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SIX

CAN LUCE IRIGARAY'S NOTION OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE BE APPLIED TO TRANSSEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES?

Danielle Poe

For over thirty years, Luce Irigaray's work on sexual difference has been the subject of debate about whether sexual difference is essential, necessary, oppressive, or some combination of these. I examine critiques from people who claim that her work is based on an essentialism that is dismissive and harmful to transsexual and transgender discourse. I argue that Irigaray's ethics, based on sexual difference, has the potential to lead to discussions about all difference, including differences in sexuality. Irigaray's complex understanding of sexual difference as natural, cultural, spiritual, and morphological can help us interpret transsexual narratives, narratives by people who seek medical intervention to attain the correct embodiment (Feinberg 1996; Prosser 1998). Transsexual and transgender narratives can also help us to better understand Irigaray's insistence that corporeality is indispensable for cultivating sexual difference. However, accounts of transgender experience—people whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex and assigned gender identity (Feinberg 1996; Halberstam 2005)—challenge any conception that sexual difference can be only binary.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on Irigaray's notion of sexual difference and critiques from feminist philosophers who argue that Irigaray relies on essentialism to define sexual difference. Many scholars assume that

because Irigaray's philosophy begins with a critique of masculine discourse in order to create a space for the feminine that she makes her distinction between the masculine and the feminine based on biological differences. These readings of Irigaray portray her as conservative and sympathetic to traditional gender stereotypes, which betrays Irigaray's continuous critique of static understandings of sex and gender (Irigaray 1996 [1992], 2001 [1997], 2002 [1999]). A close reading of Irigaray's texts reveals that it is a misunderstanding to think of sexual difference as simply biological or as static cultural essentialism.

In the second section of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which misreadings of sexual difference give rise to the argument that Irigaray's philosophy is normatively heterosexual (Butler and Cornell 1998; Murphy 2007; Bergoffen 2007). The charge that Irigaray prescribes heterosexuality leads to the further charge that her philosophy is dismissive of transsexual and transgender people. In particular, I focus on the work of Ann Murphy, a recent critic of Irigaray's project. Murphy argues that Irigaray's notion of sexual difference forces women and men to identify with their gender and with conservative social norms, which harms those individuals whose sexuality challenges traditional norms.

I argue that Murphy's critique of Irigaray hinges on misreadings of the relation between "nature" and "the natural," a distinction that Irigaray maintains in her work. According to Murphy, "nature" and "the natural" are one and the same for Irigaray, and woman's nature is that which spontaneously arises for women (Murphy 2007, 80–84). However, Irigaray develops her notion of "woman's nature" as a "cultivated natural" (Irigaray 2002 [1999]). The "cultivated natural" is the way in which woman develops her nature both in relation to culture and her material circumstances, including biology, psychology, and morphology. Thus, Irigaray does not advocate that women should simply embrace the "nature" imposed on them by society or biology. She promotes a position in which woman creates her nature in keeping with the many parts that cause her to call herself "woman."

Finally, I use Irigaray's notion of sexual difference to show that whereas critics are right to point out that Irigaray does not adequately develop what sexual difference means for transsexual and transgender people, her readers can use Irigaray's work to engage transsexual and transgender narratives. Irigaray's emphasis on the heterosexual relationship points to the deep difficulty of those relationships. Nonheterosexual relationships already challenge patriarchal structures in a way that helps to distinguish and support the limits of sexual difference. Irigaray's development of sexual difference is not a project that intends merely to preserve sexual difference, but moves from systems of oppression to ethical ways of interacting. To show how Irigaray's philosophy is applicable to transsexual people, I examine the nar-

ratives of gender crossing from Deirdre McCloskey and Max Wolf Valerio (McCloskey 1999; Treut et al. 1992). I then discuss the limits of Irigaray's analysis by considering descriptions of transgender experience as related by Judith Halberstam and Leslie Feinberg (Halberstam 2005; Feinberg 1996).

