Chapter Two: Sexual Difference—Beyond Essentialism

1. Introduction

The central thesis of this dissertation asserts that Luce Irigaray is a philosopher whose work challenges how we currently share a world via sameness, offering an ethic of difference as a challenge to a singularity of power, identity, and meaning, proffering a more material and viable path for proximity or nearness. The psycho-libidinal-linguistic subject of power that Irigaray opposes is one that services a sexual echo-nomy\(^1\) of a masculine ideal, for which all the disciplines of the modern world conspire to deny any destabilization or erosion of this monolithic source of power and meaning. I suggest that Irigaray’s difference is one that evokes difference within difference. That is, to destabilize the universalism of male subjectivity forces all other unexamined reserves of power to delimit and share the world with the many “others” (whether animals, plants, stones, air, water, fish, etc.) who exist and demand a significant and meaningful way to contribute toward and with the global experience.

A significant obstacle toward Irigaray’s stated goals has often been a lack of acceptance of her work from other philosophers and, indeed, feminists. Feminists in particular have been wary of her language, imagery, and political claims that seem to objectify some of the most negative tropes of the feminine that feminists often seek to overcome toward the end of women’s liberation from patriarchy. In the

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\(^1\) Irigaray uses this term as a variance of economy, but one deliberately inserts the word “echo” for “eco” to underscore the woman’s inability to mediate via signs, as there is no appearance of sign which corresponds with woman. Therefore, the masculine ideal is “echoed” repeatedly. See Irigaray, EP, 55; ML, 77; TSN, 198.
1980s Irigaray’s work was labeled essentialist, that is her work theorizing *le féminin* fixes or defines woman via her anatomical, biological, or socially constructed differences. Critics suggested that Irigaray’s work reified these identified differences that historically damage and culturally oppress women and others deemed “different,” which is another way of saying “other,” “aberrant,” “lesser,” or negatively outside the ideals established for human flourishing.

Feminist philosophers claiming a more contextualized reading of Irigaray’s claims have worked to inform readers of Irigaray’s nonessentialist philosophy and her excesses that challenge an essentialism/antiessentialism binary. It is not my goal to restate these well-established arguments challenging the charge of essentialism. Instead, I examine the strategy of Irigaray and deconstruct its assumed premise: the very objectification and reification of *le féminin* ought to be inspected materially and theoretically to erode the power of patriarchy and challenge its binary (which is to say singular) hold, and reestablish a greater global flourishing. I hope to contribute a reading of how her work philosophically challenges theories of secondary differences as caught within the matrix of patriarchal sameness. I believe these claims are philosophically worth exploring as the future of Continental philosophy and American philosophy depends upon careful examination of any ideals to which we aspire, utopias we might envision, and will to power we may conceal. Her concerns of imminent versus transcendent subjective positions sweep the history of philosophy and remain crucial as we identify what forms of oppression we need to curtail, what forces of justice we ought to affirm, and how we can mutually share a world where we hold incommensurate positions. In a time
when Western attitudes seem more polarized than ever, I believe Luce Irigaray is a philosopher who continues to challenge feminists and non-feminists vis-à-vis the discourse of philosophy, relocating its thrust, and deconstructing its unthought representations (woman) and the correspondence of woman's exile with sexual relations, happiness, and mutual prosperity of global humanity.

Specifically, I suggest that Luce Irigaray challenges universalism, or the withholding of power and meaning by a chosen few at the expense of others, via difference. She seeks to divest universalism of sameness, of its control, and to insist that we must relish the bountiful diversity of our world, and to delimit ourselves, strategically spoiling the very terms that “spook” us into submission of the unquestioned self-same socially constituted, philosophically unthought, linguistic ideal of man/truth/God. Her strategy hasn’t been to reverse the course of this architectonic structure of the universe or bring more people/others within its fold, but to break it apart and deconstruct its most assumed strengths within its own structural terms and norms. The most repressed ideals are the ones that can destabilize this locus of centralized unthought power. Irigaray has suggested that the most repressed, anathematic, deliberately buried threat to this power is the idea of woman, who must remain within this structure as the womb, ground, mirror, essence, and guardian of this self-same centric structure that is always suspicious of its erosion. To clarify, the idea of woman for Irigaray shouldn’t be confused with material women; it is a philosophic-psycho-sexual-linguistic notion that assaults the universal ideals that presently control all “others,” or what Irigaray sketches as “difference.”
Irigaray is understandably difficult to follow in that she uses the strategy of mimesis (parody, echo) to deconstruct these terms and meanings, while insisting that a reconstruction of shared meaning to redefine these terms and ideals must also occur, not as they are presently situated, but after the deconstruction of a singular universalism has been forced to acknowledge its very –ism and the blatant cover up of its counterfeit universality at the expense of the humans repressed within its system. Her reification of le féminin occurs as a strategic essentialism that parodies the self-same centric structure, but also seeks a horizon beyond its control.

Her “strategic” essentialism of le féminin has schemas that can provide a robust philosophical framework from which to deconstruct and carefully reconstruct the theories of feminist practice, namely, genuine equality, liberation, and contribution toward those deemed “other,” for other humans but also—of special concern in our thesis—for the myriad nonhuman others in our world. She deconstructs the most loathsome difference between the sexes in order to put forth a feminism that is more demanding, deeply engaged across disciplines, and able to speak with multiple political and religious contexts with respect and alterity.

Irigaray’s work is singular in its attempts to strengthen the need for diverse differences with a fundamental refusal to see the universe via a monolithic psycho-sexual-religious-social-political-economic lens, bordering these differences without barricading others out, or confining individuals within.

In order to dismantle power of the self-same linguistic psycho-sexual subject, which the very posture of an essentialist charge services, I first scrutinize her claims within the psychoanalytic matrix of Freud and Lacan. Psychoanalysis, a
methodology she clinically practiced, is particularly important for her not only to
diagnose therapeutically what is wrong with philosophy, but also, to identify how
the development of sexual terms, ideals, and norms hides the difference and alterity
that, Irigaray argues, masquerades as female subjectivity. Second, I explore the
question of essentialism and elaborate more fully Irigaray’s unique notion of nature
and culture as active forces in constituting identity and difference. I suggest that in
deconstructionist fashion, her style has important proximity to Derrida, but is
uniquely feminist. I suggest that Irigaray is singular in that she weds the style of
deconstruction with the concerns of feminism, importantly asking what is
unthought, concealed, and hierarchically oppressive within feminism as a discourse
of philosophy. As I outline the problem of essentialism, I will revisit some of the
notions I posited in chapter one and apply them to reveal Irigaray’s project as
dislocating the binary of essentialist/nonessentialist along with other closures of
thought regarding sex, identity, and human becoming.

I address the questions of essentialism and difference because they connect
clearly to the nature/culture divide and this binary opposition is relevant in relation
to Irigarayan ethics, particularly as I relate her ethics to ecofeminism in chapter five.
I conclude with a discussion of how to understand Irigaray’s work as a philosophic
discourse on the way toward a global ethic and how her argument of sexual
difference extends the history and worth of philosophy as a meaningful way to
construct positive identities of difference and alterity, as it deconstructs its own
exclusions and sameness.

2. *Irigaray and Psychoanalysis: The Freudian Lacanian Libidinal Self*
Irigaray’s sexuate philosophy introduces a litany of psycho-sexual terms, which some have construed as a sexual reification of female anatomy and a reduction of female subjectivity to a fixed meaning. But I suggest that Irigaray, like Kristeva, is descriptively seating her philosophy within the psychoanalytic tradition—not as a mere faithful disciple, but as an unruly daughter who defies the law of the father (the Oedipus complex) and heralds the death of the buried maternal, and the mother-daughter relationship that undergirds and is victim to the patriarchal vision of the Oedipal fate. While mining the psychoanalytic tradition for its insight into human subjectivity and sexuality, she at the same time, defies its canons and creeds by often exceeding the discourse of both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. I read Irigaray’s relationship with Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, as a sexual reformation that seeks to transform the tradition at the ideological level, rather than dismantle the tradition altogether. She doesn’t contest the ability psychoanalysis has to reveal our psycho-sexual selves; she contests the monosexuate identity that it purports to reveal.

For Freud, feminine sexuality is the enigmatic ‘dark continent’ and he actually analogized it to the continent of Africa: fertile, unknown, and waiting for colonization from authority.\(^2\) Unsurprisingly, she contests his conclusions that the libido is necessarily male, and that there is in fact only one libido (the masculine libido), and that women are the passive receptors of an active male sexuality, suffering from permanent ‘penis envy’; however, she writes that Freud was careful

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to make no claim to have understood the enigma that he described as the sexual
development of women.\(^3\) The normative critiques of female sexuality she most
strongly challenges would perhaps be directed toward Jacques Lacan. It could also
be argued that Lacan influences Irigaray's writing, although he is never directly
mentioned in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, her most explicitly psychoanalytic
account, and his absence is conspicuous. Lacan is seminal for Irigaray's work for
several reasons as Elizabeth Grosz outlines:

> These three key areas in Lacan’s work – the interlocking domains of
subjectivity, sexuality, and language define broad interests shared by
many French feminists. His decentring of the rational, conscious
subject (identified with the ego), his undermining of common
assumptions about the intentionality or purposiveness of the
speaking subject’s ‘rational’ discourses, and his problematizations of
the idea of a ‘natural’ sexuality, have helped to free feminist theory of
the constraints of a largely metaphysical and implicitly masculine,
notion of subjectivity – humanism. He has thus raised the possibility
of understanding subjectivity in terms other than those dictated by
patriarchal common-sense.\(^4\)

Carolyn Burke suggests that the writing of Lacan might be considered more
of an intertextual weaving, rather than a direct authority, in Irigaray’s work; he is
the paterfamilias of the psychoanalytic family who refuses to acknowledge the
independent wisdom of his daughters, such as Irigaray, defiant in her rebellion. His

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\(^3\) Irigaray, TS, 48

precepts begins to represent for Irigaray the Law of the Father, "le Maître" (the Master), and the phallocratic order that resists a female sexuality independent of the phallus's economy. And thus, Irigaray begins a re-reading of phallocentrism, finding it in collusion with a logocentrism, positing itself as 'truth,' and pushing the notion of 'woman' back in the conceptual machine of phallogocentrism. Later, she writes of Lacan,

Nor did I want, as some have thought or written, to enact the parricide of one of my supposed masters. Not at all. I wanted to begin to define what a woman is, thus myself as a woman—and not only a woman but as freely belonging to the female gender or generic—by carrying out a partial process of limitation or negation relative to my natural immediacy and relative to the representation I had been given of what I was as a woman, this is, the other of/for man, the other of male culture.

