

Introduction

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In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray pens a line that is evocatively incomplete—“difference is at least two.” Irigaray’s project has been a steady insistence that we have yet to emerge from a cultural metaphysics of the One and that two remains at the brink until difference at the level of the sexuate is cultivated and politicized. In this edited volume of writing on or inspired by the work of Luce Irigaray, we feature a series of contributions from two annual proceedings of the Luce Irigaray Circle by scholars who are committed to the generative project envisioned by Irigaray’s work and to contributing to the process of thinking difference as at least two. The circle met at the University of Winchester in the United Kingdom in 2017 for a conference entitled *A Sharing of Speech: Scholarship on or Inspired by the Work of Luce Irigaray*. In 2018 it met again at Brock University in St. Catharines, Canada, for a conference whose theme, “Horizons of Sexual Difference,” inspired the title of this anthology.

This book follows on from a rich tradition of scholarly and collaborative edited volumes on Irigaray, many of which are featured in SUNY Press’s catalogue.¹ While several of these volumes (and others) on Irigaray attend to the diverse complexity of Irigaray’s move from sexual to sexuate difference, her capacious challenge to androcentric thinking,² and the diversity of projects that result from her writing,³ this volume features scholarship that attempts to push the scope of Irigaray’s work beyond its horizon. In so doing, this volume offers twelve essays informed and

inspired by Irigaray's complex and nuanced critique of Western philosophy, culture, and metaphysics and her call to rethink our relationship to ourselves and the world through sexuate difference.

Included are original and innovative readings of urgent and diverse topics, such as trans feminist theory, feminist legal theory, film studies, critical race theory, social-political theory, philosophy of religion, environmental ethics, philosophical aesthetics, and critical pedagogy. Some texts speak directly to matters with which Irigaray has explicitly engaged, such as divine women (Barker), ecological ethics (Kim), and Heidegger's ontological legacy (Sares). Others foray into topics where Irigaray has chosen not to venture, such as white supremacist miscegenation (Hom), speculative evolutionary theory (Dahiya and Murtagh), and trans misogyny and feminine identities (Colman). The essays, as an ensemble, shift from a critique of the One to a conceptual reimagining of what "at least two" could bring about culturally, spiritually, aesthetically, and materially; they seek to venture toward that expanded horizon of possibility. We present these chapters under topical headings and the varying essays in each part include those that enlarge, challenge, and push Irigaray's claims, and others that transform and broaden the force of her theorization.

Space, Place, and Identity

The chapters in this volume take up the paramount themes within Irigaray's oeuvre of space, place, and identity in contemporary and cross-disciplinary ways. We suggest that these thematic tropes clarify the prescient urgency of sexual difference to theorize what is at stake if we fail to examine the diversity of topologies and morphologies foregrounded by Irigaray's work. The themes guide an intersectional and embodied analysis that responds to urgent demands for safe spaces that targeted bodies require, seats at the table for excluded others, and a language to articulate identity and difference.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray urges us to rethink space and time, particularly the association between space and the feminine; additionally, she challenges the function of women's bodies as containers, serving as a place for place.⁴ By theorizing sexual difference via the language usually considered the domain of the natural sciences, Irigaray reveals the sexualized discourse that overdetermines how we encounter space-time relation and find our places within its fabric and folds. An

underthought contribution of her work is the relationship between natural science and the politics of identity and this volume seeks to fill that lacuna.

The authors of this volume use the convergent themes of space, place, and identity to investigate the promise and possibility of Irigarayan terms and theories, including locomotion, containment, the interval, the negative, desire, morphology, as well as racial, trans, and posthuman identities.

Space and place take twin precedent throughout this volume and reconceptualizations of space often infer a necessary and ongoing reconfiguration of place. For example, in Michael Lucas's essay on Irigarayan theory in studio practice, Lucas uses Irigarayan principles of intersubjectivity and the interval to instruct his students toward reconceptualizing their mediated perceptions of objects, rethinking how students analyze the planes, texture, and scope of an artistic installation. Wesley Barker's essay on eros and the cross of vertical and horizontal direction signified by the two lips within the body dismantles binaries between sacred and secular space, allowing morphological difference to guide reconceptualizations of eros.