THE ESSENTIALISM/ANTI-ESSENTIALISM DEBATE

In the 1980s many feminists critiqued Irigaray's project of articulating sexual difference because they were concerned that sexual difference could only be established by seeking out an essential feature that was common to all women and excluded all nonwomen. This feature was thought to be an unchanging biological essence that would enforce a single lifestyle on all women. These feminists instead wanted to free women from burdensome stereotypes by arguing that there are no essential differences between men and women; we are all simply human. Irigaray and others argued that establishing a fundamental difference between men and women does not require discovering an essential feature common to all women. Instead, it requires a complex articulation of difference that is always present and the ground for other kinds of difference.

The debate over Irigaray's supposed essentialism continues. I believe that what is commonly understood as a biological essentialism in Irigaray's work is a misreading, and Irigaray is not an essentialist. What is at stake in the debate about essentialism is whether feminists should work to erase sexual difference or work to establish sexual difference. Those who critique Irigaray's alleged essentialism argue that gender is socially imposed and can be overcome in favor of common humanity in which many differences can flourish (Butler and Cornell 1998; Butler 1990, 1993). Those who advocate establishing sexual difference argue that the attempt to overcome it results in men dominating women (Irigaray 1985 [1974], 1993 [1984], 1996 [1992], 2002 [1999]). Defenders of Irigaray maintain that she observes factual difference based in culture and history and not the effects of a biological reductionism.

The charge that Irigaray is an essentialist originates in her insistence that sexual difference is unavoidable, contributes to full human flourishing, and has the potential to transform relationships between men and women, which in turn could transform the law, the market, and the environment. The argument that Irigaray relies on biological essentialism for her notion of sexual difference seems to come from her analysis of women's bodies. To understand why she focuses so heavily on women's bodies, it is important to remember that Irigaray's ethical, philosophical, and political roots all begin in an understanding of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis brings with it an attention to the body that pervades Irigaray's work.

As early as *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray turns her attention to an analysis of women's bodies (1985 [1974]). In "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," Margaret Whitford draws our attention to the importance of the lips and mucous as a metaphor in Irigaray's work that can provide a model of divinity, sexuality, and speech that are proper to establishing sexual difference. For Whitford, Irigaray's focus on lips and mucous provides a means of thinking about ethics as relational instead of hierarchical. In this model for ethics, the sensible is emphasized such that ethics relates to the here and now rather than to a static, universal definition. As something that is more accessible to touch than sight, mucous can only be accessed in the sensible. Mucous is at the threshold of the lips and signifies an openness, a refusal to close women into some fixed definition defined by patriarchy. Whitford also argues that mucous corresponds to women's sexuality and women's speech. Mucous can never be reduced to a part, or an object; therefore, mucous is not easily incorporated in the masculine imaginary. Mucous is not part of a binary opposition; it touches and flows between that which it touches (Whitford 1991).

If we take Whitford's analysis further, we notice that Irigaray's discussion of mucous and its importance never occurs separately from her discussion of the importance of the lips:

A remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this *threshold* which has never been examined as such: the female sex. The threshold that gives access to the *mucous*. Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice—a threshold that is always *half-open*. The threshold of the *lips*, which are strangers to dichotomy and oppositions. Gathered one against the other but without any possible suture, at least of a real kind. They do not absorb the world into or through themselves, provided they are not misused and reduced to a means of consumption or consummation. They offer a shape of welcome but do not assimilate, reduce, or swallow up. (Irigaray 1993 [1984], 18, emphasis in original)

Irigaray's analysis focuses on both the facial lips and the genital lips. The relation of lips to themselves is one in which the touching-touched relation cannot be distinguished. The lips are both touched and touching.