Insisting that she is not a vengeful daughter of psychoanalysis, she resources the psychoanalytic tradition to reveal its collusion with a philosophy of sexual indifference. Freud, her starting point for Speculum, is historically reversed as she

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5 Carolyn Burke contends that Jacques Derrida's (1973) essay "La Question du style" is a provocative influence, hovering in the background of both Speculum and This Sex Which Is Not One, amplifying the charge that Lacanian discourse is phallocentric. In this essay, Derrida suggests that Friedrich Nietzsche might have sought, in spite of himself to "describe a femininity that is not defined by a male desire to supply a lack." Derrida argues that Lacanian theory weds phallocentrism to logocentrism, implying that psychoanalytic discourse is guilty of identifying the phallus with the Logos as transcendent and unexamined grounds of signification, of assigning meaning. For Derrida, logocentrism implies an attitude of nostalgia for a lost presence or longing for some first cause of being or meaning and results from the human desire to posit a central presence as the locus of coherence and authenticity. Therefore, the phallus becomes "the signifier of all signifiers." See especially pp. 247-49, in Spurs pp. 62-65. See Carolyn Burke, "Irigaray Through the Looking Glass," in Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought, ed. Carolyn Burke et al (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 37-56. See also chapter one, note 32.

6 Irigaray, ILTY, 63-64.
concludes with Plato. As her subsequent works detail, her most significant dialogue partners include Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Lévinas.

Psychoanalysis, vis-à-vis philosophy, is a relevant discourse in which Luce Irigaray has come to see society perpetuating a culture of sexual indifference. She even declares psychoanalysis as “a possible enclave of philosophic discourse.”

Irigaray focuses on several key aspects of psychoanalysis to explore a philosophic basis for her symbolic and imaginary conceptualization of sexual difference. These terms become key in order to properly organize her thinking and conceptualize her framework of the relational matrix that she notes must be a nuanced aspect of her philosophic claims, a relational context she argues that moves her away from a pure biological or anatomical construction of woman and man. The next few sections are dedicated toward their explanation.

2.1. The phallus

In the post-Freud Lacanian reading, biology becomes less salient because of the distinction between the phallus and the penis. The penis, a biological organ, is not the same as the phallus, the “Master signifier.” Irigaray expounds,

Lacan specifies that what is at issue as potentially lacking in castration is not so much the penis – a real organ – as the phallus, or the signifier

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7 Irigaray, TS, 160/155.
8 In her 1994 interview, “Je—Luce Irigaray’: A meeting with Luce Irigaray,” Luce Irigaray explains the closure of a purely genealogical vertical relationship of mother-son which augurs mastery as a replacement for generative ability. Luce Irigaray offers a horizontal relationship between the two genders involving the negative and irreducibility of difference as a movement away from the previous closure. She states, “...it's not simply a question of anatomy: it's a question of the relation between subjects. The relation of the little boy to his mother is different from the little girl’s relation.” Irigaray, WWC, 158.
And it is in the mother that castration must, first and foremost, be located by the child, if he is to exit from the imaginary orbit of maternal desire and be returned to the father, that is, to the possessor of the phallic emblem that makes the mother desire him and prefer him to the child.

For the mother the phallus represents her lack, her desire for completion of what the father both represents and possesses. Thus, the phallus connotes both female and male desire. The phallus, representative of the penis, signifies the basic purpose of language – to plug up the hole at the center of all being. Masculinity is therefore subordination to the reign of the symbolic, the Law of the Father (and fear of castration), which is the foundation of social order.

Irigaray problematizes the reign of the phallus in the following:

The phallus, quite to the contrary, functions all too often in psychoanalysis as the guarantee of sense, the sense of senses(s), the “figure,” the “form,” the ultimate signifier through which the ancient metaphors of onto-theology would be set straight. Off with the masks. The suspicion is unavoidable that the Same is being postulated again in this ‘new” signifying economy, organized under the control of the said Phallus.

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11 Irigaray, TS, 61.
13 Irigaray, S, 40/44
While Lacan has established a phallomorphism as the reigning transcendent signifier, Irigaray subverts and displaces his phallocratic economy with what Diana Fuss describes as an isomorphism. According to Fuss, throughout *Speculum* and *This Sex*, Irigaray actually defies the logic of the gaze with the logic of the touch, keeping woman in touch with herself, and shifting the focus from the sight to touch.14 Irigaray challenges Freud’s Gaze, calling it “. . . at stake from the outset.”15 The little girl, the woman, supposedly has “nothing you can see” which leads her to problematize Freud’s penis-sight economy and sexual void left to woman as “Nothing to be seen is equivalent to have no thing. No being and no truth.”16

Because man’s sexual imaginary is phallomorphic, Irigaray understands Western culture to have privileged a mechanics of solid over the mechanics of fluids: therefore features such as production, property, order, form, unity, visibility, and erection dominate.17 The female imaginary is therefore more approximate to the property of liquids: continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, and diffusible.18 Irigaray’s female imaginary critiques directly Lacan’s refusal to listen to women speak of their own pleasure, their *jouissance*.

2.2. Desire

For Lacan, language fills the gap because it communicates, and enables us to communicate with one another, overcoming the loneliness at the core of each of us.19 But the reality of the universe is that it only overcomes this emptiness

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15 Irigaray, S, 47/53.
16 Ibid., 47, 48.
17 Ibid.
temporarily and to a limited extent. Words are never powerful enough to get it right. The difference for Lacan between what we want to say (the need) and what we actually say (the demand), he calls desire.

It is a movement, a transpersonal energy directed to others in a desire of another to constitute itself as conscious-desire and the desire of an “other”:

It must be posited that, as a fact of an animal at the mercy of language, man’s desire is the desire of the Other. [This formulation] concerns a quite different function from that of the primary identification . . . for it does not involve the assumption by the subject of the insignia of the other, but rather the conditions that the subject has to find the constituting structure of his desire in the same gap opened up by the effect of the signifiers in those who come to represent the Other for him, in so far as his demand is subjected to them. 20

Judith Butler has described Lacan’s desire as “. . . the moment of longing that consciousness may be said to suffer, but which is only ‘revealed’ through the displacements, ruptures, and fissures of consciousness itself.” 21 As the subject cannot locate the imaginary libidinal unity with the mother’s body, desire becomes its own object attempting to overcome this lack through the father’s linguistic expression. In Judith Butler’s words:

The subject can no longer be understood as the agency of its desire, or as the very structure of desire itself; the subject of desire has

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emerged as an internal contradiction. Founded as a necessary defense against the libidinal fusion with the maternal body, the subject is understood as the product of a prohibition. Desire is the residue of that early union, the affective memory of a pleasure prior to individuation. Desire is thus both an effort to dissolve the subject that bars the way to that pleasure and the contemporary evidence of that pleasure’s irrecoverability.²²

Desire is not about a biological urge; it refers specifically to a psychical reality. Desire exists in a space between the biological and the social. Freud referred to this place as the andere Schauplatz or, the “other scene” of mental life. Here, the psychical governs. Freud theorized that the desire to have something like the sex organ would lead girls in the desire to have something like it, and this desire would form the basis for “normal womanhood.” Desire is inscribed in a sexual economy of sameness. Luce Irigaray observes that the desire for the little girl, the woman is more of an “exile,” “an extradition,” “an exmatriation,” a displacement of the origin.²³ Rather than concede desire for the phallic economy as normative to libidinal life, she explains,

What really occurs, of course, is that the representation, the signifier of one stage in woman’s libidinal economy (and not the least important since it is the one in which she was perhaps marked from her first stage by her re-mark) is proscribed. But let us say that in the

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²² Ibid.
²³ Irigaray, S, 43.
beginning was the end of her story, and that from now she will have one dictated to her: by the man-father.24

The desire for sameness takes over, as long as a single desire is in control.25 This leads Irigaray to question,

What fault, deficiency, theft, rape, rejection, repression, censorship of representations of her sexuality bring about such a subjection to man’s desire-discourse-law about her sex? Such an atrophy of her libido? Which will never be admissible, envisionable, except insofar as it props up male desire. . . . Woman’s fetishization of the male organ must indeed be an indispensable support of its price on the sexual market.26

Again in “Je—Luce Irigaray,” she explains that men and women must examine the history of hom(m)osexuality27 and rape that is the real and cultural legacy of sexual relations without difference, an urge to violate the other that she urges all people to examine.28 But what she finds singular in our society is that men do not have to listen to themselves talk, effectively disregarding difference.29 That is to say, the relationship between the sexes has been marked by the male subject’s appropriation and violation of the other. She is careful to distinguish these sexual

24 Irigaray, S, 43/47
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 53/61.
27 The deliberate placement of the “m” in parenthesis indicates the play with the French translation for man, homme. Hom(m)osexuality must be distinguished from homosexuality, with the former meaning the symbolic reign of phallic signifiers to determine sexual norms. See Irigaray, S, 98, and Elizabeth Grosz, “The Hetero and the Homo,” Engaging with Irigaray, 341.
28 See Irigaray, WWC, 163-4.
29 Ibid.
relations as different than a theorization of sexual choice, which she would signify as ‘homosexuality’ or ‘gay and lesbian rights’, a different arena of theorization than to which she is referring as sameness, appropriation, and rape.

Irigaray continues her critical engagement with desire as she laments, “All desire is connected to madness.”\(^{30}\) If we understand desire as wisdom, moderation, and truth, all that is left for the other to bear, according to Irigaray, is the burden of madness, which it does not want to recognize in itself. Desire for the woman is ultimately a profound realization of her lack and the object of desire for the male sexuate subject.

### 2.3. The Symbolic

The symbolic represents a system of representation that according to Irigaray, cannot ‘translate’ woman’s desire. It is the junction, according to Whitford, where the body, psyche and language meet. It was Lacan who exploited the concept of the symbolic, dismantling Descartes’ rational ego, and introducing sexuality as legitimate academic and political discourses. Instead of the thinking being (res cogitans), Lacan posits the speaking being, spoken through language itself—a discursive/linguistic order constituting human socio-cultural and sexual activity.

