THE FUTURE OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE
AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH BUTLER AND DRUCILLA CORNELL

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EG: Luce Irigaray's writings have always figured strongly in your works, probably more than in the work of other American feminist theorists. Out of all the feminist theorists you both interrogate, she seems to emerge as a kind of touchstone of the feminist ethical, political, and intellectual concerns to which you seem to aspire. Could each of you briefly outline how she figures in your work, whether your relations to her have changed, and if so, how?

JB: I think that probably early on, when I started working on French feminism as a graduate student in the early '80s, I was not interested in her at all because she seemed to me to be an essentialist and that was a term we used quite easily then, when we thought we knew what it meant. In the late '80s, I started to rethink my objections to her on that basis and found that she was, among the feminist theorists I had read, perhaps the most versed in philosophy and that her engagement with philosophy was a curious mixture of both loyalty and aggression. And it became very interesting to me when I started thinking about her whole practice of critical mimesis—what she was doing when she was reading Freud, what was she doing when she was reading Plato—and I read Speculum again and again, frightened by its anger, compelled by the closeness of the reading, confused by the mimetism of the text. Was she enslaved to these texts, was she displacing them radically, was she perhaps in the kind of being in both positions at the same time? And I realized that whatever the feminine was for her, it was not a substance, not a spiritual reality that might be isolated, but it had something to do with this strange practice of reading, one in which she was reading texts that she was not authorized to read, texts from which she was as a woman explicitly excluded or explicitly demeaned, and that she would read them anyway. And then the question is: what would it mean to read from a position of radical deauthorization in order to expose the contingent authority of the text? That struck me as a feminist critical practice, a critical reading practice that I could learn from, and from that point on, highly influenced by both Drucilla's work and Naomi Schor's work [see Schor], I started to read her quite thoroughly.

PC: Is this kind of relationship that she has with the philosophers she reads a sexual relationship? I am thinking of some of the sexualized terms you just used: loyalty and aggression.

JB: Yes, there is no doubt that there is an eros of a certain kind, usually the kind that frightens me, quite frankly. I think Carolyn Burke has made this argument that Irigaray

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has a romance with the philosophers [see Burke]. I think she has a certain masochistic-sadistic erotic engagement with the philosophers.

EG: Do you think it is sado-masochistic?

JB: Well, I think it was much more aggressive in Speculum of the Other Woman than it became in An Ethics of Sexual Difference. There, I think there is an engagement that is still very difficult, but at least there is evidence of a more loving engagement.

PC: I hope that we can return to the question of love at the end. Is this the kind of relationship that you have to her texts?

JB: No, I’m probably too frightened. [Everybody laughs.] And I don’t engage them that closely, probably because I find it frightening to be in that particular knot. She doesn’t actually have a chapter in any of my books. I think I can’t quite devote a chapter to her.

EG: No, but you devote large sections of chapters.

JB: That’s true, but I can’t stay there for a prolonged period of time [laughs], whatever that’s worth.

EG: I’d like to come back to this later, because I think it is a really interesting reaction. But first, Drucilla, what is your story?

DC: Well, I started out in a romantic relationship with Irigaray, and I’ve come a long way in thinking about her. There are really three things that attracted me to her. First, the unabashed utopianism that she associated with the feminine within sexual difference. And, like Judith after she came back to her, I did not see Irigaray at all as an essentialist. If anything, the feminine was a kind of radical otherness to any conception of the real or reality. More than anything else, here I found someone who was deploying the feminine unashamedly in a utopian manner, saying that there is a beyond to whatever kind of concept of sense we have. And without that beyond being articulated, endlessly breaking up the real, we can’t even get to a different kind of ethics. I saw her as creating openings, not just a feminist ethics, but an ethics in which the feminine within sexual difference was crucial to a complete rethinking of the ethical.

This leads me to my second reason for reading her so seriously: I came to Irigaray when feminist solidarity was clearly breaking down, if it ever existed—the idea that there was a woman’s experience to which we could appeal and a kind of oppression that we all knew had been militantly attacked by women of color. I had entered the world of legal academia, where solidarity is a phantasm at best. I saw here an analysis not of solidarity as a fact, but of solidarity as a longed-for ethical relationship which would demand that we would have to rethink the very basis of our psychoanalytic concepts, particularly the mother-daughter relationship and intergenerational friendship. So just at the point when I realized that the problems of feminist solidarity were hopelessly undertheorized, and, to the degree that it was theorized, that it was used as a kind of moralistic attack on anyone who didn’t seem to be adhering to one particular party line, I found in Irigaray a compelling analysis, one that demanded that we look at the most fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis to try to rearticulate the ethics of intergenerational friendship between women.

The third reason was my own critical approach to her idea of mimesis. I had struggled for a long time to think about what you do if you are symbolically encoded or marked as
feminine, and yet, at the same time, you do not want to simply repudiate the feminine as the only way of countering all the bitterness and all the resentment associated with femininity as masquerade. The repudiation of the feminine underwrites a great deal of legal feminism. We have to show that we are like men if we want to be their equals. Formal equality to me seems to be firstly, a kind of pipe-dream of upper-middle-class women, and secondly, extremely limiting in reinscribing the kind of repudiation of the feminine that led to all the bitterness and violence that Freud so brilliantly analyzed in his work on femininity. Irigaray’s mimesis seemed to me—seemed, because I have become much more critical of Irigaray in the last few years—a way of saying, yes, we are in fact inscribed in a symbolic order, which is to say that we are wounded by it, and the only way we avoid the repudiation of the feminine is by engaging in a kind of critical mimesis or inversion.

EG: How have your views changed in the last couple of years?

DC: I was deeply influenced by an exchange I had with Judith in 1995 which has taken me away from the idea of the feminine as the signal of the beyond. I was very taken with the idea of the feminine within sexual difference being the “place” where one would go to keep alive an imaginary that had not been captured by the symbolic order. In this exchange in 1995 Judith pushed me quite hard on the ontologization inherent in Irigaray, even using the feminine in the three ways I just described, all of which I felt I could defend against essentialism, I didn’t feel that I could defend them against something that was most troubling to me, which is that they were conservative. In the end, they preserved something of the traditional definitions of the masculine and the feminine, at the same time that they arguably were being deployed for the most utopian kinds of possibilities. Out of this discussion, I developed this idea of the imaginary domain, which, in the terms of Judith’s latest book [The Psychic Life of Power], is an argument that if there is this place, this “imaginary” place, this imaginary, if it were to be symbolized as feminine, can’t help but be conservative. I started to move away from this idea of tapping into the feminine within sexual difference as the site of utopianism, moving more to what I’ve called the imaginary domain, which still keeps alive the imaginary as a place that cannot be completely captured by the symbolic order and the sets of identifications that are rigidly imposed upon us as a set of consolidated subject-positions, thinking now, of course, of gender as a closed domain, in the sense of Judith’s latest writing on melancholia and gender. So out of this exchange with Judith, I started to see that what I thought was so utopian was in fact conservative. I was confirmed in my view when Irigaray moved to a concept of sexuate rights at the same time that I felt politically and ethically compelled to critique legal feminism for its own conservative categories, and more specifically, the way in which it had deployed gender in equal opportunity so as to completely shut out gays and lesbians, and women of color, transvestites, transsexuals, and on and on from the reach of antidiscrimination law.

