Luce Irigaray: postmodern or essentialist

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Luce Irigaray: Postmodern or Essentialist

by

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Abstract

Luce Irigaray is commonly identified as a postmodern thinker. Interpretations of her thought are often centred on the role of essentialism in her work. In the postmodern interpretation, she is "rescued" from the charge of essentialism at the expense of dismissing her discussion of the female body; but if her discussion of the body is taken seriously, then she is regarded as a hopeless essentialist. An attentiveness to the literal reading of Irigaray's treatment of the body, and the resulting understanding of women's place in the world, shows that Irigaray is not a postmodern thinker. She has more--though not unproblematic--affinities with radical and liberal feminist thought than commonly suggested. Finally, Irigaray makes use of essentialism, universalism, and biologism; but the effects are radical, rather than conservative.
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Dedicated to Bob and Trudy Hall
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<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td><em>i love to you: sketch from a possible felicity within history</em></td>
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<td>TD</td>
<td><em>Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTN</td>
<td><em>Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference</em></td>
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<td>ESD</td>
<td><em>An Ethics of Sexual Difference</em></td>
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<td>EP</td>
<td><em>Elemental Passions</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ML</td>
<td><em>Marine Lover of Freidrich Nietzsche</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td><em>Sexes et genres à travers les langues: éléments de communication sexuée.</em></td>
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<td>TS</td>
<td><em>This Sex Which is Not One</em></td>
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<td>S</td>
<td><em>Speculum of the Other Woman</em></td>
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<td><em>Le Corps-à-Corps avec la Mère</em></td>
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Chapter One
Introduction

Visionary, critic, iconoclast, and polymath, Luce Irigaray is one of the most original and creative of contemporary European thinkers. Her ideas are a unique mix of linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and philosophical critique, and political thought; her use of intertextuality forges links between seemingly disparate disciplines, thinkers, and concepts. Such diversity makes Irigaray difficult to interpret, and to classify. While the most common interpretation suggests that Irigaray (along with the rest of the so-called French Feminists) is a post-modern, it is also commonly taken for granted that Irigaray is not a liberal feminist. It is not clear to me, however, that Irigaray is deservedly named a postmodern feminist. Neither is it clear that Irigaray hostile to all liberal ideas. This thesis will show that Irigaray is clearly not a postmodern feminist. On the contrary, she has more affinities with liberal feminist ideas than commonly supposed. Even though I will argue that she is a radical critic of male-dominated phallogocentric\footnote{The term ‘phallogocentric’ is a combination of ‘phallocentric’ and ‘logocentric’.} social structures, I will maintain that this is quite compatible with her essentialist philosophy.

I believe that interpretations of Irigaray are often centered upon the role of essentialism in her work: in the postmodern interpretation, she is “rescued” from essentialism at the expense of dismissing her discussion of the body; but if her discussion of the body is taken seriously, then she is regarded as a hopeless essentialist. It is worth taking another look at Irigaray’s view of the body; I believe that it is more complex and subtle than the
alternative positions. I hope to show that the female body (in all its anatomic, biological, and sexual specificity) is not only present in her works, but is a central aspect of her thought. Further, even as her understanding of the body and its role in social life may at times be problematic, it informs her view of politics and women's place in the political world. Finally, the presence and deployment of the body in Irigaray's work raises two important issues for feminist theory to answer: does essentialism not have its uses? and are there not more interesting and more difficult problems on which to focus the energy of feminist thinkers?

* * * * *

Although Irigaray is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the same breath as liberal feminism, it is worth examining the foundations and goals of liberalism in order to situate Irigaray as a feminist thinker vis-à-vis the traditional principles of classical liberal feminism. The reader should bear in mind the fact that Irigaray reacts against much of the liberal feminist project, particularly its universalism—even though, as we shall find in Chapter Four, universalism is an important element of her own theory of sexual difference.

Liberal feminism, like liberalism, is designed to end impediments to the full development and self-actualization of individuals. Focused on an abstract idea of the individual existing beneath or despite human differences of race, class, creed, religion, or gender, liberal feminism is based upon a universal and abstract model of humanity in which gender does not figure prominently. Differences between people—including gender differences—must be protected and allowed to flourish; layered on top of a fundamental human equality, differences allow the freedom and diversity found in the ideal social life. Within classical liberalism and liberal feminism, people are to be treated
similarly, regardless of their individual characteristics; fundamental human
similarity (of capabilities, needs, intelligence, etc.) is thought to far outweigh
the valued differences which divide human beings.

The subject, in this case, is universal: even as differences are valorized
and protected, the universal aspects of humanity are valued. These
similarities include access to reason, possession of human rights, and
responsibility for one's actions. A just society is understood as one which
allows every single one of its members to exercise the autonomy, freedom,
and reason understood to be definitive of the human being. Liberal feminism
argues that a society which denies these fundamental rights to women is
unjust. Mary Wollstonecraft, an early liberal feminist writer, exemplifies this
belief in her suggestion that "men have considered females as women rather
than as human creatures" [1995:74]; she also notes that women should seek to
"acquire ... character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex"
[1995:77]. She also denies that truth, the sexual virtues, and "human duties
and the principles that should regulate them" are different for men than for
women [1995:124]. John Stuart Mill echoes her call when he comments that
"the legal insubordination of one sex to the other ... ought to be replaced by a
principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side,
nor disability on the other" [1992:261]. While gender is understood as a fact of
social life which does affect the social roles assigned each sex, classical liberal-
inspired feminists would suggest that gender differences should not result in
inequitable social treatment and position of women and men. Gender is
understood as gaining its potency from social, rather than natural, supports,
and men and women are understood as more alike as human beings than
different as men and women.
Holding a noble vision of human beings and placing great faith in the powers of education, liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft argue for women to be considered full human beings, subjects (in the ontological sense), and members of civil society. Wollstonecraft believes that the education women receive in her time instills weakness, leads women to be tyrannical and cunning, and makes them into objects of men’s desire, but she has a brighter vision: an education which will allow women to become virtuous, free, and independent [1995:78-89]. Wollstonecraft believes that the differences between women and men are not natural, but are the result of women’s inferior education and impoverished social position vis-à-vis men’s education and social position; she also believes that women are as rational as men are, and that women and men share the same human nature despite the social and biological differences which separate them [1995].

Irigaray differs from liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft and Mill in one far-reaching way: she dismisses the abstract individual and the universal model of the human being. She argues that the cultural fiction of the abstract “individual” is more accurately called the universal male, because it identifies men with individuality and subjectivity and confines women to otherness and objectivity. In contrast to liberalism’s (supposedly) sexually-neutral subject, Irigaray argues that sexual difference—the difference between men and women—is the most important social cleavage. She also suggests that the model of the abstract and universal individual is based on a masculine definition which excludes women: the “equal competition” of liberalism is judged by a masculine standard. While Mill strives for equality between the sexes, Irigaray dismisses both the possibility of, and the desire for,

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the liberal goal (women’s equality to men). Irigaray’s critique of liberal feminism also suggests that women don’t exist: what is commonly understood as a woman is, within phallogocentric societies (like our own), a construction. Within prevailing cultural understandings, woman is what man wants her to be, while what women “really” are remains outside/beneath the social order and is largely inaccessible both to women and to men within the phallogocentric order. The entire economy of signification informing human social relations is governed by men’s relations with themselves, she writes [see ‘Women on the Market’ and ‘Commodities Among Themselves’ in TS]; the masculine-idealized “Woman” is exchanged among men. The feminine serves only to support and reflect the social order created by the masculine. For Irigaray, then, equality is not to be valorized. Women’s difference both from men and from the idealized feminine Woman of phallogocentrism must be acknowledged and respected.

Irigaray never makes things simple for her interpreters, however; even as she vociferously disputes the central tenet of liberal feminism, a careful and thorough reading of her works suggests that many other aspects of liberal feminism are reflected in her thought. First, Irigaray holds great respect for the category of the subject, both in ontological and in political terms. At present, she writes, women are not subjects in either sense. Women’s attainment of subjectivity and political subjecthood is, I believe, the ultimate goal of her critique of the current social order, and it is a fundamentally liberal goal. In addition, Irigaray does not reject reason. While she believes it

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is tainted and incomplete because it does not include female reason, she believes it can be redeemed by adding to it women's sexually-specific rationality. Such faith in reason is also a marker of liberal influence. Finally, I will show that while Irigaray rejects the starting premise of liberal feminism, she shares its end goal: pragmatic, de facto equality with men in the social and political worlds. Irigaray's vision is of relations of respect and equality between two fundamentally different sexes.

Irigaray is commonly identified as such a postmodern feminist. It is worth reviewing postmodern feminism, because I will show throughout this thesis that Irigaray is not a postmodern feminist, and that she should be defended from those who would co-opt her in support of their postmodern feminist project. Treating Irigaray as a postmodern thinker obscures much of the complexity which gives her work its power, makes her an iconoclast, and informs her critique of the prevailing order. While Irigaray may seem to have some similarities with postmodern feminists, I will argue (below, Ch. 3) that those similarities are mainly stylistic, rather than substantive.

Postmodern feminism enters into and echoes postmodern discourses as it undertakes a feminist deconstruction of reason, knowledge, the self, and reveals the effects of gendered ideas beneath claims to neutrality and universality; it emphasizes difference, plurality, diversity, and otherness and suggests that the ostensibly gender-neutral vocabularies of reason, morality, justice, history, theory, progress and enlightenment are based on masculine meanings and understandings. It is safe to say that as a group, postmodern

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4Though these thinkers are often grouped together into a single category, writers like Christine Delphy [1995] show that these thinkers are very, very different from one another, and that the category 'French Feminism' is more accurately understood as an Anglo-American interpretation, rather than as one issuing directly from these writers' works.
feminists advocate the advantages of otherness as a state and a way of being: it brings openness, plurality, diversity, and difference; they also challenge the unified subject, the principles of liberalism, truth, and the idea that language accurately captures our thoughts and the external reality. Postmodern feminist thinkers challenge the masculine mode of perceiving the world, and suggest that language carries and preserves men's view of the world: masculine language and perception are central to the way our cultures think, in that we can only express ourselves in the language that symbolizes the way man has perceived the world [Sellers, 1991:xvi]. The French postmodern feminist writers formulate theory to account for women's specificity, in part by exploring the relationship between the female body and female language; the primary locus for change rests in language, though for Irigaray, change is also possible through recourse to the body and demands for change in the political sphere.

Suspicious of foundations, essences, the universal, and the permanent, postmodern feminism reflects many of the concerns of postmodernity, even as the relationship between feminism and postmodern thought is at times uneasy, tense, and troubled. This unease with the archimedean is reflected first in a critique of the subject. The stable and coherent subject taken for granted within liberalism, for example, is a target for postmodern feminist critique by thinkers like Judith Butler. Denying the subject's priority to its experience, Butler suggests that experience constructs the subject in accordance with the norms of power governing that society. In contrast to Irigaray's taken-for-granted sexual difference, Butler's more radical early works suggest that gender is an act, a mime, a choice which is necessary for a

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person to be considered a subject at all. The performance of gender creates the illusion of a coherent subject that has been there all along—but the subject is contingent, momentary, and fractured beneath this appearance of wholeness and stability [1991:24]. The performance of gender creates the gendered subject: experience creates the subject [1991:25] in a reversal both of Irigaray's assumption of a stable gendered subject and of liberalism's pre-existing experiencing subject.

Postmodern feminism's discomfort with the archimedian viewpoint, the objective, and the non-contingent is also reflected in the questions and challenges it presents to foundations of all sorts; this concern about foundations is often manifested as anti-essentialism. Postmodern feminists are exceedingly uncomfortable with attributions of essence⁶, instead preferring to suggest (as the existentialists do) that "existence precedes essence", that there is not a pre-existing essential self but rather one who creates itself (or is created by webs of power) ex nihilo. Such a human being is created through its experiences, including its experience of power relations.

We therefore find Butler criticizing feminism for assuming that there is such a thing as a stable, coherent, biologically grounded identity of "woman," who articulates feminist demands for representation. Indeed, she suggests that feminism does not require a stable female subject upon which to be grounded in order to nevertheless be a political force capable of demanding, and achieving, change in the social order [1991:4-7]. Butler is implicitly uncomfortable with the attribution of any stable and universal characteristics

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⁶ In the view of postmodern feminists like Butler, essence is at best conservative and is normally reactionary. I believe that such a view misses the point of essentialism. While it can be conservative or even reactionary, it can also be radical, as it is, for example, when Irigaray uses it to demand change in the conventional order on the basis of women's unfulfilled essence as political beings, subjects, and members of civil society.
to women; indeed, she is not entirely sure that women exist—and, if they do, her suspicion of the universal and totalizing reach of feminism, as well as its essentialist foundations, forces her into a quandary about what to do with the category [1991:Ch. 1]. For postmodern feminist thinkers like Butler, differences are far more interesting than universal similarities. Gender then becomes just one difference among many, one whose current importance is due to the dichotomizing structures of rationality. The anti-foundationalism inherent in this strong version of postmodern feminism comes close to making an explicitly feminist project impossible because, in its concern for difference(s), it is incapable of recognizing gender as the single most important cause of women's oppression.

Postmodern feminists also de-naturalize the body, asking about the role of the body in personhood, and what differences in social experience result from the inhabitation of a female body. Monique Wittig suggests that women's biological specificity has no bearing on the social: rather, oppression gives the body "its form, its gestures, its movement, its motricity, even its muscles" [Wittig, 1992:xv]. Calling gender a "sophisticated and mythic construction" [12], Wittig also suggests that "language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language, for there is a plasticity of the real to language" [44]. Wittig's belief in the social construction of the natural leads her to suggest that recourse to the natural body, belief in two natural sexes, and the "natural" division of labor between the sexes are but the effects of domination. Butler suggests, similarly, that the body is central to understanding women's lives, and that the body is best viewed as a cultural object/project/product, rather than a natural fact [Butler, 1993:18].
This post-rationalist eagerness to avoid the body and the “natural” does have its difficulties, however: the resistance to the recognition that we do live in bodies which are our condition of access to the world, and that we are always limited by the capabilities of those bodies, may at times result in a mistaken view of individuals as multiple, free of the constraints presented by a natural body, or able to shift shapes and bodily situations (e.g., genders) at will.

Many postmodern feminists are suspicious of power, and theories of power form an important part of postmodern feminism. Often informed by Foucauldian understandings of power, postmodern feminists suggest that power is a central agent in constructing identities and social relations. Butler’s understandings of power as constructive, web-like, and insidious lead her to view it with great suspicion as she analyzes its operation within gender and sex. It seems to me that Butler wants to rid us of the very concept of women when she suggests that “feminist critique ought to understand how the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” [1990:2]. Butler is right to point out that power is the condition of the articulation and intelligibility of the subject, and that politics arises out of the play of power and the subject [1992:13], but I believe that her suspicion of essence and foundation again leads her to minimize the effects of sexual difference on social life in a way that Irigaray is able to avoid. Of course, Irigaray does not subscribe to the same suspicious attitude toward power which informs postmodern feminism, which again places doubt on her status as postmodern. Irigaray re-imagine the political realm and the subjects within it, while I believe that postmodern feminism has largely shown itself to be

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7 See, for example, Butler [1991], Singer [1993], and Sawicki [1991].
restricted to deconstructing the current order, and incapable of any re-
imaginings of the political sphere.

While I believe postmodern feminists are entirely too suspicious of power, essence and foundations, Butler and other postmodern feminists must be recognized for problematizing identity and foundationalism, forcing another look at taken-for-granted concepts and understandings. That very problematization, however, ensures that Irigaray may not be properly considered a postmodern feminist thinker. Irigaray, as I will argue below, is not concerned about essentialism, and uses it to radical ends. She uses foundationalism and universalism in her attempt to have women become subjects; she makes use of an archimedean "God’s eye” viewpoint in her description of the feminine and the female’s prediscursive location. Though there are some similarities between Irigaray and postmodern feminist thinkers, I will show that Irigaray cannot be considered a postmodern feminist without serious flaws in interpretation.

* * * * *

This thesis focuses on a narrow slice of Irigaray’s ideas. It is concerned with her understanding of the body, the role of essentialism in her thought, her suggestions about the political sphere, and with finding the most accurate classification of her ideas within the categories of feminist theory. It has been necessary to leave aside other themes and ideas in her work. Psychoanalysis and its accompanying themes of the imaginary and the symbolic, her work on linguistics and on the divine, and her comments to philosophers ranging from Plato to Levinas have not been addressed. A wealth of interpretive works will provide the reader with detailed accounts of these themes in Irigaray’s work, but this same wealth of interpretation is not available for the
themes this thesis addresses. Very few thinkers have chosen to write specifically about Irigaray’s ideas about the body, and even fewer have examined Irigaray’s political ideas using analysis based on the discipline of political science and the questions posed by political theory. While many writers have addressed Irigaray’s relationship to essentialism, I believe that very few of these accounts stem from a careful reading of Irigaray’s oeuvre, or a consideration of her arguments on her own terms. Instead, the majority are often informed by a will to either redeem or convict Irigaray of the charge of essentialism which is prior to their analysis. Nevertheless, this thesis would be impoverished by a failure to sketch the broad outlines of Irigaray’s thought, while paying special attention to the understandings of the female and the feminine which are so important to this thesis. It is to these two themes which we now turn.

Irigaray argues that the prevailing cultural order is hom(m)o-sexual: that is, it is about, by, and for, men. Philosophy, politics, beauty, reason, rationality, truth, and justice are defined by, and constituent parts of, the phallogocentric order. Women do not exist in this system; woman is but that which man constructs. According to Irigaray’s understanding of Western culture and philosophy, woman has had no part in constructing or creating the current phallogocentric and misogynist socio-cultural structures, but rather has been constructed by them. The Western model of the subject—

8 Elizabeth Grosz [1995a, 1995c], Vicki Kirby [1991] and Diana Fuss [1989] avoid these mistakes and consequently write compelling and original interpretations of Irigaray’s work and the question of essentialism.
9 Through this thesis, the term ‘feminine’ will be used to designate the socially-constructed feminine person/body, while the term ‘female’ will denote the female body/self existing outside/beneath the social order.
10 It seems to me that Irigaray believes that reason has been corrupted by a masculine and phallogocentric culture, and there is a ‘real’ reason that is accessible beneath/outside this false version of reason. This attitude toward reason suggests that Irigaray is more appropriately called a critical theorist than a postmodern.
understood as singular, coherent, masculine, universal, and rational—is challenged as Irigaray dissects the "paradigmatic human being" and writes that the (supposed) neutrality, indifference, and universality of knowledge and truth hides masculine productive interests; viewing knowledge as perspectival, partial, limited, and historically-specific, she is critical of 'truth', 'falsity,' and the uses to which logic is put ["The Question of the Other":7].

Woman is an image of the masculine's desire and need, defined by and for man.11 Irigaray argues that woman is the location of all that he rejects for himself: biology, nature, body, immanence, place, passion, and non-sense, which allows him to keep philosophy, culture, the mind, transcendence, time, reason, and sense as his own. The feminine is then a negative image, providing man and male sexuality with "an unfailingly phallic self-representation" [TS:70]. This constructed femininity grounds the entire patriarchal order [ML:96]: Woman is, "through her inexhaustible aptitude for mimicry—the foundation for the whole staging of the world" [ML:188]. Women masquerade12 as the masculine model of ideal femininity, living within an "alienated or false version of femininity" based on "her awareness of man's desire for her to be his other" and her experience of desire not as a desiring subject, but as the object of men's desire [TS:220]. Irigaray writes that masculine desire is "the law that orders society", and that men's needs and desires are valorized and become the ordering force within social relations

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11Irigaray does not offer a compelling analysis of the causal mechanisms behind women's status as other, but she does theorize about the means to overcoming this situation and create relations of equality between men and women.
12 Catherine Porter, translator of This Sex Which is Not One, defines the masquerade as "an alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman's awareness of the man's desire to be his other." Further, she suggests that "the masquerade permits woman to experience desire not in her own right but as the man's desire situates her" [TS:220]. In keeping with the terminology I have chosen to use, Porter's use of the term 'femininity' may be misleading: the masquerade is the female's mimicry of the feminine.
[TS:171], while women are utilized, defined, and obliterated in the masculine order. In the masquerade, women experience and embody man’s desire and yet have no access to their own desire: female desire is unspeakable and, even, unknowable within the male-dominated masculine imaginary and symbolic order.