In *To Speak Is Never Neutral*, Luce Irigaray suggests that the alphabet corresponds to a non-relation between the same and the other.\(^{31}\) The discursive/

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\(^{30}\) Irigaray, IR, 35.

\(^{31}\) She explains, “Each letter of the alphabet constitutes ... one set, or sub-set, comprised of one and only one element. The intersections among these sub-sets are, in proper functioning of (alphabetic) writing and reading, null and void. At the literal level there is not give and take of same and other.” Irigaray, TSN, 121. She speculates on the difference in symbolic force between the alphabet and graphism. She observes that letters are spaced apart in an absolute distinction from each other, graphisms justify questions, waverings, and hesitations of meaning permitting the writer to submit
linguistic order constitutes and affirms indifference. The symbolic order becomes possible when the Father forbids both the mother and child from satisfying their desires fully, directing them to the necessity of language, the symbolization of desire, and desire succumbs to demand.\textsuperscript{32} The feminine is thus symbolically insignificant.

Irigaray begins to suspect the phallus (Phallus) of representing a contemporary god, jealous of his prerogatives:

We might suspect it [the Phallus] of claiming, on this basis to be the ultimate meaning of all discourse, the standard of truth and propriety, in particular as regards sex, the signifier and/or the ultimate signified of all desire, in addition to continuing, as emblem and agent of the patriarchal system, to shore up the name of the father (Father).\textsuperscript{33}

The symbolic functions to affirm male sexual desire and frames the male speaking subject as the only legitimated speaking being. Irigaray must challenge the potency of the symbolic from within, “jamming the works of the theoretical machine,”\textsuperscript{34} and conflating the excesses within the scheme. Often she explores the exclusive grip of the symbolic through illegitimated forms of speech, such as hysteria, madness, or mad desire. She also explores what is outside of the border of discursive legitimacy, such as graphisms, images and icons, or the remainder or excess of discursive/symbolic phallogocentrism.

\textsuperscript{32} Irigaray, TS, 61.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 67
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 107.
2.4. The Death of Mother

In a short chapter titled, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” Irigaray notes that the male sex understands its desire as, “wisdom, moderation, truth,” it has left the other sex, “... to bear the burden of the madness it did not want to attribute to itself, recognize in itself.” 35 According to Irigaray, desire and madness come together as both sexes relate to the mythos of motherhood. To remember the mother is to upset the symbolic economy of reproduction and the maternal in the social order. For the purpose of this thesis, Irigaray’s analysis of motherhood is important as it connects to ethical questions of contraception and abortion rights. According to Irigaray’s critique, scientific, political, and legal discourses and practices privilege men to manage and to define women and their social roles.36 Her analysis of motherhood is meant to give critical space to define this relation anew, thus reconceiving our ethical quandaries concerning what it is to be a good mother, and one with a civic identity of her own.

Irigaray begins to query about the desire of the mother herself—the woman-mother: “Desire for her, her desire that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious father, professor-father doctor-father, lover-fathers, etc.”37 She is phallic in that her relationship has value as long as it is tied to reproduction, maternity, and as an object of desire. Why are these mothers shrouded in darkness, blackness, lost? Because there is a murder more archaic than the murder of the father in Freud’s Totem and Taboo: the buried

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 36.
act of matricide. The mother has been buried under the phallocentric reduction of maternity, crippling both the mother and, eventually, the daughter. Irigaray exemplifies the death of mother through the murder of Clytemnestra in the Oresteia.

According to Irigaray, Clytemnestra signifies a break with the symbol of virgin mother, venerated especially in European Christian culture. An engrossed lover, she will kill her husband in a crime of passion. Agamemnon, returning from years of war in pursuit of the ideal Helen, has sacrificed his and Clytemnestra’s daughter, Iphigenia, in order to ensure military success. He arrives home with a female slave, and Clytemnestra, assuming her husband was dead, has taken a lover of her own. Irigaray notes that the tragedians often present the murder of Agamemnon as fueled by Clytemnestra’s jealousy, fear, and frustration, ignoring the sacrificed daughter who lost her life so men could resolve their disputes. She goes on to note that the oracle of Apollo, Zeus’s cherished son (God the father), stirs her son, Orestes, to demand her death in return. Orestes, following the rule of the God-Father kills his mother, and he and his sister Electra go mad.

Irigaray notes that Electra, the daughter, remains mad, but Orestes, the matricidal son, must be saved from madness in order that he may “establish the patriarchal order.”38 One can sense Irigaray’s wariness of Orestes’ savior, Apollo, in the following: “Apollo, a lover of men rather than women, the narcissistic lover of their bodies and their words, a lover who does not make love much more than Athena, his sister in Zeus, who helps him to recover him from his madness.”39 The madness, notes Irigaray, follows him everywhere he goes, and she identifies this

38 Ibid., 37.
39 Ibid.
“troop of enraged women” as the Furies. But rather than simply portray these mad furies pejoratively, Irigaray will cast their voices as, “revolutionary hysterics” who oppose the supremacy of patriarchy itself. Irigaray translates the story into its contemporary familiarity:

The mythology underlying patriarchy has not changed. What the Oresteia describes for us still takes place. Here and there, regulation Athenas whose one begetter is the head of the Father-King still burst forth. Completely in his pay, in the pay of the men in power, they bury beneath their sanctuary women in struggle so that they will no longer disturb the new order of the home, the order of the polis, now the only order.

What we are left with, laments Irigaray, is the death of mother, a son left unchecked, and a double sense of burial: “the burial of the madness of women – and the burial of women in madness.” But with the death of the mother is the coming of the goddess virgin, an ideal woman, like Athena, from the father and one who will obey his law and critically “forsake the mother.” A similar death of mother will be unsung, unlamented in Oedipus when he understands the horror of infringing upon the law of the Father. For Irigaray these narratives are symbolic exemplars of the phallus replacing the umbilical cord, and anything associated with the mother's body. I suggest that Irigaray's work is significant in that she uncovers how the portrayal of

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 38-39
mothers as mad creates a false sense of need for supposed male temperance, order, and patriarchal power. In our cultural attempt to rescue the children from the mother’s madness, we forget the sacrifice of the daughter that the father willingly made to settle his own religious ritual or political disputes. Are we still a society that sacrifices our young girls, and wonders why the women go mad?

Additionally, Irigaray notes, the contempt of the mother is also contempt for her body. The father fears a regression back to the primal womb (Plato’s cave, perhaps?), and will use language (the symbolic) and a forename will replace what Irigaray dubs “the irreducible mark of birth: the navel.” To ensure the severance from the mother, she notes the way we culturally scorn her body, particularly the womb and the breast. She describes the womb as the “first house to surround us” and the place where we first “sojourn” and become bodies; in the oral phase, the breasts nourish. Yet, any return back to the mother and her body is perceived as “dangerous.” I understand Irigaray’s work to signal that this cultural portrayal of phallic anxiety, dark madness, and generative power that must be concealed continues to silence women and perpetuates their lack of language to combat their own erasure from the field of positive sexual representation. Irigaray maintains, “The substratum is the woman who reproduces the social order, who is made this order’s infrastructure: the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother.” Irigaray turns Freud’s castration anxiety around as an unconscious memory of the sacrifice which sanctifies phallic erection as the only sexual value –

46 Ibid., 39.
47 Ibid., 40.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 47.
an erection that the postulate and name of the Father cannot even keep erect. She contends,

Unless this remains unthought – this murder of the father signifies a desire to take his place, a rival and competitive desire, but a desire to do away with the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds especially the female world.\(^{50}\)

One may wonder who actually fears more—the mother without sexual identity whose fear is dominated by the instrument of the power; or the man who fears his phallus will be revealed as impotent, and must remain continually watchful of any threat to his symbolic order? Both sound exhausting. Irigaray clearly underscores the elevation of the phallus to symbolic law and order of the cosmos, and the consequent shrouding of the female origin, her sexualities, and her place as mother. What I also believe is important in the death of mother is the lament, the cry, fury, left to the woman. If language is the father-tongue, which she says can never a mother-tongue, what language is left to women, other than hysteria? Hysteria can be understood not only as the guttural reaction of fury, shame, and haunting; it can also be understood, she argues, as subtle subversion to resist the phallic language, and engage in something that resists assimilation, symmetry, and absorption in the symbolic economy. Again Irigaray argues,

But I have never heard the word ‘hysteria’ being used in a valorizing way in these progressive circles. Yet there is a

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 41-42.
revolutionary potential in hysteria. Even in her paralysis, the hysteric exhibits a potential for gestures and desire. . . . A movement of revolt and refuse a desire for/of the living mother who would be more than a reproductive body in the pay of the polis, a living, loving woman. It is because they neither want to see nor hear that movement that they so despise the hysteric.\textsuperscript{51}

But one wonders if Irigaray wants the mad desire of mother to be legitimated within the symbolic order as reasonable, rational; or, if she wants to insist on this madness as a form of subversion to the phallus, and continue in its hysteria? One can see how hysteria becomes an alternate form of communication, resisting the ‘rationality’ that powerfully affirms the association between language and reason. Yet, I concur with Margaret Whitford that Irigaray’s aim isn’t to substitute the rational with the irrational, thus upholding the binary. Instead she is “. . . restructuring . . . the construction of the rational subject.”\textsuperscript{52} In order to do so, she will challenge the “imperialism of the unconscious”\textsuperscript{53} and extend the notion of the imaginary.

