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Linguistic Feminism & The Body in 20th-Century French Feminist Texts

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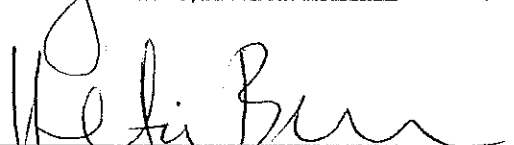
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Linguistic Feminism & the Body in Twentieth-Century French Feminist Texts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in European Studies from
The College of William & Mary

by
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Accepted for: high honors



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Philosophical Background & the Shaping of French Feminist Arguments	20
Chapter 2: Linguistic Bias & the Body: Examining the “Essentials” of <i>Écriture Feminine</i>	34
Chapter 3: Transgenderism & the Implications of French Feminist Ideology Today	52
Conclusion	59
Works Cited	61

Introduction

The idea that language influences our daily lives has drawn a great deal of attention over the last several decades, not least from movements centered around activism, which seek to work towards social equality using language's subjectivities, or the ways in which language, rather than having a certain set meaning, serves as a tool for people to create meaning in day-to-day communication. This creation of meaning constitutes an ever-changing act that occurs within social, political, and historical context. Neither the social impact of language nor feminism has individually lacked in recent scholarly attention, but the two fields are not always drawn together. This thesis focuses on the intersection of feminism and sociolinguistics in the work of French feminists. In particular, I examine the work and ideas of Luce Irigaray, a Belgian-born writer, linguist, and psychoanalyst who became well-known for her theories on sexual difference, outlined in works such as her 1974 book *Speculum de l'autre femme* ('The Speculum of the Other Woman') and *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* ('The Sex Which is Not One'), published in 1977. Irigaray studied first in Belgium at the Catholic University of Leuven, and then in Paris at the University of Paris VIII (also known as Vincennes), receiving doctorates in both philosophy and linguistics, a background whose influence features prominently in her work. She studied under Jaques Lacan, a leading psychoanalyst whose ideas underpinned much of the work done by French feminists, though they did not merely adopt Lacanian philosophy uncritically, Irigaray included: her second doctoral thesis led to her dismissal from her teaching position at the university (Mader).

My own work will examine the ways in which the philosophical and sociohistorical background of the particular time periods and societies in which they worked shaped the writings of Irigaray, and of French feminists more generally, as they responded to the particular issues

and patriarchal discourses relevant to their context. As constructionism and Derridean ideas grew more significant in the intellectual milieu of France at the time, certain writers saw how they could make use of these ideas to explain and dispute the oppression of women in Western societies. They pointed out how many of the assumptions made about women were far from “natural” truths, and instead had very specific roots in sociopolitical and historical context. They particularly focused on the ways that people used language itself, a subjective tool, to construct this patriarchal reality, and how changes to language could benefit women. They often made reference to sexual difference and other aspects of anatomy or biology, leading many to accuse them of essentialism, meaning that they believed a few biological traits of a person- typically, in this case, sexual characteristics- make that person who they are, deciding a great deal about that person regardless of other context or traits. I, however, argue that these references and biologically-centered discussions can in fact be read in an anti-essentialist manner, as the roots of French feminism lay in constructionism, and thus French feminists did not ignore context in the way that some critics have accused. Instead, readers should interpret the references more metaphorically, and as a manner of simply emphasizing a difference between men and women in order for these feminists to bring attention to a point of view outside of the dominant patriarchal one.

I then address certain quantitative experiments undertaken by Irigaray as well as the concrete proposal of *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, a new style of writing intended to construct a different type of reality in order to better reflect women’s experiences and allow for better communication both among women and between the sexes. I argue that this, too, could be initially taken as essentialist, given the implication that women should use an entirely different variety of language than men, but in fact only those espousing constructionism would believe

that changing one's style of language would also bring about a change in the nature of one's reality, as the idea that language constructs reality must underpin this proposal. Having argued against the charge of essentialism, I argue that scholars should, in fact, consider these writers to be feminists. Finally, I address how the ideologies of these writers fit into today's mainstream American feminism, finding that certain ideas transfer well while others, such as their ideas on transgenderism, prove more problematic for contemporary feminists.

It is beneficial to view these writers in context within the field of linguistics, which began only relatively recently to concern itself with gender: particularly since the 1970s, language and gender has become a prominent subfield within linguistics, examining how a person's social patterns shape their linguistic habits, how they are socialized to use language, other people's reactions to their use of language in social settings, and other such topics related to the intersection of language and gender. Feminist movements in the 1970s gave certain American linguists the idea to focus on "women's language" and how women were linguistically different from men, rather than operating under the assumption that men's speech was "normal" speech and everything else was merely a deviation from this, therefore not meriting the amount of attention that men's speech received. Robin Lakoff, a well-known American linguist, wrote a book entitled *Language and Women's Place*, published in 1975, that many people credit with spurring the creation of language and gender as a distinct field; she discussed "women's language" in relation to white middle-class heterosexual women, who constituted the main focus of language and gender at its origins. Gendered language typically does not directly reference gender, as references to gender often intersect with references to other aspects of a person's identity, such as social network, occupation, or values. Nonetheless, when Lakoff published *Language and Women's Place*, the idea of important linguistic differences between men and

women seemed to capture the popular imagination (Frawley). The field also focused on languages and communities in which speech directly indexed the gender of the speaker; many linguists have pointed to Japanese as a prime example of a language that contains a distinct genderlect (gender-based dialect) or “women’s language” (Frawley). Lakoff emphasized the ways in which linguistic representation showed bias against women and other ways in which it demonstrated sexism, such as the use of *he* and *man* as the default for generic references to a non-gendered person. The author made clear that sexual difference in language brought bias along with it, and created a hierarchy that helped to not only demonstrate, but also continue, the institutional oppression of women in various areas (Frawley). In later years, research in the field began to de-emphasize sexual difference and focus more on diversity within genders and how other factors of a person’s identity could also interact with their gender in influencing their linguistic habits as well as how they develop their relations to other people via language use (Frawley).

The sociopolitical climate of Europe after World War II set the stage for an unprecedented and still-controversial feminism that uniquely combined philosophical, linguistic, sociological, and even biological concepts, so a brief historical survey is also useful. French women had played a crucial role in resisting the Occupation during the war, both within and outside of the formal Resistance. They had filled roles for which women would not have been considered suitable in times of peace, given the traditional gender roles of the time, but exceptions to these strict gender roles were made during the war, as the Resistance wished to maximize its power and resources. They served not merely as aides to the Resistance, but as founding members, putting themselves in great danger to contribute to the collective effort during these difficult years in France (Douzou 9-10). Many women found ways to resist both

within and outside of the home during the Occupation, despite the risk of punishment, including arrest or deportation to a concentration camp. It might appear logical to classify the acceptance of new roles as a feminist act, but many women in fact cited traditionally feminine values such as family and domesticity as a major contributing factor in driving them to take on these new roles; they wished to do their part to protect their loved ones, meaning that their actual motivations for resisting did not necessarily clash with the collaborationist Vichy regime's attempts to encourage women to focus on conservative family values. Pétain and his regime rewarded women who had many children, even presenting them with medals, and emphasized women's role as the moral backbone of their families. The regime emphasized domesticity and stability, reversing much of the independence that women had recently gained. However, these efforts on the part of the regime backfired in practice as the women channeled these values rather differently than Pétain and his administration had anticipated. This suggests that, in the postwar world, overall changes in ideology and values progressed more slowly than did changes in women's day-to-day practical roles.

