

## CHAPTER ONE

# EMBODIMENT, CONTINGENCY, AND AMBIGUITY

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Feminists sometimes would like to talk in terms of a reversal of power. The men have had it, now we'll take the power. I don't think this is the gesture that needs to be made. It's necessary to establish a relation of two . . . two, but different from that which already exists.

—Irigaray 1995

In addition to those who would eliminate gender by arguing that so-called cultural differences are really natural, there has been a powerful tendency among feminists to empty sex of its content by arguing, conversely, that natural differences are really cultural.

—Laqueur 1990

### SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND "THE BODY"

In a rather well-known statement, Luce Irigaray maintains that sexual difference is perhaps *the* significant issue of our age (1993a, 5). Until very recently, the issue of sexual difference—and relatedly, “the body”—was neglected both by the Western philosophical tradition and by feminism’s response to that tradition. Western philosophy has been a primary culprit in the establishing and maintaining of dualisms, in which the characteristics of the first terms of each dichotomous pair have been prioritized and the second terms have been rendered subordinate or invisible. Keeping with this ordering, the relation between the sexes has been defined according to a hierarchical conception of reality; men and women, or masculine and feminine, have been conceived as opposing binaries—men/masculine being traditionally prioritized over women/feminine.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing women's subordination to men under Western dualistic thought, feminists of equality attempted to elevate women to men's position. That is, to rectify the inferior status held by women in relation to men, egalitarian feminists proposed that women should be conceived as equal to men. Women should be allowed to assume the same place as men. For Simone de Beauvoir, for example, women would ideally leave their realm of immanence to join men in their realm of transcendence.<sup>2</sup> In Irigaray's view, the egalitarian response to the traditional relation between the sexes is problematic in that it leaves the logic of hierarchical thought intact. Feminists of equality, rather than interrogate traditional thought, seek a solution to women's subordination and exclusion within the traditional structure itself. In the case of Beauvoir, she does not so much challenge the transcendence/immanence dichotomy as move women from a subordinated term to a privileged one. Insofar as women's exclusion in the West is a structural, or as Genevieve Lloyd (1989) claims, a conceptual exclusion, women remain concealed when traditional frameworks are left intact. While feminists intended to improve women's situations by having them assume the privileged position, in actuality, they simply adopted a problematic structure—thereby leaving in place the mechanism of their own oppression. Women were rendered “equal” only insofar as they were depicted as “the same.” Moreover, this privileged position often benefits women with class or race privilege, and it is often won at the expense of less privileged women. Ellen Messer-Davidow states that once feminists “accept the traditional framing of this matter . . . we have no way out of the system we want to change” (1989, 76).

Irigaray's concern is with the way that women have been rendered subordinate or invisible by, and within, the Western philosophical tradition. Irigaray states, “The feminine has never been defined except for the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine” (1985b, 146). Or as Barbara Freeman attributes to Irigaray, “[W]oman, as the possibility of a genuine sexual difference rather than one term in a binarism, does not exist in Western thought” (1988, 167). The result of a hierarchical construction of the sexes is that difference in terms of binarism is not genuine difference at all; rather, it is a mere modeling of the feminine on the basis of the masculine, in accord with an economy of the same. Insofar as feminists of equality, like the tradition they criticize, have only conceived women as measured against men, they have likewise failed to think sexual difference. By seeking inclusion within a masculine standard, feminists of equality have conspired in the exclusion of feminine difference. The egalitarian approach to feminism has failed to relinquish the priority and privilege of the male model.<sup>3</sup>

For Irigaray, to think through the issue of sexual difference is to (re)think the relation between men and women. To think sexual difference is to think “difference” apart from hierarchy. Given that (sexual) difference has always been rendered on a hierarchical basis, to genuinely (re)think sexual difference is to reconceive the relation between traditional categories of opposi-

tion.<sup>4</sup> Irigaray's project, in her words, "is not to create a theory of woman, but to secure a place for the feminine within sexual difference" (1985b, 156). Unlike egalitarian feminists, Irigaray does not seek to render two terms equivalent (by conceiving the feminine as equal to the masculine) nor does she aim to valorize one term over the other (by reversing the traditional hierarchy). Irigaray says:

In refusing or neglecting to interrogate their own categories of thought, feminists who pursue a "politics of equality" which demands not to be behind, not to be "second," are complicitous in women's exclusion from philosophy. (1995, 93)

Feminist efforts to secure a valid place for women by situating them in the privileged position ("on top") within a hierarchy is still to maintain the hierarchy. Putting women in the place where men have been merely attributes to women men's traditional location. In so doing, a genuine thinking of feminine difference—of women's "place"—remains neglected. Messer-Davidow maintains, "The mistake of many feminists . . . is reassigning traits to male and female, valorizing female and devaluing male, or shifting male and female roles" (1989, 76). The principle error is failing to question the traditional system.

Traditionally rendered, masculine and feminine difference, Irigaray claims, "has always operated 'within' systems that are representative, self-representative, of the (masculine) subject" (1985b, 159). Within such systems, the feminine has always been both absorbed and displaced by the masculine. Conceiving the feminine from its own point of view, the masculine has reduced the feminine to its own definition. Defining the feminine in masculine terms, the *feminine* has never been allowed to exist. Feminist proponents of equality maintain this same structure—as Irigaray depicts Beauvoir's position, for example: "I want to be the equal of man; I want to be the same as man; finally, I want to be a masculine subject" (1995, 99). No less problematic are feminist attempts to gain power by assuming the dominant position (that is, by reversing the hierarchy), since such efforts fail to relinquish the hierarchy itself. Different from both types of feminist program, Irigaray's project is to think "a relation of two," that is, of two [masculine and feminine] subjects.

Although men have always been attributed (or, have attributed to themselves) the role of subjects (and women of objects), underlying the traditional relation between masculine and feminine is a pretension that the subject is neutral. For instance, in prioritizing mind over body, Descartes suggests, as Susan Bordo indicates, that "given the right method, one can transcend the body" (1987, 94); "assured of his own transparency, he can relate with absolute neutrality to the objects he surveys" (95). Within Cartesian mind/body dualism, the mind is not simply juxtaposed to the body;

rather, the body must be precisely transcended for the mind (the subject) to acquire objective knowledge. To be a knowing subject is to be detached from the exterior world of objects. However, feminists such as Evelyn Fox Keller and Carol Gilligan have pointed out that this so-called objective conception of knowledge is inherently “masculinist.” As masculinist, Fox Keller indicates its emphasis on “autonomy, separation, and distance” and its “radical rejection of any commingling of subject and object” (1985, 79). And Bordo claims that “Descartes’ program for the purification of the understanding . . . has as its ideal the rendering *impossible* of any such continuity between subject and object” (1987, 103).<sup>5</sup>

Irigaray exposes as problematic the lack of a genuine relation, or of a passage, between traditional dualistic pairs—including the masculine (subject) and the feminine (object). As Irigaray emphasizes, an ontology of separation is based on a male morphology. Despite a presumed neutrality of the subject, the subject is—in fact—of the male sex/body. Although Descartes’ effort was to transcend the body, his body remains the hidden element in his theorizing.<sup>6</sup> Irigaray’s concern with such pretensions of neutrality connects her with the focus of other recent theorists of sexual difference (for example, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, and Elizabeth Grosz) on the alleged neutrality of the body. Like women themselves, “the body” has been rendered either subordinate or invisible by, and within, the discourse of philosophy. The characteristics traditionally attributed to bodies, for example, their threat to “disrupt, erupt, overtake and overwhelm” (cf. Bordo 1987, 93), have found their corollary in the feminine. Thus, in seeking to escape the body, Western philosophy has diverted its thought from “woman” or the feminine. Similarly, feminists—in focusing on equality and sameness rather than difference—drew attention away from female bodies, since a focus on feminine, bodily difference was feared to prolong the subordination of women to men. As Elizabeth Spelman has indicated, feminism itself has fostered a profound somatophobia (cf. 1988, 120).