While some might argue that Irigaray's attention to women's lips is a feature of essentialism in which a woman is a woman based on her genitalia, we can instead understand her focus on the lips as a rejoinder to Freud and Lacan's insistence that woman is an absence, absence of the penis and absence of the phallus. The lips are material and different than the penis. Yet, the lips are not a static category; the lips function differently in differ-

ent circumstances. Irigaray emphasizes that lips both welcome and limit our relationships. For Irigaray, ethics is not simply about what one is permitted to do, but also how one is limited by the other (Irigaray 2001 [1997], 33–37). In welcoming and limiting the other, the ethical model demands first of all that a woman can speak for herself. For Irigaray, a woman speaks for herself by virtue of situating herself in relation to her sex and to the limit of her sex. She says, in fact, I am created by two genders and I live in a mixed community. But let us consider a utopia of our age: a woman gives birth to a woman, and they live in a community of women separated from the other part of the world. A woman in such a situation should consider her identity as woman as an identity in relationship with the other gender, at least insofar as it is her intention to fulfill her own gender. There is in me, woman, a part that is negative, not realizable by me alone, a part of night, a part that is reserved, a part that is irreducibly feminine and that is not suited to represent the whole of the human being that must enter into the constitution of my identity (34).

Even for the woman who is born to another woman and who lives only with other women, this woman-among-women is still characterized by the part of her that cannot represent all of humanity. Thus, this woman does not become woman by “not being a man” since she has never been exposed to men. Rather, she becomes woman by recognizing her own irreducibility and her own inability to represent every human. In this case, irreducibility has to do with her irreducibility as a single individual, who does not represent all women and is not represented by all women. Thus, Irigaray’s claims about irreducibility include a means to preserve individuals’ concreteness in relation to the universal. But, to fulfill her relationship to the universal, woman must consider her identity in relation to the identity of men. Her relation to the universal does not appropriate all universality.

Woman’s relationship to the universal through her gender does include attention to anatomical difference, but sexual difference includes much more than bodily difference. The previous passage emphasizes that although women’s bodies are important for Irigaray, sexual difference is also based on relationships between people. Moreover, these relationships shape sexual difference, as well as being shaped by it. If Irigaray’s work advocated biological essentialism, we would expect a static, universal notion of sex, which would shape relationships. However, Irigaray does not offer any essential characteristics of women and men. Instead, she emphasizes the necessity of cultivating sexual difference in a way that would allow other differences to flourish.

Hilge Landweer argues that the concepts of sex and gender are necessarily bound to generativity, and all subsequent concepts derive from an original duality, the two sexes required for generation (Landweer 2005, 29–30). She writes,

I claim that reproduction is indeed a topic that has to be negotiated on a social-theoretical level and that should not be turned into a taboo on grounds of a general suspicion of essentialism. Due to the anthropologically still valid fact that humans are born and die, generativity leads in *every* culture to categorizations of "gender." By *generativity* I mean the simple insight that human societies (similar to many animals) depend for their reproduction on two sexes, no matter to what extent and with which culturally specific meaning. (31)

The claim that sexual difference is always based on generativity and two sexes is a claim about the nature of being human. Every human society must concern itself with reproduction in order to continue. Accordingly, every society applies its own rules, performances, and structure to how this generativity takes place. For Landweer, essentialism is not a claim about women's and men's biological destiny; rather, it is the common starting point from which we can discuss and critique categories of sex and gender. I would add that sexual difference as related to generativity begins with each person's biological origin, but once conception has occurred, a person's experience of sex and gender will occur in any number of situations. One may be born to a single woman, raised by two men, may discover that one is transsexual or transgender. Even when people's concrete circumstances are not circumscribed by a heterosexual relationship, generativity informs how our culture is structured, and sexual difference remains foundational and unavoidable.

CULTIVATING THE NATURAL

This section considers Ann Murphy's arguments that certain passages in Irigaray's writings reveal a dangerous trend to stifle difference. Murphy points to passages in which Irigaray wants to limit sexual difference to inborn differences that ought not to be questioned or changed. I argue that Murphy does indeed identify problematic passages in Irigaray's work, but we should use Irigaray's rejection of biological essentialism to counter Irigaray's rejection of transsexual and transgender identification. Drawing on work by Landweer and Alison Stone, I argue that natural differences—inborn differences—should be cultivated to preserve sexual difference. Contrary to Irigaray's own interpretation of sexual difference, I read the cultivation of sexual difference as inclusive of transsexual and transgender experience.