After the war, France found itself in the difficult position of attempting to reclaim its status as a Great Power in Europe after the embarrassment of its quick defeat by the Germans and the collaboration of the Vichy regime with the Third Reich. Charles DeGaulle and his administration placed great emphasis on the idea of stability across the board. This included not only the rebuilding of systems of transportation and communication, but also the return of stability in people's day-to-day lives. "Gender stability" constituted a particularly important part of the cultural stability that the administration wished to reconstruct (Colvin 693). In the post-war world, French women were punished for betraying not only their country, but their femininity: twenty thousand women had their heads shaved as retribution for various crimes,

including collaboration and acting as German spies or torturers (Colvin 694). Women's magazines such as *Elle* and other cultural sources also reiterated traditional femininity and its societal importance, equating French identity with the concept of the nuclear family and a conservative attitude towards gender relations. These cultural sources presented women as rather meek, domestic, devoted mothers; they presented women with specific aesthetics that they should aspire to and focused on the idea that women should search for a husband, with the clear implication that following the magazine's aesthetic instructions would help them to achieve this important goal (Colvin 695-6). A woman's aesthetic and her sexuality served as tools in her search for a husband, which these sources presented as her most important battle (Colvin 701). The woman's happiness or desires were almost entirely absent from such conversations in these cultural sources.

Emphasizing aesthetic norms and the importance of physical presentation marked a departure from wartime standards, which placed more value on other priorities, such as daily acts of resistance, than on women's physical appearance (Colvin 697). Cultural sources did their part to recreate the dominant, domestic concept of normalcy in the postwar order, emphasizing conservative concepts of family and gender roles. Some even asserted that motherhood was the factor that truly brought out a woman's beauty, though they also stated that even married women must pay plenty of attention to their appearance in order to prevent their husband from losing interest (Colvin 700-1). Such claims serve to further emphasize the connection between a return to traditional values and the focus on beauty adopted by many cultural sources after the war. Keeping women up to date on beauty and trends in this way also served as another way for France to assert itself as equal to its allies in every way and attempt to keep up with them as it struggled to regain its status as a great power as fully and as quickly as possible in the wake of

the war (Colvin 699). Cultural sources similarly treated fashion as a homogenizing agent and a way of marking one's conformity with the French state and its values during this time period as well (Colvin 704). The government appeared to believe that a return to domesticity constituted the most efficient way to stabilize the country in order to accomplish this goal, both in order to provide citizens with stable day-to-day lives and in order to restore the population after the decimation of World War II; these values quickly became evident in many aspects of postwar French culture. Many scholars, including Alison Martin, have argued that France's complicated relationship with feminism has ties to the country's history of needing to overcome the differences between its people in order to survive; many French people viewed feminism as a divisive element that created more problems and difficulties than it solved, which went against the country's values (Martin 2). In many cases, the state has made a conscious effort to repress differences and emphasize anything that will bond all of its people together; the postwar period demonstrates one such period in which the government emphasized domesticity and uniformity in order to provide stability, valuing this over the concept of feminism or fighting for women's rights.

Though French women gained the right to vote in 1944, a mere few months before the Liberation and more than two decades after women had gained this right in many other Western countries, authors such as Hanna Diamond have argued that this change did not constitute a major win for feminist ideology, in fact happening "almost by accident" (Diamond 730). The numbers of women involved in politics, and even of women who voted, remained relatively low, particularly after an initial push by various parties to involve women in politics in order to gain the female vote; these efforts faded rather quickly (Diamond 730). Many women stated at the time that they concerned themselves primarily with their daily lives, not with the issues brought

up by male politicians; issues considered uniquely “female” rarely came before committees or received political attention, leading some women to conclude that they did not relate to or care for politics (Diamond 731). Though women had gained the right to vote, the political environment remained far from inclusive and, as a whole, failed to genuinely encourage women’s involvement in this sphere. These issues regarding women in politics demonstrate that, despite certain apparent markers of progress such as increased reproductive rights and university enrollment for women, French society in fact continued to treat women as inferior to men in many ways during the post-war years.

Many well-known poststructuralist feminist writers, such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, grew up in this cultural climate, having been born in the 1930s. This postwar environment, which clearly demonstrated a push towards American-style domesticity, shaped their views, and a more feminist counterculture began to take root, strengthening as their generation reached adulthood, particularly in the late 1960s into the 1970s. 1968 brought a period of great civil unrest to France, including general strikes and the occupation of universities; this atmosphere of change extended to the women’s movement, and radical feminists seized the chance to not only call attention to problems in their society, but even publicly condemn the society as a whole in some cases rather than push for reforms within the existing structure, a strategy more commonly employed by earlier feminists (Greenwald 85). These events brought a great deal more attention to feminism in France and shed light on the demands of women fighting for equality. This increase in activism also made many French women more willing to openly support feminism and discuss women’s issues in explicitly political terms (Greenwald 86). After the Events of May 1968, the feminist movement seemed to divide in two: some women fighting for rights decided to focus on individualism and values more similar to those of

contemporary feminism, including the demand that patriarchal societies re-examine and reinvent many of their conceptions of gender roles and social institutions in order to work towards women's equality, as well as a less misogynistic society overall (Greenwald 2).

The other sect was the branch of feminism that many outsiders came to know as “French feminism,” the less activist branch that, not actually considering itself “feminist” at all, found its inspiration in the work of poststructuralist philosophers and argued for the importance of the body to women's lived experiences, as well as the idea that society should emphasize rather than move past the connection between the sexual body and consciousness (Greenwald 2). Well-known figures within this branch of feminism include the aforementioned Luce Irigaray, as well as Hélène Cixous, a French professor, writer, and poet who established herself as an important figure in French poststructuralist theory with works such as her 1975 article “Le Rire de la Meduse” (‘The Laugh of the Medusa’). The work of “French feminist” writers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous constituted a great departure from the work of other French women such as Simone de Beauvoir who were, in fact, self-proclaimed feminists. In fact, as Irigaray describes in the preface to her 1990 book *Je, tu, nous* (‘I, you, we’), de Beauvoir seemed to intentionally keep her distance from this sect of the movement, not publicly associating herself with Irigaray and hardly even interacting with her at all (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 10).