JB: May I respond to a couple of things? In this exchange in 1995 in Drucilla’s Rhetoric Seminar at Berkeley—I find it very interesting when Drucilla says that she was persuaded by me, because I actually experienced myself as being persuaded by her to some degree. One of the things I was persuaded by was the use of the feminine as a category that does not describe something that already exists but actually inaugurates a certain kind of future within language and within intelligibility, inaugurating a future of intelligibility that is not yet fully known now. This utopian dimension actually led me to reconsider what it is that we’ve all been talking about under the rubric of essentialism when we use that term, and especially when we use it in relation to Irigaray. It seems to me that what most people in cultural theory these days mean by essentialism is that you might be able to use a social
category and give a definite description of the category and that the description might capture the group in question. Obviously, the move against essentialism is against that kind of capture. People want those categories to remain open; they want them to remain constructed, constructible. They want them to remain transformable, and they are afraid that what essentialism does is close down the future of the category—it can’t hold something else it doesn’t hold now, it can’t come to describe something that can’t be fully predicted in the present moment. And I think that it is a very funny way to talk about essentialism if you look at the history of philosophy or even Irigaray herself, who says at one point in the Nietzsche book [Marine Lover] that woman has no essence. What she means by that is that there is no already established metaphysical place for the feminine; it’s very close to what Drucilla says: it would be wrong to understand her as one of many essences. Also, in the history of philosophy, one mainly learns about essences in metaphysics in their opposition to appearance. If you want to talk about an essence in a Platonic or even Husserlian sense, you are talking about something that strictly speaking does not appear.

PC: Like the eidos?

JB: Yes, it does not appear, strictly speaking, in the domain of description. What’s available to description is the realm of appearance, not the realm of essence, unless you have a certain kind of phenomenological description that is disclosive in the Heideggerian sense. But still it’s very interesting that essentialism has been collapsed with categories that describe adequately when, in fact, what an essence is is something that is always escaping the domain of appearance. The other way in which the notion of essences is used in the history of philosophy is that if something is essential, it is that without which we cannot do—it is essential, it is a precondition, it’s a necessary precondition, that without which one cannot move. And it seems to me that Spivak, for instance, uses that notion of an essence in relationship to Irigaray or to the whole problem of essentialism. It’s not a term that describes adequately a social group as it is presently constituted, but it is rather a term without which we cannot do. Then, here is Cornell with a term that inaugurates a future that is beyond any contemporary notion of sense, any contemporary notion of cognizability. So it’s extremely important that people think a little bit more critically about what they are saying when they are talking about essences, and I have probably been as guilty or more guilty than anybody else in not thinking quite clearly enough. So if someone were to ask me if the category of woman is something without which we cannot do, I would say, absolutely, it is a category without which we cannot do.

PC: But is it just a category?

JB: As opposed to what?

PC: How would the category manifest itself or instantiate itself?

JB: I don’t think that one should understand it as an abstraction that then takes on particular content. That would be to insert it into a metaphysics where it doesn’t belong.

EG: Doesn’t it buy into the question of nominalism, which is often linked to the question of essentialism, that is, is it a category that we impose on things that aren’t otherwise necessarily alike? Or is it a category we extract from things because of their similarity? Which is, in a way, to raise the question of morphology in Irigaray, because it is a way of asking, not if there is something in the bodies of all women that they have in common, but whether there is something in the cultural representation of those bodies that they all have in common.

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JB: I guess here I would defer to Drucilla, only because what I feel I can talk about is the category of woman, but for Drucilla, that is not necessarily the salient category. The category here is the feminine, which is, in a really significant way, beyond contemporary categorization. It is the beyond of categorization.

DC: This is exactly what attracted me to Irigaray; Irigaray reads the idea of the feminine in all of these different texts as the ground of what had made cognizability possible. You could say the feminine is something that Western philosophy cannot do without in a very specific sense because it has grounded a kind of metaphysics. The feminine is an aesthetic idea that breaks open the ground of fundamental metaphysical concepts and the reason that comprehends them. So in that way, it always is this door to a radical future. I have always been uncomfortable with the danger of essentialism in the category of “woman,” particularly when people use “woman” as a way of designating certain forms of oppression that, grouped together, can give us enough of a description of woman, that we can make sense of some kind of universal statement such as woman as a unified class.

EG: Is there nothing that women all over the world face?

DC: I think that there are lots of things that women all over the world face. And interestingly enough, to the degree we are going to talk in those kinds of terms, I’m much more comfortable with the word “women.”

EG: What seems interesting and productive about Irigaray is that she occupies the space of the slippage between “the feminine” and “women.” She rarely talks about “women.” She sometimes talks about “Woman,” but usually quite critically, and she often talks about “the feminine,” but somehow, she’s talking about the interlacing of and slippage between the three terms.

DC: For me, “Woman” is the least necessary.

EG: But in a way, isn’t it the potential of “Woman” to unleash a feminine that has never been understood before? Not just Woman, not just women, but something in women.

DC: Here again is where I may have been very influenced by my 1995 exchange with Judith. What may be the basis of that kind of unleashing of the feminine is not anything we think of as Woman or even something uniquely accessible to women but this place called the imaginary domain, in which cross-identifications, new identifications, old identifications are left open to the imaginary that has not yet been foreclosed. The place of “Woman,” which I used to use more, has always carried within it this attempt to try to find some universalizability in certain situations between women so as to form the basis of solidarity. I would no longer try to find this thing called “Woman,” even if it is this missing thing called “Woman,” that would give women a kind of unique access to the feminine.

PC: Drucilla, you’ve talked about sexual difference as a utopian horizon and as an idea in Irigaray which is useful to you. You and Judith are very good friends and you’ve both indicated how indebted your work has been to each other. I was wondering whether both of you could comment on the differences in your takes on the idea of sexual difference. For instance, on page 199 of Beyond Accommodation, you distinguish your position from Judith’s position in Gender Trouble by suggesting that the re-evolution of mimesis as desistance is different from the repetition-compulsion of gender identity.
JB: The first thing I would say is that I just can't talk about the feminine. [Laughs.] I really appreciate what Drucilla is doing but I can't go there. I suppose I do come out of an American social theory perspective to a certain degree, in which the notion of gender is crucial. And for me, gender is so much more unstable. I'm interested in the problem of cross-identification; I'm interested in where masculine/feminine break down, where they cohabit and intersect, where they lose their discreteness. These are Gender Trouble-like questions which are not fully compatible with most of the ways in which the sexual difference paradigm functions.