In the article "Beyond Performativity and Against 'Identification': Gender and Technology in Irigaray," Murphy continues the essentialism critique of Irigaray's conception of sexual difference by arguing that "[Iri-

garay's] understanding of nature, and her attendant hesitations regarding technology, lead in her later work to the forthright dismissal of discourses on androgeny, the neuter, performativity and gender identification" (Murphy 2007, 77). As Murphy develops this claim, it seems that she interprets Irigaray's use of the term "nature" as a natural, essential category that women have as distinct from men. For instance, Murphy cites the following passage from *I Love to You*:

Without doubt, the most appropriate context for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem . . . and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic, and political ones. (Irigaray 1996 [1992], 47; Murphy 2007, 80).

The question that arises from this passage is how to understand what Irigaray means by "an immediate natural given." The key to understanding this passage is Irigaray's emphasis on the irreducibility of sexual difference. Hence, sexual difference is natural inasmuch as it is perpetually present. The natural is not some biologically determined quality or qualities. Sexual difference does not manifest itself in the same way in every circumstance.

Landweer's analysis of gender as a holistic concept helps to clarify my argument that sexual difference is not a biological essentialism. As I will continue to argue, sexual difference is something that is perpetually present, but its manifestations change and evolve. Landweer states,

I would like to make the previously mentioned "holistic" argument based on the claim that the term *gender* refers to and is oriented toward a time axis. Gender is empirically always connected with memory, temporality and history, even though this involves infinite variations and an unforeseeable scope of new meanings. None of the mentioned concepts can be fully removed from this entire semantic field without changing the meaning of the other concepts. (Landweer 2005, 34)

Gender and sexual difference always make reference to a host of other cultural and historical terms and understandings. The interpretation and the practice of gender and sexual difference vary widely in different times and in different societies, yet sexual difference is always present. Sexual difference is universal inasmuch as it is always present, regardless of other homogenizing

influences. Racial, religious, economic, and political differences are important for understanding and cultivating difference, but we can imagine and create circumstances in which those differences are absent. Thus, sexual difference as universal refers to the inescapable nature of sexual difference, which manifests itself both in generativity and other cultural relationships.

For Murphy, though, Irigaray's conception of sexual difference is also problematic because of Irigaray's suspicion of strategies of identification. Indeed, Murphy cites a passage from *I Love to You* that seems to provide evidence that sexual difference reduces people to gross stereotypes and gender essentialism:

Some of our prosperous and naïve contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out [sexual] difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex, and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or a woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex. This new opium of the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality, and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity. (Irigaray 1996 [1992], 61–62; Murphy 2007, 89)

In part, this passage simply reinforces Irigaray's insistence that a monosexual culture destroys all difference. Throughout her work, Irigaray has rejected strategies in which sexual difference is erased since this erasure does not result in some higher, more human way of being, but in woman being appropriated by man. Irigaray's concept of sexual difference emphasizes that the constructs and choices we practice are inscribed on the physical bodies of actual women and men. Landweer reminds us of the holistic nature of sexual difference when she argues that ridding society of binary sexual difference means that we must rid society of all dual-sex reproductive practices; otherwise, society maintains its connection to generativity as dependent on binary sexual difference (Landweer 2005, 40). The difficulty with alternative reproductive practices (aside from the current scientific impossibility) is the coercion and undermining of freedom and determination that it entails in order to force people to abandon all of our current reproductive practices (Landweer 2005, 40). Further, it is difficult to imagine, and as yet undefined by advocates, how new reproductive practices would lead to more just relationships in the world.

Even if we accept the notion of sexual difference as inevitable, it is difficult to defend Irigaray against the charge that she rejects identification between the sexes, which might include a woman becoming a man or a man becoming a woman. This passage is an example in which we can read Irigaray against herself because unless bodily difference is what decides sexual

difference—which Irigaray rejects throughout her work—there is no reason why someone who is bodily a man or a woman could not identify with the other sex. A man or woman whose body disagrees with his or her sexual identification does not threaten sexual difference, lead to monosexuality, or to the unisex. Irigaray's insistence that “identity, equality, and sameness” are a problem does not lead to the further conclusion that people who are transsexual and transgender would collapse the distinction between women and men.