With a different set of disciplinary concerns, M. D. Murtagh and Annu Dahiya's work in the discipline of philosophy of science suggests a sexual difference analysis regarding containment of the universe, primordial wombs, matrices, and the gradient of hydraulic flow. By scrutinizing the sexual underpinnings of the terminology and its described function in origins theory, both scholars engage an evocative notion of space-time and the places necessary for place to exist, while eliciting ongoing curiosity regarding the maternal tropes that convey containment and origins.

Identity and the markers of inclusion and exclusion are carefully considered in works such as Athena Colman's essay on trans identities and Yvette Russell's analysis of rape with a nuanced case study of cultural difference and sexual violence. Sabrina Hom and Mary Rawlinson's contributions consider the implication of racial purity, miscegenation, and anti-blackness—themes often elided in Irigaray's explicit work. Rather than understanding sexual difference theory to be antagonistic or irrelevant to such conversations, the work of these scholars reveals both the limits of Irigarayan theory and its ongoing potential to contribute toward a thick feminist analysis that queries law, art, and culture.

We suggest that throughout this volume, complex and complicated renderings of these thematic tropes bring together the disciplines of

natural philosophy with nuanced sociopolitical accounts of being human, and in the case of James Sares and Ruthanne Crapo Kim's essays, more than human. Sexual difference is both a unifying thought, bringing together disparate groups, and also one that insists that the fragmented, nonunitary, and wounded subjectivities that have persisted and subsisted within the regime of phallic sameness can inform us on how we negotiate space, find place, and transform identity. In the following, we delineate the subtopics included in the volume and introduce the essays in the volume in more detail.

Trans Identities and Sexual Violence

In the first essay of the volume, Athena V. Colman puts Irigaray into conversation with Judith Butler and trans theorist Talia Mae Bettcher. Danielle Poe's earlier work on Irigaray and the trans body foregrounds the way sexual/sexuate difference theory can engender thinking on sexual identity beyond Irigaray's corpus and remain influenced by her generative work.⁵ Colman extends these insights, mobilizing Irigaray's pertinacious critique against the logics of sameness while revealing a profound heterogeneity of trans subjectivities and identities that refuse to figure these bodies as abject or exceptional. In "Tarrying with Sexual Difference," Colman develops Talia Mae Bettcher's analysis of the responses often proffered to the inclusion of transwomen with the category of *woman*. Reading Bettcher with Judith Butler on gender performativity, and Irigaray's ontological argument for sexual difference, Colman argues that both Butler and Irigaray offer valuable explanatory frameworks for understanding trans-identification as ontological in its claim to reality *and* performativity. In so doing, Colman works to reconcile meaningfully the experience of "realness" as a sexed being that trans sociopolitical scholars argue for, without fixing a universal or abstract notion that grounds this reality or relying on a blunt psychic self-reporting. Instead, Colman returns to the phenomenological tradition that reveals the foregrounding of reality in a metaphysics of a relation prior to one's birth into the world, or movement from the container or the womb to the container of a post-Cartesian world. Irigaray's theorization of morphology is helpful insofar as it specifies the relational and spatiotemporal conditions in which these containers dwell and explains lived experience as both valid and intersubjectively woven with ecological, genealogical, and linguistic layers.

In the second essay of this part, Yvette Russell considers the place of erotic transformation in Irigaray's work, in light of Russell's own work on rape and rape law. Russell reflects on the failure of law in the area of sexual crimes against women, focusing on Irigaray's constructive project to imagine a new mode of resistance to rape and rape culture that, until now, has remained unthought. Russell argues that sexuate difference provides a path that links the feminist critique of rape law to a framework for resistance, one that reveals why erotic transformation must form a central part of any revolutionary feminist political agenda to end rape. In working toward such an erotic transformation of subjecthood and desire feminists might be able to pose an alternative vision of heterosexuality in which the scaffolding that supports the cultural coherence of rape is destroyed. To take seriously Irigaray's claim is to grapple sociolegally with a plural form of thinking and being that engenders an erotic transformation the structure itself is unable to codify. Both Colman and Russell's essays challenge sexual sameness and its undoing as a condition for just inclusion and representation, invoking a demand for difference that can attend to material and transcendental differences.