EG: I can't see why not. There are questions that are "outside" with regard to sexual difference, but isn't it true that sexual difference still inflects how one is gay as a man and how one is lesbian as a woman, for example?

JB: I think that is to give it a fundamental status which I won't give it. That is to say, one is lesbian and one is gay, but there is this one fundamental structuring principle and that principle is sexual difference and that will affect how one is a gay man or a gay woman. I think it goes the other way around. If one really pursues the theoretical consequences of gayness, one finds that even the presupposition of sexual difference is brought into a really important crisis.

DC: I would say that my current thinking is that the utopian moment that I fought to keep alive is in the crisis of sexual difference. Interestingly enough, I still think there is something that is in crisis. I don't think that I would have thought about the imaginary domain as the space for the contestation and representation of sexual identification without the crisis that calls foreclosed subject positions into question. Yet I still don't think one can completely do away with the category of the feminine, since we have a symbolic order that polices and reinforces gender hierarchy and identity.

EG: Is this one of the major differences between the two of you?

DC: There are differences. I do feel we always have to get back to the feminine and I'm comfortable with that. Where I think I have changed is in needing to bring that into crisis. For instance, if we start with the feminine and then we invert it and that allows us to separate the feminine from the imposed persona of femininity, that is one way psychically in which sexual difference comes to have an affirmative "life" rather than the death associated with lack. I've become a mother of a daughter who I realize isn't being 'femme'-ed. This has actually been quite an educational experience for me, including in exchange with Judith, because I kept imposing the idea on my daughter that we should be inverting this femininity so as to separate this feminine otherness to it so that she could have an identity in which she could be "not just the repudiated feminine other." But I realized that she is in the imaginary domain, where these terms are in such crisis that she doesn't have them frozen into place yet. The suspicion I had had that the feminine could become conserving was actually becoming conserving in my own rhetoric with a daughter who, unlike me, had not yet internalized all the personas of wounded femininity.

EG: Does femininity have to be wounded?

DC: I think femininity does, not the feminine. I see femininity in our symbolic order as a wound.

EG: In our symbolic order, but we've been talking about radical futures, futures of hope. And if I understand "the imaginary domain," it is the domain of conceptualization that
makes certain radical actions, i.e. symbolic actions, possible. And unless one introduces this space in a future symbolic.

DC: Right, feminism needs to symbolize the space in which we keep the future of sexual identifications open, even if through the interpretation of old attachments.

EG: Is this Irigaray’s problem, or the problem of your conceptualization?

DC: I am inclined, given the way she’s gone toward sexuate rights, to think that it is a problem with Irigaray’s conceptualization—she universalized the two, the masculine and the feminine. For Irigaray, the need was to preserve—and there is much about this that is certainly radical in terms of Anglo-American legal theory—the actual space for civil identity, for what she calls “women and men.” “Woman” falls out and there are “men and women.” What she calls for is a set of sexuate rights appropriate to these entities, these beings, these creatures, who are an ontological universal. What the law has always done by erasing the unique civil identity of women is to create “uncivil men.”

EG: To defend her for just a moment, maybe to play devil’s advocate, in Irigaray’s work there are different targets and purposes in mind. She’s a very astute reader and writer who is writing for a particular constituency in different texts. Many of her more politically oriented texts are exactly about the demographics of men and women. But it’s significant that when she is raising broad issues of international significance, political issues like Chernobyl, what she is doing is bringing to bear a certain intellectual perspective that isn’t captured by the demographic “men and women” [see “Chance for Life”]. She’s setting up that difference, which is the difference in the real world that we want to address in some way, however indirectly, in feminist theory. She is trying to raise unanswerable political questions, questions that to be answered would require complete social reorganization.

DC: I agree, but I think she does this where she is not willing to challenge the divide of the human race into two sexes. The state both expresses and reinforces the truth of how we should be actualized in our sexual identities, male/female. The law so conceived inevitably closes the domain of other sexual possibilities. Judith has beautifully argued in The Psychic Life of Power that this foreclosure is achieved only at enormous psychic cost.¹

EG: But sexuate rights are impossible, isn’t this the point that she’s making?

DC: You see, what’s interesting though is that they may not be. . .

EG: A certain egalitarian understanding of sexuality can be completely accommodated within the long run or in principle, but it is not clear that when she is talking about sexuate rights, she is talking about rights that could be incorporable into a civil system that aspires to sexual neutrality, the neutral citizen.

¹ But see also Bodies That Matter:

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex,” and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the “valence of abjection,” and its status for the subject as a threatening specter. Further, the materialization of given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. [3]
DC: Within the concept of civil law that she uses, I think you could articulate civil duties and responsibilities for both men and women. What’s interesting about French law is that it is much more duty-oriented than it is right-oriented. So I think that she is serious—and there’s a lot that’s good about it—that these would be the spheres of duties and responsibilities of both men and women. But we don’t have that kind of concept of duty, for better or worse, because this is just a blatant capitalist society, and with rare exceptions nobody has an affirmative duty to anybody in our law. I have always read her as programmatically serious about sexuate rights, and seeing them as realizable. Such rights are certainly inconsistent with the way law operates now, but it is not inconsistent with the concept of the French legal system.

PC: I agree with Drucilla that Irigaray is very serious about programmatic reform. How does your concept of equivalent rights differ from her concept of sexuate rights?

DC: I now defend the imaginary domain as a moral right. As a matter of right, we have to be recognized as the source of our own evaluations of our identifications. I’ve mainly written about this in terms of what I call “sexuate being,” borrowing the phrase from Irigaray. I also think that given the complexity of national and linguistic identifications, that the imaginary would apply there too. So rather than having the state say, “okay, you are under the category we now think of as ‘women,’ and therefore your duties and responsibilities are such and such”—including giving women very radical duties to themselves and to their daughters, which I admire her courage in articulating, I would say that because we are the source of our own evaluations, the state cannot impose any engendered duties upon anyone, or any meaning to national identification. So the ideal of the imaginary domain doesn’t have to deny the ethical and political significance of racial and national oppression. But on the level of the concept of right, you are the source of the evaluation and no one else.

PC: If you are the source of your own evaluation, what role does the other have in this concept of right? The other is very important to you, and in your earlier work at least, you use the phrases “the ethics of otherness,” “other-love.” Is there a shift from that position?

DC: No, one thing that I want to make clear is that when I am dealing with the state and right, that is all I’m dealing with. I see it as a totally contaminated area. “Contamination” shows my appreciation of law. I always feel like I’m in a cesspool whenever I’m writing about law, but maybe that’s my own particular history. [Laughs.] There’s no way legal writing can encompass all of my thinking about ethics or politics. Law is a limited arena and should remain so.

EG: Could you philosophically rephrase your notion of equivalent rights in terms of the right of the other to have its other?

DC: Yes, that’s a very good way of putting it. That’s part of keeping the symbolic open.