There is an extensive amount of scholarship on the concept of French feminism and the writers who most embody its tenets. Even the concept of what American society calls “French feminism” has been the subject of much debate. This terminology has come to be associated with a few writers in particular, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray being the most well-known. Christine Delphy argues that the division of feminism into national sects based on a term like “French feminism” is counterproductive and unnecessary (Delphy 192). In addition, she believes

that attributing one specific variety of content or narrow set of attributes to a particular feminist movement reflects only an outsider's point of view, implying that this perspective takes away the nuance and firsthand knowledge that would come from an insider's point of view. Allowing an outsider to define a social movement such as this also raises questions of the power dynamic of observed vs. observer as well as who gets to define the movement, its goals, and its core attributes. Delphy also laments the fact that scholarship on "French feminism" in the United States focuses on language, writing, discourse, and other similar themes, rather than on the activism conducted by feminists in France (Delphy 191). For many Americans, this handful of writers "represent" French feminism in a way that oversimplifies the movement, its goals and accomplishments, and the larger, complex history of feminism in France. In fact, many of France consider the concept of "French feminism" to be a type of feminism created by Americans, forcibly constructing what they consider to be unnatural combinations of theories and amalgamations of work; many of these writers and works are not, on an individual level, as highly regarded in France as they are in the United States (Roussos 1). Delphy cautions that French feminism should be defined as "an ideological and political trend in the countries where it exists as an object of debate," and as something that exists in works that expand on French or other material; it should not, she warns, be defined simply as the entire body of work of any author who has been attached to this French feminist label, as these authors are "referents" of French feminism rather than the embodiment of it, and furthermore, there is disagreement over which authors should be included in such a list, which would create discrepancies regardless (Delphy 196-7).

Roussos points out that the path of feminism in the two countries has been, and remains, rather different. She acknowledges that feminism has deeper, more long-standing roots in France

than in the United States and that the country has seen more progress in certain areas, such as reproductive rights, than the United States has; on other hand, she finds that feminism has, in some ways, had a rather difficult history in France in general, stating that issues such as sexual harassment are still regarded very differently in France than they are in the United States to this day. Furthermore, she believes that the country owes many important moments in its history to uniting diverse peoples rather than dividing them, and has found that some in the country feel that feminism is counterproductive to these aims (Roussos 2). Many who are of this opinion wish to place emphasis on the national identity rather than the identity of a particular gender; these are merely a few of the obstacles to the feminist movement in France on a broader level. Roussos also acknowledges another misleading aspect of the American view of “French feminism”: much of the work of those feminists that are in fact popular in France, such as Simone de Beauvoir, also contradict the work of those writers whom Americans now most commonly know as “French feminists.”

The 1990s saw a certain amount of backlash against the concept of French feminism. A good deal of discussion was devoted to how “French feminism” differed from “feminism in France,” how the idea of French feminism had been constructed outside of France, and to the use of “biological essentialism” by writers such as Luce Irigaray and Helène Cixous. For instance, in 1996, Christine Delphy wrote an article entitled “L’Invention du “French Feminism: Une Démarche Essentielle” (“The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move”), in which she is extremely critical of the movement Americans know as French Feminism. She questions the very need for such a term, pointing out that no other country refers to their feminist movement by referencing its national identity, and this seems to place unnecessary, specific boundaries on the movement (Delphy 190). Delphy takes issue with the construction of the idea of “French

feminism” because she believes it is simply an artificial reaction that only seems to have meaning from an outsider’s point of view, which calls into question its usefulness as well as the power dynamic between the actual individuals who supposedly belong to this movement and those who are referring to or writing on the topic (Delphy 191). She does not believe that the writers considered extremely significant to the movement known as “French Feminism” are in fact held in high esteem by feminists within France. Instead, she believes that Americans simply attached this label to the ideas espoused by these writers in order to add prestige and credibility to the amalgamation of ideas, and to the claim that these ideas were feminist ones; in fact, she attaches the label of imperialism to these actions. Delphy uses this classification in criticizing the way Americans, decidedly an outsider group in this case, have taken it upon themselves to construct this concept of “French feminism” and declare non-feminists the head of the movement, an action they would never replicate in presenting or analyzing their own domestic feminist movement (Delphy 192-3).

Delphy even argues that the only works truly attributable to French feminism are Anglo-American works *about* “French feminism,” a term that she states is otherwise difficult to define; in the end, she defines it by using the term only to refer to Anglo-American authors who have written about the concept of French feminism (Delphy 197). This author does not find that French feminism properly addresses feminist questions, believing that the movement focuses too much on difference, an approach she refers to as outdated (Delphy 194). She takes issue with the conflation of “the feminine” and “women,” as well as “the masculine” and “men,” as well as the way in which the well-known French feminist authors use these concepts to discuss how actual men and women act and what they are like. Furthermore, she objects to the implication in French feminist works that the concepts of masculine and feminine are significant or function as an

immutable, essential division regardless of culture; she finds that this conflates perception with reality, and the current societal perception of “two genders” does not mean that this is what truly exists. Similarly, the idea that sexual difference is the only difference between humans that matters, or is the driving force behind sexual attraction as well as a useful basis for social, psychological, cultural, and social division, also comes into question (Delphy 198). The contemporary political and analytical goals of feminism, she argues, are highly incompatible with such lines of thinking, which treat the concepts of masculine and feminine as having an “essence” that always exists, rather than as constructions of the societies that use such terms.

Claire Goldberg Moses agrees with Delphy on several points in her 1996 article “La Construction du ‘French Feminism’ dans le Discours Universitaire Américain” (‘Made in America: “French Feminism” in academia’). In this piece, she begins by putting the movement in context, discussing the many groups of feminist writers that formed during the 1970s and 1980s, including *Psychoanalyse et politique* (“Psych et po”), a group which Hélène Cixous was highly associated with, as was Irigaray, until she had a “violent rupture” with the other members of the group in late 1974, likely due to infighting over ideologies (Moses 245). As time went on, a division was evident between the feminists in *Psych et po* and the rest of the feminist movement in France; Moses describes the group receiving much of the blame for anything that went wrong in the movement in France and in fact developing a reputation for being a “religious cult” that cut its members off from the rest of their societal commitments and obligations (Moses 248-9). Moses also describes the way that the group *Psych et po*, which included many of today’s well-known “French feminist” writers such as Cixous and Irigaray, not only distanced itself from the activism of the time that concerned itself with these issues, but in fact distanced itself from the actual feminist movement, as it considered feminists to be too masculine and simply attempting

to share in the power that men had rather than dismantling it (Moses 249). The author presents the case for Psych et po having disrupted the movement through actions such as trademarking the phrase *mouvement libération des femmes* (MLF) and suing other feminists in court, though this sect of French feminism ended up receiving the support of many American academics and constituting the core of what Americans now know as “French feminism”; the author believes this to be a mistake (Moses 251).