Calling the masquerade “diabolical,” Irigaray states that it is the occasion of the “construction of the same, in which the living [female person] is caught and deadened” [EP:27]. She argues that “femininity is a role, an image, a value imposed on women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself ... by playing on her femininity” [TS:84]. A central assumption of this process of feminization, Irigaray points out, is that women must become feminine (i.e. woman), while men are men from the start: men have only to effect their being-as-men (i.e., be themselves) while women must become normalized (i.e., become feminine), which requires that they enter into the masquerade of femininity [TS:234]. By adopting the traits of femininity, woman becomes a prop for men’s fantasies and a means of fulfilling their desires [TS:25]. Sexual relations, while they may be pleasurable for her, do not reflect her own desire, but rather result from the feminine desire to fulfill man’s ideal. As Irigaray explains, the feminine “does not know what she wants, only that she wants to be “taken” as his “object” when he seeks his own pleasure” [TS:25]. Whatever women’s desire is prior to the masquerade and the coincident social construction of the feminine, Irigaray argues that it is scarcely at all reflected in femininity [TS:30] and is not a healthy state of affairs for women. She asks,
How can I be distinguished from her? Only if I keep on pushing through to the other side, if I'm always beyond, because on this side of the screen of their projections, I can't live. I'm stuck, paralyzed beyond all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. Transfixed, including by their admiration, their praises, what they call their "love" [TS, 17].

In order to fulfill the conditions of femininity, women must repress their aggressive instincts, renounce subjecthood and their sexuality, and embrace passivity and objecthood [TS:41]. The divergence between women's desire and femininity fragments women's experience of themselves, leading to hysteria and even to psychosis [TS:30].

Within the phallogocentric order, the feminine functions as an object of exchange. Reworking Levi-Strauss' understanding of kinship, Irigaray suggests that the exchange of the feminine object between her father and her husband "assures the foundation of the economic, social, and cultural order" [TS:171]. In this exchange, the feminine/woman is valued as the product of man's creative effort, even as she is the repository for all that man does not want to be associated with (above); her natural (female) body/self is therefore treated as an abstraction, and its intrinsic or immanent value is denied, if even acknowledged [TS:175]. Within the system of exchange, all women are alike, the same, identical, because each woman is only and wholly the fabrication and object of man's desires. Irigaray argues that under patriarchy, the masculine is the model for humanity, and has a monopoly on value. The worth (even the existence) of the female is denied, while the feminine is valued. Masculine power forces the female outside/beneath the phallogocentric system, and creates, in her place, the feminine. This move eradicates the difference between the sexes, because what stands for the female is actually man's construction, and the "real" female is absent from (and this absence is the condition of) the phallogocentric social world [TS:74]. This
system of power is totalizing: it is exceedingly difficult to break free of it, because women must analyze their exploitation and domination while living as the feminine within the order the masculine prescribes and creates [TS:81. Irigaray suggests, however, that though the masquerade demanded by patriarchy is totalizing, it does not totally consume women. Even after women have entered the masquerade, been turned into Woman, and function as objects of exchange and use, the female still subsists beneath/outside the social order. Irigaray proposes the strategy of mimicry, “in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within [phallogocentric] discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her” [TS:220].13 I will show below that Irigaray turns to a prediscursive female body and to a specifically female anatomical sexual pleasure to disrupt and destroy the patriarchal order. Despite the subjugation of women in patriarchal society, the female body/self exists outside the feminine and is a powerful challenge to that order [TS:180].

Exchange of the feminine is the foundation of patriarchy, or, as Irigaray names it, “hom(m)o-sexuality,” the economy of the same, of men-amongst-themselves. The exchange of woman as a commodity allows hom(m)o-sexuality to be played out through the bodies of women, and through heterosexuality [TS:171]. Irigaray explains that the economy of the same uses woman and heterosexuality as alibis “for the smooth working of man’s relation with himself, of relations among men” [TS, 172]. The primary exchange of the feminine between men leads, she writes, to “exchanges of

13 It seems to me that mimicry is impossible without a female body which can be accessed through the sexual pleasures of the female (rather than the feminine) body (see Chapter Two, below). Irigaray provides no other means for the female to “come into itself”, as it were, and gain the conceptual distance from the feminine necessary to mimic it, to maintain the appearance of the feminine whilst gathering data about its construction in order to later destroy the phallogocentric system and its definition of the feminine.
other "wealth" among groups of men and exempts men from "being circulated and used as commodities" [TS, 172]. Men are considered to be subjects in the full Enlightenment sense of the word: self-identical, reasonable and rational, members of civil society, economic producers who create and exchange commodities but escape being commodified. Patriarchal social relations are characterized by ownership, capital, and exploitation [TD:14]. They involve "forgetting the body for some spiritual delusion" and environmental threat to the real, forgotten body [TD:14]. Patriarchy means that laws are sexist, written for men-amongst-themselves; a lack of civility between persons, and especially between the sexes, is endemic to social life and arises out of preference for property over relations between people [TD:73].

Irigaray argues that women need legal recognition of the differences between the sexes. Irigaray writes that sexual difference is one of the central issues of our time, in marked contrast with both the liberal feminist valorization of and preoccupation with equality between the sexes and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist wish for equality with men. Irigaray writes that de Beauvoir's ideas entail "a return to the singular, historically masculine subject, and the invalidation of the possibility of a subjectivity other than man's ... a theoretical and practical error, since they imply the negation of an/other (woman) equal in value to the subject ["The Question of the Other"].9]. According to Irigaray, equal rights allow women to become little copies of men: they should not be women's goal. Full equality between the sexes would be genocide, because it would (again) result in the disappearance of the female under the dominant sign of the male. The aim of any strategy of difference should be to recognize the differences between the
Irigaray wants women to be considered different from the masculine subject, because she believes that "sexes or genders are two, without being first or second ... two which are truly different" ["The Question of the Other", 10-11]. The best use of the differences between the sexes rests in codification of positive women's rights designed to guarantee the legal and social recognition of women's sexual specificity and difference from men, as well as to offer women access to civil society and subjection. These positive rights will redress men's social, political, and corporeal power over women, allowing women to establish their own cultural values.

In her more recent works, Irigaray has changed conversational partners. Lacan, Freud, Nietzsche, Habermas, and the Greeks seem to have been replaced by Hegel and Levinas [Joy, forthcoming: 20]. Irigaray has shifted from linguistic and psychoanalytic themes to a preoccupation with ethics, love, rights, and relations between the sexes. Irigaray's goal is to establish relations of mutual respect, love, and Cartesian wonder between men and women. Each person must recognize they are only half the human race, and only one person; they also must recognize the unknowability and wonder of the other. She shifts from classical texts and examinations of ontology and metaphysics to a "utopian reimagining anchored firmly in a practical assessment of the politics of feminist action" [Jones, 1995:47]. Further, Irigaray seems to have become increasingly pragmatic over the course of her writing: as she re-envisions women's relationship to the Divine—and re-imagines the Divine itself—she uses pragmatic judgments of what women need as her principal evaluative criteria [Jones, 1995:37]. Increasing concern about women's practical situation is reflected in a spate of practically-focused works...
which suggest real, practicable changes in political and social structures
designed to end or meliorate women's oppression [see JTN, TD, ESD, and IL].
Chapter Two  
Irigaray and the Female Body

Either ignored, or embroiled in accusations of essentialism (whether biological or psychic), interpretations of Irigaray's treatment of the body have largely been absent from Irigaray studies. Despite the reluctance of many of her interpreters to address the literal elements in her body-related thought, Irigaray's works hold ample textual evidence to support a literal reading of her discussion of the body as well as the more common metaphorical or metonymic interpretation. I would like to suggest that a literal reading of Irigaray's discussion of the body is appropriate and legitimate: the texts clearly show that Irigaray is (also) writing about the real, physical female body. While some might suggest that a literal reading is disingenuous, overly simplistic, or wrongheaded, I believe that a purely metaphorical interpretation misses out on a number of important aspects of Irigaray's thought. She prompts a reader to ask a number of difficult, though perhaps crassly obvious, questions: is the body prior to language? Is sex? How are sex and the body related? And is the female body as natural a fact as Irigaray presumes it to be? While not without its difficulties, her view of the body presents new elements for consideration by her interpreters. It is therefore worthwhile making a return to the texts and reading them while asking, what if Irigaray is writing literally? What does she have to say about the body? What is new, what has been occluded by the focus on essence and the figurative readings?

More specifically, then, in certain places where Irigaray has normally been taken to be speaking figuratively, there is also a plausible interpretation which suggests she is writing literally about the body. The "two lips" of This
Sex Which is Not One are often said to be figurative, for example, but they also quite clearly contain literal elements. In addition, I would like to suggest that the body—the corporeal, the anatomical, and the sexual—is a thread running through many of her other works. Following Jane Gallop, who suggests that Irigaray maintains a "naturalistic belief in a real, unmediated body available outside the symbolic order" [Gallop, 1988:30], I argue that Irigaray believes that the female body, along with a "real" female self, is outside the realm of language. The female body/self is prediscursive, unmediated by language; it is outside the symbolic order. There is, therefore, a real, natural, unconceptualized body available to women in their fight for subjecthood and civil recognition. Contrary to the heavy majority of her postmodern interpreters, I believe that for Irigaray, the precultural, presocial female body serves as the foundation of women's selves, their subjectivity, and their place in the world: the sexually-specific female body/self is a resource, accessed through sexuality, which allows escape from male-created and male-dominated social structures. Specifically, it is the sexual pleasures of the female body (located outside culture) which contain the potential for destruction of the masculine social order. Further, I would like to argue that the prediscursive female body acts as a resource and home for Irigaray's female person in her attempt to destroy the hom(m)o-sexual culture of the same. The body grounds Irigaray's attempt to create a culturally-recognized feminine difference and specificity: female bodily pleasures are the foundation of women's quest to become subjects, to create a language, sociality, and a culture of their own, and to engage in relations of equality with men.
To readers (like myself) 'raised' within the Anglo-American feminist tradition, Irigaray's comments on the female body present many conceptual difficulties and interpretive problems. I would suggest that it can be very difficult to leave aside one's assumptions about gender, sex, the body, and essentialism while reading Irigaray, even though it is necessary to do so to gain an accurate understanding of her views. Anglo-American feminists may view Irigaray as splitting the body into the two entities of the "real," natural, and/or material female body and its constructed cultural representation(s), although it is not clear to me that she does so. It is also easy to read her while assuming the universality of the conceptual distinction between sex and gender, given the conceptual split between sex and gender often taken for granted in North American and British feminist theory (particularly that of the radical and the postmodern persuasions). I believe that reading Irigaray without 'bracketing off' this taken-for-granted conceptual distinction, however, imposes upon Irigaray--and reads her through--a bifurcation of the natural and the social which may not be present in her texts. While Irigaray does posit a natural, sexually specific female body, I think that the sexual and the natural function as the means of access to a female self which is similarly outside of language and culture. Rather than the female body existing as "sex" and as the "natural" outside of a socially constructed feminine gender, I believe that in Irigaray, the body is the means of access to--and perhaps the creative force behind--the female self. Irigaray is not always clear on this point, but I believe that her focus on women's sexual pleasure shows that the body is available and accessible as the means of access to the entire female, to the many untamed and unthought possibilities outside the phallogocentric signifying order. Irigaray confounds the dichotomy of sex and gender, natural
and cultural: while, for example, the feminine is pure social construction, it has effects on the way (a) Woman lives her body. Similarly, there is a pre- or non-discursive female social self that is linked to, or even accessed through, the sexually-specific female body (and, particularly, through that body's sexuality). For Irigaray, then, the 'social' is composed of both constructed and natural elements, while the 'natural' has both physical and social manifestations. Constructing a dichotomy between natural sex and constructed gender is therefore not an accurate framework for thinking the body in Irigaray, as it is neither an appropriate nor adequately powerful conceptual tool for analysis of Irigaray's view of the body or the female self.

Finally, it is very easy to indulge in the recent Anglo-American Feminist suspicion of essentialism when reading Irigaray. The preoccupation with essence will be discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis, but it should be noted for now that the preoccupation with essentialism is a largely Anglo-American feminist concern. It may arise in response to the accusations of racism and classism leveled against the American feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, when the movement was largely preoccupied with the concerns of white, middle-class, and heterosexual women. Attention to the differences between women was thought to ameliorate the rather unitary and monolithic understandings of that era of feminism. Anglo-American interpreters must understand, however, that Irigaray writes from a tradition which is not as concerned with questions of difference, essence, or universalism [Delphy, 1995, Schor, 1995 and Scott, 1995]. To interpret her as though she is interested in them is inaccurate; to fault her for not being interested in them may place the interpreter's agenda before an accurate interpretation of Irigaray's ideas. For my own part, I believe that there are
more interesting ways of thinking about the body (and difference, universalism, and the effects of sex on the self) than those allowed by the simplistic and often viscous debate of essence v. construction. Leaving Irigaray's female body/self in its currently under-theorized state leaves us with an incomplete understanding of Irigaray's philosophy, because the body is a central theme in her works. The preoccupation with the question of essence in Irigaray's work has obscured more interesting issues: questions about her use of the female body, about materiality, matter, and place, and about the relationship between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the physical have not been as fully explored as one would hope. Nevertheless, a number of important and intriguing issues are raised by Irigaray's treatment of the body, to which we now turn.

The human female body can be found throughout Irigaray's *oeuvre*. Her work is full of reference to it: not only the obvious anatomical references to the clitoris, the vagina, the vulva and the labia, the uterus, and the breasts, but also to the biological entities of blood, lymph, the placenta and the fetus, milk, the hymen, tears, menstruation, birth, menopause, feces, taste, skin, touch, hormones, and genealogy. This evidence of the female body is found throughout her books. I believe that a literal interpretation of these references is, at the very least, plausible, and is supported in a close and careful reading of her texts. It is important to note, however, that Irigaray denies that she is making a "regressive retreat to the anatomical, or to the concept of 'nature'" for its own sake [Whitford, 1991: 97]. Rather, her recourse to the body is directed toward breaking out of the phallogocentric representations, systems,

\[14\] See, for example, Kirby [1991], Fuss [1989] and Grosz [1994a, 1995a, 1995c].
and discourses which refuse to recognize women as an/other subject—that is, as other to the masculine. She uses the anatomical in order to allow women to invent themselves as subjects "autonomous and different" from the masculine ["The Question of the Other";12].

The most famous quote in which Irigaray discusses the body has to be the "two lips" citation from This Sex Which is Not One. The quote reads:

... a woman's autoeroticism is very different from a man's. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language ... and this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman touches herself all the time, and moreover, no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact [TS, 23-4].

The literal anatomical reference to the female genitalia is clear. This citation supplies very little justification for a figurative reading. Admittedly, metaphor arises in the next line, which reads, "[t]hus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other" [TS:24]; here Irigaray has moved to the figurative, and may be alluding to the duality of the masculine-defined "woman" and the natural or unseen female. Nevertheless, in the next line (found in the next paragraph), she moves back to the biological, writing: "[t]his autoeroticism is interrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis" [TS:24]. The reference to the body in this passage is undeniably clear.

The presence of the biological is again noted later on: another widely-cited paragraph reads,

[...]indeed, the woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure.
Among other caresses ... Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures ... But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere ... the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined--in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness [TS, 28].

The anatomical and sexual specificity of the citation cannot be doubted: in discussing the body, its pleasures, and common understandings of female sexual pleasure, Irigaray is writing literally. Claims of exclusive figurativity, or of mimicry of the masculine voice, are unfounded here, as they are when Irigaray comments that "if woman takes pleasure precisely from this incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over and over again, indefinitely, by itself, that pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism" [TS:26]. There can be little question that Irigaray is discussing the female body in these passages.

Literal references to the body is not to be found only in "This Sex Which is Not One". In "Frenchwomen, Stop Trying", Irigaray writes that just because a woman has orgasms does not mean that she "takes pleasure in her pleasure" [TS, 99]; in Speculum of the Other Woman, she discusses Freud's ignorance of "the pleasure gained from touching the lips and vulva" [S:29]. Moving away from literal anatomical references, Irigaray suggests in Je, Tu, Nous that sexual difference is a material fact of social life which must be respected, that men and women are "sexuate" creatures [JTN:84] and that "the question of sexed identity is one of the most important of our time" [JTN:15]. Finally, references to contraception and abortion--control of the biological--as the foundation of women's entry into civil society are found in Thinking the Difference, along with women's special relationship to nature
and the cosmic stemming from pregnancy, menopause, and hormones [TD:26]. In each example, the evidence for taking a figurative interpretation of the discussion of the body is not immediately apparent. Irigaray writes about the female body in all its anatomic and corporeal specificity.

Noting again that the distinction between natural-sex and constructed-gender does not hold well in Irigaray, we turn to her discussion of the feminine body. This discussion explains a great deal about Irigaray's understanding of the feminine and the female; it also challenges current understandings of nature and constructed artifice, and complicates the body's placement within this dichotomy. Irigaray's view of the feminine woman is a melange of constructivism and naturalism. The social representation of woman is pliable and plastic, changing historically; the feminine self is the result of the masquerade (above). The feminine woman embodies those characteristics which define and constitute the masculine's construction of the ideal woman: as Irigaray describes it, the feminine has "only one desire, that of being as much as possible like man's eternal object of desire" [S:32]. She finds herself with a body that is both eroticized and hated, "called to a double movement of exhibition and chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject'" [TS:25]. But far from being pure image and all construction, the feminine also has a body. A body that is, according to Freud and psychoanalysis in general, "mutilated, amputated, humiliated ... because of being a woman" and coincidentally lacking a penis [S:113]. A body purportedly filled with passive instincts which are reflected in feminine passivity during intercourse; a body shaped and lived in accordance with masculine standards of desirability, attractiveness, and reproductive and/or sexual utility [S:114-5]. Irigaray notes that "we may question whether woman
has a choice of being or not being vain about her body if she is to correspond to the "femininity' expected of her" [S:114, emphasis original]; further, she demands, "[d]oes not her sexual 'usefulness' depend on her being concerned about the qualities or 'properties' of her body?" [S:114]. She concludes that "the 'physical vanity' of women, the 'fetishization' of her body ... are mandatory if she is to be a desirable 'object' and if he is to want to possess her" [S:114]. Finally, Irigaray notes that sexual desire in the feminine is "above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own" [TS:25]. The dichotomies between sex and gender, and natural and constructed, fail here: the construction of the feminine also brings with it a body with its specific forms of desire, a constructed natural body which is lived in accordance with the script of the social and is constructed according to masculine standards.

The feminine is not Irigaray's entire story, however: it is neither monolithic nor inescapable. Resistance to femininity is possible, because there must be some place outside the patriarchal order from which women can speak in order for Irigaray to be able to articulate her challenge to masculine power and social structures and to voice her demand for positive difference-based rights.15 Women are not entirely subsumed in the feminine. Irigaray suggests that "there will always be some part of "woman" which resists masculine imprinting and socialization ... a woman will never be a woman solely in masculine terms, never be solely and permanently annihilated in the masculine order" [ML:78]. Even though woman is a plastic concept which

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15Shoshana Felman [1975] raises the question of the position from which Irigaray speaks, asking "Is she speaking as woman, or in the place of the (silent) woman, for the woman, in the name of the woman?" Judith Butler approaches this question, too, in Bodies that Matter [1993], asking about Irigaray's relationship to the philosophical tradition she deconstructs, particularly to the "voice of the father". The question of Irigaray's relationship to the order she dissects is well worth exploring, but is beyond the province of this paper.
takes the shape of whatever is proposed or imposed on her, "under all those/her binds, she sub-sists" [ML:118]. Even after the masquerade in which the female body becomes a feminine, value-bearing object of exchange, a "standardized sign," an "exchangeable signifier," and a "likeness with reference to an authoritative model," the female body still exists underneath the socially valued and exchangeable body of femininity [TS:180]. Underneath and/or outside the cultural construction of femininity, the sexually-specific female body serves as foundation for women, and for an idea of womanhood perhaps best thought of as uncorrupted by the social conventions of patriarchal power. The masquerade of the feminine ideal therefore is not totalizing. It is necessarily incomplete—indeed, its full completion is impossible, for it would entail the destruction of the female subject and would result in the feminine serving always, only, and entirely as man's thing, object, or mirror.

The female body grants women resistance to femininity, even as the feminine body is constructed by the masculine. Indeed, it is arguably the female body which defines women *qua* women: Irigaray writes, "your/my body doesn't acquire it's sex through an operation. Through the action of some power, function, or organ. Without any intervention, or special manipulation, you are a woman already ... we are women from the start" [TS:211]. For Irigaray, the female body is women's lone resource for challenge to the masculine order and its definitions of the feminine. Irigaray's female body is prediscursive: it is located outside of language in the precultural realm of the natural and/or biological. It maintains its integrity in the face of socially and linguistically-constructed ideals of femininity; largely untouched by the social, the female body can disrupt, challenge, even destroy the constructed,
univocal economy of masculinity (and femininity along with it). Finally, the female body challenges masculine ideas of truth, in that "our body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it" [TS:214]. I would suggest that Irigaray advocates a specifically female (relationship to) epistemology based on female sexual specificity, a controversial advocacy which certainly does not appear in the works of the majority of Irigaray's North American interpreters.