EG: . . . which is also possibly a way to address what your concerns are, Judith, that it’s not clear, if you are, say, gay or transsexual, that sexual difference is the operative category under which you want to define yourself.

JB: I don’t think it’s a choice. . . .

EG: No, it’s not a choice, but it’s not clear that it’s the operative category. It’s a necessary category, but it may not be the most significant one in certain situations, for example, in the case of race relations.
JB: It’s not a question of sexual difference being not operative or its being not relevant. I think its claim to being foundational, the very claim that feminist theory makes about its fundamental status, is brought into crisis. So I would say it’s not a relationship of indifference or inappropriateness but one of overt contestation.

PC: Could you say more about what you think sexual difference is, or what the idea of sexual difference in Irigaray is? This seems to be a very interesting issue because Drucilla also has criticized it for leading to a notion of sexuate rights. So what do you think sexual difference is?

JB: What I think it is?

EG: ... or what you don’t like about it.

JB: That’s a different question. There are a number of different ways of tracing it in Irigaray’s work. But it’s clear to me that sexual difference does not denote a simple opposition, a binary opposition. What it denotes is something like the relationship of a presumed masculine symbolic order to what it must exclude and how that same presumed masculine order requires this excluded feminine to augment and reproduce itself. And I think that what she’s given us is a quite brilliant rendition of a certain economy in which there are not two sexes: there is the sex that is one and then the feminine which is necessary for the reproduction of that masculinity but is always figured as its outside. That has been an enormously influential way of thinking. I think that there are a number of questions that are raised by it, and one of them is, Is this symbolic order that we are talking about primarily or paradigmatically masculine?

PC: What you have just described, i.e. sexual difference as the negative but constitutive substratum of phallogocentrism, is the early Irigaray of Speculum and This Sex Which Is Not One. Is the same notion of sexual difference still operative after An Ethics of Sexual Difference? It seems to me that there, Irigaray’s idea of sexual difference changes dramatically, and it is formulated as a generative interval that exists between the two sexes. She calls sexual difference a sensible transcendent. This reformulation is partly grounded in a rereading of Heidegger in which the copula of Being, which gives Being, is rewritten as the fecundity of the couple. She argues that this interval should be affirmed as a source for the ethical transfiguration of cultural and sociopolitical life. Sexual difference would then be the dimension of the new as such. 2

JB: What happened is that a certain heterosexual notion of ethical exchange emerged in An Ethics of Sexual Difference. Clearly there is a presumptive heterosexuality in all that

2. See An Ethics of Sexual Difference:

[W]oman and man are always meeting as though for the first time because they cannot be substituted one for the other. I will never be in a man’s place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other—they are irreducible one to the other.

Who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually. This feeling of surprise, astonishment, and wonder in the face of the unknowable ought to be returned to its locus: that of sexual difference. ... [W]onder ... keeps[s] a space of freedom and attraction between [the sexes], a possibility of separation and alliance.

This might take place at the time of the first meeting ... as permanent proof of difference. The interval will never be crossed. Consummation would never take place. ... One sex is not entirely consumable by the other. There is always a remainder. [13–14]
reading, which allows us to go back and see some of that really aggressive early reading as part of a certain heterosexual trauma as well. “Commodities among Themselves” was never truly convincing to me as a lesbian text in any case—imaging that abundance where there would be no pain associated with pleasure. [laughs] No, that has never been lesbianism. That’s to put lesbianism in the permanently unrealizable. So that was not, I think, a friendly text. But the intense overt heterosexuality of An Ethics of Sexual Difference and indeed of the sexuate rights discourse, which is all about mom and motherhood and not at all about postfamily arrangements or alternative family arrangements, not only brought to the fore a kind of presumptive heterosexuality, but actually made heterosexuality into the privileged locus of ethics, as if heterosexual relations, because they putatively crossed this alterity, which is the alterity of sexual difference, were somehow more ethical, more other-directed, less narcissistic than anything else. It was, in some sense, compelling men out of what she used to call their hom(m)osexualité into this encounter with alterity, where that alterity would in fact be the feminine, and what would emerge from that exchange would be a certain kind of heterosexual love which would come to capture the domain of the ethical.

PC: And in your reading, does the interval of sexual difference exist, internally mark relations, between men and between women? I don’t think that the basic framework of her project forecloses these issues, even though she hasn’t addressed them explicitly. Crudely put, her project seems to be to try to find a concrete basis or efficient motor for structural social change for the whole of humanity, given that the world is not going the right way. And she suggests that we need to affirm and tap into the generative power of the interval of sexual difference because, for her, this is the source or necessary condition of possibility of our being. At this very general level, her argument is not heterosexist. If I could phrase it this way, she seems to be saying, “we may not all be mothers and fathers, but all of us have been children once. And until the cloning of humans is successful, in order for us to be born, in order for us to be, there must be two sexes or at least the genetic material from two sexes.” At any rate, this is the trace of the other in us, the constitutive trace of sexual alterity. The argument is not phrased in terms of sexual preferences at all or different configurations of child-rearing and sexuality in different cultures or racial communities.

JB: Does she acknowledge that the interval of sexual difference exists between men and women? Here is the thing: do we want to say that sexual difference understood as masculine/feminine is the paradigmatic interval of difference? I would say no. . . .

DC: Me, too!

JB: And I would say that what she has done has completely obliterated the way in which an ethically enabling difference exists in homosexual love.

EG: To play devil’s advocate one more time, one could read what Irigaray is asking as the question: “what would other relations of sexuality be like if and when there was a recognition of the existence of more than one sex?” What changes would there be to homosexuality, to love between women, between men, to sexual love of all kinds, if this recognition were possible?

PC: If I could just give a quote or two from Irigaray to show that her notion of sexual difference is much more fluid than either Judith or Druccilla have been allowing. First there are those lines from An Ethics (“Who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually”) where a strange
equivocation occurs and absolute alterity, which is not cognizable, which is not of the realm of appearance, nevertheless appears as sexual alterity. Then, in I Love to You, she writes, "The negative in sexual difference means the acceptance of the limits of my own gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other. It cannot be overcome, but it gives a positive access—neither instinctual nor drive-related—to the other" [13]. That seems to be gesturing towards what Liz was saying about the slipperiness of sexual difference.

JB: Not quite, not quite. Because what you’ve got is “the limits of my gender,” and then you’ve got “the other.”

EG: Even if the other is of the same “gender”?

JB: But you are the one to provide that supplement, and God bless you, as it were, for doing that, but then let’s claim it as the Liz Grosz-Pheng Cheah supplement to Irigaray.

EG: But this kind of reading seems authorized by her work.

PC: She does suggest that a culture and a legal system that respects sexual difference will also generate a woman-to-woman sociality or man-to-man sociality that is not based on Hegelian murder, such that the interval of sexual difference would also exist between woman and woman, man and man.3

JB: Why subject yourself to her?

