the existentialist, de Beauvoir insists that the decision to even join a political party or a revolution resides within the surge of the individual in flesh and blood. The idea will not carry the movement, but bodies that choose their freedom and will. She notes Hegel’s observation that a choice can only be moral if we can also choose not to realize it. Rather than abandoning ethics once the choice is made, or as Hegel understood the Spirit

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
moving past nature, for her, ethics will only be moved by embodied individuals that do as she observes Marx coaxing: "bite into the world." De Beauvoir refuses to convey ethics abstractly, but will move it toward action, the world present as we are present in it. Freedom as a given means isn't the end game, but rather, freedom converges with existence in reality, taking our freedom and making it moral in the world.

If we are free and moral when we choose ethics that align with particular bodies and in particular places in time, then it seems Irigaray's distinction of sexuate difference would be a welcomed clarification of how actions are or are not ethical. Like de Beauvoir, Irigaray also traces how man's journey from child to almost divine being would give him pause to bequeath his god-like status to become simply "a man with all his anxiety and doubt." Perhaps sexuate difference is another anxiety that people dread in the choices it demands, the distinction of wills and bodies it further asks us to consider, the lackluster ability to propel a mighty collective like "the Life of Mankind" or the Idea by which it is easier to rally political action around, the pompousness of what de Beauvoir observes as the "serious man." But what of the woman? Both Irigaray and de Beauvoir will have differing notions of how this notion can extend existential ethics.

4.3.3. Woman as Other

De Beauvoir uses the term Other throughout the Second Sex to signify the female's secondary position in society and in her own way of thinking. Her project queries why this is so. In her reading of the Hegelian dialectic, woman is a

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156 Ibid., 22.
157 Ibid., 46.
contingent identity predicated upon man’s subjectivity. She is the necessary object
to his subject position, which is free and absolute. Thus she is inessential, a deviant,
and continent. As the object to the male’s subjectivity, she is herself incomplete.
According to Beauvoir’s account, in order to become a subject, and not the Other,
women must regain their freedom or liberty, rather than their happiness, and
transcend the immanence of their facticity. She writes in the Second Sex that she
assumes the posture of existential ethics:

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely; through
projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing
toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present
existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every
time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation, of
existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral
fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it
takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an

As elaborated, primal to existential thought is the notion that humans are
creatures who are free, and freedom of choice is the basis of morality. Simply, good
acts increase one’s freedom, while bad ones limit it. Facticity or the “in-itself” in
existentialist philosophy can be any object in the world, or a given fact about us,
such as biographical history of embodied state. Typically these are things that fall
into the category of material objects that have a pre-determined essence. In contrast
the for-itself are beings with consciousness who have no inherent pre-determined essence, a creation of the present, able to reflect on the past and make choices that project us into the future. De Beauvoir is interested in the tension of ambiguity between these two poles. What constitutes the meaning of the “in-itself” is the “for-itself,” or human consciousness. That is to say, objects exist as the human subject synthesizes them according to that person’s aims and attitudes; therefore, it is unthinkable to conceive of an object or a fact with some kind of pure meaning, or a changeless essence. This unity of the in-itself and for-itself is an inseparable unity. Beauvoir’s work reveals how these supposed facts paint a specific cultural portrait of what constitutes being a woman, such as the pain of menstruation.\footnote{Beauvoir writes that for women menstruation ”. . . limits their work capacity and condemned them to long periods of impotence.” The ancients viewed it as a “horror of feminine fertility,” and “just as the penis gets its privileged value from the social context, the social context makes menstruation a malediction.” Ibid., 72, 170, 329.} But the inherent conundrum or tension for a woman is that she will discover that her autonomous freedom is situated in a world where men “. . . force her to assume herself as Other,” and thereby “. . . freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will forever be transcended by another sovereign and essential consciousness.”\footnote{Ibid., 17.} She asserts, “Woman’s drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?”\footnote{Ibid.}

According to Beauvoir a woman’s very identity is bound up in a non-identity; therefore she can never be subject since she must remain frozen as someone else’s
object. For a woman to escape this condition she must assert her fundamental subjectivity and assert her freedom to transcend. She writes, “Art, literature, and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim, one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom . . . [W]hat woman primarily lacks is learning from the practice of abandonment and transcendence, in anguish and pride.”