Transsexual discourse that understands sexual difference as a dualism can be understood in the context of Irigaray's conception of the natural, which she develops in *Between East and West*. I characterize the notion of sexual difference that she develops in this text as a “cultivated natural.” That is, she emphasizes the ties that our bodies always and already have to nature and the natural world, but she also emphasizes that those ties must be refined and cultivated. The cultivation that she wants for the body can be derived from her critique of “sociological culture”:

[The body] is submitted to sociological rules, to rhythms foreign to its sensibility, to its living perceptions: day and night, seasons, vegetal growth. . . . This means that acts of participation in light, sounds or music, odors, touch or even in natural tastes are no longer cultivated as human qualities. The body is no longer educated to develop its perceptions spiritually, but to detach itself from the sensible for a more abstract, more speculative, more sociological culture. (Irigaray 2002 [1999], 55–56)

Notice in this passage that Irigaray does not insist that the body must remain as one finds it. Instead, she critiques a culture in which one turns away from the body, and she calls for a culture in which the body's sensibilities are cultivated and developed. Thus, a woman's or a man's body must be developed in keeping with her or his sex and doing so means paying attention to nature's rhythms, more so than culture's demands. According to Stone, Irigaray connects sexual difference to nature to emphasize the continuous cycling between poles of difference and humans' place in this natural cycle. Nature functions in such a way that distinct processes function interdependently. Stone gives respiration as an example: inhalation depends on exhalation, although, they are distinct processes. Men and women are the complete realization of this duality because they cultivate their duality through culture (Stone 2003, 63–65).

Ultimately, the sexual difference is about cultivating the negative and the positive, difference and relationship. Irigaray devotes much space in her work to developing her understanding of the negative, which has an integral

place in articulating sexual difference. On the one hand, she differentiates her understanding of the negative from its traditional place in philosophy. In the prologue of *I Love to You*, she states,

What I knew of the negative was the practice and the effects of moderation, measuredness, renunciation, a certain cultivation of personal sensibility, but it lacked any real return either in myself or for myself. As for an absolute in-itself or for-itself, I could see their limitations only too well to believe in them and desire them. (Irigaray 1996 [1992], 13)

In this description, Irigaray stresses the role between the negative and the positive, or the irreducible difference and the relationship. A negative that simply limits one's actions cannot provide a ground for new relationships between persons. When the negative is defined as irreducible difference, it makes way for relationships between people. Traditionally, the negative has been used to say that woman is not man, which deprives woman of any position. The negative in its traditional sense is not itself merely historical. That the negative gets ascribed to women is historical; the negative gets ascribed to women by men. When this kind of negativity is ascribed to women, negativity is controllable, locatable.

For Irigaray, the negative is the limit that applies to every person by virtue of sexual difference. That is, one's experience can never be universalized because it is always limited by reference to a single gender. By limiting one's knowledge in a way that can never be overcome, Irigaray finds a ground for new relationships between men and women. Irigaray stresses the role between the negative and the positive, or the irreducible difference and the relationship. A negative that simply limits one's actions cannot provide a ground for new relationships between persons. When the negative is defined as irreducible difference, it makes way for relationships between people (13). Irigaray writes the following about her transformed understanding of the negative:

The meeting at San Donato led me to discover that the negative can mean access to the other of sexual difference and thereby become happiness without being annihilating in the process. Hegel knew nothing of a negative like that. His negative is still the mastery of consciousness (historically male) over nature and humankind. The negative in sexual difference means an acceptance of the limits of my 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)

Irigaray rejects the negative in Hegel's texts because it is a "mastery of consciousness." This rejection, however, does not eliminate the negative's place in a dialectic of sexual difference. Sexual difference transforms the role of the negative by recognizing its place in our relationships with the other. The negative makes room for the irreducibility of the other. Even as we come together in positive work for alleviating suffering, exploitation, and violence, the negative guarantees my recognition that the other is more than I can ever encounter or conceive.