EG: Because, from long ago, from as early as Speculum and This Sex Which Is Not One, she has actually said something very similar. She’s never been a lesbian writer. I don’t think she’s ever presented “Commodities among Themselves” as a lesbian text. Sometimes it has been read as such. Certainly in the ’70s and early ’80s, she was read as a lesbian writer. In a way, it was a mistake to expect her to address these questions. Nonetheless, her work has certain implications we can draw out on the question of lesbianism, and what lesbianism might be like outside the dominating (but not exclusive) models and constrictures of heterosexuality, even if she herself doesn’t do this.

JB: It’s “Two Lips” [“When Our Lips Speak Together”], I think, that’s really taken as a lesbian text, but yes . . .

EG: Perhaps rightfully so, but it’s not where it was destined, or at least not what it was written for. In a way, her work has always been about addressing heterosexuality, and she

3. See, for instance, An Ethics of Sexual Difference: “Women can no longer love or desire the other man if they cannot love themselves. Women are no longer willing to be the guardians of love, especially when it is an improbable or even pathological love. Women want to find themselves, discover themselves and their own identity. Which is why they are seeking each other out, loving each other, associating with each other.” Later, Irigaray observes that one of the tasks that have to be tackled is

The possibility that the female could be many; that women would form a social group. If women have no access to society and culture:

— they are abandoned to a state of neither knowing each other nor loving each other, or themselves;
— they have no way to mediate the operations of sublimation;
— love remains impossible for them. [66–67]
has been fairly explicit about that. She doesn’t deal with texts that deal with homosexuality, hardly at all.

JB: That’s fine, but then let’s put her in heterosexual studies rather than in feminism.

EG: But they are not unlinked, of course.

JB: Well, it can be a subset. [Laughs.]

DC: I want to come in here and say that whatever heterosexuality is, it is the biggest oasis in the future. It awaits us in the future.

EG: That is exactly her point, too!

DC: But by heterosexual, I don’t mean actual sexual relations between men and women. Her highly idealized writing on heterosexuality as the reflection on the limits of one’s gender that becomes the basis of wonder in the Heideggerian sense, in which you are confronted with the other as the basis for a whole new engagement with difference, is fundamentally conservative to me. Irigaray is in awe of this flowering within heterosexuality. I would try to defend a radical futurity in which the symbolization of this kind of engagement would be called into question. I think this is where I have come closer to Judith in wanting to see sexual difference in crisis. If the feminine in Irigaray was once an aesthetic idea to make havoc with what could be rationally perceived, it is now a much more traditional aesthetic idea to make present to reason a kind of ideal of difference.

EG: “Wanting to see sexual difference in crisis” assumes that it is not already in crisis!

DC: I would like to put it in a slightly different crisis, to put sexual difference and its meaning into the future so that whatever self you come out with, as you eloquently put it, you leave the other with its other.

EG: I think that it is the most interesting question of both ethics and politics. But it is exactly to her that we seem to owe this debt. Isn’t this exactly what her project of sexual difference is? It is something that is impossible in the present. Its function is always the future anterior. Its function is as ideal.

DC: I would also want to put it as ideal except that I feel that in her attempts to engage with Heidegger, she has moved away from that, and even the use of a certain kind of Heideggerian language carries with it a very different temporality than one that is directed towards a radically and, by definition, undefined future.

PC: So Irigaray is not utopian enough for you?

DC: Not in the Heideggerian mode. Her temporality is such that she has reinscribed conservatism on the deepest level of her understanding of sexual difference.

EG: That is a strong charge. Do you think that is fair?

DC: I think so. Of course, you could find texts, certainly a lot of the earlier texts, where the reading you offer would seem the fairer one.

EG: But even in An Ethics of Sexual Difference and certainly in Marine Lover?
DC: I don’t want to say that Irigaray can be easily summarized, but I do want to say that I think that there is an inescapable trap—I want to put it this strongly—in the move to the ontologization of the feminine and the masculine, even if it is a move to a new interval, towards difference, between the two sexes.

PC: But how is the move of ontologization escapable if you want your critique to have any effect, if you want a radical imaginary to be institutionally rooted, if you want institutional change to actually happen as opposed to just talking endlessly about radical change and hoping that it will somehow happen? In this sense, it is true that Irigaray is not utopian. She wants change to actually happen. As she says in *I Love to You*, “I am, therefore, a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future” [10].

DC: I think you have to have ideals at least on the level of the concept of right. I’m not against that.

EG: But more than that, that you buy into ontological commitments whenever you make certain political commitments.

DC: You inevitably buy into ontological commitments when you advocate programs of reform. I don’t think you can avoid it, which is why anytime you use an aesthetic idea to make sense to reason, you paradoxically try to show that what reason has made sense of is not fully adequate to its promise. I was very influenced by Reiner Schurmann in seeing the paradox in my representation of political ideals, even as aesthetic ideas. But buying into them and knowing that you buy into them and knowing that any representational device you use in this sense of aesthetic idea carries within it that buying into them is very different from actually thinking that you are doing something more philosophical by turning gender, engendering, or sexual difference into a way of thinking about the truth of Being in a particular historical era.

JB: Indeed, I would want to know from Liz and Pheng if it’s the case that the institutionalization of one’s feminist goals involves making ontological commitments about what women are or what the feminine is and how, at the same time, the perspective of the future anterior is maintained.

EG: There are two different issues here. Institutionalization buys less into ontological commitments than into strategic and political alignments. The intellectual understanding of what one does institutionally, if one has an intellectual understanding (which is not always the case), commits you to an ontology. An ontology that isn’t clear-cut—I’m not saying it’s an essence or a series of essences although it may be that too. It’s an ontology about what categories exist, what categories are necessary to define one’s world, and they of course shift depending on what your political position is. And your political position is itself in part structured by what battles you are facing, which depends on your institutional placement. You can’t avoid the question of ontology, but you can avoid it most readily when you are looking at an institutional or legal level.

JB: This might be another question about what we mean by ontology or ontologization, because it seems to me that there are ways in which categories that one uses in those institutional and political contexts both accrue a certain ontological weight and meaning and force and inherit it. There is a historicity to this ontology, but one would have to be able to talk about this process of ontologization in terms of temporality and not in terms of positivity.

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PC: So it never becomes flesh? How do ideas become ontologized if they don’t become flesh?

JB: Tell me what you mean by “flesh.” “Flesh” is a wonderful rhetorical word that makes everyone think that they have arrived finally at the true end of embodiment and materiality.

PC: Well, I think that if one is bound in certain ways because one is a finite being, then one is bound by certain things which accrue to oneself and it is very difficult to distinguish those things from one’s physical body. In that way, we speak of nations as bodies, we speak of collectivities as bodies, and they become a kind of second nature. For me, that is a form of incarnation of ideas, even if the incarnation is never successful. And incarnation is, of course, linked to temporalization because it refers to the persistence of any presence in empirical space-time. Precisely because incarnation as a case of presence can always go awry, the process generates the future anterior. So, for instance, with respect to the flesh of embodiment, one can say that one arrives but one never arrives at a true end because the embodiment of finite beings is a process that has no end. In flesh, one is always arriving. Derrida has called this the destierrance of being, and I think one could also read Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the flesh in this way.

