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Engaging the World: Thinking After Irigaray

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Abstract

Luce Irigaray's status as one of our most influential thinkers cannot be underestimated. Mary Rawlinson's book, *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray*, illustrates how, as philosopher and psychoanalyst, writer and activist, Irigaray has changed the course of feminist theory. Few feminist thinkers can avoid engaging with her work, and this book demonstrates Irigaray's inspiration to the current generation of women. *Engaging the world to promote life*, as Rawlinson writes, could also be an extended title for the book, as it describes the influence of Irigaray's thinking on language, conceptions of truth, and structures of the social. However, change is no easy task, and Rawlinson carefully collects essays from a wide range of scholars--those studying Irigaray's criticism of the philosophical traditions, her writings on art, her poetry, her care for language, psychoanalytic practice, and even classroom experience--to illustrate how contemporary the questions she raises are. All of the essayists testify to the power of Irigaray's philosophy to inspire within their respective fields, and this is the sustained significance of Irigaray's philosophy today.

Disciplines

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Comments

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Mary C. Rawlinson (editor)

Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray

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Reviewed by Andrea Wheeler, 2017

Andrea Wheeler is an assistant professor of architecture at Iowa State University, where she teaches classes on green and sustainable architecture and is a studio instructor. Since completing her doctorate on the work of Luce Irigaray, entitled *With Place Love Begins*, she has been working on issues of sustainability in the built environment. She is published in two collections of essays edited by Irigaray: *Teaching* and *Conversations*. In September 2016, she visited Paris to attend the seminar by Luce Irigaray entitled “The First Steps in Building a World Culture.”

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Luce Irigaray’s status as one of our most influential thinkers cannot be underestimated. Mary Rawlinson’s book, *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray*, illustrates how, as philosopher and psychoanalyst, writer and activist, Irigaray has changed the course of feminist theory. Few feminist thinkers can avoid engaging with her work, and this book demonstrates Irigaray’s inspiration to the current generation of women. Engaging the world to promote life, as Rawlinson writes, could also be an extended title for the book, as it describes the influence of Irigaray’s thinking on language, conceptions of truth, and structures of the social. However, change is no easy task, and Rawlinson carefully collects essays from a wide range of scholars—those studying Irigaray’s criticism of the philosophical traditions, her writings on art, her poetry, her care for language, psychoanalytic practice, and even classroom experience—to illustrate how contemporary the questions she raises are. All of the essayists testify to the power of Irigaray’s philosophy to inspire within their respective fields, and this is the sustained significance of Irigaray’s philosophy today.

While Irigaray continues to lecture, teach, and correspond with young academics, her energy and vitality are a commitment to the emergence of new ways of living. The intensity of her thinking, imagining, and enacting of new forms of thinking about life, nature, and the world is noteworthy. Irigaray’s philosophy is not, however, without some controversy, and this is not a book that expounds in depth on the intricacies of Irigaray’s thoughts as a whole, nor does it detail the development of her thinking over the course of her career and how her philosophy has been received. It does not refer to her latest works in any great depth, such as *Building a New World* (2015), for example, a collection of essays by Irigaray’s students, or *Through Vegetal Being* (2016) with Michael Marder, or indeed her latest offering, *To Be Born* (2017). Nevertheless, the influence of her recent thinking is evident, as already stated, in the very premise of the book,

which demonstrates her impact on a wide range of cultural fields. Moreover, the book sheds light on some of the less well-known dimensions of Irigaray's work: her studies of children's language in the classroom, as in Gail Schwab's "Creating Inter-Sexuate Inter-Subjectivity in the Classroom? Luce Irigaray's Linguistic Research in Its Latest Iteration," for example, and her thinking about science and technology in Margherita Long's "What Kind of Science? Reading Irigaray with Stengers."