Female sexual pleasure provides a means of access to the natural female body and is the site of challenge to femininity. It threatens to disrupt the "very foundation of our social and moral order" [TS:165]. Irigaray writes that even though women's sexual desire has been buried since the time of the Greeks, it still exists in the female body, although forgotten [TS:26]. Women's "frigidity," she replies to Freud, is actually a symptom. It tells us that "women's pleasure, the representation that can be made of it and that she can have of it are—once again—too suppressed, too repressed, obscured, or denied, for her to be anything but "frigid" [S:97]. Whatever women's sexual pleasure may be, its existence as sexual pleasure is denied by masculine ideals of sexuality which suggest, instead, that feminine sexuality rests in taking pleasure in man's desire for her [TS:157].

Female sexual pleasure exists outside the phallogocentric social order. According to Irigaray, it is a radical departure from the phallocentric understanding of sexuality (e.g., as solely genital and orgasm-directed). Instead, the sexuality of the female body is plural, diverse, multiple, complex, and subtle; diffuse, silent, and multiple, it is a non-genital or not solely genital geography of pleasure-sites [TS:27-30]. Female erogenous zones
include far more than the vagina or the clitoris; Irigaray suggests that women's sexual multiplicity cannot be subsumed into one generic or specific description [S:233]. Irigaray would like to see women reclaim their bodies. From the feminine's awareness of the body as constitutive of her sexual usefulness [S:115], Irigaray suggests that women should "become the spirit or soul of the body ... open out [the] female body, give it forms, words, knowledge of itself, a cosmic and social equilibrium" [S:116]. But, she warns, redeeming the female is not as simple as believing in a soul that hides and protects an accessible female "secret self". The means of access to the female is not easy, as "the path she follows to bring together and revive this wide, wild, unwary space that she is will be more savage and cruel than if she could simply fall back right now upon a "soul" that was a kind of cocoon, swathing the most secret self" [S:198]. It seems that the female self is located in process, or perhaps that this self is more accurately described as a process than an event or a pre-existing entity.

Perhaps the most accurate description of this painful and difficult path—as well as of Irigaray's view of female sexuality and the means to reclaiming or coming to know the body—would be "openness." Openness to pleasure, to touch, to the other; openness to jouissance, the enjoyment/orgasm linked to loss of control and a location outside of rationality. Openness to the loss of the boundaries of the self, to contiguity, touch, nearness, presence, the immediate, and to contact [Gallop, 1982:30]. Openness to

[s]wooning, fainting, bones and flesh torn apart with a crack that covers up the sound of all words of remission. Fire and ice freeze and singe without respite, and nothing lies between their endless, alternating intemperance [where] [e]verything is relentlessly immediate. [S:197].
In this place, in this pleasure without reason, sense, or words, the pre-discursive body/self is found underneath all the obsequious wrappings and trappings of femininity. And in finding it, Irigaray writes, women will also find the strength to mount an interrogation of the logos which has made the feminine [S:142]. Abandoning "reasonable words," women will rack phallogocentrism with "radical convulsions," name "those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her", insist on the value of the "blanks in discourse," "overthrow syntax" and, finally, "[m]ake it impossible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why" [S:142]. Irigaray's women will challenge rationality and reason, and will reveal the particularity of the so-called universal.

According to Irigaray, embracing female sexuality will also have other effects. First, it will allow those creatures comprising the category of Woman to become women, in all the diversity that category implies, rather than being forced into the restrictive garments of femininity. Second, relations of friendship and alliance will occur among women once they are no longer commodities in competition with one another for men's attentions. Third, women's voicing of their sexuality will challenge and eventually destroy masculine-dominated language and power structures. Women will be revealed as truly other to men, shattering the consensual delusion that all women are feminine and "woman". In openly and unashamedly voicing their female sexuality, women will put the "phallocracy that reins ... unblushingly on display", opening the possibility of a different sexual economy [TS:203].

In reading Irigaray's descriptions of the female body, I think it is important to remember that she is writing the body for a specific purpose. I do
not believe that she purposely sets out to annoy Anglo-American equal-rights feminists by focusing on difference, or that she purposely tries to irritate postmodern feminists by both creating a physically-grounded female subject and taking a universalistic and naturalist stance. Instead, I believe that she writes with the practical purpose of recognizing sexual difference so that there can be a sexual relation of equality and respect between the sexes, and a new ethics based on sexual difference. Irigaray’s desire for both sexes to be at home in the world, and for the sexes to participate in relations of love, respect, and understanding is marked and clear in her more recent works, particularly in *love to you*. As she explains in “The Question of the Other”,

we must move on to the model of the two, a two which is not a replication of the same, nor one large and the other small, but made up of two which are truly different. The paradigm of the two lies in sexual difference. Why there? Because it is there that two subjects exist who should not be placed in a hierarchical relationship, and because these two subjects share the common goal of preserving the human species and developing its culture, while granting respect to their differences [“The Question of the Other”]:11-2 emphasis added].

Irigaray argues that the feminine must be transcended if there is to be a valid female identity: if non-hierarchical relationships between men and women are to be possible, both men and women must become aware of sexual difference [EP:3]. This awareness will prevent women from being viewed as subordinate to destiny and without access to mind, consciousness of self, or self, and in special relationship with death and violence and it also prevents man from being shut up in a consciousness of self and for self that is perpetually in search of meaning and ever-dependent on the feminine [ESD:126]. Recognition of sexual difference will, she explains, protect women from the characteristics of femininity: a) reproductive and home-related duties, b) status as keeper of man’s desire and mind, c) a totally other-oriented
sexuality which is alien to female desire, and d) status as the incarnation of man's (varied) fantasies [ESD:164]. In a condition of sexual difference, sexually differentiated human beings will be free to construct new modes of interacting with and relating to one another.

Irigaray invokes neither an isolated, unsociable body, nor a discursive and phantasmal one. Instead, she turns to the natural (prediscursive) human body as a means toward sociality and the establishment of a civil society which includes women. The body, then, is a means of securing equality in difference for the sexes, and of creating social relations between sexually differentiated subjects. The inter-relatedness of the embodied self and the embodied other is thought to overcome the distinction between body and instrument, because the body, when used as an instrument, is nevertheless still affected as a body by that use. This means that the self and the other can no longer be seen as "distinct and rival universes," but must rather be understood as inter-related, in that they constantly affect one another [EP-58]. The relation is not one in which difference is lost, however: Irigaray writes "but I take pleasure and you take pleasure in those differences, in this difference, as an overabundance of riches. Experiencing you, experiencing me, espousing you, espousing me, we are more than one. And two" [EP-59]. Careful to note that each person's body remains their own, Irigaray argues that relations of sexual difference will bring new relationships of openness between men and women. The goal is to establish an ethics of the passions which includes loving relationships between two subjects of different sexes who possess two different kinds of sexually-differentiated bodies [EP-12].
Recognition of sexual difference allows fecundity: birth, regeneration, and "the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language" [EP:5]. It will allow a condition of wonder between the sexes in which the other, male or female, should surprise us again and again, appear to us as new, very different from what we knew or what we thought he or she should be ... we would stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. Who art thou? ... Before and after appropriation, there is wonder ... the beginning of a new story [ESD:74, original emphasis].

Sensual pleasure between men and women can challenge and change conceptions of the world [ESD:185]. I believe that a statement of Irigaray's ultimate goal for love and relationships between the sexes can be found in the following passage from *Elemental Passions*:

love can be the motor of becoming, allowing both the one and the other to grow. For such a love, each must keep their body autonomous. The one should not be the source of the other, nor the other of the one. Two lives should embrace and fertilize each other, without each being a fixed goal for the other [EP:27].

In Irigaray, then, the female body is present in all its biological and anatomical specificity. Further, that female body is the source of women's articulated challenge to the phallogocentric economy, particularly to the construction of the feminine. The body is the foundation of sexual difference; it is also the base of the new social order, one based in acknowledgment of and respect for sexual difference. One important implication of Irigaray's use of the body is that the conceptual divisions between sex and gender, natural and social, are at best confused and at worst confounded by a) her conflation of what are normally understood within Anglo-American feminism as "sex" and "gender", and b) by the slippage she introduces between the concepts of the "natural" and the "social".
We turn now to a discussion of Irigaray's views of Freud and Lacan, with focus on the body. We will see that Irigaray's views of their treatment of the female body both explain, and raise new questions about, her view of the body. Her remarks on their treatment of the female body also shed light on her relations with both thinkers. I think that Irigaray rejects far less of Freud than she rejects of Lacan, and in the end maintains a position more closely related to Freud's than to Lacan's.

Irigaray takes Freud to task for the phallogocentric elements of his thought. She is critical of Freud's tendency to use phylogensis to legitimate and make necessary the social and psychic relations he describes [S:93]. According to Freud, she writes, the anatomical specificity of the body determines the sexual specificity of the psyche: the body's anatomy imposes itself upon the psyche, and therefore upon the person's behavior [S:15]. Perhaps the most telling examples of Freud's use of this technique can be found in his work on feminine sexuality, particularly in discussing the effects of the little girl's realization that she has been castrated [as discussed in Irigaray's "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry" and "The Power of Discourse"]. Freud believes the feminine to have its origin in its anatomy: specifically, in its lack of, and jealousy for, a penis. Irigaray writes that Freud views the task of "becoming woman" as mainly concerned with "recognizing and accepting her atrophied member" [S:22]. For example, according to Irigaray, Freud suggests that "in the name of that anatomical destiny, women are seen as less favored by nature" [TS:71], and that girls "fall victim to 'envy for the penis', which will have ineradicable traces on their development and formation of their character" [S:47]. Further, she notes that Freud refers time
and again to woman's "biological destiny" and "maternal destiny," while he does not use those terms in reference to men or male sexuality. She suggests that the reference to the biological in Freud is an attempt to reduce maternal omnipotence by making it subject to "destiny", as well as a means of covering over the phallocentric system of relations governing sexual relations between men and women [S:32].

Irigaray admits that Freud describes an actual state of affairs (that is, the lot of the feminine, and the way woman is perceived within the phallogocentric economy) but she criticizes him for failing to account for the historical origins of that state [TS:70]. Freud's naturalistic recourse to the biological is taken by Irigaray as representative of the phallocentric system's justification for women's absent position, and for the dominance of the feminine over the female. Freud's idea that "biology is destiny" makes recourse to the natural in order to justify contingent forms of social organization—for according to the naturalistic justification, if things are "natural," they cannot be otherwise, and they are often therefore good. Irigaray's critique of Freud's reliance on the biological may seem to suggest that she wishes to dispense with it altogether: that is, to escape from the constraints of biology and sexuality which Freud describes. This is not the case. As discussed above, she convincingly discusses the possibility of the female sex having its own sexual specificity, and she wants women's sexual evolution to be explained with reference to women, rather than with recourse to masculine models [TS:69]. This leads me to believe that Irigaray follows Freud in believing that, to some extent, anatomy is important; but I believe that Irigaray would be more likely to phrase it, "anatomy gives potentiality", avoiding determinism while insisting upon the body's
importance to the self. While it may at first seem that Irigaray uses Freud's naturalism to support her view of the female body, the female self, and women's role in civil society, I would argue that she twists Freud (and naturalism) around, deploying them to different ends, and so her ideas have different effects than Freud's.

I think that, for Irigaray, the body's anatomical and sexual specificity determines, or at least brings along with it, the specificity of the female psyche (in contrast to Freud, for whom anatomy determines what Irigaray would term the feminine psyche). For Irigaray, the body's physical form is an integral and formative part of the female psyche and the sense of personal identity issuing from that psyche. Logically, it cannot be otherwise. The female is prediscursive and asocial due to its splitting off from the feminine at a young age (before puberty) as the girl goes through the various complexes and stages delineated by Freud in the process of "feminization". The female psyche cannot be formed within or by the social, because that is the locus of the feminine and the logic of the same and will not support any difference. The female psyche must therefore be what it is due in large part to the anatomic specificity of the female body. The psyche is formed in accordance with the body's form, and so the female has a "body/self": a body that brings along with it, and supports, a sexually-specific female self. Irigaray does not address questions about the similarity of women's bodies and the assumed

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16Irigaray does not discuss the question of the psychic structure of the female. It would seem that it must not have a super-ego, because the female does not go through the Oedipus complex. It is necessary to have a super-ego to have an unconscious, because there must be something to repress the drives and install both a conscience and the unconscious as repository of the repressed; as the female lacks a super-ego, it also to lack an unconscious. It is reasonable to suggest that the female has an ego which is created and/or formed from the female body. There are problems when Irigaray's later works are considered here, however: how can women be active civil subjects with sexually-specific rights, as in Thinking the Difference and Je, Tu, Nous, if they lack those psychic structures which allow for sociality and co-operation?
diversity of female selves, but we must assume that while biology engenders the psyche, the relationship is not wholly deterministic: that is, if all females are not to be identical, something else must play on the psyche to give each female person her own individual distinctiveness.

Beginning her discussion of Lacan in 'Cosi Fan Tutti' in *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray again emphasizes that psychoanalysis accurately describes the logic of both the feminine and 'truth'. She writes that, in Lacan, the feminine is the mainstay of the phallogocentric system of representation and (e)valuation, along with "property, production, order, form, unity, visibility … and erection" [86]. While she believes that Freud reveals and reproduces the Western tradition, she bitingly suggests that Lacan's focus on discourse reveals the "truth of the truth" of that tradition, because in his works, "anatomy is no longer able to serve, to however limited an extent, as the proof-alibi for the real difference between the sexes" [87] in, perhaps, the way she believes it functions. Instead, Lacan discusses the sexes as they appear within language, which, Irigaray reminds us, has been a masculine construction for "centuries" [87]. Within the phallocentric discursive structure, everything alive—including the female body—is transformed, scarred, and enjoyed only once it has been chopped up, dressed, disguised, and mortified in man's fantasies [88]; there is no way out of language, for Lacan flatly denies the existence of a prediscursive reality [88].

For Lacan, she writes, women are not biological creatures. Their "sexualized being is not channeled through the body," but is rather the result of a purely logical and disembodied requirement; it is transcendent language's "necessity" to become incarnate and embodied which creates women and allows them to exist [89]. Irigaray writes that, for Lacan, "woman does not
exist, but language exists. Woman does not exist owing to the fact that language—a language—rules as master” [89]. But even though woman does not exist for Lacan, he has ideas about women’s bodies and sexual pleasure. Irigaray suggests that the "not-all" of woman, the woman who exists purely in language and in sexualized discourse (in other words, the feminine) also serves as the repository for the remainders created by the operation of language—specifically, for the body. But not a sexually-specific body, no, not one with sexual organs or sexual pleasures: the feminine represents the general, non-sexually-specific materiality of the body. In terms of sexuality, Lacan believes that women have nothing to say on the topic of feminine sexual pleasure, as it is unknowable to them (and knowable only to him and to men in general) [87-90]. Lacan therefore turns to the Bernini statue of St. Theresa for his model of "unknowable" feminine pleasure [91]. Irigaray replies that it is the pleasures of the female which are as yet unknown; once known, she is confident that they will disrupt Lacan’s linguistic economy of the same.

The female body is almost entirely absent in Lacan’s thought. When it does appear, Irigaray notes that it is "gratuitous, accidental, unforeseen, "supplementary to the essential"" [96]. It is unexpected and dangerous, because it threatens as a sort of prediscursive reality to disrupt the order of language [89]. She notes that within Lacan’s logic, women cannot say or express anything and cannot be heard: after all, if they could, "it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own" [90]. Irigaray argues that this other logic, capable of upsetting the hom(m)o-sexual, rests in the arational or irrational pleasures of the female body. She acknowledges the prediscursive female body, whose very possibility of
existing Lacan dismisses, and in doing so, she challenges Lacan's phallogocentric signifying order. Again, Irigaray seems to conceptualize the female body as exterior to language and signification, accessible only through the pleasures of the flesh: the female self seems to be a natural entity formed in accordance with the anatomical characteristics of the female body outside the socio-linguistic order.

Irigaray's female body is, then, pre- or non-discursive: it—along with the rest of the female—is largely untouched by language and the social. This natural status allows it to disrupt masculine structures of language and power. Resting outside of culture, the mute natural facticity of the female body/self—including its disruptive potential—serves as an Archimedean point for Irigaray's critique of the prevailing cultural order. I find her view, however, to be by no means uncontroversial. It is not clear to me that the body is available as such a critical foundation, nor is it to be easily accepted that the female body, self, and psyche exist prior to language. I also find Irigaray's conflation of the female with the prediscursive to be problematic: the female body's—and the female self's—status as natural should not simply be assumed.

Irigaray's turn to both a prediscursive body and an unproblematic tie between the female body, the female sex, and the female gender is not without its problems. I would like to suggest that Irigaray's faith in the prediscursive, prelinguistic status of the body may not be justified, particularly with reference to female sexual pleasure. While Irigaray's view of female pleasure is based on a female body which is external to discourse, it is more likely that our experience of our bodies (including human sexuality and
sexual pleasure) may follow cultural scripts, or at least be influenced by cultural understandings of sexuality, pleasure, taboo, and the abject. The experience of sexual or physical pleasure may be, as Irigaray suggests, the result of a direct and unmediated relationship with the body; but what we find physically and/or sexually pleasure may be lived in accordance with certain social discourses on, and norms of, pleasure which are present in our minds. It is, to my mind, unreasonable to believe that experiences of physical or sexual pleasure are unaffected by language or social understandings of that experience. Sexual pleasure may be more completely understood if we at least admit the entrance of the effects of language and cultural understandings, rather than relying only on the sensations of the body. For Irigaray's project to be successful, the body must be immune to language and its effects on the social world; she must also deny the existence of those social discourses on pleasure which live in the mind, yet she does so at the risk of seriously misreading the nature of sexual pleasure. It seems uncontroversial to assert that the mind has some part in the pleasures of the body. But even as Irigaray seems to admit of this interplay, remarking that "we are children of the flesh, but also of the word, nature but also culture", she implicitly ties this interplay to the universalizing totality of phallogocentrism and seems to suggest that the cultural realm, even when tempered by biology, remains the corrupt, singular universe of the same ["The Question of the Other":11]. I would like to hypothesize that Irigaray may in fact recognize that social discourses about pleasure, prohibition, the body, and sexuality contribute in some way to what is experienced as the physical pleasure of the body, and that bodily pleasure may not be as isolated from the social sphere as she would hope it to be. But as Irigaray also believes that the cultural world is based on phallocentric and
patriarchal understandings, she views the scripts about sexual pleasure which we have in our heads as only another manifestation of the hom(m)o-sexual economy's construction of femininity in accordance with man's desires. Irigaray's powerful suspicion of the cultural realm results in a turn to the pre-cultural body which is thought to be safe from phallogocentric interpretations.

Irigaray's thought about the body contains both constructivist and naturalist elements: she understands the feminine--both self and body--to be a social construction, while the female body-self is understood as prediscursive and acultural. Purely naturalistic and purely constructivist accounts of the body are incomplete, however, and I would like to suggest that the body may not be the ground of and for the category of "sex" in the way that Irigaray suggests. Further, in reviewing Irigaray's discussion of the feminine, I am led to think that the body has more independence from the social than Irigaray would grant it. Instead, the body is more accurately conceptualized as influenced by a network of social, political, cultural, geographical, historical, and biological factors rather than as a mute natural entity upon which most anything can be inscribed. Thinking of the ostensibly biological category of "the female sex" as a social category, as well as (or instead of) a natural category is worthwhile: it reveals that sex may be a social and constructed category, constructed by the social representations which state that it is natural and prediscursive [see Butler, 1990]. Sexual difference may not be the simple prediscursive natural fact which Irigaray seems to suggest it is. Instead, sexually specific bodies can be thought of as social constructions which, in their seeming naturalness, ground understandings of gender. Put another way, the natural and prediscursive sex of the body may in fact be the effect of
the social norms of gender. The process of the construction of gender, described as performative or self-constituting, is also the process by which sex comes to be understood as outside the influence of both language and culture. Sex and gender, then, might be constructed through the performance of those elements said to be their effects [Butler, 1990:25]. A focus on the social construction of sex and the body, however, can come close to ignoring the role of the biological and the natural, placing far too great an emphasis on the social while eliding the effects of women's sexually-specific embodied and corporeal experience. Constructivism, to my mind, also relies too heavily on the conceptual distinction between sex and gender, even as it challenges the validity of that distinction. Irigaray's sensible comment on the role of menstruation, maternity, or menopause in women's lives refers to actual, physical events in and conditions of women's lives. This focus should be maintained even as the effects of the social on the body are discussed. Noting the effects of women's embodiment in female bodies is not the same as suggesting that biology is the definitive factor controlling women's lives; ignoring or eliding the body is to leave aside a substantial part of what it means to be a woman.