As a theorist of sexual difference, Irigaray seeks a relation between men and women that construes the two categories as neither essentially the same nor incommensurably opposed. Irigaray’s interest in such a relation also connects with Laqueur’s description of the one-sex and two-sex models of male and female bodies in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), since Laqueur indicates that different *interpretations* of bodies render different conceptions of the male-female relation.<sup>7</sup> However, Irigaray may also be viewed as rejecting both the one-sex and the two-sex models, as described by Laqueur, in that she seeks a conception of sexual difference beyond a mere reinterpretation of presumed biological facts. Theorists such as Butler, Gatens, Grosz, and Irigaray precisely question the relegation of bodies to the “natural” or the “biological” in the first place. As Laqueur’s account of the one-sex and two-sex models demonstrates, male and female bodies, rather than being “brute givens,” are objects subject to interpretation.

Thus, the “same” bodies (that is, women’s bodies) have been rendered—at different times—both lesser versions of men’s and radically distinct from men’s. Gayle Rubin has pointed out that “sex as we know it . . . is itself a social product” (1975, 166), while Messer-Davidow has emphasized the concept “*ideas about sex and gender,*” rather than *sex/gender traits*, in part to stress “that both phenomena are constructions” (1989, 76).

Consequently, Laqueur and others claim that the notion of the sexes as “opposed” is a cultural/historical development rather than a factual depiction of male and female bodies. “Language,” Laqueur maintains, “marks this view of sexual difference” (1990, 4). One result of the idea of “opposing sexes,” in Laqueur’s view, is that “sexuality as a singular and all-important human attribute with a specific object—the *opposite sex*—is the product of the late eighteenth century” (1990, 13). He concludes, “There is nothing natural about it” (13). And as Rubin has suggested, “Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex” (1975, 180). A particular conception or interpretation of the relationship between male and female *bodies* is thereby linked to a certain notion of sexual desire. As the sexes are conceived as oppositional, the object of desire is constructed as the purported opposite sex. As a “given” sex is considered to entail a specific gender, that sex is likewise thought to demand a specific object of desire. “Desire” is thereby implicated in different views—or models—of the relation between male and female bodies.

Whereas on the one-sex model, women are thought to be atrophied variations of men; on the two-sex model, women are interpreted to be qualitatively distinct from men. Sexual difference, or the relation between the sexes, is rendered on the basis of “degree” in the one instance versus “kind” in the other. Around the year 1800, Laqueur claims:

In place of what strikes the modern imagination as an almost perverse insistence on understanding sexual difference as a matter of degree, gradations of one basic male type, there arose a shrill call to articulate sharp corporeal distinctions. . . . Sexual difference in kind, not degree, seemed solidly grounded in nature. (Laqueur 1990, 5–6)

The very notion of sexual difference as “grounded in nature” led egalitarian feminists to de-emphasize women’s difference(s) from men and to stress their likeness(es) to them. That is, feminists upheld a wariness of “difference” between the sexes and retreated from “the body,” since bodies were understood to link women with an unalterable nature—and “nature” was considered responsible for maintaining women’s subordination to men. By moving away from bodies, feminists adopted—or took as obvious—an articulation of bodies as natural, given, static, and factual.

However, for feminist theorists of sexual difference, to think through the issue of sexual difference is to bring into question the very notion of

bodies as “factual” or “natural” at all. Such theorists do not limit or essentialize women by placing them “in” their bodies, as they have sometimes been accused of doing. Instead of suggesting that women transcend their bodies, sexual difference theorists locate the possibility of women’s movement in an interrogation of bodies themselves. Rather than promoting an overcoming of bodies (the same type of transcendence argued, for men, by traditional philosophy), their aim is to confront bodies in their usual renderings. Hence, “the body” central to feminist theories of sexual difference is not the body as traditionally conceived. While the Western tradition has overwhelmingly neglected bodies as worthy topics of investigation, bodies—when they *have* been considered—have been theorized as restricting, confining, and impeding. It is not until recently that they have been thought otherwise.