\textit{2.5. The Imaginary}

If irigaray’s aim is to restructure the construction of the rational subject, her place of analysis begins in the unconscious, going back to the pre-discursive. She will retrace Freud and Lacan’s theory that a child has two vital moments of identity formation 1) the development of the imaginary body, 2) the selection of sexual difference through language. Lacan developed the imaginary as a psychoanalytic

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 47-48.
\textsuperscript{52} Margaret Whitford, \textit{Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine} (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 53.
\textsuperscript{53} Irigaray, IR, 81.
concept from his reading of Freud and Freud's theories of the Ego and of narcissism.\textsuperscript{54} According to Grosz, "The ego operates within an imaginary order, an order in which it strives to see itself reflected in its relation to others."\textsuperscript{55} The infant, physically dependent, begins to form its identity in the mirror-stage, as it gazes at the mirror (which can be a person, presumably the mother) and sees an idealized or unified version of itself, a stark contrast to the infant's fragmented experience of lack. This more ideal version serves as a "... narcissistic structure of investments which transform the image of otherness into a representation of the self."\textsuperscript{56} For Lacan this sole identification of the child to its mother can only lead to a negative cycle of projecting, internalizing unconscious phantasies, and thus the need for the symbolic order. Lacan's symbolic order is predicated upon a unitary imaginary body; in the symbolic order the father-master is the phallic signifier, the coherence of language and its external definitions render a clear, social identity and sexual difference.\textsuperscript{57}

According to Irigaray, the Western imaginary has been a male imaginary, where woman is a "prop,"\textsuperscript{58} reduced to "muteness or mimicry."\textsuperscript{59} But she suspects there could be space for a repressed female imaginary to be made visible and she

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{55} Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) xviii.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{57} I do want to note Margaret Whitford's observation of the prevalence of the French imaginary related to Jacques Lacan's work, yet, she argues it would be a mistake to read Irigaray simply taking over his analysis of the imaginary. Whitford contends that Irigaray's use of the term ought to be read against a broader intellectual milieu. According to Whitford, the imaginary has Lacanian and pre-Lacanian currency, and is importantly picked up by phenomenological discourses and psychoanalytic discourses, all of which contextualize, Irigaray's usage of the female imaginary. See Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray, 54-7.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Irigaray, TS, 25
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 164
\end{itemize}
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explores the possibility of a multiple, fragmented-nonlinear, rather than an unified-
progressive, imaginary body.\textsuperscript{60} She speaks of a multiplicity of female desire and
language understood as “shards,” “scattered remnants,”\textsuperscript{61} and a sexuality that is
“plural.”\textsuperscript{62} With such a different imaginary body, to sexually differentiate via
language would be an entirely distinctive or asymmetrical order from Lacan’s, one
predicated on a different imaginary body. Starting from the point of a multiple,
decentered subject, female subjectivity thus exceeds Lacan’s framework.

Irigaray employs the imaginary to speak and symbolize the sexual woman’s
body in non-phallic and non-maternal terms. The concept of the imaginary Irigaray
has posited makes possible a female imaginary, corresponding to the morphology of
the female body (the two lips), with its own space-time modalities, where women
are no longer exiles wandering the land of a phallocratic economy, but are able to
find a house of their own. They are no longer in ‘deadly immediacy’ (the absence of
symbolic representation), but rather, they speak, discovering the divine that will
end their incessant comparison to one another. The daughter will have someone to
identify with, providing a boundary between the two and “skin” of their own,
creating a symbolic object of exchange to mediate, to move, and to breathe freely.

2.6. The Mirror

In \textit{Speculum}, Irigaray questions the psychosexual imaginary of Freud (and
included in this critique is implicitly understood Lacan), and develops her thesis
through the concept of the mirror. Lacan’s mirror stage determines the child’s

\textsuperscript{60} Irigaray, TS 28, 164.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 30  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 28
future identification: “It conceals, or freezes, the infant’s lack of motor co-ordination and the fragmentation of its drives.” Grosz explains the result:

The mirror stage positions the child within a physical, psychical, and familial space, but it does not empower the child to act as an agent or subject in a larger linguistic and economic community. In other words, while the child remains bound to the other as its double, it cannot participate in social or symbolic exchange with others.

The child must break the cycle of imaginary projection, or enclosure with its mother, in order to create room for a “third, independent term.” Irigaray articulates how the relationship to the mother, the desire to return to the origin, will differ drastically for the boy and the girl:

Therefore, if you are a boy, you will want as soon as you reach the phallic stage, to return to the origin, turn back toward the origin. That is possess the mother, get inside the mother who is the place of origin, in order to reestablish continuity with it and to see and know what happens there. And moreover to reproduce yourself there. If you are born a girl, the question is quite other. No return toward, inside the place of origin is possible unless you have a penis. The girl will herself be the place where origin is repeated, re-produced and reproduced, though this does not mean that she thereby repeats “her” original topos, “her” origin. One the contrary, she must break any contact with

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64 Grosz, Jacques Lacan, 50.
65 Ibid.
it, or with her, and making one last turn, by a kind of vault – up one more branch of the family – she must get to the place where origin can be repeated by being counted.66

Irigaray understands all of western discourse to display this effect, the male projecting his own ego on to the world, which then becomes a mirror allowing him to see his reflection wherever he goes. The reflection doubles his distance and alienates his relation to the body, a ‘disinterested’ neutered space; she criticizes the illusion of a space of pure reflection that reflects everything except him.

Are we to assume that a mirror has always already been inserted, and speculates every perception and conception of the world, with the exception of itself, whose reflection would only be a factor of time? Thus extension would always already be re-staged and re-projected by the subject who, alone, would not be situated there. Does the subject derive his power from the appropriation of this non-place of the mirror? And from speculation? And as speculation constitutes itself as such in this way, it cannot be analyzed but falls into oblivion, re-emerging to play its part only when some new effect of symmetry is needed in the system. By some recourse to the imaginary, perhaps, that is both other and the same?67

Where is the woman? She as the body/matter becomes the medium of the materials of which the mirror is made, thus never seeing reflections of herself. Grosz rightly acknowledges that “She asserts that psychoanalysis can only represent the

66 Irigaray, S, 40.
67 Ibid., 205-6
imaginary and the symbolic from the point of view of the boy; it has no means available to elaborate what the imaginary and symbolic may be in the girl's terms.”

Irigaray’s speculum is an offering of another reflective identity. Not the self-distancing platonic mirror, but a self-touching speculum, curved, distorted, a medium of women's self-observation and self-representation.

For any hope of renewal, the male imaginary must recognize its own unconscious, cease to use the mother as a prop, and the female imaginary needs to find a voice of her own. It was this daring, this presumption afforded by language that she could discover a symbolic place for the girl, which removed her from her former university.

While sharing a commitment to anti-humanism and unlocking the archaic force of the pre-oedipal, Irigaray develops her thesis through the mother-daughter relationship. According to Grosz, she is more interested in elaborating a theory of enunciation that seeks to make explicit the sexualization of all discourses. Irigaray, while arguing against a deeply phallogocentric psychology, critiques psychoanalysis from within, not merely railing a polemic of attacks against Freud, but rather, pointing out what is missing, absent, unheard – namely, she turns psychoanalysis on itself to pose questions of sexual difference.

Irigaray uses psychoanalysis to formulate and develop a philosophy that reveals patriarchal and phallocratic power, power that the Oedipus drama in many

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69 Ibid.

70 Whitford, Luce Irigaray, 70-74.
ways hands over to the masculine gender, including the power of religion and politics. The law of father has become mixed with the divine law or creed and like the gods granting fire to Heraclitus, the psychoanalytic gods, writes Irigaray, have granted linguistic power to men. “Without divine power,” she contends, “men could not have supplanted mother-daughter relations. . . . But man becomes God by giving himself an invisible father, a father language.”71 Like the biblical passage in John 1, man becomes God by becoming the Word, and then as Word made flesh, she argues, linguistic code solidifies the progenerating power of semen through logos, which desires to become all-embracing truth. Phallocratic patriarchy colludes with logocentrism to produce what Derrida dubs ‘phallogocentrism,’ the sexual and linguistic core of psychoanalysis and the basis for the diagnosis of female dysfunction. She writes that men appropriate linguistic code to attempt to do at least three things: “1. prove they are fathers; 2. prove they are more powerful than mother-women; 3. prove they are capable of engendering the cultural domain as they have been engendered in the natural domain of the ovum, the womb, the body of a woman.”72

Irigaray suggests that the power of the symbolic has colluded with the monosexuate identity formation of psychoanalysis to perpetuate further sexual indifference. Psychoanalysis thus exemplifies through its matrix of sex, language, and genealogy the absence of sexual difference. While she critically engages the field, I argue, she has not abandoned its tenets, but like her other projects, seeks to uncover, redefine, and redistribute the value of sexuate identities within this matrix.

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71 Irigaray, LSG, 120.
72 Ibid.
She brings to the conscience the unconscious background of the mother-daughter relationship and reformulates the concept of the imaginary to be the condition of possibility for a female sexuate identity. She also minimizes the totalizing effect of the symbolic and the assumed deification of logos, arguing instead that true incarnation abounds when intersubjectivity is present.

2.7. Body Morphology

Irigaray's sexual difference weaves a philosophy of the body with ethics—for this Belgian woman, bodies matter. At the same time, body anatomy is not her main focus; rather, it is body morphology that she theorizes, a body in relation to language. As elaborated, she is quite critical of Freud and his reduction of female desire to female anatomy and the woman's lack of the male sex organ. In an interview in This Sex, she explicitly states, "Another 'symptom' of the fact that Freud's discourse belongs to an unanalyzed tradition lies in his tendency to fall back upon anatomy as an irrefutable criterion of truth." Irigaray exerts tremendous energy to philosophize a theory that embraces the reality of the female subject without assuming that subject is reducible to his or her anatomy.