Maintaining the focus on the body for a while longer, I would like to again emphasize that constructing a dichotomy between natural sex and constructed gender is not an accurate framework for thinking the body in Irigaray. Further, I would suggest that this dichotomy is neither an appropriate nor adequately powerful conceptual tool for a more general analysis of the body, whether the body is understood as prediscursive or as embedded in discourse and/or power relations. The body may neither be
singly prior to language or culture, nor constructed within language and culture. It is worth returning to Iris Marion Young's 'Throwing Like a Girl' [1989], in which she presents a view of the body that recognizes this interplay of social and biological factors, providing contrast to Irigaray's purely constructed feminine and purely natural female. While both thinkers agree that women's bodily comportment results from the social pressures and ideals of femininity, they differ on their understandings of the role of the body: Young suggests that the body is lived only and always within culture, in contrast to Irigaray's suggestion that there is an/other female, accessed through the body, which is capable of disrupting the feminine. Such a dormant, extra-cultural capacity is not present in Young's view.

While denying the existence of a 'feminine essence,' Young (like Irigaray) admits there are sex-specific differences in behavior and experience [Young, 1989:52]. Her definition of femininity is also similar to Irigaray's: "a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves" [52]. But instead of viewing women's struggle as one of escape from femininity and the attainment of subjectivity and civil subjecthood, as Irigaray does, Young believes women's primary struggle is centered on subjectivity and the body. The conflict women experience between being a subject, and yet being treated as an object within the social sphere (that is, between viewing one's body simultaneously as a capacity and as a thing), figures prominently in Young's article [54-81]. According to Young, the female body displays an ambiguous transcendence overlaid with immanence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity in its dealings with the world [58]. Each feature arises out of social
experience and is therefore a constructed, rather than natural, feature of the female bodily experience: as Young notes, "they have their source in neither anatomy or physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine "essence" [but rather in] the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society" [65]. In Young's view, a pre-cultural body is not available to women in their challenge to patriarchal social structures; the body is, rather, completed, understood, and lived as a cultural artifact. It absorbs cultural ideals and expectations, which have powerful effects on the ways women understand their bodies and live their lives. Young's body is, I believe, neither pure construction nor pure biology. This view is opposite to Irigaray's feminine Woman, with her constructed body, and her female women's selves created in accordance with, and accessed through the sexual pleasures of, their natural, pre-cultural bodies.

It is possible that bodies are never purely construction or natural fact, but rather are a meld of the two. Irigaray's acultural, natural body acts as disrupter of the social, but Young argues persuasively that the body, whatever its natural status, is finished, organized, and completed only within culture—a challenge to Irigaray's view. The existence of a pure, natural, pre-cultural, and pre-linguistic female body and self is challenged by Young's phenomenological view of the body as a social and discursive production. If it is a natural entity given its final form in social relations, then the body is best understood a social product and so is not as immediately, or as easily as Irigaray would suggest, available as a source of challenge to the social order. Young's argument accurately reflects the imbrication of the biological and the cultural; I agree with her that any "natural" or biological body available prior to enculturation would be incomplete, unfinished, and asocial, and would be
unsuited for use in a social context. Such a body is a very poor resource for those like Irigaray hoping for drastic social, political, and linguistic change. I would like to suggest that the female body may not be available to Irigaray without always and already having undergone some cultural shaping. It therefore may never be the unknown, unthought gust of wind which Irigaray hopes will bring down the phallogocentric house of cards.

Irigaray’s understanding of the physically-grounded female subject bears two further examinations. First, I have suggested that Irigaray’s female subject is grounded upon the female body. This challenges her status as “postmodern” thinker: her use of the female body reveals a desire for foundation or anchor that is foreign to postmodern analysis. Tying the subject at least in part to the natural facticity of its body also is opposite to the postmodern challenge to modern ideas of the subject, identity, and embodiment (as in Butler’s Gender Trouble [1990] or Linda Singer’s Erotic Welfare [1993] for example). Irigaray’s status as postmodern is not, however, the focus here (as it is below, in Chapter Three). The intent is rather to show that a literal reading of Irigaray’s language of the body brings a number of new questions, new problems, and new understandings of her work. Irigaray’s specifically female take on the age-old philosophical problem of the relationship between the mind, the self, the subject, and the body, for example, quite clearly retains a central place for the physically-grounded subject, as well as promoting respect for sexual difference as the condition of a truly civil society in which women can exist as subjects. Irigaray provides a distinct alternative to those theorists who would prefer to see women as
subjects who happen, secondarily, to be embodied in a biologically female body.

Second, this chapter has argued that Irigaray believes the female subject's sexually specific body must be acknowledged and respected for the female to be considered a subject at all, which seems to show a Kojevean influence in its focus on recognition. Problematically, however, even if women are able challenge the construction of femininity by voicing the truth of the female, their claims to subjectivity and membership in civil society may not be recognized by those in power—and without recognition, neither the female subject nor its claims to subjectivity can exist as a social force. Irigaray assumes that women's sexual specificity will be recognized once it is spoken and known, but the emphasis on recognition allows the possibility that the masculine order may not so easily accept women's far-reaching challenge.
Chapter Three
Reading Irigaray as a Political and Feminist Thinker

This chapter will examine three aspects of Irigaray's work which have particular relevance to political and feminist thought in an attempt to locate Irigaray as both a political and a feminist thinker. Irigaray's concern for the status of the female and her understandings of the body inform her view of politics, of both what can and should rightly be considered "political", and the place and uses of equality and difference. This chapter will focus on her views of politics and of feminism. Specifically, Irigaray's understanding of the uses of equality and difference will be explored, along with her suggestions for practical changes in the legal sphere designed to remedy the oppression she believes women face. This chapter will also explore the question of Irigaray's proper classification with feminist thought, noting her differences from liberal feminism, her affinities with radical feminism, and her relationship with postmodern feminism.

Irigaray has a very practical, action-oriented side to her work which seems often to be left aside by some of her interpreters. It is in her more practical works, oriented toward the "real world", as it were, that Irigaray's questions about and understandings of the political can be found. These books include Thinking the Difference, Je, Tu, Nous, and, to a lesser extent, Elemental Passions, i love to you, and An Ethics of Sexual Difference. In exploring these forceful and clearly-written more practical works, it is important to recall the insights of her more theoretical works like This Sex Which is Not One, Speculum of the Other Woman, and Marine Lover of
Freidrich Nietzsche. The reader must, for example, remember that Irigaray believes that current socio-political arrangements are phallogocentric, masculinist, and patriarchal, and that she believes that society is governed by the relations of "men-amongst-themselves" in which nearly all institutions are organized according to the male economy of the same, and the male law [TD:7]. It is also important to note that, according to Irigaray, female identity is unknown, and women are in a state of cultural and social subjugation [TD:14]. She believes in an innate sexual difference between the sexes: she writes that "women are not, and cannot be the same as, men" [TD:19], and that "women do not obey the same sexual economy as men" [TD:25]. Finally, it's important to recall that she retains some of her Lacanian heritage in her belief that language is never neutral: it always, she suggests, "weighs heavily on the constitution of a female identity and on women's relationships with each other" [TD:27].

Approaching Irigaray's understanding of the political through her practical suggestions, it is clear that her goal is neither absolute equality between the sexes nor equal rights. Instead, she seeks sexually-specific positive women's rights, and legal recognition of sexual difference. Equal rights are, in her view, "for the most part, rights which allow women to slip into men's skin" [TD:79]. These rights are an "opiate": in insisting on the near-equality of men and women, they maintain the status quo in that no changes are made to the hom(m)o-sexual economy of the same. In France, she writes,

the difference between the sexes no longer exists! Apparently we are all equal now. Apparently we all enjoy the same rights; men and women are peers. Obviously we cannot be remarking on the same difference. The reality of hierarchy before equality and the reality of sexual identity in which each person enjoys rights appropriate to each sex are not one
and the same. And denying that men and women are different in the name of some hypothetical social equality is a delusion [TD:viii].

In other words, simple equality is not enough. The current socio-political order is not neutral when it comes to sex, and rights of equality between the sexes do not of themselves create a neutrally-sexed individual, nor do they dispense with sexual difference. Within an equality-based framework, Irigaray argues, the male is taken as standard and norm; women are viewed as odd or inferior men with the inconvenient attributes of periods, pregnancy and child-rearing duties [TD:63].

The neutral, rational, a-sexual public being is a cultural fiction, remarks Irigaray: instead, she believes that humans are always sexed beings. Irigaray demands that sexual difference be recognized as a constituent part of civil identity, in rather glaring contrast with both those liberal feminists informed by classical liberal ideals who insist that rights must not be contingent upon gender, and reform-liberal feminists who would use gender-focused affirmative action programs to redress past imbalances and move toward a gender-blind society. Irigaray explains that her "thought on women's liberation has gone beyond simply a quest for equality between the sexes" [JTN:11], and suggests that the aim of any strategy of equality should be to get difference recognized [JTN:85]. Civil society must be re-shaped to take account of sexual difference; indeed, Irigaray considers respect for sexual difference to be the foundation of a truly civil society. It is also the basis for life, love, and the generation and regeneration of the world [TD:71]. Recognition and valorization of difference is Irigaray's chosen strategy: the denial of difference implicit in most strategies of equality is, in her mind, dangerous in its support for the current order. Now, Irigaray seems to believe that equal-rights focused
feminism wishes to dispose with difference altogether and will admit no
difference between the sexes, but it is not clear that this is always the case: it
seems to me that recognition of sexual differences between men and women
does not preclude meaningful commitments to equality of opportunity or of
result. Irigaray's concern, however, is for female escape from the culture she
defines as misogynist and phallocentric, and for access to a female imaginary
and female culture. Her focus therefore rests with recognizing difference,
rather than with affording women equal rights within the phallogocentric
system.

According to Irigaray, the women's liberation movement must be
focused on difference, not equality. She argues that feminism can have no
issue other than "social and cultural sexualization" designed to end women's
subjugation [TD:14], argues that "men and women are not equal", and admits
that she thinks "it's very problematic or misguided to orient the
development of the women's movement toward demands for equal rights"
[TD:77]. She believes that "all other differences are valued except the one that
defines society: sexual difference" [TD:61]. The possibility of the female's
existence is obscured when equal rights are the goal of the women's
movement: "equal" rights are not and can never be truly egalitarian, due to
their adherence to the logic of patriarchal social structures and the masculine
norm. Indeed, Irigaray argues that if they are to achieve a minimum of
freedom within relations of supposed equality, women have to submit
themselves to the imperatives of a culture that is not their own (and that is
fundamentally oppressive to the female) [TD:77].

Irigaray goes on to suggest that many, if not all, of the problems facing
developed societies today--environmental destruction and resulting illness,
cultural disorder and imbalance, crime, exploitation, and problems like pornography which face women [TD:Ch. 1]—result from the sexual indifference of the hom(m)o-sexual economy of the same. Irigaray believes, perhaps rather naively, that all exploitation is based on sexual difference, and that solutions to these problems will be evident once sexual difference is recognized [JTN:12]. If sexual difference is not recognized, human society will embark upon a course of genocide [JTN:12]. It is clear that for Irigaray there can be no more important action to take than to seek the recognition of sexual difference: she states in several places that "the question of sexed identity is one of the most important of our time". [JTN:15]. Sexual difference can be recognized by allowing women entry into civil society and addressing the political implications of admitting that there are two different sexes, and two imaginary-symbolic structures. The first, and perhaps most difficult, transformation necessary for recognition of sexual difference is for women and men to dispose with the feminine and allow the female to exist in the public realm; this must be followed by both sexes finding value in women as women, rather than as mothers.17 Irigaray is aware of the difficulty of this task: she admits it will require the rethinking and transformation of centuries of socio-cultural values within one's self, as well as within the culture at large. The issue is really, she writes, "whether our civilizations are still prepared to consider sex as pathological, or if they are finally mature enough to give it human cultural status" [JTN:36].

Irigaray believes that changes in legal structures may aid in the social recognition of sexual difference, in that legal structures can help to establish

17A free, independent female person must already exist in order to be recognized, which suggests that Irigaray does not believe this female subject will be created in and through recognition, but rather will be recognized once it comes to exist—again, in contrast to the focus on recognition in the earlier and more theoretical works.
social structures. Specific sexually-differentiated civil rights, written into law, will help make the differences between women and men apparent [JTN:85]. Codification will redress current social pathologies which damage women; it will entail balancing men's social, economic, and physical power over women with the legal entrenchment of women's cultural values and the values of female sexuality [JTN:13] in the hope of replacing men's power over women with relations of difference, and a balance of power between the sexes. Defining women's civil rights will "replace abstract rights appropriate to non-existent natural individuals" with rights specifically suited to female identity [TD:xv]. Women should demand rights—the rights of sexual difference—which are based in women's value as people. These rights should aim to extend human dignity to women. Such dignity is given by the right to recognition as a full human social subject and the right to participate freely and meaningfully in civil society. Irigaray proposes four elements for women's civil rights which are designed to bring women into civil society and allow them human dignity; each is expressed in terms of rights.

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18I find it interesting that Irigaray turns to the law to remedy cultural indifference to sexual difference, when, in one reading, the law might be understood as one of the most powerful institutions legitimating both this indifference and the hom(m)osexual economy. A second reading suggests that Irigaray may believe the law is not affected by power and phallogocentrism, and as such is a neutral instrument which can be used to remedy sexism. If accurate, this would suggest a far less relativistic reading of Irigaray's understanding of power and truth. Such an objectivism about the law would fit well with the alternate view of her use of the body presented above, in that Irigaray then would seem to suggest there may be several elements of the social sphere which escape contamination by the phallogocentrism of the hom(m)osexual economy.

19Irigaray seems here to assume the existence of the female (women) in a way that she does not in, for example, *Speculum*. It seems that somehow women have left behind the feminine and are in a position to articulate demands within the phallogocentric economy, yet it is not clear how this has happened. Irigaray does not touch on this subject, but it is implicit within the practical works. I believe it reveals an inconsistency between the theoretical and philosophical works so critical of the phallogocentric economy, and the need within the more practically-focused for a female sex which is capable of articulating demands within that hom(m)osexual system.
The first right is the right to civil identity and human dignity. It demands the end to "commercial use of [women's] bodies or images", the display of "legitimate representations of themselves in actions, words, and pictures in all public places," and an end to the exploitation of motherhood by civil and religious powers [TD:60]. Women should demand the restructuring of taxation, financial systems, and systems of exchange (though she does not explain the elements of this restructuring) and should be represented equally with men in situations of religious and civil power [TD:61-2]. These last suggestions are designed to ensure that economic structures function in women's interests, and that positions of cultural power are open to women; they are designed to allow women to possess a free, responsible human identity. Irigaray remarks that enshrining this right is one of the "most urgent tasks of our time, not only for the sake of living women and men, but also for the sake of a possible future for the national and international community" [TD:xvii]. Second, Irigaray strives to separate the maternal and the female, which are currently conflated, into two distinct and respected identities; thus we find her focus on what I think of as the rights of the body—rights which she believes are essential to women's lives, and to ensuring them full involvement in the civil sphere. Rights of the body include legislation recognizing rape, assault, and battery of a woman by her husband as a crime [TD:14]. These legal provisions should also entrench women's right to consent to the sexual relations they are involved in: girls and women should have the right to ownership of their virginity (thereby foiling the structure of commodification, discussed in Ch. 1). Women should also have the right to choose how many children they bear, as well as the related right to partake in motherhood and childrearing if they choose to have children, in effect
ensuring both that women are not expected or forced to become mothers, and that women and mothers are not conflated into a single entity. Women's civil rights should also include legal guarantees of access to contraception and to abortion on demand which are necessary for their choices about childbearing to be meaningful and have practical effects on their lives. Together, Irigaray suggests that these rights show respect for women's lives in that women are "not obliged to reproduce their husband’s line of descent" [TD:14].

Third, Irigaray believes that women's civil rights should also include legal recognition of the mother-daughter relationship, and of the importance of female genealogy. Irigaray includes this right because she believes that the relationship between mother and son is more highly regarded and valued by society than that between mother and daughter; indeed, "we live in a society of men-amongst-themselves that operates according to an exclusive respect for the ancestry of sons and fathers" [TD:7]. Critical of the way in which genealogy is currently traced through the paternal line, subsuming maternal ancestry under the paternal, Irigaray suggests that female family trees are to be valued because they recognize female ancestors and the hitherto unrecognized place of the female in both genealogy and the family. Irigaray is critical of the physical and cultural separation of daughters from their mothers which occurs when women enter the male social world, and hopes that recognition of female ancestry and the mother-daughter bond will allow for the sexualization of genealogy and increased valuation of the relationship between mother and daughter [TD:7]. Her preferred means of effecting this change is to put up "in all public places ... beautiful pictures representing the mother-daughter couple, illustrat[ing the] very special relationship to nature
and culture" within that relationship [TD:9]. This simple strategy will, she
believes, help women move from the family into the public sphere, though I
think her confidence in this method is misplaced: these public pictures of
mothers and daughters may defeat her goal of creating a conceptual division
between womanhood and maternity. Fourth and finally, Irigaray demands
women have the civil right to defend themselves, their children, their
traditions, and their religions against "unilateral decisions based on men's
laws" [TD:81]. This right is designed, I believe, to enforce each of the above
three: it ensures that women will be consulted in political and civic decision-
making which affects them, and that they will not have decisions made by
men on the basis of patriarchal or phallogocentric legal or political structures
thrust upon them.

Together, these civil rights will disrupt the "exclusively male cultural
ambiance" [JTN:122]. They will allow the return and the existence of
spirituality as women's bodies and souls are relieved of the "cultural and
familial fetters ... synonymous with the conquest of the spiritual" [JTN:117].
These rights will also allow women to feel free of the "useless obligations,
knowledge [and] possessions" of a culture not their own, and to claim and
enjoy those of their own culture as it joins and changes the phallogocentric
economy. Irigaray's use of rights within a strategy focused on difference is
surprising; but in practice, the mix of ideas works well together, even as it
may confuse some definitions of Irigaray's classification within feminist
thought.

The question of Irigaray's relationship to various schools of feminist
thought is well worth addressing. The controversy surrounding Irigaray's
focus on difference rests in part, I believe, in the way she draws upon the goals and methods of liberal, radical, and postmodern feminism. I would like to suggest that Irigaray, while seeming to reject liberal feminism and liberalism in general, maintains a fundamentally liberal attitude toward both equality and reason. Even as there are significant difficulties with considering Irigaray within the framework of liberal feminism, her thought does have important affinities with liberal feminist belief in rights and rationality, and her wish to resuscitate the subject. While Irigaray’s critique of liberal feminism is too far-reaching to allow her to be considered as a liberal feminist, the similarities between Irigaray’s ideas and those of liberal feminism are rarely explored.

Irigaray’s above-noted turn to the language of civil rights reflects a liberal faith in the ability of the state to legislate against discrimination, as well as a belief in the power of equal political and legal rights to remedy past injustices and ensure just relations between the sexes in the future. I also think that she also has an implicit affinity with liberal feminism’s view of women as rational actors capable of reasoned action in the public sphere, and its belief that women, as human beings, are entitled to full human rights. It is liberal feminism’s focus on equality that Irigaray finds troublesome; liberal feminists work toward a goal of equality with men in the public and private spheres. Irigaray, in contrast, believes that a strategy of simple equality will backfire, because the standard of equality is male. In effect, she argues that the effects of the phallogocentric order and of liberal feminist goals of equality are one and the same: women are held to a masculine standard, and are perceived as little copies of men. Irigaray argues that strategies of equality result in the continued absence of the female from the public sphere—a belief
more commonly associated with radical feminism. This difference has normally closed the case of Irigaray's relation to liberal feminism, but the question is not so simple.