#### CONTINGENCY, NON-NEUTRALITY, SEX/GENDER

Neglect or distrust of bodies, as suggested above, has been prevalent in feminism and has infected the feminist distinction between sex and gender. Genevieve Lloyd indicates, for example, that part of the problem with the sex-gender distinction as traditionally conceived by feminists is that the “distinction itself brings with it many of the difficulties inherent in Descartes’ way of conceptualizing the relation between mind and body” (1989, 19). Bodies, or sexes, have been considered “independent of processes of socialisation,” while minds, or genders, have been rendered “complete unto themselves” (Lloyd 1989, 19).<sup>8</sup> The Cartesian mind-body relation, like the feminist sex-gender distinction, is a relation in which “bodily differences lie entirely outside the realm of mind” or gender—“causally interacting with it, but separate from it” (19). In separating mind from body, gender from sex, mind/body and gender/sex are established to relate only arbitrarily. Confined to their own distinctive and mutually exclusive realms, neither mind/body nor gender/sex need seemingly relate at all. The connection between femininity (gender) and the female body (sex) is depicted as merely accidental. Thus, feminists have claimed that female bodies are capable of assuming masculine traits (a different gender), enabling women to engage in an equal relation with men. However, residing behind this conceptualization of the sex-gender distinction is the problematic assumption that the body is neutral.

In “A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction,” Gatens states, “Concerning the neutrality of the body, let me be explicit, there is no neutral body, there are at least two kinds of bodies; the male body and the female body” (1991, 145). Gatens’s claim against assumptions of bodies as neutral is a claim against, what she calls, “the postulated *arbitrary* connection between femininity and the female body; masculinity and the male body” (1991, 140). Gatens suggests, in a way comparable to Irigaray, that it is the relation between categories that must be interrogated. In the case of Gatens, it is a certain presumed relation between femininity and female bodies, masculinity

and male bodies, that proves problematic. While the traditional conception of the relation between sex and gender has been one of necessity—that is, masculinity has been conceived to attach to male bodies, femininity to female bodies, by a sort of ontological necessity—feminist programs of degendering have, on the other hand, attempted to elevate women to men's equals by proposing that women, like men, are capable of assuming masculine characteristics. While on the traditional conception of their relation, sex and gender collapse (they merge by way of a presumed ontological necessity), on feminist proposals of degendering, sex and gender strictly divide (they are conceived to relate only arbitrarily). Bodies are presumed to be neutral, allowing the application of either masculine or feminine characteristics. At the forefront of Gatens's critique is the presumed arbitrariness of the relation between the categories of sex and gender. What occurs in-between the bodies discussed by Gatens—the male body and the female body—marks the site of a new critical examination.

For Irigaray, both the traditional and the degendering views of the sex-gender relation or distinction would be mistaken. On the traditional view, gender is absorbed into sex; the difference between gender and sex is neutralized. On the degendering view, gender displaces sex; gender is prioritized to the exclusion of sex. In a similar manner, Anne Edwards remarks that the “overwhelming preoccupation with the socially constructed differences and divisions between men and women . . . has inevitably resulted in gender getting all the attention and sex being largely forgotten” (1989, 7). “Until very recently,” Edwards continues, “the original equation of sex with biology, as something *pregiven* and non-social remained unquestioned” (7). Feminists neglected sex, or emptied sex of content and focused on gender, since sex—like the body—was presumed to be simply given or neutral. In the words of Gatens, sex was conceived as a “barren category” (1991, 139). The category *gender* appeared a more fruitful one for feminist purposes. Lack of attention to sex, by feminists, parallels lack of concern with the body by Western philosophy in general. Bodies, as Grosz points out, have “remained a conceptual blind spot” (1994, 3). Likewise, Laqueur emphasizes, “The presence of the body is so veiled as to be almost hidden” (1990, 12). And Braidotti remarks, “In a lot of ways, the body is the dark continent of feminist thought” (1994, 180).