The role of the negative also functions between women-among-themselves and men-among-themselves by guaranteeing their singular identity. Woman and man must relate not only to each other, but to others like them. By relating to others like them, woman comes to understand her concrete singularity, which is irreplaceable by any other woman.

Thus, the first part of Irigaray's philosophical project begins with an emphasis on finding the inconsistencies, gaps, and irrationality of philosophy that focuses on a singular vision of what it means to be human. In particular, she focuses on the ways in which a "feminine" consciousness is hidden by a masculine process. In the later part of her philosophical project, Irigaray describes the ways in which men and women might find ways of having relationships that respect irreducible difference. Irigaray's work points to the need to take seriously the concerns expressed by essentialist feminists and antiessentialist feminists, but also we must move beyond these reductive categories to move to the real work of transformation.

IRIGARAY AND TRANS PEOPLE

As I have argued throughout this chapter, Irigaray's notion of sexual difference does not rely on any static conception of femininity or masculinity. Instead, sexual difference is a dynamic process in which men and women cultivate their identities as men and women. Moreover, I have used Irigaray's theoretical articulation of sexual difference to illustrate that although she is quite critical of feminist strategies that insists that genders are the same, equal, or interchangeable, she does not draw the further conclusion that no one is transsexual or transgender.

Many authors have used Irigaray's work to critique normative heterosexuality (Hope 1994; Schutte 1997; Ferguson 2004). Ofelia Schutte argues that Irigaray's disruption of symbolic structures moves society incrementally away from normative heterosexuality by emphasizing the phenomenology of touching and parting (Schutte 1997, 53). Schutte's argument emphasizes the power of touching to disrupt the symbolic power of penetration. Also, Schutte's emphasis on parting should remind us of the distance that the negative creates; both parting and distance create space for women

to develop apart from heterosexual relationships. Ann Ferguson applauds Schutte's critique of Irigaray and furthers that critique by citing numerous authors whom Schutte fails to mention in her critique of Irigaray (Ferguson 2004, 173–74). Trevor Hope, on the other hand, argues that Irigaray offers a compelling critique of normative heterosexuality but is not adequately attentive to the regulatory strength of homophobia (Hope 1994, 174–75).

Irigaray's work can move us even further than providing a critique of normative heterosexuality. Her theory can be used to provide a theoretical groundwork for interpreting the narratives of transsexual people who describe their experience of crossing genders as visibly becoming the people that they always knew themselves to be. In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg defines transsexual people as those who "traverse the boundary of the sex they were assigned at birth" (Feinberg 1996, x). For the transsexual man or woman, surgical intervention allows him or her to cross a sexual boundary and to embody the proper sex (Prosser 1998, 69, 83). If we consider some of the literature on crossing from male to female or female to male, Irigaray's point, that sexual difference is an irreducible difference, clarifies why crossing sex boundaries is important for transsexuals.

Consider the book *Crossing: A Memoir*, by Deirdre N. McCloskey, in which the author details her transition from being a man to being a woman. McCloskey states, "My gender crossing was motivated by identity, not by a balance sheet of utility" (McCloskey 1999, xiii). McCloskey did not become a woman simply because she thought that women are happier, nicer, or prettier, nor did she cross because she thought that women have easier lives. Rather, she argues that she changed her physical identity to match her psychological and spiritual identity. In McCloskey's case, it would seem that the body with which she was born was an unreliable way of establishing sexual difference. For McCloskey, her sexual identity is established by her mind, emotions, and spiritual beliefs. Only after she fully crossed did her body become consonant with her identity.

For Irigaray, the body is working with the mind, emotions, and spiritual beliefs to define sexual identity and to establish sexual difference, but McCloskey's experience challenges us to refine our understanding of sexual identity and difference. In this case, sexual identity is still established through sexual difference because McCloskey knew he was not like other men. Through crossing, McCloskey discovered herself as like other women, a discovery that brings consonance between her mind and body, but requires more conscious cultivation than is required of women born with female bodies.