Most of the literature written in more recent years takes a nuanced view of Cixous, Irigaray, their “French feminism,” and their discussion of the body. Manashi Bora’s PhD thesis *Ideas of language in French Feminism with Special Reference to Luce Irigaray*, completed at Gauhati University in 2008, provides context for the work of these writers and the movement they became an integral part of, delving into the history of women’s movements in France, which can be traced back to the French Revolution, and how the poststructuralist philosophers of the time influenced this particular subset of well-known feminists in France. In a broader sense, the women’s liberation movement in France during the 1970s was in fact shifting away from a narrower focus on legal rights and women’s role in the public sphere, to analyzing various influential social structures they found to be created by and centered around men, such as family, government, history, etc.; the movement also shifted towards analyzing various forms of knowledge, including language, the key communication system that allowed the various other social structures to function (Bora 3). As the author argues, the concept of language constructing as well as reflecting one’s reality and the subjectivities of the world was one that was growing substantially more popular in the philosophy of the 1970s (Bora 8).

Bora thus places the writing of these poststructuralist feminists into its historical and philosophical context and describes how the writers who came to be known as “French

feminists”- and particularly Irigaray- approached the issue, as one of bringing women into these traditionally masculine fields by allowing them to write themselves, their experiences, and their bodies into their work. They combined activism with a focus on language to call attention to the role of language in their oppression. By extension, such an effort also called attention to the role of the men who had created it and continued to use the language to uphold the traditional power structures by shutting women out of domains such as discourse, as well as by using language whose subjectivities were turned against the feminine; Irigaray, for instance, did a great number of empirical studies on gender bias in the French language (Bora 19). The author also discusses the alternate form of writing invented by these writers- typically referred to as *écriture féminine* or *parler femme*- and the ways that the French feminists who were attempting to create and popularize it wished it to reflect women’s experiences and women’s bodies in particular. Cixous and Irigaray acted as two of the most significant and well-known proponents of this “new language,” which is not only outlined but also embodied by their own work. They wanted language to be fluid, lyrical, and not tied to particular meaning, as they felt this better reflected femininity; they found that a woman’s experiences were extremely closely tied to her body, which, as Bora points out, has led to much criticism of their “essentialist” and “utopian” views (Bora 27). Bora does not, however, necessarily agree with these claims. She takes into account many recent interpretations of Irigaray’s writing in particular and focuses on those that more sympathetically view her biologically-based arguments as simply an attempt to differentiate men from women and ensure that women’s experiences would receive attention at a time when men and their experiences were considered the default standard against which all others should be measured. While making use of Bora’s ideas on linguistic feminism and the work of Luce Irigaray, I focused my research more on the extent and utility of French feminists’ use of the

theme of essentialism, as well as the usefulness of such strategies in today's feminism, than on the invention of women's language or particulars of Irigaray's use of her language in her own work which received the majority of Bora's attention.

My own research on the role of language in the work of French feminists required balancing the various, often highly contradictory viewpoints belonging to various scholars across time periods in regards to what exactly constitutes "French feminism" and whether this term proves useful at all. Personally, I find that it does, as scholars have now used French feminism as a classification for decades, with the result that it now clearly denotes a particular group of writers and brand of feminism, though I agree that the term itself constitutes an Anglo-American construct. One could even classify it as a misnomer, as the grouping together of this particular group of writers and ideas occurred not necessarily naturally, and not via any efforts of the writers themselves, but largely at the hands of Anglo-American academics; of course, French feminism also does not represent the extent, or even majority, of feminist thought in France in the late twentieth century. Acknowledging these issues and keeping them in mind as I use the term in my own work, I have nevertheless found it beneficial to use the French feminist classification, given the history of the term's usage in academia and even in non-academic circles today. The prevalence of the term's current uses in various sectors of American society make it highly useful in examining a particular branch of feminism. Certain scholars have questioned the authenticity of this grouping, and by extension, the need for the very concept of French feminism. I argue that, regardless of French feminism's less-than-French origins or somewhat artificial beginnings, it now constitutes a movement that unquestionably merits examination, as it has proven highly significant in feminist thought for several decades now. In addition, I agree with critic Katherine Costello's argument that, given the variety of feminist

work by French writers translated into English and published in the US, the grouping of and emphasis on this particular group of people reflects, rather than an actual ignorance of other writers or ideologies present in France's feminist circles at the time, simply a particular interest in the psychoanalytic approach of these specific writers (Costello 18). Though it is important to keep in mind the questions about authenticity and terminology posed by various scholars, including those above, the role that French feminism has played in feminist thought and academia since its inception makes it an important movement to examine nonetheless.

Chapter 1

Philosophical Background & the Shaping of French Feminist Arguments

The philosophical background of French feminist arguments can shed light on why these discussions took the form that they did. Many scholars, including those already mentioned, have questioned why French feminist writers grounded their ideology in essentialism. Historical, social, and philosophical context is a crucial tool in answering such questions, shedding light on the strategies and arguments employed by the group known as “the French feminists.”

Philosophy plays an important role in French society in general; the French feminists would have received an education in philosophy even as schoolchildren, gaining familiarity with philosophical arguments and rhetoric, and along with the field of linguistics, the field of philosophy strongly influences the work of many in this group. Irigaray remains rather private about her own early life and education due to her belief that the patriarchal academic establishment could use personal details against her. However, as previously mentioned, it is known that she received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Paris VIII, with her famous work *Speculum de l'autre femme* being her second doctoral thesis. Other French feminist writers, such as Cixous, also had a great deal of exposure to philosophy: Cixous, like Irigaray, had worked closely with Lacan, and also knew eminent philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose philosophy served as a principal guiding force for French feminist ideas.

Many French feminists, including Irigaray, did consider themselves primarily philosophers, prioritizing this label over any other classification (Bora 34). The French feminists' emphasis on the philosophical aspects of their work indicates that further investigation into the philosophical background of the movement will provide clarity as to the origins of the French feminists' own arguments. Philosophical context and the intellectual environment in France

during this period shaped French feminist arguments. This occurred via the influence of pre-existing ideas the movement gladly adopted, such as the conception of language as a construct that proved fundamental to their discussions, but also through the role played by ideas these writers specifically sought to refute in crafting their own arguments, including certain Freudian theories of essentialism.