Irigaray's general project in combination with her specific critiques of the subject would at first glance suggest that she would abandon the liberal subject. She seems to react against the universality, freedom, autonomy, rationality, growth, and natural rights of the Enlightenment subject; she is critical of current understandings of the subject, believing that the subject is definitively masculine, univocal, and hierarchical ["The Question of the Other", 8]. I would suggest, however, that her critique of the subject is designed to create the possibility of a female subject, not to dispense with the subject altogether: she wishes to strip the subject of its misogynist phallocentrism and open up a space for women within the definitions of subjectivity. Far from attempting to destroy the subject, I suggest that Irigaray wants to extend its definition to include women. Her focus on sexual difference is designed to force recognition of women's difference from men, and to make people realize that women are not civil subjects in the way men are. I would like to suggest that a careful reading of her texts reveals that for all of Irigaray's focus on difference, she wants women to be liberal subjects—that is, to be equal to men in civil rights, civic duties, and membership in the public sphere. Her focus on difference is a means to the end of equality, a fundamentally liberal goal achieved though unusual yet highly effective means.
It is a very rare occasion, if ever, that Irigaray is described as a radical feminist. While Irigaray's thought cannot be described entirely within the rubric of radical feminism, I think that there are a number of unexplored similarities between the two which are worth investigating. First, Irigaray's thought shares radical feminism's orientation toward women, women's rights, and women's place in society. Her thought—like that of radical feminists like Marge Piercy or Mary Daly—is focused on women's experiences, understandings, and perceptions, rather than on any existing political or social theory (save, perhaps, a commitment to feminism). Secondly, the radical feminist preoccupation with sexuality is certainly reflected in Irigaray's work, especially in her work on the body and on femininity. I think of Irigaray's work as oriented toward understanding, describing, explaining, and overcoming domination based on sex: she believes that sexual difference is the central division in social life. More than race, class, ability, creed, or indeed any other facet of identity, Irigaray suggests that sexual difference is the single most important determinant of social relations—a strong affinity with radical feminist thought, although Irigaray's focus on reproduction is not as central as that of radical feminist writers like Mary O'Brien. Within radical feminism, sex roles are understood to be socially constructed in accordance with masculine desires, in much the same way that Irigaray understands the feminine. The parallel is strengthened when we note that radical feminism understands sex-role constructions as drawing women away from their own natural sexual desires and needs, and toward dominant masculine models of female sexuality and pleasure [Tong, 1988:111]. Third, Irigaray believes that women as a group are oppressed within and by patriarchal social structures;

20 I was not able to find any descriptions of Irigaray as a radical feminist in the secondary literature without making a specific effort to do so.
regardless of the differences between them, women are all affected by the sexism and phallogocentrism of the current order. Again, there is a strong affinity with radical feminist thought, although I think radical feminism, and lesbian separatist thought in particular (see Rich [1980] and Atkinson [1986]), tends to posit a politicized "woman-class" united against oppression, while Irigaray's feminine woman is, for the very most part, a construction of the oppressive system which is incapable of rebellion. Irigaray's female social subject is, in contrast, capable of rebellion and is united with other female social subjects in opposition to phallocentric social relations. Finally, Irigaray reflects the radical feminist tenant that oppression of women is not limited to the public sphere and coincident problematization of the public/private split. Irigaray convincingly shows that oppression based on sex permeates the private sphere: women are, she argues, alienated from their bodies and their true selves, exchanged as commodities, forced to speak a language that is alien to them, orphaned of a divine female model, and identified with their materiality and maternity rather than recognized as members of civil society. Along with radical feminism, Irigaray views the patriarchal construct of (feminine) sexuality, and the close identification of women with the maternal found within the phallogocentric order, with suspicion. Similarly, the discovery of the pre-social female sexuality (and self) and the recognition of the biological bonds of female genealogy are two of Irigaray's armaments shared with radical feminists and put to use against the oppressive phallogocentric culture of the same.

An incisive critique of radical feminism also explains a great deal about Irigaray's thought. Radical feminism can be lauded, as I believe Irigaray should be, for recognizing the impact of the body's materiality on social
Radical feminism has politicized the body, making childrearing, maternity, and pornography into political issues, and has politicized the private sphere. It can, however, be faulted, as Irigaray can be too (above), for viewing the body as a determined biological entity immune to culture, an unchanging and fixed given. In addition, the female psychology thought to issue from the female body is one that is identified with empowerment, emotionality, nurturance, "ways of knowing" that are unique to women [Belenky et al, 1986], and a different sense of self and understanding of morality than men [Gilligan, 1982:2]. While Irigaray does redeem women's materiality, maternity, pacifism, and relatedness to both the other and the environment [TD:Ch. 1], I am not altogether sure that her female psychology, although seemingly based on the female body, is identified with the same attributes as those of radical feminism. Irigaray's female persons demand access to the public sphere, input into decision-making, and status both as subjects and as members of civil society, but it is not clear to me that the nurturance and emotionality identified with women in radical feminism is capable of either demanding or desiring such change. Irigaray departs from radical feminist theory here.22

Irigaray does, however, adopt a feminist standpoint epistemology based upon women's unique view of culture, just as radical feminism does at times. Christina Crosby outlines two elements of feminist standpoint theories: first, one's existence as a woman is thought to be prior to experience

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21 Shulamith Firestone [1970] and Mary O'Brien [1981] are two radical feminist thinkers with a great deal to say about the effects of the body's materiality--and reproductive capacity--on social relations.

22 In fact, my impression is that Irigaray keeps a rather masculine model of the political and social subject; there is little textual evidence to suggest that women would in practice make very different members of civil society than men do. On the other hand, there is also little evidence to suggest that they would not be radically different, but given her understanding of rationality, it seems that the former is a more likely case.
or to thought, and second, existence as a woman is thought to precede other
differences in importance to self and identity. Differences of sexuality, class,
race, or age are thought to be secondary to the primary similarity of
womanhood [Crosby, 1992:133]. Irigaray's insistence on the importance of
sexual differences, as well as her reluctance to admit difference within the
category of "women", prompt me to suggest that she comes close to
embracing a standpoint theory. Irigaray's category of "woman" is
homogenous, "women" and/or the female is valued because it is located
beyond the margins of "male" or "normal" culture; women's special insight
into the problems of and solutions to socio-political problems is granted at
least in part by their position outside of culture. As with radical feminism in
general, however, Irigaray fits with many of the defining characteristics of
standpoint theory without falling into most of its theoretical traps: Irigaray is
able to avoid being tarred with the brush of conservatism so often associated
with standpoint theories. Because standpoint theory is often founded on
women's marginality, and often valorizes that marginality, overcoming the
oppression which results in marginality destroys the basis for the theory. So
while standpoint theories are proficient at recognizing unequal social
relations, they can rely too heavily on the very relations of domination they
describe for the theoretical and practical force of their arguments. Irigaray does
not make the same mistake. Though the basis of her theory is the absent
female which gives a unique female view of the world, she strives to
transcend the marginalization of that subject by, and its exteriority to, the
phallogocentric economy. Irigaray does share one flaw of standpoint theories:
the primacy of identity as woman--of sexual difference--results in the erasure
of other important differences between women. It also presents a false
universal: the erased or secondary differences may hold more responsibility for identity than supposed, and the category of "women" is not as monolithic or as universal as supposed by both Irigaray and standpoint theories.

The fit between Irigaray's thought and radical feminism is not perfect, however: she exceeds the radical feminist project in several ways. First, her focus on language, the imaginary, and the symbolic goes beyond what is normally considered to be the scope of radical feminism. Second, the continuing influence of psychoanalysis on Irigaray's thought would be more appropriate to a psychoanalytic feminist than to a radical feminist. And third, the above-noted difficulty found in applying the sex/gender distinction to Irigaray's thought challenges a central tenet of radical feminist thought—a stumbling-block also found when Irigaray is classified as a postmodern thinker.

Irigaray, along with the French Feminists familiar to Anglo-American feminist scholars, is popularly identified as a postmodern thinker. Irigaray can legitimately be considered postmodern in several ways. First, and most obviously, she calls into question the current understandings of the subject, the self, rationality, truth, and justice. She also raises important questions about gender and about sexual identity which are difficult to ask from within the Enlightenment liberal tradition, given its reliance on the abstract individual as universal model of humanity. Second, Irigaray's style suggests that she is a postmodern writer. Her intertextual play, the seeming anarchy of some of her texts, her focus on process and becoming, and her interest in absence, as well as the deconstructive focus in her earlier works, and her use
of metonymy are also clear signs of postmodern writing. Finally, Irigaray's interest in difference(s), desire, indeterminacy, and sexuality all point toward a thinker not trapped in modern writing styles, nor concerned with typically modern subject matter.

Third, Irigaray takes part in a distinctively postmodern genre of writing called, simply, "theory". Her works are at once philosophy, political science, sociology, and comparative literature, but yet not wholly any one. The effacement of the boundaries between disciplines is a characteristic feature of Irigaray's writing, as she jumps from legal philosophy to psychoanalysis to theology and then to political science and on to linguistics—sometimes all within the same text, or even the same page! Theoretical discourse of this sort is one of the manifestations of postmodernism [Jameson, 1986:112]. Fourth and finally, Irigaray's intertextual style uses pastiche, a distinctively postmodern technique. Along with parody, pastiche involves the "imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles" [Jameson, 1986:113]. But pastiche goes further. It lacks parody's ulterior, satirical motive, and its laughter. Pastiche is "blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" [Jameson, 1986:114]. One admittedly must be careful calling Irigaray's style one of pastiche, because she does come up with a distinct idiosyncratic style of her own: her voice is not limited to imitating Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Aristotle, Levinas, or to taking on each voice as she chooses. Nevertheless, her parody of these writers is not intended to be funny, but rather is to be taken very seriously. She uses the styles of these writers sardonically, to make her point, and more often

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than not reacts to their words with anger, rather than with peals of parodic laughter.

Even though these four points would suggest that Irigaray can be considered a postmodern, at least stylistically, there are three important difficulties which arise if Irigaray is classified as a postmodern thinker. First, one of the most glaring discrepancies between postmodern feminism and Irigaray's thought arises with her understandings of the masquerade and of the female body. Judith Butler interprets Irigaray to view

the substantive grammar of gender, which assumes men and women as well as their attributes of masculine and feminine, [as] an example of a binary that effectively masks the hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism, silencing the female as a site of subversive multiplicity [Butler 1990:19].

Butler, however, is wrong: Irigaray views neither gender nor sexual difference as a masking technique of the phallogocentric order. Butler's reading is accurate only if it is applied to Irigaray's understanding of the feminine—but it is not correct when it comes to her understanding of the female, or of the body. For Irigaray, the female is sexe, not sex; the feminine is not to be conflated with gender. The female body exists outside, but so does everything else that is female: the entire female is bound up together, locked outside the masculine signifying order. The feminine, body and self, exists within that order (above, Ch.2). The body's sexual pleasures seem to be the most effective means of access to the female; the body seems to be the foundation of Irigaray's female subject, suggesting a desire for an Archimedean foundation which provides another challenge to the postmodern label. Still, interpreters must note that Irigaray's female is more than simple acultural biology. Irigaray's acceptance of the body, her suggestion that the body may be foundational to female identity, and her
refusal to accept a dichotomy between the natural (sex) and the cultural (gender) suggest that we must be very careful in categorizing Irigaray as a postmodern thinker.

Second, Irigaray's appeals to biology to explain women's reality tend to be rejected by postmodern feminists themselves as monocausal and essentialist (see below).24 Further, in her use of motherhood, reproduction, and female sexuality as central supports for her theory of the social [JTN and TD], Irigaray can legitimately be accused of taking the socially-dominant conventions and idiosyncrasies of her own time and place and expanding them into a timeless description of women and social life, thereby ignoring cultural/historical specificity. Finally, postmodern feminists would be critical of Irigaray's stress on sex as the most important social cleavage, to the exclusion of race, class, or nation. Postmodern feminism--as with postmodernism in general--is obsessed with difference(s): those of gender, yes, but also those of race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national affiliation, and other innumerable social cleavages. Irigaray, in contrast, suggests that gender is the single most important division within social life, that all other social divisions are secondary to sexual difference. From the Anglo-American postmodern feminist point of view, then, Irigaray is not named as a postmodern feminist without significant opportunity for disagreement and controversy.

Third and finally, Irigaray's views of reason also threaten her postmodern status. While postmodern thinkers explicitly reject reason and rationality as totalizing, violent, dangerous, and no-longer functional, Irigaray makes no such rejection. Irigaray denounces reason as masculine--but

24The classic disavowal of Irigaray for essentialism is Toril Moi's, in 1985's Sexual/Textual Politics.
I suggest that she considers reason to be incomplete due to its exclusion of women, rather than irredeemably corrupt. While she does not explicitly discuss reason itself, there are clues to her stance throughout her books. Recall that for Irigaray, women are the unknown outside of phallogocentrism. It follows that they have had nothing to do with making society as it is: nothing to do with reason (or with science, war, charity, or nobility, for that matter—which is, as discussed below (Chapter Five), a problematic assumption). Human history, then, is man's place, while woman has subsisted beneath/outside it all, allowing man to be what and who he is. Now, this supports two readings. On the postmodern reading, Irigaray wants to dispose of reason altogether, and replace it with women's flow, *jouissance*, indeterminacy, and mucosity. I find this reading too simplistic because it ignores the implications of those works concerned with women's practical situation. Whitford, too, dismisses this possibility, writing that "Irigaray's critique of rationality is not a prescription for female irrationality" [1991a:53]. I believe that a more plausible reading is that Irigaray hopes to redeem reason by adding to it the absent female. As she writes, "it clearly cannot be a matter of substituting feminine power for masculine power. Because this reversal would still be caught up in the economy of the same" [TS:130]. Whitford explains that "for Irigaray, the conceptualization of rationality is inseparable from the conceptualization of sexual difference" [Whitford, 1991a:59]. Adding the female to reason and rationality, rather than replacing masculine reason with feminine anti-reason, supports her view of the subject: one cannot advocate making women into full members of civil society with the accompanying rights and duties while simultaneously jettisoning reason. Reason is the foundation of the subject's ability to be civil. While combining
phallogocentric reason with the missing reason of the female subject will change what we understand by reason, reason will still exist, and will still form the cornerstone of civil society.

I find it curious that, given the ideas elaborated thus far in this thesis, the postmodern interpretation of Irigaray is so hegemonic. I think that Irigaray has by and large been co-opted by postmodern feminist thinkers, with the radical and liberal aspects of her thought receiving short shrift at their hands. I think that Irigaray's postmodern interpreters should be faulted for ignoring the possibility as well as the content of a careful and literal reading of her works. Irigaray, then, is not as easily considered a postmodern thinker as is often assumed. It is this erroneous assumption which has allowed the debate over the role of the body, essentialism, and universalism to become such an issue in Irigaray studies. We now turn to examine Irigaray's relationship to essentialism, biologism, and universalism, along with her critique of Aristotle. I will argue that just as Irigaray is not a postmodern, she makes use of essentialist (and biologistic, and universalistic) arguments. But I will also argue that her use of these techniques is radical in its effects, and is and the cornerstone of her plans for change in the social order and women's lives. Essentialism, universalism, and biologism are not reactionary or regressive by nature, but rather become so when put to that use. Irigaray puts them to opposite employment.
Chapter Four
Irigaray and Essentialism

The question of Irigaray's essentialism has been an important theme within Irigaray studies. Turning first to a comparison of Irigaray's thought with Aristotle's, and to her comments on Aristotelian philosophy, this chapter will discuss her understandings of essence and of politics, and the way her view of the body relates to these understandings. Then the chapter will argue that although her use of essentialism, biologism, and universalism is often treated by anti-essentialist thinkers as conservative and regressive (if they do not deny its use), Irigaray's use of these techniques is radical in its effects. Irigaray's works suggest that essentialism, biologism, and universalism are techniques which can be used to either conservative or radical ends, and are not deserving of suspicion in and of themselves; the uses to which they are put, rather than the fact of their use, should be the focus of feminist concern.

Though she comments on a number of contemporary thinkers, I find Irigaray's discussion of Aristotle to be one of the most interesting parts of Speculum of the Other Woman, and one of the more powerful of all of her textual 'dialogues' with the philosophers. Irigaray's critique of Aristotle is, along with her discussion of Plato, the foundation of her critical reading of Western metaphysics, political structures, and social organization; she reveals the phallogocentrism informing his conception of politics and provides a powerful critique of the foundations of philosophy and political science. The importance, and the implications, of Irigaray's views of the female, the body, and the political realm, are revealed in contrast to Aristotle's understandings
of these elements. While, for example, Irigaray views the female body as women's means of access to subjection and posits it as the ground of female subjectivity, the physical materiality of the human body is anathema to Aristotle's conception of political life. Irigaray embraces the body as women's means to subjection and civil identity, but Aristotle views the body as an impediment to political life. In identifying woman with the body's materiality and animality, he sets man into culture, free of the natural constraints of life. Irigaray challenges Aristotle's belief that political and moral freedom are achieved through freedom from the body, suggesting instead that women's freedom is achieved though the acknowledgment of the female sex (importantly, including the female body), as well as celebration of its difference from the male (and the male body). Irigaray ferrets out the way in which Aristotle identifies women with materiality and with the body, seems to suggest that he accurately describes the feminine, demands that the female be acknowledged, and then celebrates the difference of the female body, as well as the changes it requires in the political realm. It is as though she says, "So you think we're these material, animal, immanent creatures? Well, that image is your own construction, and it underpins your own self-understanding. Our bodies are very different from that which you think they are. They are the foundation of our selves, and their difference from yours—and from what you think they are—must be recognized".

Irigaray is critical of Aristotle's suspicion of the material. Recall that in Aristotle, the political (and public) aspects of life are the most highly regarded: the life spent in learning, contemplation, politics, and debate is understood as the Good Life. The public sphere is thought to have an altogether different quality from other parts of human existence because it is concerned only with
the non-material aspects of life. Fulfilment of life's material necessities is the responsibility of the household, the place of production and reproduction and the rightful place of women and slaves. The public is the realm of freedom, while the household is the realm of necessity. This categorization infects the occupants of these places, such that those who participate in the governance of the polis are free, while those who exist in the household are not; the distinction is made on the basis of relative association with materiality. If one is not associated with production or reproduction, and/or is thought to be incapable of re/production (whether by reason of physical disposition or status), then one is by nature free. Those associated with production and/or reproduction, however, (that is, women and slaves) are necessarily unfree because of their perceived contamination by the material. Put simply, those capable of re/production are considered, due to their proximity to natural processes, to be contaminated by matter to the extent that they are identified with it, while those who are liberated from matter and nature are free.

An association of women with materiality and reproduction informs Aristotle's view of women as 'matter' which "naturally" requires the form-giving guidance of free political man [Aristotle, 1963:108]. Whatever form woman has is given by her closeness to matter, while man's form is found in action—"seeing, thinking, conceiving, living, tasting, happiness" [S:165]—the activities of a human being free of banal and animalistic material concerns. Irigaray points out, however, that Aristotle's beliefs about women are justified not by women's natural characteristics (whatever they may be), but by man's need to isolate himself from his own materiality such that he can live in the realm of freedom—that is, in politics. Irigaray implies that Aristotle legitimates relations of domination by casting them as natural and therefore
necessary and good. She suggests that Aristotle justifies exploitative social relationships by casting them in the innocuous paper of necessity, so that the political disappears in the soft insulating cover of "nature".

Irigaray is critical of Aristotle's understanding of the female, particularly his relegation of the female to—and his identification of the female with—the material, calling it a powerful and insidious fiction [S:162]. Defined as first matter, woman does not enjoy the ontological status with which man privileges himself [S:163]. In Aristotle, woman is matter, plant-like, antonymic to intelligible, intellectual (masculine) Being within which all activity is undertaken and judged; she is but the carrying-case for the fetus, whose form is given and whose existence is determined by the male before she even begins to carry it [S:161, ESD:34-51]. Irigaray suggests that Aristotle severs the relationship between matter and Being; she is highly critical of this conceptual division because she thinks the relationship is in actuality unseverable [S:162]. She insists that Aristotle's discussions of matter must be regarded with suspicion, because the understanding of matter they utilize will already have been tampered with. It is an understanding that results when materiality is suspect and matter is thought of as prime matter requiring form [S:162, ESD:34-51]. In this system, she writes, woman serves as the soil in which the form of the masculine can grow: her material status allows living things (i.e., men) to grow within the logos, even as she has no access to logos herself [162]. Irigaray's deep suspicion of the Western philosophical tradition is evident here, as she suggests that all of Western metaphysics and ontology are founded upon the relegation of woman to non-being and materiality, such that she grounds both fields while lacking access to either one. Keeping in mind the exploration of the body in the chapter above, I would suggest that
Irigaray would regard Being as, at the very least, partly material—that is, as having an important material component. One of the most important points I believe Irigaray makes here is that a view of existence that does not recognize the materiality of that existence is at best inaccurate and misleading, and, at worst, profoundly misogynist and staggering in its consequences for women's lives and the way in which women are perceived.