In addition to Gatens's critique, the presumed neutral status of bodies has been the focus of Butler and Grosz. Their analyses assume the following form: for Grosz, social, historical, and cultural factors do not merely impinge on *pregiven* bodies; rather, such factors actively produce bodies as of a “determinate type” (1994, x). Grosz places bodies at the center of analysis, not in an attempt to reduce subjectivity to bodies, but in an effort to explain the effects of subjectivity “using the subject's corporeality as a framework” (1994, vii). She undermines dualistic views of the subject (that is, the idea that minds and bodies are two separate, unconnected sorts of “stuff”) by discussing both how the subject's “psychical interior” acts to form a body as a specific type of

exteriority (from the inside out), and how “social inscriptions” on the body’s surface serve to produce a psychological interiority (from the outside in). Grosz demonstrates how bodies, of their very “nature,” are amenable to social organization and completion; that is to say, how bodies are volatile. In their volatility, bodies are located in-between “inner” and “outer”—marking the locus of connection between the psychological and the social.

Like Grosz, Butler (1993) argues that gender is not a cultural overlay or construct imposed on a given sex or body. Such a view is problematic, Butler claims, since (in language comparable to Irigaray’s) gender so conceived “absorbs and displaces” sex (5). Sex is construed as a factual/static state of the subject’s body which is, in effect, cancelled by the social meaning assumed by gender. By contrast, Butler maintains that the concept of sex is itself problematic. Sex is not a pre-given object, but is instead an ideal construct. It is, in Butler’s view, a “regulatory ideal” in the Foucauldian sense. “Regulatory power” is not an external imposition of “power” on a subject but is an operative constraint in the subject’s very formation. For Butler, the materiality of bodies (or, the category *sex*) is both “constructed” by, and resistant to, social/historical/cultural influences. Bodies are not simply given; instead, they are “forcibly materialized through time” (Butler 1993, 1). Thus, sex is not merely a factual/natural category. It is, rather, a “cultural norm” governing bodies and their materialization. This implies that sex is not only a malleable—or volatile—category, but that it is a normative one. Sex (as it regulates bodies) resides in-between construction and constraint.

On this point, Butler can be brought into dialogue with Gatens, since Gatens argues against feminist programs of degendering that conceive sex as a biological category and gender as a social one, and claim that women can attain equality with men through a resocialization of gender roles. In Gatens’s view, such programs uncritically assume that “the body is neutral and passive with regard to the formation of consciousness,” and that “the important effects of the historical and cultural specificity of one’s ‘lived experience’ is able to be altered . . . by consciously changing the material practices of the culture in question” (1991, 143). For Gatens, it is significant that cultures do not simply valorize masculinity, for example. She states, “It is not masculinity *per se* that is valorized in our culture but the masculine male” (151). Since, as Gatens indicates, “a network of relations [normative relations] obtain between femininity and femaleness, that is, between the female *body* and femininity,” there is likewise “a qualitative difference between the kind of femininity ‘lived’ by men” (146). Again, for Gatens, the relation between such categories must be examined.

In agreement with Gatens, Grosz claims that gender cannot be construed as an ideological category imposed on a biological foundation. That is, if bodies are not natural facts as has been supposed, but are themselves volatile, then gender can no longer be conceived as a malleable overlay on a static category *sex*. To (re)think bodies is, thus, to rethink the distinction/relation



between gender and sex. Like Gatens, Grosz maintains that genders cannot be neutrally ascribed to bodies. The masculinity of male bodies is not the same as the masculinity of female bodies. In the words of Grosz, the kind of body matters in the “meaning and function of gender that emerges” (1994, 58).

One consequence of Grosz’s focus on bodies, as she herself notes, is that it allows the question of sexual difference to be framed in new ways. Through an investigation of bodies, Grosz states that questions of women’s sexual specificity can be raised to more readily “demonstrate and problematize” the social subordination of women to men. Grosz brings sexual difference to the forefront, showing how an investigation of bodies must also be an investigation of bodies as sexed. In a way similar to Grosz, Gatens indicates that programs of degendering neutralize sexual difference by proposing “sexual equality” through relearning what are taken to be arbitrary gender roles. However, if the human subject is conceived in sexually specific terms, then in Gatens’s view, “patriarchy” is not properly conceived as “a system of social organization that valorizes the masculine *gender* over the feminine gender. Gender is not the issue,” Gatens states, “sexual difference is” (1991, 145).