When attempting to account for the significant role of poststructuralist philosophers on this movement, one might question how the French feminists managed to employ poststructuralism to promote their sexual difference-focused conception of gender, given that poststructuralism deemphasized binaries and focused on constructionism, while French feminist arguments do focus on the body and the importance of emphasizing, rather than downplaying, “natural” difference. Though this contrast might appear troubling at first glance, these movements do not, in fact, inherently oppose each other. The French feminists focused on language precisely because they agreed with philosophers like Ferdinand Saussure in regards to the concept of language as a method of producing self, identity, and meaning (Khoja-Moolji). They believed in the power of language in culture, as their philosophy held that ideas could not exist without language. For the French feminists, this meant that language “created” ideas in a way that made language highly significant, for if the language that one uses to create ideas contains inherent bias, then it will become nearly impossible for the ideas not to carry this same bias. It is the desire to eliminate this bias that led them to their examination of language as such a crucial cultural tool, and even to invent *écriture féminine* with the intention that this entirely new manner of speaking would liberate women from the need to use a language inherently prejudiced against them. Thus, the idea of linguistic constructionism does align with the work of the French feminists, as this constructionism led them to the conclusion that language not only reflected, but

helped create, the misogyny they found in their society; this also led them to the more hopeful conclusion that, by changing how people used and thought about language, they could also change their reality.

Simone de Beauvoir adapted Jean Paul Sartre's theories of existentialism when writing about women to explain how men constituted the subject and women constituted the "other" in the society, an idea that proved highly salient and is used in the later works of many French feminists as a framework for analyzing women's position in Western society (Bora 36). The study of semiology furthered French feminists' discussion of the concept of otherness; the French philosopher Roland Barthes placed great emphasis on semiology, analyzing what people in a society take for granted or believe to be simple, common, unquestioned truths, in order to uncover the underlying ideologies that lead to such beliefs. This approach also demonstrates how poststructuralism and constructionism do in fact agree with the work of the French feminists: semiotic examinations sought to bring people's attention to the fact that historical, social, and linguistic context shape meaning, in opposition to the idea of meaning as inherent and unquestionable. A semiotic examination constitutes an effort to discover or create a better understanding of the true historical explanation for certain things that the society might typically view as simply "natural." This analysis of "what goes without saying" logically appealed to writers studying the condition of women, as it provided them a framework for examining societal assumptions of what women "naturally" are or should be, allowing them to analyze and draw attention to the actual historical, values-based, less "natural" reasons for such assumptions (Bora 38). In the case of the French feminists, the most crucial overarching societal assumption in question during such a semiotic examination was typically the supposed natural inferiority of women.

Derridean philosophy, with its emphasis on language and differentiation, also played a crucial role in the philosophical climate that shaped the work of French poststructuralist feminist writers. According to Jacques Derrida, language shapes meaning, and neither language nor its referents can have meaning without each other. This leads to his conclusion that fixed identities and meanings do not exist; there is nothing “beyond” linguistic processing, meaning that nothing can entirely avoid the influence of language, a subjective tool (Bora 40). This particular Derridean idea proves critical to many theories of French feminism, including the idea that women’s sexuality is discursive, meaning that the liberation of women’s sexuality would require changes to language itself (Berg 55). Derrida and many of those following in his footsteps often used these ideas about the crucial role of language to draw attention to identities and concepts that were typically repressed or marginalized. Along with Michel Foucault, Derrida placed a great deal of emphasis on the idea of otherness and “the remainder”- essentially, they discussed ways in which society excluded anyone who did not fit into the category of a heterosexual white Western man. Derridean thought constituted a reaction and opposition to the idea of a self-centered and self-sufficient Cartesian subject insistent upon seeing “the world in its own self-image” (Bora 43). This emphasis on otherness, which included women, made Derridean “deconstruction” a highly useful tool and commonly-used line of thinking among the French poststructuralist feminist writers.

Several other anti-humanist French philosophers also had a great deal of influence on the work of writers who rose to prominence within this more essentialist sect of feminism. French philosophers such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Louis Althusser focused on those who did not fit into the categories most valued by the patriarchal and logocentric attitudes of Western society (Bora 37). This drew the attention of many poststructuralist French female

writers, and they often used similar thinking in their writing on women's issues. Many French philosophers at the time, such as Louis Althusser, also focused on Marxism and antihumanism, arguing that the state used repressive and ideological apparatuses to keep people docile, allowing the dominant social system to remain unquestioned and powerful. Foucault even argued that truth does not exist outside of regimes and the system of power, as power belongs to those who determine the norms of a society and find themselves in a position to regulate and enforce these norms on a daily basis; those whose regime controls the productive power of a society are those who will hold this highly important position of "creating" truth (Bora 38). Such arguments strongly influenced the poststructuralist French feminist writers by furthering the discussion on who determines what it means to be a woman, how a patriarchal society constructs the concept of femininity, and how the dominant power systems had influenced women's lives for many centuries.

Another French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, played an important role in encouraging the essentialism for which French feminism has long been derided: he emphasized embodied experience and how the body shaped relationships between the self, others, and the world as a whole (Bora 42). He characterizes the body as "the subject of perception" and argues that perception does not occur objectively, because it occurs through the medium of the body. As the body plays such a crucial role in a person's presence in the world, Ponty states that it must constitute part of one's "natural self." In fact, in his work, the philosopher makes unequivocal references to "the fact that we are our body" (Merleau-Ponty 206). It follows that, subscribing to these theories, the French feminists would not desire to remove the body from their discussion of societal issues, particularly issues related to sexual difference. Believing the body forms an important part of a person's interactions with the world, and also believing that sexual difference

constituted the distinguishing factor between men and women, many French feminists did not find it possible to discuss societal misogyny, as well as potential solutions to the problems it caused, without frequent reference to the body.

The French feminists' emphasis on the body may also have resulted partly from their engagement with Freudian ideas. Freud focused many of his explanations for social psychology on the body, including by describing it as a site of memory that stores aspects of human history and connects people to those before them. The philosopher also focuses on "the relationship between an individual and the object of interpretation," discussing the body as a place where power and discourse interact (Punday 517). Evident connections exist between such ideas and the work of many later French philosophers, such as Foucault, even as the ways that they use these theories and concepts lead them to conclusions that contrast sharply with those of Freud himself. For instance, Foucault uses Freud as a resource and catalyst for the discussion of analyzing individuals according to spatial laws. However, Freud's main function in Foucault's work remains as a foil, as most of Foucault's conception of power and sexuality does not align with that of Freud (Punday 517). By influencing Foucault and other philosophers, Freud by extension influences the ideas of certain French feminists; of course, the French feminists also concentrated on the body in their own arguments, but did so in a way that, on the whole, contradicts and negates the theories of Freud. Like Foucault, an important influence on this movement, the French feminists most often find use for Freudian ideas only as a foil to their own arguments. Many of this group objected to the extent of Freud's biological determinism, and in particular, his definition of women as those without a penis, or women as *lack* (Bora 48). While essentialism holds that different categories of people have intrinsically different characteristics that make them who they naturally, inherently are, determinism like that espoused by Freud takes

this argument another step further, positing that these characteristics constitute determining factors that decide many aspects of a person's life or "destiny," allowing very little room for free will or individualism. These ideas constituted simply another way of prioritizing the male experience as well as defining women as "different" and inferior in an immutable, natural way that would immensely impact the possibilities of their lives, but could never change due to any action of theirs; thus, certain French feminists reclaimed the discussion of the body to instead emphasize and celebrate female difference.