Irigaray's critique of materiality in Aristotle's thought points to the necessity of exploring the role of the body in political thought: the significance of Aristotle's relegation of materiality to woman (and vice-versa) hinges on the importance that Aristotle assigns to the body. Showing Irigaray's view of the body against Aristotle's reveals important aspects of the way both thinkers conceptualize the body. I would like to suggest that the Aristotelian understanding of the body is precisely the one Irigaray hopes to challenge, overcome, and liberate women (and men) from. To Aristotle, and within Greek thought in general, the body is described as constraining, heavy, oppressive, earthly, visible, tainting, dark, murky, a prison, a tomb, a womb, lustful, emotional, and source of moral incontinence [Brown, 1988:55]. It is hated in its ordinariness and in the routineness of its capacities and needs [Brown, 1988:58]. It is feared because it is understood as limiting and threatening man's freedom. Moral freedom, thought to be brought by self-control and continence, is threatened by the body's sexual and physical desires, while physical freedom is threatened by the eventual decay and decrepitude of the body, as well as the body's needs for sustenance, water, and sleep. Wendy Brown explains that from the point of view of a Greek citizen, the body is an aspect of existence shared with animals, women, and slaves, and is thereby associated with enslavement, production, reproduction, and
other threats to freedom. The body is therefore best used as the instrument of a free and virtuous mind—that is, a mind that is transcendent, ethical, self-disciplined, and therefore good [Brown, 1988:58]. Altogether, it seems that Greek citizens had a great deal invested in the maintenance of their status as non-material beings—indeed, enough to lead them to fear and revile women because of their connection to and seeming entrapment in the body. As Brown describes it,

since humanity is defined against animality, women threatened this self-conception to the extent the they were counted as members of the human species. Woman's apparent inability to escape her ... "animal" nature establishes her as an omnipresent challenge to a conception of the human being as transcending animality [1988:55].

Aristotle defines woman as the body and as matter, and as a result, he denies that women are fully human creatures. In Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, for example, the female is described as a "deformed male" [Aristotle, 1963:175], as "weaker and colder in nature" [461]. We can assume that "women and the other animals" [463] are less rational, too, because "physical activity has nothing whatever to do with the activity of Reason" [171]. Brown puts it well when she writes, "[f]rom the perspective of men, masters, and the polis, women and slaves stood for the function and identity of the body, and were nothing other than their bodies. Conversely, men of the polis were citizens by virtue of their freedom from or repudiation of bodily concerns" [40]. It is clear that for Aristotle, the body is associated with a lack of humanity and a coincident animality, a lack of control over the passions and emotions, weak or absent powers of reason, and, nearly exclusively, with the feminine; women in Aristotle stand for the "function and identity of the body, and [are] nothing more than their bodies" [Brown, 1988:40].
Irigaray alleges that within the Aristotelian world view, women are things that exist because of, and for, others [5:165]. Defined as matter and supporting the metaphysical (and philosophical) order, Irigaray suggests that woman is an "un-necessary in and of herself, but essential as the non-subjective non-subjectum" [165]. That is, woman is not a subject herself; created by man and absorbing twice her share of materiality, she becomes the enabling factor behind man's cultural existence. Irigaray alleges that woman is the "indispensable condition whereby the living entity [man] retains and maintains and perfects himself in his self-likeness ... this "lack of qualities" that makes the female truly female ensures that the male can achieve his qualifications" [165]. Irigaray shows that "woman" is constructed as body to allow man's unfettered access to culture and politics: "to act will nonetheless be man's privilege over woman, [who is] closer to matter" [164]. She reveals the suspicion and nervousness with which Aristotle treats women and the body, clearly demonstrating the extent to which women are associated with matter, and the way in which matter is considered to be antithetical to action, public life, and politics. Finally, she shows how closely related the concepts of femininity, animality, enslavement, re/production, and the body are in Aristotle. It seems that Aristotle's understanding of masculinity is premised on a rather profound alienation from the body, and his understanding of femininity is based on its conflation with the body.

According to Irigaray, Aristotle's "ceaseless struggle with matter" is resolved "only by postulating an "immanence" that corresponds to that of the logos" [S:167]. Within Aristotle's system, Irigaray argues that woman is "first matter", serving as fountain for all that is constructed upon her and upon the natural [S:162]. Woman is, "by her failure to be defined or predicated, [the]
in(de)finite basis for the ontological promotion of each living thing. She is both radically lacking in all power of logos and offers, unawares, an all-powerful soil in which the logos can grow" [S:162]. Because each sex is locked into its own singular realm, "generation, growth, change, and expansion" are precluded. Within such phallogocentric systems, the only development possible is a corrupted teleology: growth toward ones self, becoming ever more perfectly debased by one's single category of belonging [S:164]. But even in her development toward her form, woman is lacking: Irigaray suggests that even here it seems to be "up to man to help her to take possession of her form--and of herself"; but Irigaray notes that man "use[s] the opportunity to tap this potential for other ends of his own" [S:164]. Acting as first matter and supporting the phallogocentric social order, woman is the "cloth of fantasy from which a logical order is still cut" [S:167]. Irigaray suggests that she functions so even as it is admitted and recognized "in certain places" at that time that her physis or natural form has been travestied [S:167].

Note that the reader must maintain an awareness of the female/feminine distinction while reading Irigaray's critique of Aristotle. Not only does she suggest (and convincingly show) that the Aristotelian woman is a plastic and changeable construction serving phallogocentric social and political structures (i.e., the feminine), she also suggests that the entire Aristotelian conception of nature is constructed. Woman, she writes, "added to--or taken away from--essence, fortuitous, troublesome, 'accidental,' ... can be modified or eliminated without changing anything in 'nature'" [S:167]. Irigaray implies that "woman" can be done away with, as the concept has done its work and its presence is no longer required to support the system it grounds; the self-grounding system of phallogocentrism in Aristotle may, in
fact, be better off if woman disappears altogether. There will then be no troublesome reminders of what woman is in her natural wholeness—no hints that she might even have the "natural wholeness" identified in Irigaray as the female [167].

A comparison of Aristotle's and Irigaray's views of the female body shows that they are diametrically opposed. Aristotle has been shown to view the human body in an extremely negative light, reviling it as the defining element of women, those substandard men. He is suspicious of the home the (definitively) female body gives to brute and irrational animality, and of the danger of possible contamination the body presents to man's ability to act in the public sphere. At base, Aristotle dreads woman's enveloping body, denigrates re/production, and fears desire and bodily processes, while Irigaray, conversely, views the female body as the source of women's challenge to the phallogocentric order. She embraces those aspects which, for Aristotle, seal the female body's status as abject: she lauds the female body as women's defining element, and as the means of challenge to the phallogocentric construction of the feminine. She rejects his implied claim that physicality is akin to animality, instead reveling in women's sexual pleasures and casting them as the means to a true sociality that recognizes and respects sexual difference. Finally, I believe that, for Irigaray, the recuperation and recognition of the female body is necessary for women to enter the public sphere and participate in it meaningfully as fully political members of civil society. For Aristotle, on the other hand, it seems that the very fact of possession of a female body was enough to be cast out of public life.

These differing views of the female body are related to different understandings of the political realm: that is, of the nature and the purpose of
political life. Turning again to Wendy Brown's cogent discussion of manhood and politics, it is clear that the Greek polis was premised on a view of politics which valued action, immortality, courage, and self-discipline. Aristotle believes that the polis gives people their humanity and/or telos. Without the polis, man is "not really a man but a 'poor sort of being'"; women (and slaves) lack the function and essential character which the polis grants them [Brown, 1988:36]. Brown goes on to suggest that the polis is entirely artificial, "purely conventional and materially superfluous" in that it is constructed against and in exclusion of materiality and the natural [1988:37]. If the polis is artificial, so must be the men (and women) it creates: indeed, the Greek citizen must be "removed from his source of sustenance and maintenance in order to come into his own as a man" [37]. The political universe of the Greek citizen is quite fragile: the forcible separation of the public and the necessary results in a political realm which is easily threatened and contaminated by the inferior elements of materiality which undergird it [43]. The Aristotelian political realm is also quite limited: it is restricted to "what occurs in refined conversations between male citizens, not in the violence or domination in relations between masters and slaves, men and women, colonized and colonizers" [44]. The Aristotelian conception of the political necessarily excludes the actions which constitute political activity and the realm of political action itself. Domination and inequality are justified as the result of natural processes and are legitimated in their "naturalness"; the most ostensibly political aspects of the Aristotelian understanding of politics are actually to be found in that supposedlyapolitical realm, the "natural". The processes though which woman is identified with materiality and the body is identified as a threatening source of irrationality are to my mind the very
stuff of politics, but Aristotle strips them of their political content and thereby excludes them from political life by naming them "natural".

Irigaray's understanding of the political is in great part dependent on her view of the body. The political realm, as Irigaray would define it, is powerfully influenced by sexual difference; her understandings of political actors, political actions, and the substance of politics to be are, as we will see, opposite to many contemporary understandings. Irigaray presents distinctly different understandings of the role of the body in political life, and the role of sexual difference in public life, from those offered by mainstream political science, or even from mainstream feminism(s). In asking about who counts as a subject and a member of political society, and why, for example, Irigaray explores one of the central questions of political philosophy and, indeed, one of the foundations of any political community. I believe that Irigaray is writing about the most basic political questions: while her approach to these questions may appear to properly belong to philosophy and/or linguistics, I would like to suggest that she is considering some of the most contentious political questions that can be put up for consideration. I find her thoughts and answers on these questions to be thought-provoking, and although I am not sure that she is entirely convincing, I believe that even a considered dismissal of her views forces her reader to confront those rarely-asked questions about political organization: questions about who qualifies as a subject, and why, what politics is (and should be) all about, and why the sex of one's body should figure so importantly within the political sphere.

The role of the body in Irigaray's work has been overshadowed by the debate about her "language of essence". This debate has been the most
contentious aspect of her philosophy, particularly within Anglo-American feminism [Schor, 1995, Delphy 1994]. The question of whether or not she is an essentialist—or, as the question about essentialism is often phrased, whether or not she believes in a "deterministic relationship between human biological peculiarity and human sexual identity" [Xu, 1995:87]—has dominated Irigaray studies to the exclusion of more interesting issues. Critical opinion on the topic abounds, some of it brilliantly argued, some misleading or plainly wrong. Unfortunately, it seems to me that a fear of biological essentialism among Irigaray's readers has effectively halted critical interpretation of her view of the body and its implications for her view of politics, her agenda for social change, and her fit with various schools of feminism. While analysis of the role of language, discursive strategies, Lacan's influence, and her dialogues with other philosophers are common topics in Irigaray studies, a considered examination of the role of the body has been made by only a very few thinkers. Outside of Elizabeth Grosz, Vicki Kirby, Naomi Schor, and Rosi Bradotti, it seems that Irigaray's female body is dealt with in two ways. On one hand, Irigaray's use of female body is branded essentialist and biologistic; Irigaray is tarred with the same brush and is thereby removed from consideration as a serious and legitimate feminist thinker. On the other hand, the presence of the biological in Irigaray is ignored, and/or it is argued that the seemingly biological is in actuality discursive (and therefore is not essentialist). This strategy exempts Irigaray from essentialism and redeems her as a feminist (and as a postmodern) thinker.

I would like to suggest that both of these strategies impoverish the reader's understanding of Irigaray's works and project. If Irigaray is to be considered an essentialist—a rather problematic categorization, though one
that can be made (but not in the way her interpreters might suggest)—her reader must make this decision based on a considered examination of the role of the body in her work, not on the simple fact that the female body appears there. The remainder of this chapter will address whether or not Irigaray’s treatment of the female body and of sexual difference gives rise to essentialism. It will discuss critical reaction to Irigaray, and will also re-examine the abject status of the essential within feminism. I believe that Irigaray shows that essence may be extremely useful to feminism. It is at least worth reconsidering the general fear of essentialism in light of Irigaray’s insights about essence and the female body. I would like to suggest that the important question is not, “Is Irigaray an essentialist?”. It is rather, “Why does it matter that she is an essentialist—and what can she tell us about essentialism and about the body in feminist theory?”

Essentialism is rarely defined within feminist theory, and accusations of essentialism are often neither well-argued nor strongly supported: the term has most often been wielded as an epithet, and is a term of closure and dismissal. It is often, I believe, taken to be self-evident, but it is not: it is often conflated with biologism and universalism. It is well worth defining the term.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy suggests that, in its strongest and most interesting case, essence is "a property that only it could possibly have had, in any possible world: it's 'thisness' or haecceity" [Honderich, 1995:251]. A thing's haecceity is "distinctively of the essence of some thing: for it is a property that is necessarily possessed by that thing in whatever possible world it might have existed, and one that could not possibly have been possessed by any other thing" [Honderich, 1995:251]. In its strongest version,
then, essentialism is the attribution of certain necessary and unique characteristics to a thing or category of things. Now, in speaking of the essences of human beings, one of these characteristics is often a unique telos, or end state to which the thing strives; more accurately, it is the potential state of full development of that organism. To use Aristotle's example, an acorn has several unique characteristics, one of which is that it is small, hard, and smooth on the bottom. Another of its essences is its potential to become an oak tree. In the absence of proper light, water, and nutrition, however, the acorn's growth may be stunted, or the acorn may never even begin its growth to its final form. One common mistake is to forget that telos gives only potential, and to treat essence (including telos) as deterministic of the thing's possibilities. Of course, an acorn cannot grow into a maple tree, but the existence of limits to an entity's growth does not imply determinism: what one cannot become does not determine what one will become.

Now, when applied to that group known as "women", essentialism would suggest that there are unique characteristics which women possess which define women qua women. It would also suggest that there is an ideal state of "woman-ness" or womanhood, which women may reach under certain conditions—but this telos is potentiality, rather than determined. The fact of being a woman imposes limits upon what a woman may become, but does not determine what a woman will or must be. Because women's (and all living things') ability to reach their telos is highly dependent upon the external environment, that outcome cannot be considered determined. Essence's political heft—and problematic status for feminism—arises when conventional social arrangements are either criticized or justified on the bases of their relationship to women's essence. Patriarchal social relations, for
example, can be supported by attributing to women certain essences which justify those relations. Indeed, when women are understood as mothers, or as "the weaker sex," or as properly belonging at home, then those social arrangements are justified by recourse to those attributions of essence. It is no wonder that many feminists are uneasy with any form of essentialism, given how often unfair treatment of women has been justified by recourse to their (supposed) natures. The other use of essentialism is opposite in effect. Stating that convention is opposite, or harmful, to women's essence is a powerful critique of current social relations; using essence to criticize and change convention is a powerful political strategy. After discussing the feminist understanding (suspicion?) of essence, I will show that Irigaray not only attributes to women a universal essence, but makes radical use of this essence in demanding change in the current hom(m)o-sexual order.

Essentialism is usually conflated with universalism, naturalism, and biologism, but each of these elements should be considered on its own. When used within postmodern feminist discourse, essentialism is normally viewed with suspicion and "essentialist" is often used as a term of abuse. In this context, it is said to inhere in the attribution of fixed characteristics to women, whether biological, dispositional, or procedural [Grosz, 1995:47]. It can be applied to dispositions or activities and procedures characteristic of a thing, and it is often naturalistic, in that a) the essence may be said to be a "natural" characteristic, and b) an equivalence between natural and biological characteristics is assumed. Of particular relevance to the discussion in this chapter is biologism, a form of essentialism which suggests that women's essence is to be found in their biology or biological capabilities [Grosz, 1995:48]. I would like to argue that it is biologism, rather than essentialism, that could
more legitimately be regarded with suspicion, in that it attributes social relationships (which, again, could be otherwise) to the natural facticity of biology (which cannot be otherwise), thereby reducing social relations to biological causes and justifying them as 'natural'. Finally, essences are understood to be universal, as they are defining attributes of all women and therefore are qualities of all women in all possible worlds (which fits with the philosophical definition above). As Elizabeth Grosz explains, in essentialist definitions,

women's essence is assumed to be given and universal and is usually, though not always, identified with women's biology and natural characteristics ... [Essentialism] thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization [Grosz, 1995:47].

Further, in this understanding, the attribution of essence(s) is normally taken to be conservative25: if it is said to be impossible for women to act in a manner contrary to their essence, then change related to that essence becomes impossible, or at least restricted. It is the limitations of essence which seem to be problematic for postmodern feminists like Butler. Representing women's characteristics, biology, or social position as the result of essence (or, more specifically, as the result of nature and biological essence) is understood in this case as naturalizing social characteristics which could be otherwise and legitimating them as unchangeable, necessary and, often, good. Much as Aristotle hides highly political social relations in natural necessity, essentialism, biologism, and universalism can remove the contestibility from social relations by naming them natural and the result of essence; of course,

25 Such accounts ignore the distinction between nature and convention, which may have radical and disruptive consequences: arguing that convention is to be contrary to nature/essence and its teleological fulfillment is a powerful means of challenging the status quo. It is precisely this strategy which I believe Irigaray makes use of.
essence can also problematize social relations by naming them unnatural and contrary to essence, but anti-essentialist arguments rarely, if ever, recognize essentialism's radical potential. We will now turn to an examination of whether, and to what effect, Irigaray makes use of essentialism, biologism, and universalism.

Is Irigaray an essentialist? Yes: she attributes to women certain necessary and unique characteristics. I would prefer, however, to phrase it thus: Irigaray makes use of essentialism. First of all, she writes about women as a group, and she attributes certain characteristics to all women: for example, the possession of a uniquely female sexuality which, when accessed, allows escape from the hom(m)o-sexual economy, a different relationship to reason, (&etc). Irigaray can therefore be accused of a simple essentialism. In writing about "women", Irigaray makes use of nominal essentialism, that essentialism through which certain things sharing an essence are grouped together within a category. Irigaray implicitly assumes there are certain meaningful essences which all women share and which allow us to group them together within the category of women. But while Toril Moi suggests, "all efforts towards a definition of 'woman' are destined to be essentialist" [1985:148], this form of essentialism seems to me to not only be not particularly harmful, but to be necessary for some sort of feminist project to exist—indeed, this essentialism is a necessary foundation for Irigaray's project. If women are not grouped together within the rubric of a single category, Irigaray's system of ideas—along, perhaps, with feminism as a political movement—falls apart. I believe that Irigaray is forced to use the so-called "language of essence" [Fuss, 1989] if she is even to state the problematic of her
works: she must assume that there are women if she is to be able to formulate her feminist critique of phallo- and logo-centric social, political, ontological, and epistemological structures. This nominal sort of essentialism gives rise to a troublesome use, however: Irigaray's understanding of feminism, and of politics, suggest that being a woman determines (or, at least, has great bearing upon) one's politics. This is evident in *Je, Tu, Nous*, for example, when the fact of being a woman results in demands for certain positive women's rights, and determines one's stance toward politics and legal structures. Some would prefer to see politics liberated from essence (or, more specifically, from sexual difference), such that one's political stance would determine the coalitions one is involved in, and essence or identity would be left aside from the political. In contrast to Irigaray, I believe that one's gender should not be the sole determinant of one's politics; but contrary to the postmodern feminists, I think that gender has important bearing on one's experience of the world and cannot help but influence one's stand toward both the political order and the social world in general.

Irigaray also suggests that all women share certain characteristics, and that there is an "essential" situation in which women find themselves. According to Irigaray, in order to be fully human subjects, women need to have a relationship to the divine and a distinctively female imaginary; they need to be in relations of equality with men in which their difference from men is respected, to be able to express themselves truthfully and honestly, and to be full members of the political community. In describing these distinctively female needs, Irigaray describes her understanding of women's essence, and suggests that it is not fulfilled in the present phallogocentric economy. Irigaray also suggests that all women currently find themselves in a
situation which includes a lack of relationship to the divine and the symbolic, an absent female imaginary, commodification as feminine objects, and isolation from hom(m)o-sexual social and political structures. While the attribution of these characteristics to women is essentialist, the attribution of an "essential situation" to women with those qualities is not an entirely clear-cut example of essentialism. Irigaray describes the way in which the masculine economy has constructed woman, so this essential situation of the feminine that she describes is not natural, but is constructed—which shows that the distinction between essentialism and constructivism may not be as clear-cut as it seems. I would like to suggest that Irigaray's use of essence shows that essentialism can in fact be a radical strategy, one which demands change in the social order: indeed, her description of women's essential situation goes beyond observation and demands drastic changes in the social context in which women's lives are lived in order to reconcile convention with the fulfillment of women's essential needs.

In "How to Conceive (of) a Girl" and "Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, Physics IV", Irigaray comments on women's relationship to essence, matter, and place. She writes that women have been defined within philosophy as lacking a relationship to essence, yet represent Essence. Women have been forced to take on the burden of acting as the body and representing Essence for men, which frees man to become Experience and to involve themselves in cultural, theoretical, and philosophical endeavors while denying the limits of his own essence. Irigaray suggests that denial of the female essence allows her, even forces her, to live the masquerade, and to thereby "serve as in(de)finite basis for the ontological promotion of each

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26See Fuss [1989] for a very smart discussion of the theoretical and practical difficulties surrounding essence, essentialism, and the distinction between essentialism and constructivism.
living thing"; lack of access to her essence allows her to be "both radically lacking in all power of logos and [to] offer, unawares, an all-powerful soil in which the logos can grow [S:162]. Further, she writes that this lack of essence means that the female "can never achieve the wholeness of her form" [S:165] and "can never achieve the status of subject, at least for/by herself " [S:166]. Finally, man "continues to feed on her undefinable potency of which place would be, some say, the most extraordinary store" [S:166].