Otherwise, if you maintain a sharp distinction between the ideal and the real and you see the ideal as the beyond from which to critique the real, you can’t really argue how the ideal is to be connected to the real. It seems to me that is what Derrida, for instance, doesn’t do—he doesn’t separate the ideal from the real, but regards each term as the difference of the other.

EG: And I don’t think Irigaray does, either.

PC: Yes, she is suspicious of philosophies that separate the ideal from the real and which regard the ideal as a simple beyond or outside from which to reshape the real. Her critique of patriarchal religion and the complicity of what, in shorthand, I’ll call “idealist” philosophies with patriarchy is apposite here. For Irigaray, sexual difference is a sensible transcendent. It is an outside that is in the inside of the real and concretely so. It is not an abjected ideal, as Judith would put it, or a utopian ideal/idea in the Kantian sense, as Drucilla puts it. But at the same time, the ideal and the real are not sublated into spirit in the Hegelian sense. So unlike the Hegelian attempt to overcome the ideal/real split, we also don’t end up in a blind acceptance of the status quo as the fully incarnated ideal. For Irigaray, the possibility of the future inheres in that which gives the present, namely the interval of sexual difference.

That’s where the point about her move towards ontologization comes in. I agree absolutely with Drucilla. Irigaray sees sexual difference as the ground of Being. She rewrites Heidegger’s copula of Being as the sexuate couple. But then the ground is no longer secured as a positivity. It is a generative interval. That’s one way of ontologization. But the point is this: unless you believe that ideas can be ontologized or incarnated, that ideas can come to be, how can you link the ideal and the real? In other words, how can your critique have real effects? How can you argue for material change if there is no possibility of the ideal becoming real?

JB: Unless you identify the copula with the couple?

PC: No, not unless you identify the copula with the couple, but unless you engage in ontologization, in some kind of incarnation, of which Irigaray’s couple is one example.
JB: Incarnation is a very strangely theological way of describing the problem of ontologization. It makes me nervous because it presupposes the exteriority of the ideal to the place of its instantiation. That’s the reason why I wasn’t fully able to understand your previous question to me.

EG: It need not resonate only in theological terms. To talk about ontologization is to talk about putting things into our schema of being.

PC: It is precisely to talk about the real effects of ideals without reducing reality to a positivity.

JB: Not quite, because that’s already to presuppose this first nature which then becomes instilled with ideality and then becomes this second nature.

PC: But then the question is, If nature can become supplemented by ideality and become a second nature, is it not more dynamic than we earlier assumed? Once again, sexual difference for Irigaray is the transcendental that is, at the same time, sensible.

EG: Whether one buys into Pheng’s description or not, if we focus on Irigaray for a moment, it seems that when she is talking about sexual difference as ontological difference, she is not specifying it in any way, nor can she possibly specify what it might consist in. She is claiming that each has its other and that they are irreducible and that any notion of Being that denies that thereby falls into one of those categories, i.e. the masculine.

JB: Yes, but that is just to make it so fundamental. . . .

EG: Well, it’s to make a fundamental but not to make it the only fundamental. . . .

JB: Is that right? Does she give us a list of some other fundamentals? [Laughs.]

EG: No, she doesn’t, but I don’t think that is necessarily her task to do that.

JB: That’s the fabulous contribution of Liz Grosz, let’s call it that!

EG: No, I don’t think that’s entirely fair to her.

JB: Oh, my God! Abjection! Abjection! [Laughs.]

DC: You know, Liz, I go along with Judith. I think this is a Liz Grosz contribution.

EG: I don’t think she has ever said it is the only one. Seriously, she’s talked about the space where racial differences, where class differences, arise. And what its ontological implications might be, because they are not simply historical as far as she is concerned. . . .

DC: But class is for her a sociological concept.

EG: Yes, but it has epistemological and ontological implications. And this is the point about politics, that each of those positions has their ontologies and epistemologies and that is what knowledge is. It is the contestation and usually the victory of one category of those over others.
DC: Let’s take a classic example. The category that we use in the US census and which many people who are “women” identify with, is the category “Latina,” which encompasses everyone who is not Spanish who is from some country in South America, Puerto Rico, or Mexico. It only makes sense in the United States. “Latina” is an identity created here out of a whole set of historical factors of oppression, so that if you were a national Argentine living in Switzerland, you would never say “I’m Latina.” So “Latina” is an identification which has come out of a whole set of historical specificities which creates alliances, particularly in bilingual education, between a Puerto Rican nationalist and an Ecuadorian who is for the time being living with his or her family in New York City. And this category is a political and ethical identification because it insists that you are not trying to pass as Spanish, thus you are not Hispanic.

EG: The point of this political identification is that it gives the people who thereby identify with it a position, a series of positions . . .

DC: It gives them a series of positions, and it can even, so to speak, take on a kind of being. What is particularly interesting about the identification “Latina” is that this is all very obvious in its historicity, in its connection to a set of moves by the United States government to obliterate Spanish language in this country, and it creates allegiances between people who otherwise wouldn’t identify with one another, and indeed, may have national identifications that put them in deep conflict. You might say it does take on something like an ontological reality. What I was suggesting about Irigaray, and I am using “Latina” because it is also feminine, is that she cannot give an account of this kind of complex identification. The identification “Latina” is a complex set of historical, cultural, linguistic, and national factors that create a kind of political identity which then does put you in a certain position. Recently I feel I have to identify as a mother of a Latina, which is even more complicated, for the purposes of bilingual education. It is these kinds of subtle engagements with not just gender but with a feminine set of identifications inescapable from all of these other realities which take on a very specific formation starting from something that doesn’t have any meaning outside the United States . . .

EG: Can’t we see the category of Woman as exactly the same, as having no more essential identity than that and still being powerful and effective nonetheless?

DC: What I am suggesting is that Irigaray’s way of thinking about sexual difference cannot comprehend the complexity, even the imaginary complexity, and here, of course, “Latina” is obviously to me an identity that awaits us in the future because its meaning is political and ethical.

PC: I still feel that Irigaray’s work facilitates more than you have been allowing. It seems that there is sexual oppression in all societies and that, in neocolonial globalization, the maternal body is the support of the global capitalist system. Women of the South become low-paid workers or unpaid workers or sweated labor largely because of the identifications of woman as good wife, good mother, or good daughter. This seems to confirm Irigaray’s point that woman has always been regarded as a (maternal) envelope for man, that the maternal body has been made the substrate of existence in many societies. In a perverse way, this is even more true if one thinks about the role of reproductive engineering (the suppression of the mother) in keeping populations low in the South so that it can be more attractive to foreign direct investment or inflows of multinational capital.