For Irigaray, as with Gatens and Grosz, the rethought relation between sex and gender is neither one of necessity nor of arbitrariness; it is, rather, one of contingency. Irigaray’s thinking through sexual difference is, again, a thinking of difference—the difference between sex and gender included—to foster alliance without absorption. The type of relation that can both preserve and mediate difference is precisely a contingent one. Whereas the traditional view of the relation between sex and gender erred in relating sex and gender necessarily, feminist responses to the traditional view, in the form of degendering programs, failed in conceiving the relation as purely arbitrary. This is to say that while masculinity has been traditionally conceived as the only logical outcome of male bodies (and femininity of female bodies), feminists mistakenly took the opposing view, claiming *no* correspondence between gender and sex. By detaching gender from sex, feminists—like the tradition, albeit in an opposing way from the tradition—neglected the significance of sex and its relation to gender. If subjectivity can be explained on the basis of corporeality while not being reducible to it, as Grosz suggests, then the subject neither passively adopts a natural, given gender nor actively assumes a gender unrelated to sex or the body. Rather, the subject resides at the intersection of—in-between—natural/biological sex and cultural/social gender (cf. Braidotti 1994, 182). The subject is neither a passive surface nor an active, unrestrained site. In this respect, the bodies at the center of feminist analyses of sexual difference are bodies as lived; that is, bodies that reside in-between nature and culture.

To say that the relation between sex and gender must be understood as “contingent” means that although male bodies tend to adopt masculine traits (or female bodies, feminine ones), this mapping of sex to gender is not a required or necessary one. For example, male bodies can, and sometimes

do, assume traditionally feminine traits (and vice versa). The very ability of bodies to assume “unexpected” characteristics defeats the claim that sex causes gender. Moreover, the traditional notion that sex and gender are necessarily or naturally linked translates into relegating such cases of unexpected gender assumption to the heading *unnatural*. Such unnaturalness is precisely born of a faulty assumption vis-à-vis sex and gender. Thus, as Butler claims, “oppressive gender norms continue to exist only to the extent that they are taken up and given life again and again” (1986, 41). The mistake of egalitarian or degendering feminists is failing to recognize the normative nature of the category *sex*; that is, neglecting the fact that different meanings are attributed to various mappings of sex to gender. Some of these mappings are promoted while others are “prohibited.” On a theory of sexual difference, these very mappings—or relations between—are examined.

#### AMBIGUITY AND BODIES

Irigaray argues that by relegating women to bodies, men (or the Western tradition) have attempted to contain and control them. Bodies, depicted as capable of overwhelming subjects (where “subjects” are located in “minds”), have been rendered sites of needed restraint. Spelman, among others, has pointed out that “the body is seen as an enormous and annoying obstacle”—threatening to “get the upper hand over the soul” (1988, 113). Linking women with bodies thereby means attributing to women the required restraint of bodies. However, insofar as women have been associated with bodies, and insofar as the question of “woman” or of sexual difference has not been thought, it is also the case that the body has not been genuinely thought. “The body that gives life,” Irigaray states, “never enters into language” (1993b, 46). Although it serves as a starting point (for him), the maternal-feminine nonetheless remains unthought (by him). “This sameness,” Irigaray remarks, “is the maternal-feminine which has been assimilated before any perception of difference. . . . It is this sameness that constitutes the subject as a living being but that man has not begun to think: his body” (1993a, 98).

In *her* effort to (re)think “the body,” Butler states:

I found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries . . . appeared to be quite central to what bodies “are.” (1993, ix)