Sexuate Ontology

The second part of the book shifts the focus to sexuate ontology, offering speculative insights about the origins of life and the gradient of water flow in early hydraulic movements (Dahiya) and the conditions prior to the explosion of the universe and our present space-time (Murtagh). James Sares's essay closes the part with an ambitious analysis of how Irigaray's work can ontologically inform the inquiry surrounding transhumanism. This part features close readings of Irigaray's work through the disciplinary lenses of biology, physics, and technology, contributing significant evolutionary analyses that works like Elizabeth Grosz's *Becoming Undone*,⁶ Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Waters*,⁷ and Deboleena Roy's *Molecular Feminisms*⁸ agitate and foreground.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray calls attention to how the biological sciences have been slow to study the permeability of membranes, a reservation she directly correlates with the female and maternal sexual imaginary. Dahiya, in "The Conditions of Emergence: Irigaray, Primordial Wombs, and the Origins of Cellular Life," examines how the concept of *womb* in contemporary origins of life research

coalesces with, and can potentially reframe, the relation between matter and life within feminist theory. Dahiya concentrates on research that theorizes the origins of cells by considering how the environmental conditions of the Ancient Earth may have facilitated their emergence. This research suggests that cellular life required semipermeable compartmentation, or inorganic wombs, to initially form. Disentangling “womb” from cis-female bodies, Dahiya contends that the far-from-equilibrium hydro-logics of primordial inorganic wombs dissolve a binary relation between matter and life, instead reframing this relation as a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind in the context of the latter’s emergence.

M. D. Murtagh, in “Irigaray’s Extendable Matrix: Cosmic Expansion-Contraction and Black Hole Umbilical Cords,” takes up Irigaray’s urging to rethink space-time—at the level of the Copernican revolution—given the critique of sexual difference theory. Murtagh’s chapter facilitates a preliminary dialogue between sexual difference and cosmology, investigating the query: What contains the container of the universe itself? Murtagh explicates how Irigaray’s work brings into focus the conditions that engender the universe prior to the Big Bang. Murtagh presses into the multiverse hypothesis, utilizing the insights of Stephen Hawking, Martin Rees, and Alan Guth in order to draw attention to the filial language all three deploy as they use words such as *embryo*, *offspring*, *child*, and *baby* to describe the universe as an emergent phenomenon of something Other. Murtagh suggests a failure to recognize a primordial “place” for the emergent universes to appear and highlights the occlusion of a relational theory of cosmic gestation. Murtagh suggests, “A multiverse theory of fundamental reality, however, would resolve the contradiction by pointing to an even more fundamental maternal origin or ground out of which they both emerge; that which remains absent and unthought.” Murtagh turns to Irigaray’s essay “Place, Interval” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* in order to elaborate how her early essay foreshadows key notions of locomotion, gravitational attraction, and cosmic expansion through the lens of sexual difference.

James Sares provides an account of sexual ontology, grounded in and responsive to Irigaray’s philosophy, which focuses on the question of possibility. He considers the scope of ontology in terms of the “negativity” of sexuate beings, whereby one sex or sexuate morphology does not exhaust all that that one being is or *can be*. Sares goes on to consider how understanding sexuate difference as a structure of being

brings about “positive” possibilities for sexuate beings to develop in their singularity. With particular focus on the human being, he argues that these principles develop a sexual ontology that recognizes how sexuate difference structures being through determinate limits while also engendering possibilities for its development and for new expressions of life.

Divine Women

The third part of the book focuses on another topic familiar to Irigarayan scholars—divine women. However, the writers featured here bring fresh and innovative readings of the ecstatic and erotic, which Irigaray argues we must rethink to transform categories like the sacred and ordinary and, importantly, the function of woman in these ascriptions. Using text and film, these chapters trace the crisscrossing of word and flesh, evocatively situating Irigaray’s enduring analysis.

In “A Theology of Lips: Beyond the Wounding of Desire” Wesley Barker focuses on Irigaray’s mimetic use of the feminine in her attempt to “speak” feminine desire through the language of lips. Barker is interested in the intersection of Irigaray’s writing with religious language and Christian theology, in particular. Within the saying and unsaying of feminine desire vis-à-vis her mimetic use of fleshy language, argues Barker, Irigaray’s writing evokes a territory at the limits of philosophy—a space that explicitly invites an exploration of religious language. The chapter concludes by reading Irigaray’s invocation of lips crossing in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* to shift focus away from the association of desire with either penetrative wounding or impenetrable touching, and toward a notion of desire as a continuous incarnation of the ambiguities of eros found in the generative slippage between flesh and word.

In her contribution to the volume, Tessa Nunn examines two films, *Hail Mary* by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville’s short film *The Book of Mary*. In her analysis of these films Nunn proposes an Irigarayan viewing practice in which spectators search for representations of maternal genealogies and relationships among autonomous women, thereby affirming positive representations of the female gender, even when films fail to offer such images. Nunn argues that such a practice enables viewers to celebrate and enjoy women in relation and communion with one another, while also exposing the gaps in films that normalize a reductive representation of women as objects.