But the morphology, or perhaps "horizon" of the body, becomes an existential reality for sexual difference and she combines a philosophy of the body

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73 Irigaray, TS, 70-71.
74 Horizon is an important notion Irigaray often associates with a gendered ideal. She refers to the term in Sexes and Genealogies, one her most direct spiritual elaborations. Spatial relations, like a horizon, are important for her account of sexual difference, particularly rethinking the vertical and the horizontal. A horizon is typically understood as "The line at which the earth's surface and the sky appear to meet." "horizon." Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press. https://www.oxforddictionaries.com//definition/english/horizon (accessed June 18, 2015). For Irigaray's purposes, earth, often associated with mortal and material relations (immanence), represents the horizontal, while the sky, often associated with immortal or celestial notions (transcendence), represents the vertical. A horizon thus becomes the place where these two meet, or
that keeps nature and culture in touch with each other. Female subjectivity has
frequently been reduced to anatomy in phallocentric literature that either
sublates or valorizes female sexuality. Irigaray’s project complies with neither
concept of the female subject. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, she is interested in the
‘blind spots’ that run throughout phallocratic discourses on femininity, female
identity, and the maternal function. Grosz explains that Irigaray’s work is not a
true description of women or femininity—true in the sense that it is superior to false.
These sorts of claims, argues Grosz, are exactly what patriarchal culture conditions
as the possibility for truth to be valued. As such, as articulated in chapter one, the
two notions are the positive or privation of each other, creating binaries of
opposition. Her aim, insists Grosz, is to make explicit what phallocentric images
exclude—what exceeds the mirror. She is not positing a truth about women or the
female subject, but rather, as previously noted, exposing an isomorphism between
male sexuality and patriarchal language, a mirroring or entwining of phallocentric
discourses and oedipalised forms of male sexuality. While caught in the language
and saturation of patriarchal language symbols and a patriarchal imaginary, Irigaray
attempts to exceed performatively or mimic (exploiting the Greek term mimesis)
what patriarchy posits in order to resist its solidification of female identity and

where the vertical and the horizontal form a critical axis. She will argue that each gender needs its
own horizon. She writes, “In order to become, it is essential to have a gender or an essence
(consequently a sexuate essence) as horizon.” Irigaray, SG, 61. See also horizon associated with
gender in SG, 62, 63, 66, 67, 163. She also Penelope Deutscher’s essay analyzing the vertical and
horizontal in Irigaray’s work, “’The Only Diabolical Thing About Women…’: Luce Irigaray on
detailed discussion of Irigaray and the divine horizon see Peta Hinton, “The Divine Horizon:
Rethinking Political Community in Luce Irigaray’s ‘Divine Women,’” Hypatia 28, no. 3 (2012): 436-51,

75 Grosz’s excellent essay on Irigaray in Sexual Subversions, 100-139.
76 See chapter one, section 1.1.3, Asymmetrical Contraries of Sexual Difference.
possibly discover something new: female subjectivity. I argue that to read her work and conclude that she essentializes female identity misses the strategy of her writing and misinterprets the mimetic play. I elaborate on this argument in the next section.

3. Essentialism and Difference: The Question of Nature and Culture

In chapter one I noted Irigaray’s supposition that nature and culture form a dialectic with each sex, which creates a double dialectic. Irigaray takes the reality of difference seriously, for it causes her to return to the aim of her political project: “... how to distribute this difference.” 77 Unless this reality is thoroughly recognized, women will not be free of exploitation, for this she reasons, “Women cannot be liberated from a reality other than a sexual one because this is the starting point from which they are exploited.” 78 The notion that all exploitation begins with sexual exploitation is a pivotal and volatile concept for Irigaray. First, it becomes apparent that Irigaray isn’t a philosopher only interested in ahistorical theory, but here she is engaged in the economic, social, and, cultural struggle of women, and she is theorizing toward feminist outcomes 79—towards an all-inclusive global ethic.

But her claims for a primal sexual difference are especially disturbing for many feminists who have rightly observed other dominant differences of

77 See Irigaray, WAW, 155.
78 Ibid.
79 In her work, *Je, Tu, Nous*, and *Thinking the Difference*, Irigaray writes for a more general readership addressing issues of practical political concern for women’s rights. She writes, “All the following issues of women’s lives ought to be made the concern of and written into civil law: temporary concessions on contraception and abortion; partial and provisional protection from and penalties against public and domestic violence against women; the abuse of female bodies for the purpose of pornography or advertising; discrimination in the sexist definition and use of the body, or images, of language; rape, kidnapping, murder, and the exploitation of children who are—it seems it has to be repeated—the fruit of female, not male, labor etc.” Irigaray, JTN, 78-9.
discrimination and exploitation that are always at play with one’s sex, such as, economic class, social status, ethnic identity, race, age, religion, and sexual orientation. In her later works, like *I Love to You*, she points unequivocally to the pervasive scope of sexual difference. She writes,

> Without doubt the most appropriate content for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. *The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else.* The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem—except from a geographical point of view?—which means we cannot see the wood for the trees, and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic and political ones.\(^8^0\) (my italics)

Anglo-American feminists, particularly the second wave feminists, worked diligently to raise awareness that the category of “woman” is a social construction premised upon the female body, and the social ascription of roles and cultural norms assigned to masculine and feminine ideals are not biologically given; they are, in fact, social constructions.\(^8^1\) Gender, as a social construction, now becomes distinct from the assumed truth of biological sex.

### 3.1. The Wrong-Headed Charge of Essentialism

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\(^{80}\) Irigaray, ILTY, 47.

I address the critiques of essentialism by first considering the multiple levels upon which essentialism is charged. Just as Irigaray’s writing technique and insistence for sexual difference is deliberately fluid, open, and resistant to unity and closure, so her response to essentialism is unsurprisingly similar. First, I examine how she constructively uses language, and the fluid way she writes without certain Anglo-American distinctions such as sex versus gender. Second, I note how her proximity to Derridean deconstruction renders her project open and able to withstand any closure that might reify a static notion of woman. Third, I address the theory that she may be a “strategic” essentialist in order to disrupt the binary opposition of essentialist/non-essentialist binary pair, which is itself in service to patriarchal assumptions. Finally, I address concerns over the semantics of body morphology, elaborating how one must read with Irigaray, drawing from her insistence that cultural change must happen at the level of language and subject relations, not just quantity of goods. In her words, we suffer from a lack of comprehension of the relations between “individual bodies, social bodies, and the linguistic economy.”

Furthermore, “Language represents an essential tool of production for this liberation.” She uses her training as a linguist, psychoanalyst and philosopher to develop the terms morphology, nature, rhythm, and le féminin, and when contextualized properly, I argue these terms may be understood as moving beyond essentialism.

3.1.1. Essentialism of Sex and Gender

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82 Irigaray, JTN, 72.
83 Ibid.
Writers like Tina Chanter observe the way the sex/gender distinction dominates the feminist landscape and becomes an almost assumed lens through which many feminists critique Irigaray’s writing.\textsuperscript{84} However, this becomes a serious misreading of how Irigaray employs such terms. To hold these two terms apart is, in a way, to reify the nature/culture divide. As Chanter rightly observes, the sex/gender distinction lines up sex, nature, and biology on one side, and gender, which is socially constructed, culturally informed, and historically produced, on the other.\textsuperscript{85} Irigaray’s project disputes this rigid line that separates culture from embodiment.

Irigaray is often misread because of the unconventional way she uses the French terms \textit{sexe} and \textit{genre}, which cannot be literally translated as the English concepts of sex and gender. Irigaray deploys the term \textit{sexe} to replace the more traditional rendering of the term \textit{genre} (gender), which often connotes a grammatical gender (\textit{il/elle}), a style of discourse, or the \textit{genre humain} (humankind).\textsuperscript{86} She may use the terms \textit{sexe} and \textit{genre} interchangeably, which is confusing since most consider the French term \textit{sexe} to refer to sexual organs. Her use of \textit{sexe} can mean sex, gender or sexuality.\textsuperscript{87} Additionally her use of the term

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[84] Chanter notes that sex and gender are two categories that carry with them metaphysical, ontological, political and ethical implications. She writes that men and women are defined according to their biological sex, which implies that women and men have fixed identities, empirically established by reference to their bodies, which serves as a kind of unchanging ground. Contrastingly, gender formation is construed as a result of processes of learning, social expectations, peer pressure, and local and family values. These are all culturally specific and reveal that sex is not a universal transcendent, but a malleable process that to some extent, can be altered or manipulated. Chanter argues, “The sex/gender distinction has been so influential that it is almost taken for granted, with the result that it sometimes acts as a silent center.” Chanter, \textit{Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers} (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 26.
\item[85] Ibid., 25.
\item[86] See Irigaray, JTN, 31, Tr. Note 3.
\end{footnotesize}
sexual and sexuate are used strategically to convey a carnal reality, but not necessarily a sex act. In fact, it is the very normativity of connecting sex acts to human subjectivity that Irigaray challenges.

3.1.2 Essentialism?

Jacques Derrida, like Irigaray, also challenges the notion of essentialism and as his work is often associated with Irigaray’s, it is important to explain the relation between their arguments. While never explicitly referencing Jacques Derrida as a focal point for her writing, Irigaray’s work evidences clear signs of continuity with deconstruction and evokes Derrida’s différance. Like Derrida, she contests the inequality of the binary opposition, where one term conceals the other, privileging one and possessing its opposite. Deconstruction permits a new eruptive concept to emerge, often relying on the strategy of reversal followed by displacement of conceptual hierarchies like identity/difference, subject/object, and male/female. In order to conceal or possess and suppress the latter, the former term often creates fabled accounts of the lesser term, and such has been the plight of woman.

In Of Grammatology Derrida introduces the term logocentrism, defining it as the metaphysics of phonetic writing. He means that any system of language can make meaning present, reaching a kind of metaphysical ‘closure’. As Ellen Feder and Emily Zakin explain, “Logocentrism does not presume that truth is present but that it can be made present, . . .” and the work of deconstruction shows that “… logocentrism is always in and with what he calls ‘difference,’ the play of signifiers (of

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88 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 3, 10. See also the invaluable introduction by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Of Grammatology, lxviii, lxxi, lxxxii.
presence and absence) upon which is predicated any discourse.” But by 1972, with the publication of *Margins of Philosophy, Dissemination,* and *Spurs,* he expands the term by four letters, making an economical, but vitally important modification of logocentrism to phallogocentrism, implicating Lacanian phallocentrism with logocentrism. For Irigaray, his wedding of these words implies that psychoanalytic discourse is guilty of identifying the phallus with the *Logos* as transcendent and, therefore, unexamined (and unexaminable) grounds of signification, of assigning meaning. Logocentrism, the positing of a first cause of being or meaning, colludes with the male sex: God and man come together as a locus of coherence and authenticity that remains unthought. In Carolyn Burke's 1981 essay, “Irigaray Through the Looking Glass,” she suggests that Derrida and Irigaray challenge the doubled centrism by creating new sexual fables of the process of signification. She explains, “Derrida proposes an account that replaces phallogocentrism with a 'hymenal' fable: one that involves both sexes and sexual difference in its metaphorical representation of the creation of meaning. Irigaray, by contrast, omits the male sex and valorizes female sexual sufficiency, in a fable that can be described as ‘vulval’ or ‘vaginal’.” Indeed, Irigaray’s popularly referenced essay in *This Sex* emphasizes the plural styles of female sexuality and expression, as typified in the multiple lips that are constantly “in touch” with each other and the diffuse locations

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92 Burke, *Engaging Irigaray,* 43.
of sensuality. What is pressing to observe is that both Derrida and Irigaray have offered fables of their own in order to contest Lacan’s, but these are in fact fables, deconstructive texts meant to create “… limited analogies without an absolute claim for their ontological status. . . . Words are being used without their authors’ subscribing to the premise that the models to which they refer might actually exist. The referential status of language is put into question . . . antiauthoritarian.”93 This Sex Which Is Not One and Sexes and Genealogies can be understood as deliberate discursive attempts to move away from hard theoretical writing to a softer, more fluid engagement with ideas at the level of myth, fable, or poem. Both Irigaray and Derrida share this concern to speak in ways that resist a position of mastery, making much of the position of the subversive “other.”