The book is organized into three sections that explore philosophy first, language and creativity second, and finally education and psychoanalysis. In the beginning section, the first chapter, Fanny Söderbäck's "In Search for the Mother through the Looking Glass: On Time, Origins, and Beginnings in Plato and Irigaray," addresses the duality of origins in Irigaray's work. Söderbäck explores Irigaray's reading of Plato in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray 1984) to examine the temporal-ontological stakes involved in the artificial notion of origin. Söderbäck reveals not only Irigaray's criticism of space as conceived in Western philosophy, but also a notion of "revolutionary time," writing: "If sameness and repetitions are flip sides of the same coin, Irigaray's philosophy of alterity must simultaneously be a philosophy of alteration" (12–13).

In the second essay, "Place, Interval: Irigaray and Ronell," Rebecca Hill similarly discusses space and place, this time with reference to particular notions of violence and space. Man depends on woman, she argues, as the space that gives him form and being, and woman is confused with the space in which man lives. Hill thus suggests that woman is both place and the collapse of place and, thereby, an extraordinary threat to the subject of Western philosophy (45).

In the next chapter, Anne van Leeuwen examines Irigaray's critiques of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to explore the significance of Irigaray's use of the future anterior tense and to disband accusations of essentialism, a seemingly persistent criticism of Irigaray's work.

In chapter 4, "Game Change: Philosophy after Irigaray," Rawlinson herself steps in to investigate Irigaray's discussion of human rights. Describing the radical impact of Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference, she states, "[a]fter Irigaray philosophy will never be the same again" (65). Rawlinson argues that philosophy cannot continue to operate under the hegemony of the One, Man cannot continue to claim to speak for the human; with the demonstration of the irreducibility of sexual difference, Irigaray's philosophy prevents continuation under the fiction of the generic subject. In Irigaray's criticism of the Declaration of Human Rights, the theme of the chapter, Rawlinson describes how Irigaray argues that women are not born free and equal in dignity and rights because they are not men. They are not the subjects of the Declaration, and moreover, proclamations that equality has been achieved "keep pushing us further back." Rawlinson writes: "These abstract rights fail to respect the different histories and conditions by which actual human beings are determined, while masking the real urgency of inequity" (67). Nevertheless, Irigaray's philosophy does not simply engage with criticism, as the collection of essays reveals; Rawlinson reiterates: "[t]hinking sexual difference opens up the possibility of a new relation to nature and to others that might secure a more livable future" (72).

In chapter 5, "Irigaray and Kristeva on Anguish in Art," Elaine Miller laments Irigaray's aesthetic preference for the peaceful expression of feminine subjectivity in artistic expression,

rather than women's suffering within the existing paradigm. It is these joyful expressions, Miller argues, that enable women's aspiration to construct new meaning for themselves (87).

In the next chapter, Claire Potter describes beautifully the right of women to think about love as a response to the profound absence of ontological considerations of sexual difference. The rediscovery of love in the history of Western philosophy becomes a new poetics of women's experience. As Potter suggests: "At the nub of Irigaray's philosophy lies a manner or rather a way of doing things differently; for her it is the cultivation and experience of difference that mediates the will and the instincts, shaping time into a shared space" (93).

In "Wonder and *Écriture*," Perry Zurn argues not about love but about how wonder belongs to the encounter with the other. Zurn argues that in wonder, this space where adventure is still possible, is the recognition of an irreducible difference (130). It is, nevertheless, Zurn who also raises some of the difficult and contentious criticisms of Irigaray's work, of sexual difference as the most basic of all differences. Zurn writes: "As previously established, Irigaray locates wonder at the heart of the most basic of all differences. She further identifies that most basic difference as sexual difference. Irigaray locates and in fact restricts wonder to the relationship between male and female. It is no secret that this foundationalism is a point of contention amongst many scholars" (129).

Rawlinson touches on these criticisms in her introduction where, she argues, as if to smooth over such difficulty, that we need to discover new figures of agency, "rethinking the universal as multiple—recognizing the experiences of women and other silenced and marginalized groups as sources of the universal in human experience" (2). There is a distinction, however, between multiple possibilities and at least two possibilities: a distinction between the logic of at least two in Irigaray's philosophy and of the one and the multiple. As Söderbäck writes in her early chapter, "Irigaray's own philosophical project is an attempt to deconstruct this culture of the One and the Same to construct an alternative culture of two—a culture of *sexuate* difference" (12). This issue is of some importance in contemporary discussion of Irigaray's philosophy, and attempts to make her work less controversial only enable an erosion of the distinction between the sexual and *sexuate* difference in her work. This is a difficult question but one that is discussed in the remaining essays in the book.