Rethinking Race and Sexual Difference

While Irigaray's work has called for a rethinking of subjectivity that imbricates other aspects of lived experience, scholars like Mary K. Bloodsworth,⁹ Stephen Seely,¹⁰ Rachel Jones,¹¹ and Rebecca Hill¹² have mapped structures of racism and colonialism with sexual difference theory, advancing the relevance of multiple differences without reinstating hierarchical comparison. The authors of this part expand upon these prior readings of Irigaray's work and bring into focus prescient political turmoil such as the rise of white nationalism, practices of miscegenation, and the summarily dismissive volley of "fake news" that conceal a sameness of critical race consciousness.

Sabrina L. Hom's chapter "White Supremacist Miscegenation: Irigaray at the Intersection of Race, Sexuality, and Patriarchy" explores the relevance of Irigaray's philosophy to understanding the role of patriarchy in resurgent white nationalist movements. According to Hom, feminist analyses must not take the white nationalist focus on racial purity at face value but need to account for the fact that white nationalist leaders frequently engage in interracial sexuality, even as they argue for the preservation of an endangered white race. Although patriarchy is ostensibly focused on the maintenance of white purity, the responsibility of maintaining purity is placed on white women's bodies, while white men are afforded unfettered access to nonwhite women. Hom argues that Irigaray's account of the patriarchal exchange in women and the exploitation of women's reproductive capacities provides an accurate description of the role of white women in white patriarchy but fails to account for racial differences between women. Hom argues that Irigaray's analysis can be expanded and enriched by putting it into dialogue with the work of black feminist scholars who have elucidated the role of race in the sexual economy. Together, these approaches offer an analysis of "white patriarchy" that scripts different but related roles for white and nonwhite women in the sexual and reproductive economy. The double action of white patriarchy to produce both pure white legitimate lineages and also to produce highly profitable but unacknowledged, racially impure lineages, explains the phenomenon that Hom calls "white supremacist miscegenation."

In her contribution to the volume Mary C. Rawlinson explores the genre of noir crime fiction, arguing that it proves particularly pertinent

to the possibility of justice in the era of “fake news,” false narratives, and growing social inequity. Philosophical narratives of equality elaborated in the law of property prove equally impertinent in a world where the very institutions meant to protect the vulnerable instead serve increasingly to exploit them, while concentrating wealth and privilege in elite zones of security at their expense. In her investigation of noir crime Rawlinson observes that Irigaray’s critique of philosophical fictions of equality under globalization calls for a rethinking of justice and new narratives of political solidarity. Rawlinson argues that Frank Miller’s neo-noir graphic novel and film *Sin City* offer just such an account of the possibility of justice and solidarities across difference in a world of structural injustice.

Environments of Relational Difference

This final part engages Irigaray’s attention to the environment, which includes the material, social, and cultural environs of living and learning. The first chapter (Kim) coalesces around themes of ecological ethics and Irigaray’s recent publications that reinforce her insistence that sexual difference theory isn’t an anthropocentric critique, but one with a substantial force that can guide our thinking about all of life.¹³ The next chapter (Lucas) speaks to Irigaray’s ongoing interest in built environments and how lived space can cultivate respect between beings. Architectural philosophers Peg Rawes and Andrea Wheeler have developed Irigaray’s work in this area at length¹⁴ and Lucas’s chapter includes an investigation of their considerations with the wave of new materialists influencing design and studio practices. The part concludes with the specific sociopolitical environment of Belfast, Northern Ireland, and an Irigarayan methodology that the author forwards to sustain peace and reduce political strife (Merrick).

In her contribution to the volume Ruthanne Crapo Kim traces Irigaray’s sexuate ecological ethics through a conversation with ecofeminist Val Plumwood and biocentric deep ecologist Freya Matthews. Kim focuses on Irigaray’s conceptualizing of self-affection, breath, and her critiques of artificial life, as they relate to environmental thinking. She argues that by situating Irigaray’s self-affection as a poiesis of human making, Irigaray can be read as calling for a safeguarding against a fabricated, unified world where the environment serves as a neutered backdrop. In

this way, Kim draws from Irigaray a normative ecological ethics that urges humans to relate in difference to other beings to share the diversity of worlds we inhabit.