But according to Burke, what sets Irigaray apart from other French feminists like Monique Wittig and Helene Cixous is that “Irigaray does not invent (or reinvent) for us female characters, heroines, or myths in opposition to patriarchal culture. Her deconstructive procedure is puzzling, because she is chiefly concerned with questioning familiar modes of thought and interrogating the concept of logic and the rules of discourse. Once we realize that this procedure is, in part, her content, we are on the right track.”94 Her style of questioning, ellipse, and trailing thoughts deliberately leaves authorial intent, conclusions, or closure at bay.

93 Ibid., 44.
94 Ibid., 45.
Indeed, Elizabeth Weed notes Irigaray’s deliberate echo of Derridean terms and style\textsuperscript{95} of displacement of woman’s sexual identity challenging the discourse of the male logos:

How, then, are we to try to redefine this language work that would leave space for the feminine? Let us say that every dichotomizing—and at the same time redoubling—break, including the one between enunciation and utterance, has to be disrupted. Nothing is ever to be \textit{posited} that is not also reversed and caught up again in the \textit{supplementarity of this reversal}......There would no longer be either a right side or a wrong side of discourse, or even of texts, but each passing from one to the other would make audible and comprehensible even what resists the recto-verso structure that shores up common sense.\textsuperscript{96}

Similarly, Ellen T. Armour has also noted the close proximity between Irigaray and Derrida’s valuation of “woman,” whereby the conclusion of both thinkers disrupts current gender structures, resisting a traditionally essentialist reading of Irigaray and providing feminism with a valuable ally in Derrida. Armour suggests that both Irigaray and Derrida take a similar position on Lacan’s infamous declaration, “woman does not exist.” She explains, “For both, I think, ‘woman does

\textsuperscript{95} Similarly, Derrida writes “The question of the woman suspends the decidable opposition of true and non-true and inaugurates the epoch of the epochal regime of the quotation marks which is to be enforced for every regime of quotation marks which is to be enforced for every concept belonging to the system of philosophical identity. The hermeneutical project which postulates a true sense is disqualified from this regime.” See Jacques Derrida, “The Question of Style,” in David B. Alison, ed., \textit{The New Nietzsche} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 188. Derrida’s \textit{La Question du style},” first published in \textit{Nietzsche aujourd’hui} (1973), was revised and expanded in \textit{Eperons/Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles}, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 107.

\textsuperscript{96} Irigaray, TS, 79-80.
“not exist’ means whatever ‘woman’ is or becomes, whenever she is or becomes, ‘she’ is not subject to the order of the ‘is,’ to metaphysics as such.”

According to Armour’s account, both Irigaray and Derrida uncover the workings of phallogocentrism in order to break through to another economic order. Woman, for Derrida and Irigaray, is undecidable and outside of phallogocentrism, and both want to keep her as undecidable. The location of these different approaches, argues Armour, permits one to read these two as supplements to one another, rather than rivals or antinomies.

Although Derrida and Irigaray do have some differences, like Derrida, she deconstructs woman’s object status within metaphysics and psychoanalysis. Whereas Derrida prefers to dream of a “sexuality without number” for fear that specifying man and woman traps us in old stereotypes, Irigaray dares to envision a “feminine imaginary” that looks towards a new as yet unknown be(com)ing of woman, theorizing towards a specificity of feminine subjectivity and identity. Her specificity isn’t an essentialist reconstruction vis-à-vis patriarchy, it is a challenge to the system of discourse that establishes the binary pair, and it is a redistribution of how we understand this untruth, error, which has been woman’s identity. She urges that we ought to theorize an evolving sexual culture of difference that redistributes claims of truth, language, and being in proximity to and with the other sexual

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99 Irigaray uses this term to construe a specificity of feminine nature, identity, and subjectivity. See Irigaray, S, 25; TS, 85; DBT, 134; WL, 10; BEW, 128;
dialectic. The undecidability becomes her well spring as she moves toward intimacy, nearness, proximity, and love. Irigaray's theory shifts from undecidability and fable toward an “amorous exchange”\textsuperscript{100} between these developing sexual differences. It isn't difference per se that she is after; it is the possibility or wonder of proximity, nearness, and love in the interval between these differences. Consider her translated poem in the epigram of chapter three, \textit{Teaching}:

\begin{quote}
Difference, alone, allows intimacy.

To kiss you, there is the threshold of the shared:

Pure proximity

That nothing brings under control.

Touch that is strange to something other than itself.

Ecstasy from the time

To be built again after such an opening

Where I arrive at you

Finding and losing myself

In this inappropriable

Nearness,

As much birth as mourning.

Access to the other

Who I shall never be,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{100} The term appears in, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” IR, 43-44. It is another way of positing the bodily exchange between men and women that is devised outside of the economy of sexual desire only.
Irigaray transposes the question of being with the question of difference; the question of presence with the question of the concealed invisible; and the question of truth with the question of love. All these transpositions develop a sense of genuine nearness or proximity. Her work is not merely a critique of language and a deconstruction of philosophy; it is a road map toward appropriate or ethical nearness with the self and others, constituted via difference. In This Sex she reminds the reader that le féminin always remains “several,” resisting the exchange-value economy of ownership and property with “nearness.” She explains, “Woman derives pleasure from what is so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself. She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either.” Proximity is about one’s nearness to one’s own body and one’s nearness to others, others who are Other without the phallic symbolic of language, representation, and meaning pre-determining the outcome of this amorous exchange. Irigaray’s proximity is open to wonder, surprise, and an excess of meaning. She is not stepping outside of meaning or reifying or conceding to the phallic economy. Instead, she uses her position within the phallic economy as a bonus, rather than a lack, and with this Nietzschean transvaluation of

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101 Cited in Irigaray, T, 24, as (Luce Irigaray, Everyday Prayers, 28 October. p 74).
102 Some examples of her movement toward nearness and proximity can be found in the following passages: “Being placed side by side does not suffice for reaching nearness.” WL, 68;
103 Irigaray, TS, 31.
104 Irigaray, ML, 87.
femininity, as asks the question of proximity and nearness as a positive understanding of the other.

To put it in religious terms, it is a question of incarnation and Immanuel, God with us. It is not the male phallic God of the phallogocentric inheritance, but a divine horizon whereby true difference yields a question that moves toward and with others. Her feminine specificity of undecidability is open, but it is open so it may be free to discover a collective sense and limitation of its own, a limitation without closure, one that is self-determined and specified with particular others.

3.1.3 Essentialism as Strategy?

Throughout her career, but especially during the eighties and early nineties, Lacanian feminists and social/maternal feminists united to charge Irigaray with positing an essentialism of woman. Diana Fuss outlines how some of Irigaray's readers have interpreted her as a non-essentialist in the traditional sense, and suggest Irigaray employs a "stratégie" essentialism as a tactic to expose that woman has been the ground of Aristotelian male essence (matter), while having no access to it herself: "it is the essence of woman to have no essence." Thus, Irigaray's woman, or le féminin, is a deliberate provocation. Irigaray's woman challenges that woman's essence is not her usefulness to the male subject to complete his form. In this reading, Irigaray's "essentialism" is not so much a pit she falls into, but as Fuss declares, "... a key strategy she puts into play ... a lever of displacement."

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107 Ibid.
Gayatri Spivak explains how Irigaray’s deconstruction of woman may be understood as remaining outside the essentialism/anti-essentialism discourse itself and she places the focus on how we read her text. As she explains, “The real in deconstruction is neither essentialist nor antiessentialist. It invites us to think through the counterintuitive position that there might be essences and there might not be essences. . . . Deconstruction is not an essence. It is not a school of thought; it is a way of rereading.”¹⁰⁸ Spivak clarifies regarding Irigaray, “It is only if she is read as the pure theoretical prose of truth—whatever that might be—that she may seem essentialist when she talks about women. . . . Why do we become essentialist readers when we read someone like Irigaray?”¹⁰⁹ She asks that we cease to ignore the “. . . aggressive role of rhetoricity in her prose”¹¹⁰ and engage the harder task of reading faithfully.

While I appreciate Fuss and Spivak’s comments, I suggest that Irigaray is in no way an essentialist, and I think it is a mistake to talk of her as advocating a “strategic” essentialism. It not only gives a wrong impression, but brackets her major concern to move beyond essentialism, as I will argue in the next section.

3.1.4 Essentialism of the Body?

But other feminists still insist that within Irigaray’s writing a ground of woman’s definition or closure exists. Toril Moi contests Irigaray’s play with morphology as different than anatomy and insists, “Irigaray’s theory of ‘woman’ takes as its starting point a basic assumption of analogy between women’s

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¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 17.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 163.
psychology and her 'morphology' . . . which she rather obscurely asks to be different from her anatomy.”

However, in my view, I judge that readers of Irigaray like Elizabeth Grosz and Margaret Whitford are on track to suggest that reducing Irigaray’s critique of morphology to biologism is either a false misreading or deliberate ignorance on the part of her critics. Jane Gallop also warns of too literal a reading of Irigarayan anatomy, suggesting that she is involved in a process of remetamorphizing the body, which retains an insistent illusion of referentiality. I agree that morphology cannot be reduced to mere biologism, but must be nuanced as a concept that is in touch with female anatomy, but not reducible to it. I understand the following as compelling reasons why Irigaray’s body morphology cannot be reduced to anatomy.