Irigaray attributes to women an essence, and in doing so destroys the economy of the same because its foundational and central concept--woman--cannot logically have an essence while representing Essence. Irigaray wants women to have an essence of their own, and she believes this essence will protect women from phallogocentric social structures: she asserts a female essence in order to "create a space for women which cannot be colonized by patriarchy and/or the masculine" [Whitford, 1991a:84]. When women become aware of, and speak about, their physical and sexual difference from men, and when they speak as women and speak about women's experiences, Irigaray believes they claim a relationship to essence which destroys the phallogocentric social order. A sexually-specific process of becoming ensues from the claim to essence [TD:25], a process which allows women to become self-defined active subjects, instead of passive objects defined by the masculine. Woman no longer functions as ground or foundation for the masculine order; rather, she morphs into a female lover, an active female subject, and is no longer imprisoned as the passive and beloved woman [ESD]. Irigaray believes that attributing women an essence will allow women to be civil persons, members of the political community, and subjects no longer restricted in their access to the public sphere: claiming an essence and
thereby an identity of their own, women-subjects gain access to subjectivity and civil society. They gain a relationship with time, and lose their exclusive identification with place. In Irigaray's estimation, women's essence gives them their political principles, and demands their participation as political subjects in civil society: women's essence is the foundation of female subjecthood and subjectivity, such that essence becomes the necessary base of women's political community. It is a powerful pressure for change, too: if women have an essence, and social, political, ontological, and epistemological structures can all be said to be contrary to that essence, then it is quite clear that these structures are a) oppressive and b) must be changed. After all, Irigaray might say with a wink, it is impossible to live contrary to one's essence, isn't it?

Does Irigaray make use of biologistic arguments? A qualified yes: to some extent, women's essence is defined in terms of their biology, if not their biological capabilities. Does Irigaray's use of biologism limit women's possibilities in the social sphere by means of recourse to their biological capabilities, particularly those of maternity and nurturance? No, it does not.

Irigaray posits both an essential difference between men and women and an essential characteristic of women when she posits a meaningful difference between men and women. Specifically, the difference is one of sexuality, though it impacts upon rationality, knowledge, and language. Irigaray believes that sexual difference is the primary division among human beings. There is "real otherness" between men and women in morphology, biology, and relationships [IL:61]. The sexes are different, and it is proper, she writes, to be faithful to one's differently-sexed nature [IL:4]. Sexual difference
is at least in part a difference of biology, in that biological capacities are defining characteristics of those different sexes: it is “evident that male and female corporeal morphology are not the same and it therefore follows that their way of experiencing the sensible and of constructing the spiritual is not the same” [IL:38]. Yet even as Irigaray admits the effects of biology upon the life experiences of the sexes, she does not specifically define men or women, and does not state, “men are ...” or “women are ...”, which reduces the normative content (and therefore the power, and the danger) of her use of biologism. She does, however, suggest that there are certain biological characteristics which all women share: for example, all women can access an amorphous, arational, asocial sexuality within themselves which has the power to challenge masculine-defined social structures. She also suggests that women have a different relationship to their bodies than men do, and presumably this is the result of sexual difference [TD, Ch. 1].

Irigaray’s use of biologism is understandably upsetting to many feminists, but the question here is whether this essentialism is harmful, and I would suggest, with one reservation, that it is not. Irigaray posits an irreducible sexual difference—but there are men and women in the world. At least part of the distinction between them is based on the possession of certain biological sexual characteristics: there is some basic biological correlation with the basic and ubiquitous division of human beings into men and women.²⁷ In

²⁷Social constructivists like Judith Butler might suggest that the category of sex (and the body’s materiality) are constructed as an effect of gender and thereby of power, a regulatory norm, and a coercive means of situating the subject within systems of cultural and symbolic intelligibility [Butler, 1993:9-15]. But I would think that even Butler would, if pressed, have to admit that a man with breasts and a pregnant belly would be a very strange sort of man. And as she admits, the materiality of the body is a problem which will not disappear for constructivists [Butler, 1993: Introduction]: there really are bodies. Attributing discourse causal agency for sex and materiality, in my mind, effectively elides the question of the effects of sexual difference on the social and political sphere.
posing an essential characteristic which women share, she is, I believe, stating the obvious: we know what women are—they exist. Nevertheless, I believe that Irigaray walks a dangerous path when she attributes to women a certain form of sexuality and certain sex-specific attributes, not so much because of the sort of sexuality or the specific attributes she posits, but because such descriptions can be as much social as they are biological. They therefore run the risk of being prescriptive, rather than the more clearly descriptive (though not entirely free of normative considerations) check-list of biological features which is suggested by a simple focus on sexual difference. Of course, for Irigaray, sexual difference is not limited to the biological, but I think that it is to a large degree rooted in the body.

Irigaray’s use of biologistic arguments does not limit women’s possibilities for action in the world, however: women are not constrained by their biology. In fact, Irigaray argues quite strenuously that women’s biological capabilities need to be controlled, and women must not be conflated with those capacities, if they are to be “treated as civil adults” [TD:xvii]. As noted above, one of the most important sexually-specific rights designed to allow women entry into the public sphere is the right to control over and choice about reproduction and maternity [TD:61]. Legal guarantees of access to contraception and abortion, as well as an entrenched right to choose to be a mother, ensure that women are not held prisoner by their reproductive capabilities and are not too closely identified with the capabilities of their bodies. A typical statement of hers is that “there is a specifically [female] energy, one related more to communication, to growth, and not just to reproduction” [IL:99]: she defines certain characteristics which women share, but in doing so she steps away from tying that essence too closely to
reproduction. She is thereby able to avoid the conservatism often found in biologistic arguments.

While I believe Irigaray has avoided the conservatism often found within essentialist and biologistic arguments and uses them to radical effect, her views of the female body, materiality, and sexual difference can be accused of conservatism because they take these elements for granted. Neither essentialism nor biologism seem to be particularly worrisome to Irigaray: she seems to find them useful weapons in her attack on the phallogocentric economy. In taking sexual difference for granted and as a positive force for change, Irigaray's account (as well as the one offered by this thesis) can be accused of conservatism. Other feminist thinkers are not equally convinced about the power of sexual difference to destroy patriarchal power structures. Indeed, Judith Butler [1993] takes a very different view from Irigaray's. While Butler suggests, much as Irigaray does, that patriarchal power identifies women with materiality, she turns from Irigaray in her suggestion that the body's materiality is a construction and thereby a result of power (in contrast to the materiality of Irigaray's female, which rests outside the social). Butler suggests, further, that the category of sex must be contested and problematized such that the power relations operating under its neutral facade are brought to light [1993:15]. She also notes that matter is best taken as the object of feminist inquiry, rather than as the ground of feminist inquiry [1993:49]—in direct opposition to Irigaray, who grounds her strategies, if not her view of the public arena, on women's matter and essence. While Irigaray's ideas are a powerful critique of the prevailing social order and propose ways of ameliorating that order, Butler's views do show that Irigaray's focus on sex precludes different, further-reaching, and more radical ways of perceiving and
organizing the world. Of course, Irigaray does not suggest that there are any other such ways: for her, sexual difference is the primary social division. It is possible, though, that there are other ways of organizing human sociality which do not revolve around sexual difference, and the focus on sexual difference may be said to preserve the status quo because it does not look beyond current preoccupations to a society in which the primary social difference is not sexuality. Taking class distinctions, for example, as the primary social cleavage changes the focus on social action quite drastically, and changes our understandings of the social. But I don't think that taking it as the primary cleavage in social life would produce analyses as meaningful and realistic as those of feminism. A related argument would suggest that the focus on sexual difference does not allow analysis of the causal mechanisms through which that difference is produced, whereas analysis of the production of class, race, sexuality (i.e. queer/lesbian/heterosexual), or nationalism may more accurately reveal the power relations which construct such identities and identifications. In contrast, I believe the analysis of gender and sexual difference has produced some works which have dramatically changed cultural understandings of power, sexuality, and their production.  

In response, I would suggest (as I imagine Irigaray might) that taking sexual difference as the primary social cleavage is legitimate. While there may be other cleavages around which the social may be organized, the biological division between the sexes, along with its social implications, is currently so far-reaching in its implications that it demands continued analysis. Further, while it is well worth imagining alternate ways of organizing the social, I think that sexual difference in all its permutations and effects so preoccupies

28 See, for example, Foucault's History of Sexuality (Vols. 1-3), Linda Singer's Erotic Welfare, and Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety.
our society that analysis of other social cleavages must be undertaken with an awareness of the ways in which sexual difference affects or underlies that division. Finally, I think that studies of gender’s production are more than able to make strong theoretical arguments about the construction of other social cleavages.

Is Irigaray’s thought universalist? Undoubtedly, yes. I believe that Irigaray’s universalism is one of the most interesting and important aspects of her thought, and so I would like to undertake a short exploration of this concept before I relate it to Irigaray’s ideas.

Universalism occurs when all women (regardless of cultural or historical differences) are attributed stable and invariant membership in certain social categories, functions, and activities [Grosz, 1993:48]. It asserts that all women have certain commonalties and similarities in all possible worlds. Universalism is restricted to such commentary—by definition, “it can only assert similarities, what is shared in common by all” [Grosz, 1993:48]. It is therefore incapable of speaking to the differences between women. Universalism is often conflated with the essentialist ascription to women of a series of “unchanging, ahistorical, transcultural traits” [Schor, 1995:24]. Indeed, universalism is very similar to, and is normally a constituent element of, essentialism: not only does it ascribe fixed and unchanging characteristics to women as essentialism does, but universalism also groups all women within a single category, much as essentialist definitions of women do. Neither essentialism nor universalism is restricted to the biological: both are equally powerful when discussing women’s non-
biological characteristics, and so are able to analyze social constructions as well as biological entities.

Universalism is the foundation of the universal subject and the abstract individual, though, of course, universalism itself dates back to Plato and Aristotle [Schor, 1995, Scott, 1995]. The abstract individual expresses what is considered to be universal among human beings (as understood by Enlightenment thinkers)—rationality, morality, and sociality, among other attributes. As its critics explain, isolating these qualities as quintessentially and definitively human required “abstracting individuals from differentiating social structures, treating them as disembodied, and posit[ing] a fundamental human sameness” [Scott, 1995:3]. This universal subject, its critics argue, functioned as definitive of the human qua human, such that those who were not believed to share in the qualities of the universal subject were excluded to various extents from the social and political spheres [Scott, 1995:4]. The single and universally-applied standard of the abstract individual recognizes difference from the universal as pathological. Irigaray too is critical of universalism: she argues persuasively that the universal standard is not, in fact, universal in any sense: it is based on the traditionally masculine virtues and understandings of the world (or, as Irigaray might phrase it, on the hom(m)o-sexual economy of the same).

Irigaray is undoubtedly a universalist: she is concerned with the similarities among women, not all human beings, and she suggests that women’s identity is based on the sexual specificity common to all women. Sexual identity is universal, she writes: more universal than race or religious, political, or economic differences [IL:47]. Female sexual identity is common to all women in all times and places. Irigaray explains:
I have to realize myself as who and what I am: a woman. This woman I am has to realize the female as universal in the self and for the self as far as she is able during the period of history in which she finds herself again and again given the familial, cultural, or political contingencies she has overcome [IL:145].

So the actual circumstances of women’s lives will affect the degree to which women are able to recognize and welcome the universal in themselves, but regardless of the degree to which it is recognized—and despite whatever distinctions separate women from each other—the universal is present. To Irigaray, sexual difference is a shared and universal characteristic of all women.

Irigaray again uses a theoretical technique often considered by feminists to be conservative to radical ends. This radicalism arises precisely in the aspect of her thought considered widely to be conservative: her belief in sexual difference and the political beliefs and affiliations which that belief gives rise to. While universalism, used in the Enlightenment sense, may entail recourse to the universal subject and a single standard of humanity, Irigaray’s universal is sexed: there is a female, as well as a male, universal subject. She rejects the abstract individualism hitherto definitive of the western tradition’s understanding of the subject because it is sexually indifferent. This paper has discussed Irigaray’s strong belief in and reliance on sexual difference at length: for Irigaray, the male and the female are two separate types of subjects. Both are human, but for Irigaray I don’t think the human in itself means a great deal: her interest lies in the human female, and I would like to suggest that those are the terms in which sexual difference and the universal are considered in her work. Thus Irigaray suggests that the sexes are irreducible to each other [IL:64], remarking that the other sex is
 unknowable, unknown, transcendent, and inaccessible [IL:104]. Irigaray
dismisses the possibility of a universal subject upon remarking “[b]eing a man
or a woman already means not being the whole of the subject or of the
community or of spirit, as well as not being entirely oneself ... I belong to a
sexed universal and to a relation between two universals” [IL:106].

The universal, for Irigaray, is sexed. Further, this sexualization of the
abstract individual maintains the connection to the body so often lost in
universalist accounts: the process of sexualization does not entail
estrangement from the body [IL:104]. Writing in An Ethics of Sexual
Difference, Irigaray discusses her vision: if sexual difference were to be
recognized, “society, culture, discourse would thereby be recognized as sexuate
and not as the monopoly on universal value of a single sex—one that has no
awareness of the way the body and its morphology are imprinted upon
imaginary and symbolic creations” [ESD:68]. Irigaray’s understanding and use
of the universal re-embodies the universal subject. It also leads to political
action based on one’s embodied and gendered situation which is anathema to
the universalism of the abstract individual. Irigaray’s universalism leads
directly to political action based on sexual difference: it is the foundation for
identity, coalition, and political action. In the end, Irigaray’s universalism
recognizes difference, and demands change in social, political, symbolic,
linguistic, and philosophical realms, rather than supporting current social
structures and depoliticizing gender identity in the way universalism can.

Irigaray’s use of essentialism, biologism, and universalism is unsettling
for feminist thinkers. She is not afraid to “risk” using any of these elements:
indeed, it seems to me that she does not think twice about the difficulties so
often encountered in using them. She uses theoretical techniques which most often are conservative and misogynist in application—and yet in her hands, they become weapons for change and are successfully put to use against the patriarchal economy. Suddenly, the dreaded “isms” no longer seem quite so dangerous and threatening: given the anti-essentialist focus of some recent feminist theory, it is refreshing to note that essentialism, biologism, and universalism can have radical uses and effects and be deployed in women’s favor. Irigaray’s use of these elements has, however, sparked massive comment from her interpreters. In the following conclusion, I will examine Toril Moi’s and Margaret Whitford’s interpretations of Irigaray in detail; these interpretations shed light upon the way Irigaray has been interpreted, the effects the postmodern unease with essence have had on her interpretation, and on the elements of her thought which, as a result, have—and have not—been attended to by her interpreters.

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29 Assuming, of course, that one agrees with Irigaray in her estimation of sexual difference, and of women’s universal characteristics. If one does not—like the majority of the social constructivists—then her use of these elements will seem hopelessly naive or regressive, depending on one’s attitude toward Irigaray. The recent willingness on the part of feminist thinkers like Gayatri Spivak and Diana Fuss and, in effect, Vicki Kirby, Elizabeth Grosz, and even Judith Butler (to some extent) to re-consider essentialism’s abject status is refreshing. Re-opening critical debate about the “isms” would, I believe, be in the interests of good feminist theory, as well as allow a fuller conception of Irigaray’s ideas.
Chapter Five
Conclusion

I have argued that Irigaray must be read on her own terms. I believe that if she is read from the perspective of her political science concerns, several aspects of Irigaray's thought crystallize into a new pattern: they show that while Irigaray is often co-opted by postmodern feminists, she is not a postmodern. When taken literally, her thought on the body suggests that women's selves are very closely tied to the female body, and that women's sexuality (and all other aspects of the female) are unknown in a phallogocentric social system. Irigaray's understanding of the body prompts difficult questions for feminists about both the role of sexual difference in personal identity, and the body's role in personal identity; similarly, the conceptual divisions between mind/self and body are problematized and beg re-examination. When read as a political theory, Irigaray's ideas are a refreshing turn from the common feminist concern with essentialism and construction. I have argued that Irigaray uses both essentialism and universalism with great skill and stealth to turn the weapons of the hom(m)o-sexual economy against itself; in attacking the conventions of phallogocentric social structures with an attribution of a sexually-specific essence to women, Irigaray makes a radical critique which destroys the system's supports and forces politics and philosophy into a reckoning of the place they assign to women. Finally, Irigaray's more practical works reveal a politically-minded thinker concerned with women's actual place in the world, and changes which can be made to improve that place. Her recommendations, designed to forge a place for women within current
definitions of the subject and the member of civil society, are striking: when considered alongside her understanding of reason and rationality, they suggest that Irigaray may—though not unproblematically—be most appropriately considered within the framework of liberalism and liberal feminism, even though her thought has very important affinities with both radical and postmodern thought.

Irigaray’s reception has been framed by the essentialist/anti-essentialist division within Anglo-American feminist theory [Schor, 1994:vii], and much of her critical reception—as well as her reputation—revolves around questions of essentialism: “most of the criticisms leveled against Irigaray’s work ... are based on or in some way linked to [a] fear of essentialism” [Fuss, 1989:55]. Critics and interpreters of Irigaray have normally taken one of two stances on the issue of essentialism: either they suggest that she is an essentialist and is therefore dangerous to feminism, or write that these essentialist elements are actually figurative and not to be taken literally. I would like to argue that both attitudes are incorrect: Irigaray makes use of essentialism, but this use is not dangerous for feminism. Rather, it forms the backbone of Irigaray’s call for change in the social order.

Toril Moi’s criticism of Irigaray for her essentialism is cited widely, and represents the first reaction. We should note that Moi assumes that essentialism is always regressive, reactionary, and to be avoided at all costs. She writes that “Irigaray’s attempt to establish a theory of femininity that escapes patriarchal specul(ari)zation necessarily lapses into a form of essentialism” [1985:143]. Further, she suggests that while [Irigaray] strongly defends the idea of ‘woman’ as multiple, decentred, and undefinable, her unsophisticated approach to
patriarchal power forces her to analyze ‘woman’ ... throughout as if ‘she’ were indeed a simple, unchanging unity, always confronting the same kind of monolithic patriarchal oppression [1985:148].

In other words, Irigaray essentializes and universalizes ‘women’ into a metaphysical and ideal category because she does not pay sufficient theoretical attention to power or to historical context [Moi, 1985:148-50]. Now, Moi’s critique is informed (indeed, rather obviously) by a strong anti-essentialism and a resulting suspicion of identity-politics. Moi, it seems, would be more comfortable jettisoning the concepts of ‘women,’ ‘female,’ and ‘femininity,’ along with identity politics as a whole. She remarks that feminism better approaches issues of both oppression and emancipation from a paradigm informed by marginality, subversion, and diffidence than from one informed by the metaphysical category of ‘women.’ Whatever ‘women’ are, she writes, they cannot be represented, cannot be spoken about, and are that which remains outside naming and ideologies [1985:154-169]. Finally, Moi both rejects identitarian identifications as a foundation for political coalitions, and suggests that there is nothing specific or unique about women’s struggles against patriarchal power structures—men, too, can be “marginalized by the symbolic order,” (which is as close as Moi comes to defining what a ‘woman’ actually is) [1985:164].

Moi’s critique is simplistic. Writing with such a strong suspicion of identity politics and essentialism, as well as a reluctance to attribute to women any characteristics whatsoever (even those required to group women within one undefined category), Moi is bound from the start to find Irigaray’s understanding of women, and use of the terms “woman” and “women” extremely troublesome. While Moi undertakes a powerful and well-argued critique, I believe that the premises and assumptions of her argument serve
only to destroy the feminist project. Moi's hopes of leaving woman undefined, free-floating, and changing feminism's focus to oppression and emancipation leaves no room for a feminist project: she dismisses any attempt to even name 'women', let alone define them, as hopelessly essentialist and therefore dangerous and oppressive. But without an entity of 'woman,' or indeed a category of 'women,' does not feminism become impossible? There must be a female subject, with some essential and universal attributes (whether biological or no), upon which to base the demands for change which are collectively termed 'feminist': without such a foundation, how can feminist demands for change even be conceptualized, let alone articulated? Admittedly Moi may not be at all interested in feminism; her interest seems to rest in marginality of all kinds rather than that specific to women. But if one believes (as both this writer and Irigaray do) that the sexual difference is the primary division in social life, then Moi's shift of focus from feminism to "oppression" in general is not at all satisfying. Rather, it prompts speculation that such a focus would ignore the oppression specific to women, strip feminism of what efficacy it has, and make political coalitions like feminism itself impossible.