Michael Lucas's contribution to the volume is a reflection on his own pedagogical practice in the architectural studio in conversation with Irigaray's work on language, air, breath and the "third space." Lucas reads Irigaray alongside Graham Harman on flattened ontologies and argues that students benefit from being involved in a sexuate, embodied, and inductive practice of encounter and discovery in the process of design and making, beyond mere idealist/object form and weak critical functionalism.

Situated firmly in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Ciara Merrick provides a lyrical rumination on Irigaray, breath, and the processes of peace making. The making of alternative horizons in and through peace requires, argues Merrick, a return to elemental and ontological commitments. Irigaray's work provides the path to such a return. Merrick puts Irigaray into conversation with philosopher Erin Manning to draw out an embodied relationality of movement to think anew Irigaray's "to-be" of bodily becoming. Merrick recalls a year of fieldwork in Belfast during which she implemented an Irigarayan inspired methodology of breath as an active and sensing participant researcher. Merrick calls for a conception of peace from within an alternative horizon in which the body is always in becoming and always moving with breath.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the labor required to organize scholarship and scholars, the grant monies generously given, and the profound artistry in word, image, and performance that no volume can justly represent. We acknowledge the two annual meetings of the Irigaray Circle, the first organized by the Institute for Theological Partnerships at the University of Winchester in the United Kingdom (2017) and the second by the Department of Philosophy at Brock University in St. Catharines, Canada (2018). We are grateful to many members of the Irigaray Circle and beyond who provided thoughtful and generous peer review of the chapters included in this volume, and who are committed to creative and supportive feminist scholarship. Thank you to Rebekah Pryor for generously donating an image of her beautiful artwork *Horizon* (2017), which adorns the cover of this volume.¹⁵ Thanks finally are due to Luce Irigaray, whose work seems endlessly generative and nourishing in these uncertain times. It is our hope that this volume continues the flourishing dialogue that she started.

Notes

1. Maria C. Cimitile and Elaine P. Miller, eds., *Returning to Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy, Politics, and the Question of Unity* (2006); Elena Tzelepis and Athena Athanasiou, eds., *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and "the Greeks"* (2010); Mary C. Rawlinson, Sabrina L. Hom, and Serene J. Khader, eds., *Thinking with Irigaray* (2011); Mary C. Rawlinson, ed., *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray* (2017); Gail M. Schwab, ed., *Thinking Life with Irigaray: Language, Origin, Art, Love* (2020).
2. See, for example: Serene Khader, "Introduction: The Work of Sexual Difference," in *Thinking with Irigaray*, ed. Mary C. Rawlinson, Sabrina L. Hom, and Serene J. Khader (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1–9.
3. See further: Luce Irigaray, Introduction to *Luce Irigaray Teaching*, ed. Luce Irigaray with Mary Green (London: Continuum, 2008), ix–xi; Gail M. Schwab, Introduction to *Thinking Life with Irigaray: Language, Origin, Art, Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 3–24.
4. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 7, 40.
5. Danielle Poe, "Can Luce Irigaray's Notion of Sexual Difference Be Applied to Transsexual and Transgender Narratives?" In *Thinking with Irigaray*, 111–130.
6. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
7. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
8. Deboleena Roy, *Molecular Feminisms: Biology, Becomings, and Life in the Lab* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).
9. Mary K. Bloodsworth, *In-Between Bodies: Sexual Difference, Race, and Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
10. Stephen D. Seely, "Irigaray between God and the Indians: Sexuate Difference, Decoloniality, and the Politics of Ontology," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 43, 1 (2017): 41–65.
11. Rachel Jones, "Philosophical Métissage and the Decolonization of Difference: Luce Irigaray, Daniel Maximin, and the Elemental Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (2018): 139–154.
12. Rebecca Hill, "The Multiple Readings of Irigaray's Concept of Sexual Difference," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 7 (July 2016): 390–401.
13. Luce Irigaray BTE; TVB; I.
14. See Peg Rawes, *Irigaray for Architects* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Andrea Wheeler, "Architectural Issues in Building Community through Luce Irigaray's Perspective on Being-Two," in *Luce Irigaray: Teaching*, edited by Luce Irigaray with Mary Green (London: Continuum, 2008), 61–68.

15. *Plane + Horizon*, Rebekah Pryor, <https://www.rebekahpryor.com/plane-andhorizon>, accessed November 29, 2021.

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