I suggest that Irigaray postulates body morphology as a notion connected to the symbolic and the imaginary, arguments that take place at the level of privileging psychoanalytic claims of closure and woman’s non-existence. Irigaray’s woman is a possible positive reconstruction of a non-oedipal and non-phallic account of woman that resists the closure of woman’s essence via metaphysics and psychoanalysis. Like Kristeva, she understands the grip of metaphysics and language, and she postulates le féminin via a sexual subtext of the abject, the unseen, or the concealed. But unlike Kristeva, these locations offer a possible positive reconstruction of an identity other than the oedipal/phallic determination of woman. Her strategy is to exceed the sexualized closure of language, and stay connected to meaning. She is a

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feminist who deconstructs and rallies for a positive feminist reconstruction. Indeed, intelligible meaning is an important issue within Irigarayan scholarship, as she is a philosopher concerned with transcendental claims, working to make them sexually inclusive and clear, rather than myopically exclusive. But clarity ought not be confused with closure.

According to Grosz, Irigaray’s use of body morphology, as opposed to female anatomy, suggests that bodies do not exist as some “pre-given material reality,”114 but rather, they function to constitute actively the world and human experience as evocative or signifiable. She writes, “Bodies are not conceived by Irigaray as biologically or anatomically given, inert, brute objects, fixed by nature once and for all. She sees them as the bearers of meanings and social values, the products of social inscriptions, always inherently social.”115 Irigaray goes beyond theory, connecting the historical reality of people’s social oppression with a rigorous theory that aims toward greater inclusion, collective identity and self-representation.

Certainly, her philosophy of body morphology regards the social or cultural inscriptions of meaning on the body. Indeed, her Freudian background and training as a psychoanalyst in many ways demands that she be alert to how bodies are read, interpreted, and culturally inscribed. As Judith Butler suggests, one ought to be attentive as to how bodies perform according to these values and inscriptions. But as Alison Stone has also argued, and I agree, Irigaray, at the same time, defines body morphology as something that exceeds a sheer cultural inscription or social value. Bodies aren’t simply the paper of culture’s ink. Nature must be more than culture’s

114 Grosz, Sexual Subversion, 112
115 Ibid.
artifact. If Irigaray has a robust philosophy of culture's inscription and the power of patriarchy, she has an equally robust philosophy of nature to resist the closure of patriarchy.

3.2 Irigarayan Rhythm and Nature

According to Stone, some of Irigaray readers,\(^1\) sensitive to Irigaray's resurrection of nature, have problematically theorized nature and culture as intertwined. These feminists, agreeing that Western culture and society pervasively devalue and denigrate nature relative to culture, and that women's bodies are linked to nature, conclude that women's situation can be most readily improved through cultural or symbolic change that recognizes culture’s dependence upon and continuity with nature. Namely, culture has defined nature this way, and nature is passively responding. But if these two concepts are continuous, questions Stone, this also implies that there must be some natural basis for current patriarchal culture, and that this culture is unchangeable. Not wanting to be pushed into such an undesirable corner, feminists insist on culture's independence of, or under-determination by, nature. This affirmation, argues Stone, “...threatens to perpetuate the symbolic devaluation of the female, insofar as the female is aligned with nature.”\(^2\)

I agree with Stone when she argues that this strategy, while politically advantageous, continues the privileging of culture over nature, simply flip-flopping

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\(^1\) She cites that both Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens as feminists seeking to avoid the split between nature and culture by intertwining nature with culture. This intertwining, while more genuinely attempting to reconcile these concepts, still leaves many questions for Stone, such as how can culture be modified through natural tendencies that direct this change? See Stone, *Luce Irigaray*, 130-31.

\(^2\) Ibid., 130.
the present situation instead of calling into question its structural hierarchy. As Stone convincingly writes, “If we rethink nature as active and self-changing, then we can recognize (and promote social recognition of) culture’s natural roots without implying that women’s and men’s respective symbolic standings are fixed and cannot be changed for the better.”\(^{118}\) The nature that Stone reads Irigaray’s work as positing is active, dynamic, striving for expression, while at the same time not limiting that expression. Rather than abandoning the natural to the overwhelming tide of culture (à la Butler), Irigaray argues, “...from the natural we should start over in order to refound reason.”\(^{119}\) I concur with Stone that Irigaray posits what one could be called in Derridean fashion a quasi-transcendental\(^{120}\) of/for nature, a multiplex normative of directions, thus limiting and pointing the way, but without specifying fixed structures, once for all essences, or unalterable positivations. The natural does not involve universally pre-given forms of matter, but it is what she identifies as a rhythm\(^{121}\) that comes to bodily expression in two different kinds of fluid and diverse sexuate bodies. As Irigaray explains, bodies have ties to the natural, but these ties must be refined and cultivated.

Irigaray’s idea of rhythm is of paramount importance in my efforts toward an Irigarayan ethic involving a wide-ranging panoply of interacting differences. She

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 131.
\(^{119}\) Irigaray, ILTY, 37.
\(^{120}\) Caputo, More Radical Hermeneutics, 278, note 2. Caputo writes: “A `quasi-transcendental` is a condition for the possibility—and impossibility of a thing. As opposed to a straightforward transcendental condition, which sets forth the borders within which a thing may appear, a quasi-transcendental is the condition of a field without closure, for effects that overrun their borders.” See also John Caputo, ed., “The Gift,” Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 141-2.
\(^{121}\) This is Stone’s analysis of Irigaray’s position on nature. She argues that is not so much a thing as it is a rhythm of life.
says, ”Women do not have the same sexual economy as men,” and she appeals to differences such as “homeostasis, entropy, and release,” explaining, “Their internal regulation is much stronger, and it maintains them in a constant irreversible process of growth.”\textsuperscript{122} Contrastingly, a man’s rhythmic temporality corresponds to Freud’s description of the sexual model for both sexes, marked by “irreversible momentum” or “ruptures” and operates on the thermodynamic model of tension, discharge, and return to homeostasis.\textsuperscript{123} Differently, “Women’s temporality is complex hormonally, and this has an effect on a body’s organization and general equilibrium.”\textsuperscript{124} The two distinct temporalities, she observes, are linked to cosmic rhythms and to the time of universe.\textsuperscript{125} Naturally, seasonal shifts tend to mark or indicate changes in time. Agrarian life moves according to the shifts of spring, summer, fall, and winter, with implicit changes of food, lifestyle, and light. She notes that the urban landscape now alters our sense of seasonal change, creating a repetition of days and moments that is “nullifying” and “entropic.”\textsuperscript{126} These two temporal rhythms and associations with time correspond to the two sexual economies and ontologies that she has vigorously described. Articulating the male temporal rhythm, she discloses, “In fact this economy’s temporal rhythm more or less accords with a traditional model of male sexuality. It’s not the only model possible, but it has just about so in our culture.”\textsuperscript{127} What is the other model(s) possible? She connects difference with the alternative

\textsuperscript{122} Irigaray, TD, 25, JTN 115.  
\textsuperscript{123} Irigaray, TD, 25.  
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{125} Irigaray, JTN, 114-5.  
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 114.  
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 114-5.
female sexual model that she insists is possible, and that the male sexual temporal rhythm ought to appreciate sensibly:

Female sexuality . . . is more related to becoming, more attuned to the time of the universe. Which means a woman's life can't be reduced to a series of facts. . . . A woman's life is marked by irreversible events that define the stages of her life . . . puberty (which boys can also experience), losing her virginity, becoming pregnant, being pregnant, childbirth, breast-feeding—events that can be repeated without repetition: . . . body and spirit have changed, physical and spiritual development is taking place.¹²⁸ (italics mine)

In the same passage she writes of three examples: mothering, menstruation, and menopause. She explains that mothering, or child rearing, connects a woman intimately to the process of growth and development of humans and their consciousness. Menstruation connects a woman to the cosmic cycles of lunar, solar, tidal, and seasonal periods. Finally, menopause is the irreversible change in hormonal equilibrium whose cosmic change provides social meaning with freed time for social, cultural, and political life. For Irigaray, these are not simply material or corporeal changes; they are fundamentally spiritual as well. The holistic well-being of a woman shifts with time and reproductive cycles that rise, recede, and cannot be reversed. The swells of a woman’s movement and her being are intricately co-extensive with the biological changes of her body and the social

¹²⁸ Ibid., 115.
meaning that they have. She has a unique temporality or rhythm, and yet she is still free to interpret the social meaning of the body and these shifts.

But Irigaray notes that a woman’s temporality has been sublimated to the temporality of the male economy. This maneuver, which fails to address or listen to the female temporality, has natural and cosmic consequences. She insists, “Women are affected more fatally by the break with cosmic equilibria. It is therefore up to them to say no. Without their yes, the world of men cannot continue to develop or subsist.”

I understand Irigaray’s aim to be a critique of patriarchal culture, which resists all theorization of nature and the body. What is unique or uncanny is her insistence to bring theorization of nature into play with culture, the body with the mind. Indeed, she notes that the current sexual economy of momentum and unhampered power sacrifices the health and being of bodies, nature, the cosmos, and anything deemed ‘other’ to the male subject and his culture. In fact, such an economy that fails to attend to these vital contributors of the cosmic equilibrium will cease to function and fail upon its own unchecked monstrosity. Its very right to rule without dissent will cause its self-collapse. Such an economy is untenable and unstable and other subject positions, whose contributions provide equilibrium to the cosmic order, are needed and critical for global stability and cyclical, sustainable, and ethically responsible growth. Irigaray contends that women must become willing and able to engage in subject-object relations and engage culturally and politically in the cultural milieu. In so doing, they enjoy more than a passivity or

\[129\text{ Irigaray, TD, 26.}\]
contentment with object relations, the object of the male sexuate subject, and they cease to impose this status on other women.\textsuperscript{130} Critically, women must assume a subject-speaking posture (\textit{l-she}) and men must also listen to women when they assume these subject positions.