Hence if we want to think about political transformation on a global scale, something that is necessitated by the fact that globalization increasingly connects all nations—then
isn’t Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference useful because it undermines the basis of this globalized form of superexploitation? If one doesn’t want to use the word “universal” because it is a bad word, wouldn’t sexual difference be at least generalizable, so that this idea of a sexual ethics can be made practicable in a global political theater? Or do you see the attempt to extend Irigarayan ethics as a form of cultural imperialism that fetishizes the maternal body?

JB: But here you are talking about generalizability and usefulness, and here it is a question of whether we can use sexual difference to describe what can be ethnographically substantiated as a prevalent concern in a number of societies.

PC: I would say “all societies,” but to be cautious one should say “most” . . .

JB: Even if we do accept that questions of reproduction, which I gather is not what you mean by the maternal body.

PC: But they are conjoined.

EG: It’s particularly this ideology of being a faithful part of the family, of being a good wife and a good mother—it’s precisely that ideology that forces poor women to continue working in appalling conditions.

JB: Right. But then the question is whether the use of sexual difference as we have seen it in at least two of its forms that we have talked about, whether that works as a rallying point for politicization or indeed, as something that is descriptively rich for any of these societal situations.

PC: . . . or counterproductive, as both of you have claimed in terms of the scenarios that you described above.

JB: It seems that you are suggesting that there is a question of the reification of the feminine as the maternal, a way in which the feminine has been cast as the maternal, in a number of societies. And now Irigaray comes along, and does she diagnose this or does she continue that act of fusion?

EG: No, is she useful?

JB: At which point, we are then asking whether her notion of sexual difference usefully describes these preexisting societies. If that were true, then we would have to go back to square one and ask what we mean by “sexual difference,” because as Drucilla has taught me, as Naomi Schor has taught me, it is not supposed to describe the existing and it cannot, it is precisely what is beyond any description of the existing.

PC: But Irigaray tries to overcome the essence/existence distinction. This is what makes her idea of sexual difference so interesting. It is the work of the negative that is at the same time extremely real, to speak in Hegelian terms, that she sometimes also uses and reinscribes. There is no split between the ideal and the real. For her, sexual difference is the sensible transcendental.

JB: It seems to me that you are having it be all things, and the real question is, To what extent can her framework work as a politicization in a global perspective, or is it in fact globalizing in an imperialist mode that would make it actually quite problematic?
EG: Those are the two operative questions that we want to ask! They are the positive and negative limits, what might be good or bad about what her work entails.

JB: Let me just point one thing out to you. We could have an argument: is her notion of sexual difference in fact reactionary? Is it complicit with the very problem that women are facing in these societies that we purport to be describing?

EG: Yes, there isn’t a simple answer to these questions. But how would one go about answering them?

JB: I’m struck by the fact that she’s not particularly interested in problems of globalization, is she? She’s very interested in universality, though.

EG: Recently, she has addressed certain questions of sexuate rights, for example, to the United Nations.

JB: So an internationalism of a certain kind. But I gather that this would be distinct from a perspective on globalization.

PC: In her work, there is a general narrative that is not dissimilar to the one offered by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* about the rise of technology and the domination of nature by man ending in the domination of man by man. Irigaray sees sexual domination and the demise of love as a fundamental part of this degeneration of humanity. The work on sexual difference is an attempt to unleash a regenerative force that will overcome this nihilism and malaise. For her, the reach of this force is global although, of course, her knowledge of other societies is not great, so she doesn’t write about them in great detail.

DC: I think it is universalizable, but it is not really global. This is a particularly Irigarayan-Heideggerian moment. She is talking about a time of Being in which the interval and the disclosure of Being is to be through this couple. It is very beautiful when you read it, or at least, I find it very beautiful, and I am tempted by religious metaphors. It’s the religiosity that she takes into the universal—this is the truth of the spirit in a sense. What is missing is a full-blown engagement with the horrifying brutality of global capitalism.

EG: There isn’t a full-blown engagement, but then there isn’t really in any of our work, so it is difficult to criticize her on that basis.

PC: In any case, in principle, she is against global capitalism which would fall under the domination of nature and of man, but especially of woman by man, or the invasion of the life-world by technology. She has written about Chernobyl and is against other similar kinds of technological disasters. Her critique of the patriarchal family is intimately connected to her sustained critique of money and her critique of commodification. It is a concrete theory of sexuate needs (she argues that sexual love is a natural necessity) that aims to transform the existing system of needs or the economic sphere from the ground up. The energy for this transformation comes from the acknowledgment of the irreducibility of sexual alterity within the realm of needs. Irigaray writes that “[s]exual difference is, as it were, the most powerful motor of a dialectic without masters and slaves” [*I Love to You* 51]. I think we often miss the beautiful simplicity of her point: sexual difference is not an ideal that is separated from the real. The interval of sexual difference may be slippery and impossible to pin down. But in this world, it is a concrete “mechanism” for structural change. If her critique of the patriarchal family can ever be put into practice, it...
will have immense repercussions for the restructuring of the market, economic production, and the state in all nations throughout the globe. So she can be read as speaking against the relentlessness of economic globalization.

DC: It may be true of all of us that we have not yet fully confronted it. But whatever we have to deploy against it, it would not be enough to speak through Heidegger about the disclosure of Being as the couple. There has to be a place—and this is what I was saying about her conserving of the categories, particularly when she uses Heidegger—for that kind of critique and that kind of head-on confrontation with violence. I think the only place where I have spoken to it is the chapter in The Philosophy of the Limit on Bowers v. Hardwick as the ruthless violence of the law.

PC: This kind of Heideggerianism that you dislike in Irigaray, isn't there a similar strand running in the Derrida who says that ethics is the experience of the impossible, that which is impossible but still given to experience?

EG: And in psychoanalysis and in Nietzsche. Yet this may help bring us around, in a way, to your statements in the very beginning, Judith, when you were talking about her aggression. In a certain way, what always attracted me to her work was that she stood face-to-face with key texts, revered texts, and said "I dare you," and attacked when they did. She wasn't afraid of mobilizing a certain kind of violence in the sphere of the intellectual where it was never given over to women to have.

JB: I agree. I think it is very interesting and important. But I do worry that her aggressive engagement was in some sense a function of her attachment to these texts.

EG: Yes, that's clear. It's not clear that one would even need to deny it.

JB: I've never seen her read a woman, and I wonder what that would look like.

EG: She does have a number of texts that do address women writers: there's a text on the placenta where she is reading a woman biologist. She also reads the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza [see "Equal to Whom?"] and has explicitly, and generously, addressed the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir [see "A Personal Note"]. So she does read women writers, but she is not renowned for it.