The crux of the tension revolves around a pervasive feminist impasse: the relationship of embodiment/nature/immanence and the degree of freedom and power that women possess to influence and determine reason/culture and thus, transcendence. Historically, women’s supposedly ‘weaker’ bodies have been fraught with culturally abhorrent associations, such as the unclean blood of menstruation, the public shame of breastfeeding, and the anxiety of pregnancy and childbirth. The division between the public and private spheres of life have often been to women’s economic and social disadvantage as they have remain cloistered within unpaid domestic labor or lower earning ‘pink’ collar positions. Meanwhile the homogenous male counterparts were welcomed as public wage earners and had access to the corridors of public law, education, and privilege. While feminists do not debate the access all people should have, regardless of sex, gender identity, race, and sexual orientation, to private and public resources, the resulting equality has also been a tacit reaffirmation of the division between nature and culture, nature being ascribed to the private sphere of embodiment and care of those bodies (infant

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162 Ibid., 748.
163 The situation was and remains typically worse for women and men of racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious incongruity within a homogenous dominant culture.
care, child rearing and education, care of the sick or diseased, elder care) and culture to the public sphere (labor associated with reason, the mind, or physicality without dependence on others).

To put it in terms of Beauvoir’s account, for women, and other people deemed Other, to be equal required the ability to transcend the pole of immanence/embodiment/facticity, and feminists have seemingly felt obliged to abandon any associations with ‘nature’ and bodies as a fixed and stable identity. Instead, they distance themselves from a fixed identity that biology determines and affirm societal construction of these bodies and their meaning, therefore locating culture as the culprit of any fixed female identity, and thus, its limitations and exclusions. Any return to nature, women’s immanence, or hyper focus on embodiment can sometimes be interpreted as a female essentialism. Is one born a woman, or does one culturally learn, as Beauvoir famously quoted line suggests? Is woman a biological fact, or are these facts subject to cultural formation? Are there differences between the sexes, and if we affirm these differences, do we merely confirm the private/public schism that has so limited and confined women’s participation and ability to determine their own autonomy and identity? And a greater question at stake seems to be, are the democratic values of freedom, choice, and liberty the highest ideals for women, and extensively, humanity, to gain and pursue? I suggest Irigaray’s work on woman as other confirms Beauvoir’s observation of woman’s “frozen” object condition, but her universal of two genders also offers an important way to regain subjectivity without abandoning the
differences which are often key to groups and their ethical demands. I expand
Irigaray's ethics in the final chapter.

4.3.4. Subjects, Objects, Ambiguity, and Proximity

What I find most interesting in de Beauvoir's work in comparison to
Irigaray's concerns are her views of ambiguity. Much of the discourse about these
two has been around the notion of essentialism, but just as the notion of proximity
between Heidegger and Irigaray elaborated a more fruitful conversation about her
philosophy, I wonder if a reflection on ambiguity and de Beauvoir might also
provide a greater avenue of insight that shifts beyond essentialism, as my last
chapter contends. I suggest that both de Beauvoir and Irigaray seek a philosophy
that defines an essential notion of woman vis-à-vis patriarchy's supposition that she
is an object of male subjectivity. The very ambiguity of ethics calls de Beauvoir to
action, to choice, to ethics. But for Irigaray, this ambiguity can exist only within a
patriarchal scheme, and may possibly protect women from this definition as other,
but any attempt at subjectivity continues to correspond to language, choices, and
embodied experiences vis-à-vis male reflections, patriarchy's values, and fails to
bring genuine difference into play. By actually calling attention to this difference, the
very ambiguity that is female essence, Irigaray destabilizes this role without
reconstructing a new one, but allows the negative to be the trope for embodied
women in specific times and places to give it the definition their ethics demand.
Again, Irigaray's call for a feminine transcendence differs from de Beauvoir in that it
is a spiritual or immaterial horizon, not the god-like status of men with a token
female figure, but a confounding of transcendental spirituality over and against
immanent relations. These particular relations can be the spiritual proximity or call to ethical action by which collective groups can understand their positive political projects, that makes much of these differences, thinking them anew. Read this way, Irigaray is bringing de Beauvoir’s philosophy to its logical conclusion that ambiguity requires a greater investigation into the bodies that makes the choices, not looking for the essence, but the ethical posture, for true intersubjectivity.