Now, consider the story of Max Wolf Valerio, a female-to-male transsexual (Treut et al. 1993). He tells a similar story to the one told by Deirdre McCloskey in that his gender crossing is motivated by identity: "I always felt

like I was supposed to be a boy. Like I *was* a boy. Even though, I knew I was not, but I felt I *was* somehow" (Treut et al. 1993, 98–99). He describes being male as his identity: "My male gender identity was sort of the core of my personality, of the core ingredients of who I am" (Treut et al. 1993, 98–99). Similar to McCloskey's insistence that sex crossing is not something that people choose to do for utility or for gaining acceptance or financial gain, Max describes trying to be a woman and to live as a lesbian. Ultimately, this attempt failed. "Then one day it just happened. It was like an explosion in my mind. When I realized that I wasn't really a lesbian, I was a transsexual, and I was really a straight man" (Treut et al. 1993, 98–99). For Valerio, his life as a transsexual entails being treated as a man by others and not simply knowing in his own mind that he is a man.

As McCloskey says, "Gender is not in every way natural" (McCloskey 1999, xv). Gender is established by eras, societies, and individuals and is projected on bodies. In the cases of McCloskey and Valerio, though, simply changing their own conceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman did not satisfy the separation they felt between themselves and how other men and women viewed them. Thus, it would seem that although one's body is not enough to establish one's identity as male or female, it contributes in significant ways, such that for some people who experience dissonance between their sexual identity and their biological identity, it is rational to cross from male to female or female to male.

The distinction between sexual identity and biological identity is a familiar theme in Irigaray's work, as she distinguishes between anatomy and morphology. As Whitford reminds us, morphology is the way in which bodies are culturally mediated (Whitford 1991, 107). That is, we begin with some anatomical structures, but the interpretation of our anatomy is filtered through culture. In the case of transsexuals, it is important for her or his body to be recognized differently from the anatomy with which she or he is born. The descriptions that McCloskey and Valerio offer about gender crossing indicate that there is something important about one's gender identity that confirms the arguments that I have been making. Sexual difference is a process of cultivating nature. Irigaray's descriptions of cultivating the natural require one to cultivate the body with which one is born. However, transsexual accounts of cultivating identity require changing their bodies, or the way that others view their bodies, in order for others to recognize who they are. For McCloskey and Valerio, crossing from male to female and female to male allows them to have bodies that correspond to their self-understanding. Although Irigaray herself would not cite these cases as instances of cultivating the natural, I believe that they are because McCloskey and Valerio do not claim to be inventing their sexual identities; they are establishing sexual identities that are already latently present.

Jay Prosser's account of transsexuality in *Second Skins* highlights the importance of establishing a correlation between one's embodiment as recognized by others and one's own body image. According to Prosser, prior to sexual reassignment surgery, transsexuals feel that they are trapped in the wrong body (Prosser 1998, 69). Sexual reassignment allows a transsexual person "to get the body back to what should have been" (83).

Whereas gender is not something that can be solely determined by culture, body, or biology, all of these things come together to help one identify with and distinguish oneself from others of the same gender and another gender. For a transsexual person, this process of identification and distinction can be aided by sex reassignment. Rather than restricting sexual difference to women born women and men born men, sexual difference is a concept that allows a flourishing of different experiences. As Stone states, "a culture of ubiquitous and maximal sexual difference would not restrict individuality or autonomy, but show unprecedented permissiveness in the extent to which it allowed and solicited individuals to realize themselves in accordance with their natural drives" (Stone 2003, 73). Irigaray's readers, Stone among them, emphasize the flourishing of difference that comes out of the concept of sexual difference, a flourishing that can include transsexual and transgender difference.

The difficulties that transsexuals face in defining their gender status are the traces of the sex to which they were born. We can imagine a transsexual person who has crossed to the other gender; she or he is indistinguishable in her or his hormones, anatomy, voice, mannerisms, and self-understanding from other women or men. However, the transsexual always has a past that is not like other men and women. The transsexual was born as the other sex, can remember having the other sex's genitalia and hormones, and carries the memories of being treated as the other sex (Stone 1994, 5–10). Nevertheless, transsexual narratives underscore the importance of understanding sexual difference as between two. The transsexual person has not been fooled by a cultural binary. If she or he were that easily swayed, then she or he could simply accept the label that society assigns. A transman, as Matt Kailey refers to himself, is not a woman who is tricking people into thinking that she is a man; he is a man (Kailey 2005, 28). Irigaray's articulation of sexual difference can help us to respect transsexuals and their relationship to nature and culture.