JB: But even in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, what she does in the name of conciliatory love to, say, Merleau-Ponty is really quite brutal. And what interests me, and perhaps this takes us far afield from some of these other questions, is the extent to which there is a certain identification with Freud, with Plato, and indeed with Lacan, although for the most part he remains unnamable. And what that does, then, to our notions of the feminine, given that this is a woman who is most profoundly identified with masculine authors, a more profound identification than we have ever seen, we might say. . . .

EG: There is a profound identification. But the underside of that identification, and what makes her very different to the various disciples of some thinkers, is that she uses this identification as a form of detailed dis-identification, as a mode of breaking out of the identification, which is so necessary for critique.

4. See Derrida, "Force of Law." Cf. Derrida, The Other Heading: "But there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible" [44–45].

5. See "On the Maternal Order." Here she discusses in detail the work of the biologist Hélène Rouch.
JB: But does she?

EG: Well, she does to the extent that she produces it as critique, she does to the extent that she reads Merleau-Ponty’s language with a certain great and intense love so that she can use it against him.

JB: But to what extent does the identification work against her strategy? I am tempted to say that this identification is strategic, but in fact, I wonder if it doesn’t disrupt or limit the possibility of strategy.

PC: The other thing to note is that what is interesting in the later work, especially in the rereading of Hegel on the family, is that she introduces love as a political category and distinguishes it from both desire and friendship.

JB: One could read her explicit pronouncements on what love is and then note that there is a certain practice of love, to use de Lauretis’s phrase, that comes through in the rhetoricity of the text that very often is at war with the explicit proclamations that she makes about it.

PC: So she is not giving herself into the people she reads?

JB: She certainly is, and she hates them massively for it!

EG: What is fascinating about this deep entanglement is that she has to enter texts internally, with love, in order to generate precisely this future anterior, this hope of a future that I think has been so important in the work of both of you, but is much more explicitly articulated in Drucilla’s writings. If we don’t just want to write this out as a psychobiography of her personality . . . if there is a possibility of reading this politically rather than identificatorily, it seems that why she is doing this—and this is partly about the strategy of mimesis that we touched on earlier . . .

JB: Let’s remember that Lacoue-Labarthe says that it may be that identification is the central question of politics.6 By “identification,” I don’t mean Irigaray the person identifying with Freud the person or Freud the text. I’m really talking about a way in which the authorial perspective, as articulated in the narrative perspective of the work, goes in and out of being indistinguishable from the position that she is explicating. And this strikes me as a textual analysis. It doesn’t necessarily involve any postulation of a psychological state.

EG: But nonetheless the question remains: is her strategy—we’ve called it a mimetic strategy—but we need to make clear that it has these underlying strands of deep ambivalence. . . .

JB: I think all mimesis has ambivalence in it. But I also wonder whether mimesis isn’t precisely that kind of thing that is so fundamental that it actually defeats any strategy that might be built upon it?

EG: But isn’t this very close to your notion of performativity?

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6. "Why would the problem of identification not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?" [Typographies 300].

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JB: Probably. That’s why one can’t understand performativity fully as a strategy. That’s correct.

EG: Nor is mimesis fully a strategy or only a strategy. They are both attempts to generate an anomaly that produces a new future, an anomalous working of the system, the breakdown from inside the system that allows that system itself to generate a future that isn’t containable by that system. In a way, isn’t mimesis just a nifty word to capture this bringing into being of something that hasn’t existed before, which is hope, or more precisely, the condition of hope?

DC: I’m not convinced that it is a good enough word.

EG: It’s not the only word. There are many more interesting words that deal with the same phenomenon. “Utopia” is another such word, as is “becoming,” “performativity,” “difference,” “iteration.” They are attempts to think from the limits of the present what a future outside those limits are.

JB: Yes, to open space.

EG: Is there anything you would like to add as we approach the end?

JB: There is just one thing that I would like to add. This relationship to alterity, to what we call “the other,” seems very crucial to what we’ve all been saying about ethics and politics. But it worries me when alterity becomes understood as a dyadic relationship. If it is just the couple, then I’m not sure that it can be a model for ethics or politics.

EG: But I think that this is why Irigaray stresses the other of the other. She talks about a double symmetry, not a symmetry. The other of the other might not be the subject. It could be someone or something altogether different.

JB: I do understand that, and that is actually the strength of the early work and why I remain a greater fan of the early work than the later. . . .

EG: Yes.

JB: I think that there is a general question about whether explicating an ethical relation can give us the foundations of a political one. I think when we start talking about nations and national boundaries, the problem of alterity moves beyond any of these ethical scenes that she gives us, and I just wanted to caution about that.

DC: My final words on this would be that the conservation and temporality in Irigaray’s program of sexuate rights have to make us wonder about the value of trying to name the future in the specific sense. Although I still think we have to use the feminine, I would no longer name the future “the feminine.” That’s part of what I was trying to say with the example of “Latina.” Irigaray simply cannot grapple with someone who is a woman whose “feminine difference” is inseparable from imposed personas that she has to live with in a racist society like our own, one in which Spanish culture and society has been evacuated of cultural significance. A complex ethical and political field has to be opened up that would allow us to preserve feminism as an active movement, that would allow us to make, not sense in the traditional sense of cognizable reality, but make us able to see that our categories of traditional gender-understanding simply cannot grapple with the kinds of oppression and alliances that are mandated by a sense of “being a woman.” And
that for me has become the limits, particularly of the later Irigaray. This is not to say that you don’t need the category or, as I called it, the aesthetic idea, “the feminine,” because who a Latina is imagined to be (and I use those words very deliberately) and who a Latina who takes up that identification is politically asserting herself to be by taking up that identification has to deploy the feminine in some way.

PC: To end on this, what would both of you name or figure the future as?

DC: To the degree that I have any concept of right in which I would dare to name the future, I’ve named it “the imaginary domain.” But this is a concept of right meant for the recognition that in terms of the state, our evaluations and our identifications have to be put in our hands, so that the design of ourselves awaits us in the future. That’s as far as I have gotten in terms of naming a moral and legal ideal which has a kind of future temporality to it by maintaining it at a high level of abstraction. Rather than one ideal, I would look for a proliferation of ideals that served us on different levels of social, political, cultural, and national existence.

JB: The first thing I thought of about what holds the place of the future was that if the name of the feminine can’t secure it, then the crisis of the name of the feminine can. What I mean by that is that it is very important to remember that “the feminine,” “femininity,” and all of these terms have their own intelligibility, and the question is: what are the kinds of social formations that call that intelligibility into question? If we are to stay with something like the feminine, how can what is unintelligible in it be brought to bear on its circulation? And what I worry about is that although Irigaray shows us the logic of how what is unspeakable and unrepresentable returns to disrupt the operation of the symbolic and to produce this echoing dissonance within it, to open up a space, to show its incoherence, the question is whether there isn’t a new normativity that is entered precisely as the instrument of that disruption. And so for me this is a place where feminism has to allow its own fundamental precepts to come into crisis in relationship to other critical paradigms.

PC and EG: Thank you both.

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