“It is this ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them,” Grosz maintains, “which fascinates me” (1994, xi). While the attempt, traditionally, has been to confine bodies, bodies of their very nature appear to resist or defy such limitation. Whereas bodies have been

purportedly kept under control or “put in their place” by Western philosophical frameworks, to theorize bodies means to recognize their entrance into places where access has been presumably denied. Grosz claims, “Sexual difference is a mobile, indeed, volatile, concept, able to insinuate itself into regions where it should have no place” (1994, ix). If, rather than being neutral and static, bodies bleed—extend or exceed frameworks—then men, in relegating women to the bodily in an attempt to contain them, have actually placed women in an “unlimited site.” If bodily boundaries are ambiguous (which is not to say arbitrary), then women, like bodies, resist and alter a static definition. Irigaray claims, “[He] places limits on her that are the opposite of the unlimited site in which he unwittingly situates her” (1993a, 11). Contrary to men’s attempts to limit women (for example, by placing women “in” their bodies), women confound confinement in virtue of this very placement. “The body is a most peculiar ‘thing,’” Grosz says, “for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it manage to rise above the status of thing. Thus, it is both a thing and a non-thing” (1994, xi).

Butler (1993) makes a similar point to Grosz in conceiving “matter” not simply as a passive surface but as a dynamic site. In “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” Butler indicates that “[b]y purposely embodying ambiguity—dichotomies lose their forcefulness” (1986, 327). Despite what has been described as Beauvoir’s problematic conceptualization of sex and gender vis-à-vis bodies, implicit within Beauvoir’s account—as Butler brings out—is a productive sense of “ambiguity.” The problem with Beauvoir’s rendering of the sex-gender distinction is that gender, in the words of Butler, “becomes a free-floating artifice” (1990, 6). Gender, to reiterate, is “theorized as radically independent of sex” (6). Such a division between sex and gender produces the difficulty highlighted by Gatens and is articulated by Butler as follows: “[T]he consequence [is] that *man* and the *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and the *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (1990, 6). The female body becomes the “*arbitrary locus* of the gender ‘woman’” (Butler 1986, 35). Again, this arbitrariness is problematic in its neglect of bodies, in its assumption that bodies are simply neutral. Beauvoir’s well-known claim in *The Second Sex* is that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Revealed in this statement is the problematic separation of sex from gender; but also demonstrated, in more productive terms, is an ambiguity involving the verb *become* (Butler 1986, 36). Butler maintains that, within Beauvoir’s account, gender assumption is both a “project” and a “construct”; it is “a purposeful set of acts” and “a received cultural construction” (1986, 36). Gender assumption or “choosing a gender,” according to Butler, means “to interpret received gender-norms in a way that organizes them anew” (1986, 40). This conception of gender (1986) prefigures Butler’s account of “matter” (1993) as being both produced/constructed and resistant to production/construction. Like the ambiguity involved in becoming a gender, a certain ambiguity involving matter places it in-between traditional

terms of opposition. To be ambiguous, or to be in an ambiguous position, is to interrogate the mandates of “fit” instituted by categories of mutual exclusion.

Irigaray’s interest in certain Greek mythological figures introduces a comparable point. For example, in her reading of Diotima’s discourse in Plato’s *Symposium*, Irigaray shows Diotima’s nature to be one of essential ambiguity. By rendering the relation between pairs of opposites ambiguous, and by embodying ambiguity herself, Diotima introduces a relation between oppositional pairs different from that of traditional binaries. Commentators on the *Symposium* have, however, tended to interpret Diotima’s discourse as presenting Plato’s view of love (*eros*). The notion that *eros* is intermediary, or ambiguous, between opposites has been neglected in favor of a Platonic formulation of desire—a formulation in which desire is subjected to a telos. In a similar manner, Irigaray suggests that the figure of Antigone, from Sophocles’ play, “is silenced in her action. Locked up—paralyzed, on the edge of the city. Because she is neither master nor slave. And this upsets the order of the dialectic” (1993a, 119). Irigaray refers to Hegel, who, as a commentator on the *Antigone*, interprets Antigone according to her “properly feminine role”—thus limiting her. Irigaray argues that Antigone actually *confounds* the dialectic by refusing her assigned position. Antigone, that is, bleeds her defined boundary within Hegel’s system. And of Persephone, Irigaray says, “Persephone does not stand still. . . . She passes, ceaselessly, from the (male/female) ones to the others, but she knows their differences” (1991, 114). Like bodies, whose borders are unclear, “[Persephone] . . . passes beyond all boundaries” (115). Persephone refuses to be contained.