In chapter 8, Gail Schwab discusses Irigaray's little examined empirical studies of language in the classroom recognizing differences in speaking between girls and boys, women and men. In the next chapter, "Irigaray and Darwin on Sexual Difference," Elizabeth Grosz sets out how Irigaray rethinks the relationship of sexual difference as "a concept that can affect how we understand both nature and culture, both ourselves and the world" (158). Echoing this question of the place of sexual, or rather *sexuate*, difference as the most basic of differences, Grosz states that, arguably, Irigaray's most contentious claim is that sexual difference is "the engine or force involved in the production of all other differences, and thus has an ontological status that is radically different from that of racial, ethnic, religious, class and other differences" (161). In addition, in her own understanding, she writes: "Sexual selection is how sexual difference transforms itself, intensifies itself, selects the most attractive, forming new ideals, new types of bodies, qualities, and activities" (167).

Margherita Long, in the next essay, challenges misreadings of Irigaray as anti-science and anti-technology. Using an atypical theme for studies on Irigaray's philosophy, Long argues that Irigaray's questioning is "scientific" but that science is too limited to recognize it as such. Long interestingly presents Irigaray's position on science as that which could be dedicated to cultivation of flesh, to becoming the man or woman one already is; nevertheless, the question remains what kind of science is this, and with what kind of method? However, perhaps, as Long argues, this is a science where the material asks the questions and has a story to tell, and it is one to learn to unravel: "Once we understand that nature is itself at least two, it becomes impossible to ascribe difference solely to the realm of the cultural and the linguistic" (186).

Tara Rodgers explores sound as the materialization of life, sound that sets us in ethical relation. Through the figure of the sound wave, a common metaphor in modernist thinking, she argues that the metaphor controls the pleasure and danger of unruly waves. Rodgers shows, by examining Irigaray's "'The Mechanics' of Fluids," how the space of the wave is both gendered and racialized (197). Rogers calls for women to reclaim their sensory powers; she writes, "sound waves also offer ways of imagining situated knowledges and partial perspectives that depart from merely visual senses and metaphors, in part by signaling contingent and open-ended processes of touch and movement" (207). Mary Beth Mader, in the next chapter, examines Irigaray's relation to the methods of anthropology and presents the question of whether the anthropological thought of Irigaray and Gilles Deleuze might be fruitfully brought together. The distinctions between the philosophers become very apparent. Mader writes that perhaps the dissimilarity between the work of the two is most clearly found in Irigaray's response to Deleuzian proposals about becoming-woman and his critiques of subjectivity. Irigaray suggests, Mader writes: "these proposals seem to imply that the male subject is ready to abandon subjectivity just when women threaten to accede to it, and that this should not prompt women to abandon the search for what they have not yet achieved" (225).

The final section of the book, which concerns psychoanalysis, love and desire, and new ways of being together, contains some of the most engaging chapters. Cheryl Lawler in "Desire at the Threshold" explores the interval opened through the cultivation of a new language that can leave the other to his or her own place, where the other is never reduced to a possession. Britt-Marie Schiller in "Gendering Drives" rethinks falling in love as tenderness and the cherishing necessary for human flourishing. In "Psychoanalysis and Yoga," Sara Beardsworth meditates on "the love that may come to pass between two freedoms" (Irigaray 2002, 79).

This book illustrates the range, breadth, and depth of thinking inspired by Irigaray's work in a range of cultural fields. Although it briefly engages with some of the important and contentious issues in her work, the value of the book is creative, as Rawlinson argues, and is seen in the collection of essays as a whole exploring how we might create a more livable future. In this way, the book presents us with an important threshold to a new way of living. The scholars' engagement with Irigaray's work, as described in this book, is a testament to her importance today, and in illustrating the continuing impact of Irigaray's work, this book makes a significant contribution to scholarship in contemporary feminist philosophy.

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