The work of the French feminists demonstrates their reactions to other philosophical and social ideas of the time, both in the ways that they incorporate the ideas of those they agree with and in the way they construct their arguments as rebuttals to those whose ideas they aim to refute. The historical, political, and philosophical context surrounding their discussions of the body plays a crucial role, as these feminists constructed their arguments in what they felt was the best way to combat the particular misogynistic arguments and conditions they encountered. In her book *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* ('Thinking the Difference'), Irigaray presents her scathing opinion of the concept of the "neutral individual," stating that she finds this concept wholly unrealistic and saying, "women get pregnant, not men; women and little girls are raped, boys very rarely; the bodies of women and girls are used for involuntary prostitution and pornography, those of men infinitely less; and so on" (Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference* 59). She even argues that women's ability to create another human being accounts for the fact that they are more responsive to others and speak about people other than themselves more than their male counterparts do (Bora 120-121). Such sentiments, treating the body as the central issue, make it clear that Irigaray's concern was entirely focused on presenting the female experience as distinct from the male experience, yet never less valuable (Bora 44). She in fact goes so far as to argue in

her book *Je, tu, nous* that, “To wish to get rid of sexual difference is to call for a genocide more radical than any form of destruction there has ever been in History” (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 12). Irigaray demonstrates very clearly that her definition of femininity centers on the biologically female body and all the ways it differs from the biologically male body, seemingly in an attempt to differentiate women from men as much as possible and create a concept of a distinctly feminine identity; men and their experiences, language use, etc., were considered the default, and Irigaray attempted to counteract this by placing the emphasis of her analysis on what she considered the most immutable, core ways that women did differ from men, believing in some crucial, essentially “feminine” part of women that could not be altered or taken away regardless of the ways in which the patriarchy devalued them. Toril Moi describes Irigaray’s strategy by arguing that, “it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to define women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that defines women *as* women” (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 102). It appears that Irigaray does exactly this as she continues to insist upon sexual difference.

Irigaray’s discussion of women’s “two lips” has also attracted a great deal of attention, and many have interpreted this as a highly literal discussion of women’s genitalia, adding to the criticism surrounding Irigaray’s use of biology to discuss women in her work. However, many critics, including Margaret Whitford, have argued that Irigaray did not necessarily intend the “two lips” as a definition of women on literal biological terms. Whitford also objects to the characterization of the “two lips” as merely a specific symbol for the the idea of “feminine plurality,” a common poststructuralist idea that Irigaray engages with often as she describes the distinction between men and women’s sexuality by focusing on women’s multiple sexual organs. Despite Irigaray’s other uses of this concept, Whitford argues that Irigaray did not mean for the

“two lips” to specifically symbolize plurality, nor was she alluding only to a literal anatomical identity of a woman; instead, the lips themselves have a multiplicity of meaning that reflects this concept of feminine plurality, and goes beyond the intentions of one particular author (in this case, Irigaray) to evoke, and become part of, “our cultural and symbolic ‘baggage’” (Whitford, *Irigaray’s Body Symbolic* 99). Jane Gallop and Elizabeth Grosz argue that this symbol has an inter-discursive rather than specifically referential function, meaning that this symbol reflects multiple discourses coexisting and perhaps combatting each other. They find that this reflects the discourse that Irigaray herself creates with her own work, as she intends it to exist alongside and combat other, misogynistic discourses created by the patriarchy, which she saw currently prevailing in her society. Thus, much like the idea of emphasizing sexual difference to carve out a particular identity and place in society for women, the idea of the “two lips” appears as a direct reaction to dominant ideologies or discourses of the time. Irigaray uses biology as the tool she believes will most efficiently and directly confront the way that patriarchal societies, such as the one she herself lives in, identify and oppress women.

Certain scholars have also pointed out that Irigaray’s more specific discussions of anatomy can in fact negate rather than support the ideology of essentialism. Despite the fact that her anatomical discussions initially strike many readers as presupposing an overly biological definition of gender, this interpretation should not go unquestioned: the true effect of her references to biology merits further attention. The poststructuralist intellectual environment and ideology of Derridean deconstruction underpinning French feminist work does not begin and end with language: in French feminist ideology, societal conceptions of the body are, similarly to language, constructed and shaped by the dominant discourses of society. As such, they are neither objective nor unmediated. In the words of Jacques Derrida, “There is no ‘the’ body”

(Derrida 2005, 288-289). By this, the philosopher means that ideas of the body, like everything else, should be questioned and examined for assumptions whose explanations lie in historical and societal context, rather than in “nature.” If the body itself is not considered a static, unbiased and universal fact of life, but rather another product of society created along the same lines as language, then biology does not appear sufficient as an approach to defining “woman” or the concept of gender, but instead would merit further definition and discussion in itself; it follows that Irigaray did not in fact intend to use biology to define the experience of women. Though it might at first glance seem tempting to pinpoint these biological references as examples of essentialism, the ideology of the French feminist movement holds that language mediates the body, and not vice versa.

This tenet of the movement’s ideology does not have to conflict with Irigaray’s anatomical discussions: when viewed in light of this constructionist ideological background, Irigaray’s biological references could lead readers not towards a biological definition of gender, but instead towards questioning the very idea of anatomical referentiality (Costello 48). According to this constructionist ideology, language is not simply referential, meaning that language can never perfectly or literally represent a referent. Differences exist between language and its intended referent, and these differences result in the movement’s belief that nothing, including the body, can be considered unbiased or untouched by language. For instance, Jane Gallop argues that, when Irigaray discusses her idea of male sex, she discusses not literal male genital anatomy, but rather “an already phallic conception of male genitals, that actually has only a selective relation to male anatomy”; readers should read her discussion of female sex in a similarly inexact or somewhat metaphorical manner, rather than as an agreement with Freud’s statement that “anatomy is destiny” (Costello 48). Rather than directly relating biology

with predetermined characteristics, Irigaray simply employs this discussion of the female sex to redirect the conversation away from focusing only on men and their experiences, sexual and otherwise, while either ignoring those of women or treating them as deviations. Additionally, readers should likely avoid reading her discussion of female sex too literally: much like her discussion of male sex, it seems that this portion of Irigaray's work does not actually constitute an attempt to directly discuss genitalia, but instead to invoke a general societal conception thereof. By nature, this societal conception of the female sex has a less-than-exact correlation to the female sex itself, and by invoking the concept rather than the female sex itself, Irigaray leaves more room for interpretation, alteration, or perhaps even criticism of this societal conception. This less literal interpretation leads one to the conclusion that Irigaray's "two lips" and other anatomical discussions do not reduce sex to anatomy, but instead simply make symbolic use of biological references in order to begin a new variety of discussion about the body.