Irigaray posits that bodies indicate these truths through the senses of the body in hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch, and she laments the malaise that results when these senses are utilized in patriarchal fashion to create sensible conditions which disregard the contribution of women. She offers a few examples. A chief concern of Irigaray is not the lack of ability for women to speak, but the alarming fact that the male is not listening to her.\textsuperscript{131} Such loss of hearing, loss of the sensible capacity, is a chief indicator of the need to honor sexual difference. In her concern for a global ethic she cites pollution of noise, air, blindness, and loss of the sensible ability as the consequences of amassing technology, resulting in toxic tragedies like Chernobyl.\textsuperscript{132} By listening to nature, and the call for balance and equilibrium, the ‘we’ could become mediated sensible observers, thinkers, and lovers, where the embodied difference constitutes an ethico-spiritual awakening that can save the individual, as well as corporate, communal, and ecological selves. Irigaray is critically concerned that too often culture alone, not nature, creates civil identities, or put another way, civil codes do not correspond to nature.\textsuperscript{133} Civil codes

\textsuperscript{130} See Irigaray, TS, 198-204; KW, 146.
\textsuperscript{131} As the speaking subject, she poetically addresses the male ‘you’ in the following: “You do not hear. Nothing from outside the place where you already are reaches you any more.” Irigaray, EP, 10.
\textsuperscript{132} Irigaray, TD, 3. Currently, we could also cite the contemporary crisis in Japan: the effect of the earthquake, tsunami, and de-stabilization of nuclear reactors and the deadly threat of radiation to the Japanese people.
\textsuperscript{133} Irigaray, ILTY, 131.
do not correspond to what constitutes a man or a woman, and as such, they are in Irigaray’s estimation, negatively neutered.

If we offer her theory of sexual difference as indicating a non-essentialist two-pronged quasi-transcendental universal that sets forth the general conditions of possibility and impossibility without foreclosing on possible changes, mutations, and transmutations, it not only opens up the space for real existent individuals, but mandates the need for every creature to be(come) themselves, embracing their freedom and responsibility to develop their sexuate identity in ways unique to themselves. Irigaray posits nature and culture as active, self-changing, fluid and unfolding quasi-transcendentals that set general parameters in which men and women shape their identity as individual men and women. Neither is dependent upon the other or co-extensive with the other, and therefore, each requires each sex to investigate its relationship with both spheres in order to found a culture that is in touch with the sensible immediacy (nature) of each gender. To cement these identities isn’t her concern, but to elaborate a civil culture that allows these fluid identities in their difference to flourish is a vital part of her project towards a global ethic.

3.2.1 Nature, Difference, and Limit

Rather than privileging nature or culture, or problematically intertwining them, I suggest we may read Irigaray as articulating a theory of sexual difference which envisions the horizons of nature and culture as active, changing, and dynamic, continuing to rhythmically evolve, mutate, and modify as they interact. What has been posited as a body need not be the final telos of the body. Bodies can
take on many incarnations, notions, forms, and what some might call deformities, abnormalities, and variances.

For Irigaray patriarchal culture is hom(m)osexual, or in service of the same. For her the presence of the couple offers another avenue for a disruption of the same and the honoring of difference. Irigaray, critical of monosexuality, seems attracted to the infinite limit that one can radically reclaim in order to ensure difference and create a boundary for intersubjectivity. The gesture of limit, or the dialectic of the negative becomes a critical method for her theory of intersubjectivity and how subjects can in the interval caress, touch, and love without fusion or fissure. She suggests we need, “a love remaining in harmony with the natural living universe that serves us a place of existence and of regeneration.”\(^\text{134}\) As articulated in chapter one, self-limitation is the labor of the negative, whereby we each recognize and honor our distinctiveness as the self-limitation which functions at the same time as both boundary and connection with other selves.

I have posited her insistence on two as an unfolding dimorphic structure of fundamental difference that finds representation in sexed bodies. Irigaray explains, “The natural, aside from the diversity of its incarnations or ways of appearing, is at least two: male and female.”\(^\text{135}\) The diversity of human subjectivities is the natural result of recognizing that the two-fold universal call is actualized in the on-going, continually mutating multidimensional physio-biotic-psycho-social processes which make up the contingency of our finite existence. If one ignores the twoness of sexual difference, one is doing injustice and ignores the multiplicity and unfolding of the

\(^{134}\) Irigaray, BEW, 55. 
\(^{135}\) Irigaray, ILTY, 37.
universe. In other words, as I read Irigaray, the question of sexual difference is inextricably connected to her ethical concern to foster on a global level a collaborative, partnership approach to differences of every kind as an alternative to hierarchical approaches that traditionally and historically too often have been variations of a male monosexual hegemony.

3.2.2 Difference and Diversity

Irigaray is highly concerned that the history of philosophy posits female sexuality as something to be sublated (Hegel), transcended (Sartre), or outside the phallus (Lacan). The binary structure of philosophy renders woman caught within a subject-object model and this sameness can be concealed in the language of equality or diversity that diverts the question of fundamental difference:

To promote only diversity, as is often the case in our times, runs the risk of remaining in an unchanged horizon with regard to the relations with the other(s). We then entrust this problem to customs, moral rules or religious feeling without questioning our culture about its capability of meeting with the other as such. Furthermore we are unable to open ourselves all the time to others different than us. We need to return to ourselves, to keep and save our totality or integrity, and this is possible only in sexuate difference. Why? Because it is the most basic difference, this one which secures for each one bridge(s), both between nature and culture and between us. It is starting from
this difference that the other sorts of otherness have been elaborated.\textsuperscript{136}

It is not that she opposes advocating for equality or diversity, but that these terms tend to not probe the embodied self, its relations with others, and the foundation of the culture of difference. At the heart of this discussion, Irigaray sets herself apart as a philosopher tackling the foundations of power within discourses, subjectivity, and the history of philosophy, more than a feminist advocating for issues like equality, diversity, or multiculturalism. For Irigaray, these questions remain bound within the question of difference, and once all discourses question the sexual monologic of sameness, then we can actually parse out what diversity, equality, and multiculturalism mean via difference, or the differences within difference. Irigaray, I suggest, is not dismissive of these concerns; she is more demanding, questioning the structures that undergird and the assumptions that mask what is at the heart of these concerns, namely, alterity. For Irigaray, equality means equity between two wholly other beings who are asymmetrical to one another. Her feminism strikes at the very heart of the question of being, nothingness, becoming, and the dialectical movement, asking for a stronger ethic, a transvaluation of sexual identity and relations, a co-cultivation of civil society, and a widening of horizontal transcendence.

True difference, argues Irigaray, yields a recognition of self-limitation, or the negative of one’s gender. When men and women respect the difference, they can permit the limit of each gender to challenge the Hegelian sublation of the negative.

Instead the negative acts as a constitutive affirmation or positivity of one’s self-limit. Again, the self-limitation of the negative is not a sacrifice, but a way of self-representation, self-definition, or development. Self-limitation, based upon our natural embodiment, permits self-limitation to open the space for the other to form his or her own self-development, and definition, which in turn allows for a mutually intimate meeting in the interval. These representations aren’t fixed, but are again fluid, unfolding, and in touch with nature and culture.

Her philosophy of nature grants nature the ability to be constituted by what has been said of it, as well as what we hope nature can become. Nature is not a handmaiden to culture, nor is nature the over-determined master; nature is in relationship of difference with culture, and as we seek cultural change, we must also expect natural change. I propose that Irigaray’s notion of nature and culture suggests an evolution of both spheres as they commune together, respecting their divide, but affirming the fecundity between them.

4 Conclusion: Beyond Essentialism

Irigaray has infamously stated that “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age,”137 performing the doubled task of feminism: to uncover what a certain training in Western philosophy forces her to see, while uncovering what this posture represses, oppresses, and claims is invisible, namely, that there is nothing to see.138 I have suggested she adds an active third position: to rally for this invisible, repressed difference or alterity (female

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137 Irigaray, E, 5/13.
subjectivity) to come into its own being. I also suggest that she notes a limit of time: our age. If each age can only temporally consider one issue, then this is her issue for her age.\textsuperscript{139} I suggest that she does not think that sexual difference will fix or repair all other forms of repression, but within her time, this is the oppression that she understands as most pressing, vital, and able to open positively other forms of difference and closure. This ontology is not reducible to a simple sexual identity (natural or biological sexual desire as identity), but is radically informed by the sexuate morphology, culture, and relationships formed in the lived identity. She is not willing to reduce the complexity of nature or culture as they inform a sexuate identity.

Earlier I noted that Irigaray was concerned with the ‘material reality’ of sexual difference. Differences, she argues, between men and women exist and concealment of this difference has had deleterious effects on women in particular. If biological or physiological anatomy isn’t the essential difference between men and women, what is? Alison Stone exhaustively examines Irigaray's assertion that each sex has its own rhythm, universal nature, and transcendent shape.\textsuperscript{140} The idealized version of each sex isn’t something that one can pin down, but it is a project that is connected to space, time, and the question of being. Therefore the differences between the sexes will yield differences in how each sex temporally shifts, occupies or offers space, and becomes and belongs to a gender. The rhythm that Irigaray

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{139}]I understand her to be saying that within her bodily existence, her task has been to limit strategically her work in order to open up others areas of justice and distribution, not to close or render the work complete.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
postulates is different than a concrete positivity of a fixed identity, or a reduction to an essential biological or romantic view of nature. An Irigarayan definition of the female gender must yield an ideal that accords to the elements that the female gender accords with: the diffuse, multiple, and voluminous. I suggest that her images of sexuate identity are not meant to reify identity into a static normative identity, but are intended to be new modes of being and thinking, beyond essentialism, oriented by nature and culture, that signify space, place, and time for difference. We must offer space and place and give time to consider intimacy with a different economy. By using the “undecideable,” “excess,” “or silent invisible” of the phallocratic economy, she can contend with patriarchy while philosophically theorizing a transvaluation of a different economy. The morpho-logic of the female body informs a new mode of approaching difference, but does not constitute identity. To shift our thinking and being, or the metaphysical project, away from the ec(h)onomy of sameness is her first gesture toward that definition.

In this chapter I have argued that Irigaray’s strategy of positing le féminin exceeds the binary opposition of the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate. Rather, Irigaray argues that the limit of finite passive boundaries of the body together with the active process of cultivating one’s gender constitutes one’s identity. To cultivate one’s gender has been understood as the process that each individual performs in relation to his or herself with the larger collective communities in which people are located. People constitute their identities by passively recognizing the affirmative boundaries of one’s self and power, while situating the self in a relationship of

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intersubjectivity to others, a respect for the transcendence of another gender who is wholly other. Reading Irigaray as an essentialist is a mistake given that it concedes to the power of the very binary opposition she is continually disputing. Releasing difference from being judged and elaborated in fixed opposition, not only allows sexual difference to take on a burgeoning still to-become meaning, but it opens Irigaray's way towards a sustainable global ethic in which differences of all kinds weave together in a cosmic rhythm of collaboration and partnership.