Irigaray’s task has been to expose the lack of genuine relations between the binary pair of subjects (male) and objects (female). Conceived in this way, how can a passage even be possible? Since both subject and its predicate object are actually constituents of the self-same male subject, her first maneuver has been to separate these two in order to allow a true passageway to be developed. The supposed neutrality of the sexual subject is in fact the male sex/body and any pretension otherwise only exacerbates the problem and this is why sexual difference is so vital.

Her notion of body/nature and mind/culture often receives a similar binary critique, that the very point of critical analysis reifies these positions. But if Irigaray follows in the existential phenomenological tradition of de Beauvoir, any fact of the body is also a fact of culture, and any fact of culture is also a fact of the body, specifically, the sexed body. If we must keep these spheres in touch, body/nature and mind/culture, then the examination of sexual difference must honor this indivisible analysis that de Beauvoir offers. There are facts about women’s bodies (essentialism) that have been damaging and culturally abused, but there are also no facts about women’s bodies since there is no such thing as a pure fact apart from its natural sphere and cultural sphere. Any fact is a fact perceived by a person that
carries a natural or cultural interpretation. Rather than denying this hermeneutic of cultural and natural bias, we must confess it, and diagnose our own self-limitation and self-representation in relationship with others. We are free but our freedom ought to move in concert with the awe and wonder of irreducible difference that others represent.

To circle back to Irigaray’s conversation with Levinas, a fact about woman is only a broken piece of a saying, the said that hearkens to a collective Saying that is proper or appropriate for women. But these are natural/cultural facts that must in turn remain indeterminate as we share this speech regarding the ‘facts’ of women, a posture that requires listening, silence, and communicating. Instead, we may explore words that permit the unthought, excess, and denigrated notions of woman, outside the fetishization of woman as man’s object, to emerge. A pure natural or cultural fact is already synthesized and human existence can only approach such facts in indeterminate fragments of ‘truth’ that unfold. The most appropriate ways to contest these supposedly ‘pure facts’ may be to subvert any metaphysical claims about women via poiesis, music, song, and art, permitting words that are lyrically strategic to figure a new kind of calculation of facts.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated Irigaray’s selection of key Continental philosophers with whom she seeks to engage critically toward the aim of advancing her theme of sexual difference and its inherent need to be philosophized. I suspect that her choice also acknowledges her relationship to these individuals and by her choice, she is also indicating what is worth analyzing in their ideas and approaches
and how sexual difference may advance their scrutiny of metaphysics by deliberately conceiving particular others whose sex matters. I have suggested that these critiques are not meant to overthrow or dismiss phenomenology and existentialism, but may be read as critical supplements and a co-extensive outworking of these initial claims. Instead of inverting metaphysical claims, or storing will to power, she works from within the boundaries of language, thought, and writing in order to draw attention to the human subject the elements that sustain and cultivate language and thought, our collective identity, and the ethical life we can share. She envisions a non-oppositional way of amorous exchange in the interval that allows both parties to remain themselves even as they are in authentic connection with each other, a way to exchange meaning and ideas without sacrificing ‘objectified’ humans and nonhumans and using them as the exchange. This emphasis on the interval as a third factor, as a critical meeting-in-the-middle place to approach others as partners regardless of difference, in fact, because of our difference, begins to open the way to envision what this would mean for ethical interaction on a global scale involving the full gamut of worldwide diversity.