Historical as well as philosophical factors shaped the biologically-based arguments of French feminist writers. At the time, concerns related to women's bodies had in fact attracted the concern and attention of many groups centered around women's liberation. Many began to argue that women could not liberate themselves without, at minimum, some progress towards giving women the ability decide if or when they had children; this was a new and forward-thinking argument for the time as it contradicted popular belief about the importance of motherhood as a source of women's personal and societal value (Greenwald 63). To achieve this goal of more reproductive independence, women in France began to fight for more access to birth control and legal abortions, an issue that soon became a focal point of the mainstream *mouvement libération des femmes*. As one might expect, this new stance taken by many women's organizations led to a

great deal of backlash from those concerned about falling birth rates, known as *dénatalité*. This argument held some weight in France, as the country had had concerns about its birth rates for many years; attempts to combat this included the Law of 13 July 1920, which made any anti-natalist agenda illegal in addition to criminalizing abortion, and the Law of 27 March 1923, which established that anyone helping- or attempting to help- a women acquire an abortion could receive up to five years in prison as punishment. In 1939, shortly before World War II, the *Code de la Famille* made abortion penalties stricter, with prosecutions falling disproportionately on poor women, and by 1942, abortion was classified as a crime against society, falling into the category of sabotage or treason (Greenwald 64).

These efforts did not stop after World War II. As mentioned earlier, the French government continued actively striving to encourage women to have more children and emphasizing the importance of motherhood, largely due to the same concern over birth rates that underpinned anti-abortion arguments from many sectors, as well as a desire to create a general sense of stability. They did have some success, as a general renewal in domesticity took place after the war, but it is likely that the focus of women's liberation movements on abortion and reproductive rights in the 1970s began as a reaction to such restrictive measures and the dominant political discourse of domesticity. Certainly Irigaray and other French feminists would not have agreed with all of the arguments made in this area by the mainstream movement; in fact, French feminism has been criticized for placing too much emphasis on motherhood, and as Irigaray made clear that women should remain equal to but entirely different from men, it seems unlikely that she would agree with mainstream feminists' argument that women should strive to embody the same individualism as men. However, the idea that women should have control of themselves, and particularly of their bodies, clearly underlies much of French feminist ideology;

responding to their patriarchal society's attempts to control women's bodies most likely constituted another reason that French feminists felt the need to focus on the body in their discussions. Addressing the body in their own work allowed them to present their own ideas of their bodies, taking the privilege of defining women's bodies away from the patriarchy and back into women's own hands. Their work emphasizes the body as something that the patriarchy cannot take away from women, which reverses the dialogue of oppressors attempting to assert their control in this area. Irigaray did not appreciate the reduction of women to their role as mothers, as this constructed women as, once again, simply an object, primarily used for producing the male subject (Weinbaum).

Acknowledging the influence of many anti-humanist French philosophers and the context of dominant patriarchal discourses during this period can lead scholars to a better understanding of the origins of French feminist ideology and why their discussions of women and power in society took the form that they did. They found themselves in the position of needing to "define women *as* women" in order to reclaim this definition from, and refute concepts of "women *as* women" created by, patriarchal institutions. However, in doing so, they also needed to avoid the patriarchal framework and the typical pitfalls that come along with attempting such a definition (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 102). These include a lack of historical or social context in favor of assuming some unchanging "natural" quality that defines women, a common problem as writers strive to create a definition general enough to serve the purpose at hand. Avoiding such issues proves no small feat, but many French feminists found that concentrating on the discussion of sexual difference in particular allowed them to strike this rather delicate balance. A Derridean philosophy of the body- or lack thereof, given Derrida's argument that "there is no 'the' body"-shaped French feminists' own anatomical discussions, along with the theories of Ponty; though

this group of writers agreed with Derrida's characterization of the body as a construction, their work also shows agreement with Ponty's idea that it remains a highly important part of how one communicates with the world, helping to form an individual's understanding of themselves and others. When analyzing the particular arguments that characterize the movement, including those that have attracted a great deal of criticism or even discounting of the movement's ideologies, it is important to view these arguments in historical, social, and philosophical context. This not only provides a better overall view of the movement, what it stands for, and how it fits into the history of feminism as a whole, but also avoids potentially inaccurate readings or interpretations of the work produced by these writers. In the specific case of French feminist writers' use of anatomical references, a closer contextual reading can provide meaning that transcends the accusations of essentialism or initial inclination for scholars to read these references literally, leading readers instead to an analysis that better highlights the unique aspects of the movement that initially attracted the attention of Anglo-American academics; this also allows attention to focus on those aspects of French feminist ideology that could still prove useful in feminist discussions today.

Chapter 2

Linguistic Bias & The Body: Examining the “Essentials” of *Écriture Feminine*

French feminism has attracted certain harsh critiques over the years, particularly in regards to its focus on biology and the fact that it belongs to a sect of feminism that is often not highly-regarded within France itself. For instance, in her 1996 article, Claire Goldberg Moses, an outspoken critic of the traditional conception of French feminism, describes issues that constituted crucial rallying points for feminist activists at the time, such as abortion rights and rape, and the way that they talked about these in the broader context of questioning the patriarchy, marriage, housework, compulsory heterosexuality, and particularly motherhood (Moses 244). This clashes with much of the work of those who would come to be known as “the French feminists,” as they often valorized and emphasized motherhood, which they characterized as a uniquely feminine experience and one of those that society had devalued for centuries; this was particularly a feature of the writing of Luce Irigaray, and a feature that critics have heavily debated. As described above, many of those who Americans now know as “French feminists” belonged to the group *Psych et po*, which distanced itself from feminism as much as possible; in fact, many view the group as a major obstacle that the feminist movement in France has had to overcome over the last several decades, given its trademarking of logos and names in order to block other feminist movements, its ensuing lawsuit, and its sometimes inflammatory statements against feminism. The organization once said in a statement, “Feminism is radical only as the root of Patriarchy” (Moses 250). By this, they may have meant that feminism encouraged women to simply take over the role of men in the current structure and become more like them rather than overturning the structure entirely, as many in the organization wished to do.