With the introduction of ambiguity—with the opening of a passage between opposites rather than the lack of alliance accorded a strict divide—the traditional view of “difference” gets recast. Speaking of sexual difference, Irigaray states, “We must examine our history thoroughly to understand why this sexual difference has not had its chance to develop. . . . It is surely a question of the dissociation of the body and soul . . . of the lack of a passage” (1993a, 15). “As for philosophy,” she continues:

So far as the question of woman is concerned—and it comes down to the question of sexual difference—this is indeed what has to be brought into question. . . . The philosophical order is indeed one that has to be questioned, and *disturbed*, inasmuch as it covers over sexual difference. (1985b, 150)

The figures that concern Irigaray throughout her works—in a way comparable to Butler’s discussion of the resistance of matter—resist and disturb, in the words of Grosz, “the frameworks which attempt to contain them” (1994, xi). By disturbing traditional frameworks, these figures act to reveal the very issue of sexual difference. The ability of certain figures to expose sexual difference, or bodies, demonstrates that although the issue of sexual differ-

ence has been concealed by the Western philosophical tradition, it is nonetheless resistant to a complete “forgetting.” The issue of sexual difference is, at moments, revealed in the precise texts that neglect it.

Consequently, Irigaray must be read through her claim of sexual difference, and sexual difference should be understood in the manner outlined above. In so doing, Irigaray’s readings can be given a proper context. Readers of Irigaray have, at times, failed to do this. For example, by failing to consider Irigaray’s concern with sexual difference, Andrea Nye (1992) misunderstands the intent of Irigaray’s reading of Diotima’s discourse in Plato’s *Symposium*. Nye underestimates the value that Irigaray places on the figure of Diotima and fails to see the movement that Diotima’s discourse depicts, for Irigaray, within the history of Western metaphysics. Similarly, by failing to take Irigaray’s concern with sexual difference as a long-standing concern, Luisa Murara (1994) argues that Irigaray’s work shifts with the essay, “The Universal as Mediation,” from a focus on women-to-women (mother-daughter) relations to men-to-women (sexually different) relations. Although Irigaray’s work may mark shifts, her concern with sexual difference can be traced throughout her works and is consistently central to her readings. Such feminist (mis)readings of Irigaray illustrate the same basic point that Irigaray herself makes with respect to the Western philosophical tradition: “These mediators [Diotima and Antigone],” Irigaray states, “are often forgotten” (1993a, 106). It is in their role as intermediaries (that is, as “angels” gesturing toward possibilities that have not yet been allowed to manifest) that Irigaray intends to illuminate such figures. By reading Irigaray in terms of the issue of sexual difference, and by connecting Irigaray with recent feminist scholarship on the status of the body, these figures may be revealed in their forgotten role as mediators—intermediaries who bridge binaries.

Additionally, inasmuch as Irigaray’s claim of sexual difference is an ontological claim; that is, one that interrogates traditional Western metaphysics, Irigaray is concerned to open and reveal difference broadly construed. Irigaray locates the possibility of a genuine relation of difference—a difference that is non-hierarchically ordered—in a fundamental consideration of sexual difference in Western thought. Hence, in a statement that could pertain to Irigaray, Gatens states:

Many feminists have argued that those representations of women cannot be dismissed as superficial bias on the part of (predominantly) male theorists. Rather, it has been argued that those representations have a metaphysical basis in Western thought that is not easily removed without destroying the coherence of the philosophical system concerned. (1996, vii)<sup>9</sup>

By considering Irigaray’s concern with sexual difference as an approach, her thinking of sexual difference can be interpreted as a thinking intended to

disturb and “to lay foundations different from” those of the tradition (1993a, 6). By interrogating the structure of Western thought—or, by positing how sexual difference unsettles that structure—other forms of difference can likewise be engaged. Again, the essential neglect of Western philosophy has been that of bodies. While presumably being written out of philosophy, bodies emerge to affect and to show themselves within it. Consequently, the pursuit of disembodiment is a fundamentally flawed endeavor since the presence of the body can never really be denied.<sup>10</sup>