If theorists of sexual difference insist that sexual difference is a strict binary, then they cannot open a conversation with transgender people whose experience does not fit into the binary between man and woman. Whereas transsexual people are men or women (not both), transgender people are men and women. According to Feinberg, "Transgender people traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were

assigned at birth" (Feinberg 1996, x, emphasis in original). The way in which transgender people traverse, bridge, or blur gender boundaries has many manifestations. One might be born a female and appear masculine or androgynous, or born a male and appear feminine or androgynous. We can consider two manifestations of transgender people by drawing on personal descriptions from C. Jacob Hale and Leslie Feinberg.

For Hale, being transgender is what he chooses. Hale describes a time in his life when as a woman, she engaged in a culture in which she could become an adolescent boy (Hale 1997). The culture he describes allows for a masculine identity that he argues is more real than sexual fantasy or mere identification with the other sex, but less permanent than the complete transformation of a female-to-male transsexual person.

According to Feinberg, being transgender is what happens in a society with rigid sex/gender boundaries. Feinberg attempts to define herself to a reporter and says, "I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as male. It's not my sex that defines me, and it's not my gender expression. It's the fact that my gender expression appears to be at odds with my sex. Do you understand? It's the social contradiction between the two that defines me" (Feinberg 1996, 101). In response, the reporter asked Feinberg if she's a third sex, which only deepened Feinberg's frustration. Throughout the book *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg presents historical evidence of societies in which people who crossed gender lines were accepted and celebrated, or vilified and persecuted. She creates a space for the reader to understand that transgender people have always existed. Feinberg's project creates a space for transgender people to locate their experience as like others' experiences and creates a challenge to the idea that sexual difference can be understood as a rigid binary. Hale and Feinberg give evidence that sexual difference can be fluid, can change, and is defined within a cultural context.

To understand the significance of cultural context for transgendered sexual difference, Judith Halberstam's statement about relationality can help,

Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds. (Halberstam 2005, 49)

"Transgender" is a term that helps place people in relation to people like them and distinct from them, a project which is intimately linked to Irigaray's project of cultivating sexual difference. For Irigaray, cultivating sexual

difference requires a positive space in which people with shared culture, morphology, and genealogy can define and develop their experiences, but sexual difference also requires a negative space where the one's identity limits and is limited by the other's identity.

Irigaray's philosophy has been groundbreaking in challenging the idea that sexual difference is rigid since being a woman or a man is defined by nature, culture, biology, and psychology. She leads the way in trying to think of sexual difference as at least two instead of as man and not-man. Yet, her own work overemphasizes that sexual difference is merely two and that the possibilities for cultivating one's sexual difference are inscribed at birth. Consider "How Old Are You?" from *Je, Tu, Nous*, in which she writes,

The idea that I was born a woman but I must become the spirit or soul of this body I am. I must open out my female body, give it forms, words, knowledge of itself, a cosmic and social equilibrium, in relation to the environment, to the different means of exchange with others, and not only by artificial means that are inappropriate to it. (Irigaray 1993 [1990], 116)

For Irigaray, the body with which one is born is definitive for developing what one should become. I have argued, though, that when the body, mind, and spirit tell different stories of who one is, then one's body can be cultivated to correspond to the mind and spirit. Transsexual and transgender narratives reveal that the experience of sexual difference may change over the course of a life or may include identification with man and woman, masculine and feminine. These experiences provide a richness and complexity for sexual difference that an insistence on a binary difference established at birth misses. To support the flourishing of difference illustrated by transsexual and transgender people, we can use the rich language, framework, and methodology that Irigaray provides to discuss sexual difference, even as we acknowledge that Irigaray resists this expansion of her work.

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