The other common critique of Irigaray suggests that she is to be read figuratively (Whitford), metaphorically (Xu), metonymically, synchedotally, or as mockingly taking the masculine voice (Judith Butler and Sandra Bartky). These writers refuse to entertain the notion that Irigaray may be writing literally; they are careful to suggest that the appearance of the body, particularly the "two lips," should be read figuratively. Vicki Kirby describes a conference presentation in which just such a preemptive clarification of Irigaray was offered:
In anticipation of the charge of essentialism often leveled against this particular French feminist, a preliminary clarification was offered in her defense. We were told that corporeality in Irigaray's writing was to be understood as a decidedly literary evocation. Those notorious "two lips" were a figurative strategy, a metaphor ... to extinguish any lingering doubts that this argument may nevertheless harbor a naturalizing impulse, the anatomical or biological body was safely located outside the concerns of Irigaray's interventionist project [Schor, 1991:7].

Such a response is unfortunately common in Irigaray studies. Even Margaret Whitford is not safe from such a dissociation from the body in Irigaray's work.

Margaret Whitford is Irigaray's premier interpreter, and her interpretations of Irigaray are valuable resources to Irigaray scholars. Her analyses are cogent and powerful, but even Whitford dismisses the possibility that Irigaray is or could be writing literally. This paper does not presume to suggest that the figurative interpretation is wrong: there is ample evidence for, and critical acceptance of, that interpretation. But I believe that the literal interpretation—even the possibility of such an interpretation—has been rejected out of hand by even the very best Irigaray scholars, Whitford first among them.

Whitford, for example, suggests that Irigaray is not referring to a direct and unmediated relationship to the body. She interprets Irigaray's "statements about female ... as statements about representation" [Whitford, 1991a:86]. Whitford suggests that Irigaray is referring to an imaginary and symbolic representation of the body, an "ideal morphology," which "leaves residues that are unsymbolized" [Whitford, 1991a:70]. She is critical of those who interpret the "two lips" as literal in intent and meaning, and argues that Irigaray's statement that the "two lips" are "continually interchanging"
should tip the reader off that she cannot possibly be writing about "the real body, unmediated by the symbolic order, which women might recognize as their own" [1991a:170-1]. Whitford is careful to be very clear on this point, emphasizing that the "two lips" are the central figure in a scheme of metonymy and contiguity, and do not refer to the body: the lips are said to stand for "the vertical and horizontal relationships between women, the maternal genealogy, and the relation of sisterhood" [1991a:180]. As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, however, there is also ample evidence for the literality of the two lips and the presence of the female body throughout Irigaray's works. There is enough evidence to again prompt the question which Diana Fuss puts so clearly: "are the two lips a metaphor or not?" [Fuss, 1989:62]. While the figurative interpretation has the weight of critical opinion behind it, I would like to insist that the literal elements of the "two lips"--and of Irigaray's thought in general--are ripe for interpretation by feminist scholars who are not cowed by the presence of the essential, the biological, and the universal. Given the complex and convoluted arguments which must be used to prove that Irigaray is not writing literally, it may be wise to unsheath Ockham's razor and slice away the complex exonerations of essentialism until the simplest and most parsimonious explanation of what is really going on in these texts is revealed. I believe that the literal explanation might win such a contest. But setting the two interpretations up as contestants is perhaps not the best way to go about it: it is worth reading the literal and the figurative together and judging whether such an interpretation provides the texts with an additional layer of detail, and/or helps to solve this seemingly intractable problem.
Whitford also clears Irigaray of Moi's charge of essentialism. Viewing Irigaray's work as an "interpretive re-reading" and a "psychoanalytic undertaking"—rather than as a literal description of women's lives and situation—allows Whitford to interpret what is described as the female and the female imaginary to be "not the essential feminine, common to all women, but a place in the symbolic structures" [Whitford, 1991a:72]. Women's essence and identity does not yet exist, Whitford explains: "woman is a future identity rather than a biological or metaphysical determination" [1991a:137], and women's identity should be seen in terms of the construction of a "house of language" rather than as the "discursive articulation of an ontological category" [1991:135]. Whatever use of essentialism Irigaray may make, Whitford argues that she is only using it as a lever with which to displace the phallogocentric economy, using the master's tools to destroy the master's house [1991a:93]. While I agree with Whitford that Irigaray uses the phallogocentric system's tools to effect a radical and far-reaching critique, I must disagree with her assessment of Irigaray's use of essentialism. Irigaray makes undeniable use of essentialism and universalism, as much as many thinkers would hope to defend her from that conclusion.

I would now like to explore the interpretive reluctance to discuss the presence of the literal body in Irigaray's work; I would like to suggest that it may be due to a more deeply held feminist ambivalence toward the body—an ambivalence which Irigaray herself may strengthen. The largely postmodern feminist ambivalence about her use of the body is sometimes justified: she seems to rely on certain stereotypes about women, the female body, and female sexuality, and she deploys essentialism, biologism, and universalism.
At times, she appears to be unquestioningly basing her ideas of liberation and change on misogynist beliefs about women, beliefs which suggest they are controlled by the sexuality of their "defective" bodies and are closer to nature and less culturally sophisticated than men. She uses techniques and stereotypes which normally function to structure women's secondary position in the social to disrupt that social ordering—but the way she uses them turns the supports and justifications of the patriarchal order and its power structures against themselves. She plays with traditional views of women, turning on its head the cultural stereotype of women as the closer to nature and more biological of the two sexes. Her sophisticated understanding and use of essentialism and universalism allows her to challenge the belief that women's bodies are primarily biological-reproductive entities and therefore belong in the private, as well as the view that women's relationship to their own biological natures threatens culture. This challenge works the tropes against themselves; she takes them further than they were meant to go, and she adds in new demands and new concepts such that the concepts are quite different than when she first took them up. Irigaray's use of women's physicality and women's sexuality show this process of challenge and revaluation of the traditional (masculine) justifications for women's secondary position in social life.

A more insidious reason for the discomfort with the presence of the biological in Irigaray may rest in women's desire to claim a relationship to the rational and cultural; as women's social inequality has in large part been justified by recourse to the "defective" female body, this misguided unease with the body and desire for a recognized relationship with the cultural is predictable. Women have traditionally been understood as the more
biological or natural of the sexes, while man is more closely associated with culture. Woman's closeness to nature has been thought to result from their reproductive abilities. Women's bodies and their reproductive abilities have been used to justify different treatment of the sexes, as well as different assessments of their cognitive strengths and abilities; women's bodies are assumed to be weaker, less capable, and more prone to irregularity, intrusion, and unpredictability than men's [Grosz, 1994:14]. Elizabeth Grosz puts it well when she writes that "patriarchal oppression ... justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men with the body and through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms" [Grosz, 1994:14]. This view, of course, presumes a dichotomy (and a hierarchical relationship) between the mind/self and the body (which I believe Irigaray convincingly rejects); it is therefore not surprising that those (many) feminist thinkers who take this value-laden dichotomy for granted tend to dissociate women from the female body. As Butler describes it, "the return to biology as the ground of a specific feminine sexuality or meaning seems to defeat the feminist premise that biology is not destiny [Butler, 1990: 30]. Against this uneasiness with biology, female persons are euphemized into agents, actors, and subjects--disembodied ghosts floating around without troublesome reminders of the female body's sexual specificity like breasts and pregnant bellies. Wishing to escape the cultural sign of female specificity, some feminist thinkers denounce the body and its role in human (female) life in favor of rationality, philosophy, and status as "honorary men". This stance suggests that women must become like men if they are to engage in culturally worthy pursuits--in Irigaray's terms, "slipping into men's skin" and engaging in the sorts of elevated pursuits historically understood to
be restricted to men [TD:79]. As Naomi Schor notes, "it is as though certain feminists were more comfortable evacuating the body from the precincts of high theory--thereby, of course, reinforcing the very hierarchies they would dismantle--than carefully separating out what belongs to nature and what to the world of matter" [Schor, 1994: 69]. The sexism inherent in such a position hardly needs explaining: not only does this view support an idea of a naturally inferior female sex, it maintains rationality, philosophy, science and technology as the legitimate province of men. The female body remains off-limits, unsuitable and inappropriate as either a topic of discussion or as a level of analysis. In contrast with this view, Irigaray suggests that women (and feminists) as a group need to repossess both their sexed identity, and their relationship to their bodies--and that such a reclamation will allow them to make rationality, philosophy, science, and technology at least partly their own.

An uneasy echo of the stereotype of women's unruly biology possessing power to disrupt culture sounds when Irigaray posits the female body as a source of challenge to the symbolic order and patriarchal power structures. Women's bodies, in Irigaray's analysis, have the power to disrupt and destroy men's culture. As discussed above, man's culture is founded upon the delegation of materiality to woman; woman is also forced to take on the burden of both her own and man's materiality, a devalued and feared materiality, which results in her identification as the biological half of the human race. The feminine body is constructed out of man's desires and his ideas about pleasure, orgasm, beauty, femininity, and the proper feminine attributes. It is a body which in woman masquerades, in her desire to fulfill man's desire. The biological, sexually-specific female body is the blind spot in
this view. Untheorized, unrecognised, and unacknowledged, women's bodies—and women themselves—are completely outside the system of representation and (e)valuation which creates and operates as culture. Irigaray suggests that the most appropriate means of challenge of this state of affairs rests in women embracing their physicality: "jamming the theoretical machinery" by voicing the fact of their possession of a uniquely female body. Judith Butler puts it more directly: she suggests that Irigaray's response to the exclusion of the female is to say "Fine, I don't want to be in your economy anyway, and I'll show you what this unintelligible receptacle can do to your system by ... showing that what cannot enter [the female self/body] it is already inside it (as its necessary outside)" [Butler, 1993:45]. The female body, when acknowledged in accordance with the stereotype, has the power to disrupt and destroy cultural structures. But, in Irigaray's twist of the stereotype, it also has the power to create new structures based on sexual difference—which takes the stereotype beyond it's normal scope, stretching it into something new. If women are the repository of the biological, she implies, then why should they not be the source of the birth of the new order? Even as she challenges the status of the feminine as body yet lacking a body of her own, she works the stereotype against itself, revealing its inconsistencies and blind spots. The female body will show the idea of the feminine to be pure construction (just as living the masquerade of femininity deliberately in a strategy of mimesis will reveal the social construction of the feminine's status as 'the natural'). Relations of supposed sexual difference will be revealed as relations of same with same; the representational economy will be revealed as a masculine construction which could be otherwise.
Irigaray challenges cultural stereotypes of the lewd, pleasure-craving, never-satisfied female lover. Irigaray again twists the stereotype, however, and in doing so she enlarges our understanding of the nature of sexual pleasure. Women's sexual pleasure has long been an object of suspicion in both psychoanalysis and in culture at large. Irigaray seems to support that suspicion in her descriptions of women's sexuality in *This Sex Which is Not One*. Characterizing women's sexuality as plural, she suggests that "woman has sex organs more or less everywhere" and that woman "finds pleasure almost anywhere" [TS:28]. Irigaray seems to suggest that women are sex: given the descriptions above, women's sexuality seems to pervade their entire bodies. Women have a number of erogenous zones and a number of kinds of pleasure: beyond the obvious sites and pleasures, Irigaray seems to imply that a woman could get as much pleasure from non-genital and non-erogenous contacts as from any of the more obliquely genital sites of sexual pleasure. Irigaray's suggestions about the female body and female sexual pleasure may seem ridiculous in the light of a conception of sexuality teleologically focused on orgasm (specifically, on intercourse and ejaculation), but her point is that women are not occupied or controlled by the drive for orgasm. Women's sexuality is far more amorphous and diverse than current models suggest. Women's sexuality, she writes, "really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" [TS, 30]. In extending the realm of sexual pleasure from the genital to the corporeal, the pleasures of the body—as well as the more specific pleasures of the genitals—may be included in what is defined as sexual pleasure. Because Irigaray believes the genital model to
belong to a masculine model of sexual pleasure, the female body again is able to exert its disrupting influence on prevailing cultural understandings. While Irigaray here comes rather disconcertingly close to an essentialist, biologistic, and universalistic conflation of women and sex, she uses it to open up the possibility of different understandings of the body, and of sexual pleasure. It is not conservative in application; instead, Irigaray's use of essentialism, biologism, universalism, and of this stereotype, is radical in both its implications and its effects.

Irigaray's ideas show that there are more interesting ways of thinking about the body than those allowed by a feminism(s) preoccupied with the debate between anti-essentialism and essentialism. I think it is worth rethinking this issue. After all, humans live in bodies, and without theorizing those bodies, we are blind to the ways in which biology and social construction work together to form the people we recognize as human. Paying attention to the social and political effects of embodiment and corporeality is key: any social theory which abstracts human beings from their bodies is simplistic in its ignorance of the way the politics of the body play out in social life. While the Cartesian split would sever the mind from the body, making the body the locus of materiality and the mind a creative entity free of the constraints the body presents, a different understanding of the mind and the body may be more helpful to feminism. The insights of the existential phenomenological approach to the body seem to me to have a great deal to offer feminism.

The existential phenomenological body is understood as the human being's basis for action in the world: it is the condition which allows entry
into the world, allows us to exist in the world, as well as to undertake action within the world [Sartre, 1956:304-318]. Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that the body has three dimensions: that in which individuals "exist" their bodies, that in which the body is used and known by others, and that in which one exists for oneself as a body known by the other [1956:304-351]. The relations of self and body and other are a central part of Sartrean philosophy, and existentialism in general, and these insights may be of theoretical interest to a range of feminists currently outside the discourse of continental philosophy and/or de Beauvoirian feminism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought on the body is also worth a feminist re-reading: he refuses to separate the body from the self or the soul, just as he will not split the subject from the object in the human self [1969:185]. The mind is rooted in the body and its experience, he writes: the body is not an object in the world, but is rather that which grants us our point of view on the world [1969:369]. Merleau-Ponty is worth quoting at length as he explains his understanding of the body:

My awareness of [the body] is not a thought—its unity is always implicit and vague. It is always something other than what it is, always sexuality and at the same time freedom,\(^\text{31}\) rooted in nature at the very moment when it is transformed by cultural influences, never hermetically sealed and never left behind ... I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience [Merleau-Ponty, 1969:213].

Merleau-Ponty is not without his difficulties for feminist thought, but feminist thinkers will do well to note his reluctance to split the body from the self, or from the experience of the world and its contents.

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\(^{30}\) Judith Butler discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body and sexuality in her 1989 article, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception".

\(^{31}\) Merleau-Ponty's dichotomy between sexuality and freedom is interesting in its opposition to Irigaray, who suggests that in female sexuality is found freedom from the patriarchal economy of the same.
Taking the body into account does not mean slipping into regressive determinism or biologism which ties women to the hearth by their apronstrings. On the contrary—theorizing the body could have positive effects. First, in terms of theory, thinking about the body does not require a solely biological focus. The body is, I think, best understood as both biological and social. Theorizing the interplay of materiality and construction could not only give feminists additional insights into the workings of both constructivism and essentialism [see Fuss, 1989], but may also reveal some of the ways in which power relations, social structures, and other political phenomena affect the ways in which women understand and exist within their bodies. Second, recognition of the role of the body is also important in terms of practical feminist struggles. Many of the most salient issues for feminists today are those of the body: those of abortion, access to contraception, female genital mutilation, women's medical studies, and the new reproductive technologies are centrally dependent on understandings of the female body, embodiment, and corporeality, and each seems to revolve around a somewhat taken-for-granted body. Finally, becoming aware of the ways in which the body is also socially constructed and understood will ensure that the problematization of the body does not become a "regressive retreat to the anatomical" (to take Irigaray's words), but is able to add significantly to feminist thought and action.

Finally, I would like to discuss two aspects of Irigaray's thought which I find troublesome: her rather unsophisticated view of power and her omniscient view of social relations. First, Irigaray does not offer a strong understanding of power, particularly in relation to the body and to sexual
difference. I would like to suggest that her lack of attention to power imports a glaring weakness into her arguments about the female body and about sexual difference; the only power relations she comments on are those which occur in phallogocentric social structures, but even then she does not analyze the causal power relationships which result in those structures. The natural female body of Irigaray's thought seems to be an unchanging physical essence which is not subject to the same change, diversion, inversion, and differences in style or forms of knowledge which affect the social realm. It seems to be immune to the machinations of power and untouchable by, for example, the corporeally- and historically-manifested powers which Foucault describes in the three volumes of his History of Sexuality. The feminine body, that constructed within the hom(m)o-sexual economy, is the locus of power: it is responsive to changing historical understandings of the body and of ideal female bodies. As Irigaray's female body is left outside of culture—outside the only realm in which power operates, and in which change and differences are assumed to occur—it is open to the charge of ahistoricism. The female body seems to exist in a power vacuum. It is not clear to me, however, that the body is ever truly left outside culture or power relations, as the female is, or totally constructed within culture and utterly subject to power relations, as Irigaray's feminine is. I also believe that recognition of the subject's historicity, and of the influences of power upon it, is made more difficult (if not precluded) if the female body is understood ahistorically and seen as a foundation for the construction of the female subject. It is important to acknowledge historical changes in understandings of the body, the self, and the self's relationship to the body, and to investigate the reasons why these changes occur—specifically, to note the power relations and social structures
which encourage various accounts of the body and the self. I believe that Irigaray's account is incapable of such commentary, because of her lack of concern with power and power relations.

The second challenge to Irigaray's conception of power suggests that she may be understood as positing a normative female body and sexuality which is before or outside or beyond power [Butler, 1990:30]. Irigaray's view of the female body and the female self as outside culture is troublesome, because in suggesting that women have been a cultural presence only insofar as they have lived the masquerade of femininity—that women have not existed within culture—Irigaray suggests that women have hitherto been neither subjects nor participants in civil society. It may be true that femininity is a social construction based on masculine desire. But to write that women have historically been nonexistant, that they have never been subjects or members of civil society, is by no means uncontroversial. I suggest that it is both insulting and inaccurate to suggest that women have not been members of civil society: not only famous women, but ordinary women who have participated in political contests and activism have taken part in the political hurly-burly of civil society. It is, of course, exactly Irigaray's point that they have not, but I believe that her view effectively denies women positions of historical and political agency; her view quite clearly implies that women are not and have never been subjects, and thereby exempts them from the play of history and politics. She implies that women have had no part in the construction of current social order: social and economic power structures, relations between and within states, social mores, and politics have, according to Irigaray, been constructed by patriarchal, phallogocentric power structures in which women have no part. This preserves women's moral purity in the
face of a history full of war, destruction, and immorality, but I believe it can also deny women a right to celebrate the social, economic, political, and artistic successes of human history as partially their own. Irigaray's view also exempts women from responsibility for the problems and tragedies of history. While Irigaray argues that the order is corrupt and has no place for women, I believe that women should not retreat to a position of moral purity from which to critique the current (or historical) order. Instead, women should demand a part in the decision-making, responsibility, and integrity of the political world.

Irigaray should be faulted for her understanding of power, which seems to operate only in the social sphere, leaving the pre-discursive physical body and female self untouched; hers is a rather naive understanding of power in comparison with a view like Michel Foucault's, Butler's, or Sandra Bartky's. Worst of all, Irigaray's view exempts women from responsibility as human subjects and prevents them from being viewed as capable and responsible actors in the world. Irigaray's turn to the body is designed to remedy this state of affairs by allowing women to attain their sexually-specific subjectivity, but the consequences of her view of women as hitherto outside a corrupt masculine regime are unsavory and pose a danger to any social or political project which seeks to have women recognized as responsible subjects and as members of civil society.

Second, Irigaray's omniscient view of social relations is open to question. How does Irigaray step outside both the phallogocentric social order, and the a-cultural realm of the female, to offer her description of both realms? Is there perhaps a neutral third place from which she speaks, an archimedean point of observation from which she can see both the social and
the a-social? Irigaray's description of femininity is premised on her ability to comment on that construction; as the feminine arguably lacks this capability, Irigaray must be exempted from membership in that category. Similarly, her discussion of the female is undertaken from a place which allows her to comment on it as though she is external to it: she tells the reader about the power of *jouissance*, the uses of essence and the universal and the ways they can be used to make a space for the female and bring down the phallogocentric order. Given her understanding of sexual difference, however, this omniscient point of view seems contradictory: the stress which Irigaray places upon sexual difference would suggest that one is first, foremost, and always a woman (or a man), and that this identity is the foundation of identity—and yet she seems to abandon that point of view in favor of a universal and gender-neutral perspective. Indeed, this point of view shapes and guides her reflections on the phallogocentric order.

These questions are only some of those which can be asked to and about Irigaray; there are many more which can be asked about the ideas discussed above. It is in this process of analysis and questioning, I believe, that Irigaray's value and usefulness is found: she forces her reader to ask difficult and profound questions about the state of the social and political universes, and about one's self. While Irigaray's answers may not always be satisfactory, they are thought-provoking. At minimum, they reveal weaknesses in her thought, but at her strongest, Irigaray's responses have the potential to challenge our understandings of the social world and the relationships between our gender, our selves, and our bodies.
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