In spite of such sentiments from the group, which only increased in fervor over the years, the public continued to laud Psych et po's publications as feminist due to the way they advocated for women (Moses 250). Moses argues that the American public has conflated this group, its writers and their work with "French feminism" because of articles published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Articles by Carolyn Burke and Elaine Marks in the summer of 1978 juxtaposed discussion of these writers with discussion of the *mouvement libération des femmes* (MLF), and focused on the linguistic side of feminism, which was often associated with Cixous and Irigaray (Moses 253). This appears to have led many American to make the association between the *mouvement libération des femmes* and these writers, one which most in France had not made, and which some of the "French feminist" writers in question had in fact actively and publicly resisted. Thus, while strongly resisting the *mouvement libération des femmes* on many levels, the group known as Psych et Po, as well as many of its core, most vocal members, managed to become a symbol of the movement in certain circles, particularly American academic circles. In spite of this conflation of the movement and these individuals, many feminists in France did not, in fact, wish to be associated with certain attributes of the "French feminist" movement, such as its distance from the actual mainstream feminist movement and its focus on biology. However, I will argue that the French feminists were indeed feminists, and that their anatomical references can hold meaning outside of essentialist interpretations.

One shared goal among the group known as "French feminists" was to increase the attention focused on, and valorization of, the female experience. They object to the reduction of women to the status of "not-men." However, they do not believe that women must prove themselves "like men" in order to fix this problem; some question women's meaning or motives

in arguing for “equality,” disagreeing with the idea that women should wish to be “similar” to those who currently filled the role of the oppressor in their society. Instead, many French feminists wish to transform the category of “not-men” into the category of “women”- a category that, while not less valuable, would remain, in no uncertain terms, distinct from men. This approach demanded the question of what, exactly, constituted a “woman”; the French feminists had to determine the qualities around which they could center this identity. Many of them responded to this dilemma by turning to essentialism and emphasizing biological differences between men and women, effectively removing any distinction between sex and gender, an approach for which they have faced heavy criticism in the years since. For many French feminists, womanhood centers on the body, and many of what they consider essential feminine qualities stem from the body’s contributions to women’s experiences.

Within the movement known as French feminism, many authors, including Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, placed particular emphasis on language and its role in patriarchal power systems. Many have referred to their ideas as “linguistic feminism”: they pointed out ties between the patriarchy and the language used to uphold it. They believed that the first step to changing their reality, and the misogyny they found within it, was to change the language that was used to create, express, and sustain this reality. Some writers, such as Gayatri Spivak, have even accused these writers of being so focused on language, discourse, and representation that they lose sight of actual activism in forgetting to worry about the material issues facing women in the real world on a day-to-day basis (Bora 6). Irigaray and Cixous believed that the creation of an entirely new language, which they typically referred to as *écriture féminine* (‘feminine writing’) or *parler femme* (‘woman speak’), would be the best way to break out of the patriarchal framework of traditional styles of language, which they found to be contaminated by the

misogyny of traditional patriarchal power structures (Bora 22). Irigaray argued that the patriarchal system of language allowed men to assert their dominance over women and claim their position as the ones to determine culture (Irigaray, *I love to you* 69). Irigaray also discusses this topic in her book *j'aime à toi* ('*I love to you*'), arguing that men asserting their role as the creators of culture forget that women must create life, and society should therefore consider them the true creators rather than men (Irigaray, *I love to you* 66). Russian philosopher Mikhael Bakhtin had great influence on many within the French feminist movement, and once said, "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life" (Bakhtin 1981, 667). Many French feminists agreed with his assessment of the sociopolitical and ideological importance of language, both as a reflection and a tool; it soon became one of the central concerns of the movement.

Much of Irigaray's work focuses on mitigating the problems that stem from women having to fight against their patriarchal system of language simply to express themselves. She and other French writers who formed part of the "French feminism" movement devoted their attention to how language constructed and upheld the patriarchy. They found not only that conventional language had long been the language used by men and the society that oppressed them, but in particular that it encoded many misogynistic biases. Of course, given that this was the main system of communication, they found that these biases reflected and perpetuated biases within the ideologies of the society as a whole. For instance, Irigaray often discussed the *ils/elles* distinction in French, and the fact that any group of people including even one man was—according to conventional, prescriptivist grammar—referred to with the masculine plural pronoun

ils, even if it was a group of a hundred women and one man. Other examples included the lack of specific job titles for women that would be equivalent to men's job titles (*le docteur* vs. *la docteur*). She believed that this prioritization of the masculine in French reflected a deep-rooted ideological misogyny in the society (Bora 109). She also conducted substantial empirical research into linguistic biases and language use, particularly that of women, and found that even women preferred a masculine pronoun in the active subject position in French (Bora 109).

Her studies also found that the third-person feminine pronouns *elle* and *elles* were much less frequently used than their masculine counterparts in general; one of her empirical studies found that many mother-daughter interactions were in the imperative, a mood which does not require or permit the use of a subject in French, further reducing the use of *elle* and *elles* (Bora 98). She also discussed biases she noticed in which nouns were assigned a feminine grammatical gender (Bora 92). For instance, in *Je, tu, nous*, Irigaray argues that nouns considered more important have been assigned masculine gender, such as those that have higher value in the society or those that describe living, animate objects rather than inanimate, uncultured objects (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 70). She notes that, though the words for the moon and the stars have been assigned feminine gender, the sun, considered the true source of life, takes the masculine (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 31). Though she does not propose that Francophones somehow do away with the use of grammatical gender, which constitutes an integral part of the language, she does wish to valorize and emphasize the female pronouns, making them more frequently used in order to counteract the biases that speakers have developed in favor of the masculine and condition them to hearing female pronouns in general, and particularly as active subjects. Irigaray states that grammatical gender is “neither motiveless nor arbitrary” when discussing the issue of *ils* vs. *elles* as well as what nouns are assigned masculine gender while others are assigned feminine

gender (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 20). The French feminist movement focused on the ways that the patriarchal order of the society in which they were living was constructed by the the society itself, and the immense role that language played in this construction as it shaped people's realities and perceptions (Bora 85).

In her 1996 book *J'aime à toi* ('I love to you'), Irigaray details some of the quantitative experiments she has done to examine this crucial relationship between language and cultural values, particularly focusing on the gender bias she believes exists in French. In one experiment, she simply gave participants a noun (such as *chien*, 'dog', the example she gives in her book) and asked them to create a sentence that used this word. She found that, in the case of *chien*, only 15% of women and 14% of men used *elle* when given this simple request to construct a random sentence. Results varied somewhat depending on the noun provided to the participants, but regardless of the noun or the participant's gender, the proportion of people using *il* remained much higher than the proportion of people using *elle*. Irigaray also found that, when participants did use *elle*, it tended to be with certain verbs: verbs relating to nurturing a child, as well as negative verbs such as *perdu* ('lost') or *renie* ('denied'), tended to receive a feminine subject more often (Irigaray, *I love to you* 70). These results indicate that both men and women, by the time of adulthood, gravitate towards a masculine subject more than a feminine subject in entirely neutral situations such as the one Irigaray created for the experiment. (She also notes that, in some cases, researchers did not inform participants that the noun provided, such as *chien*, should form part of the complement rather than filling the subject role itself, and in these cases, many participants did use the noun as the subject rather than any pronoun.) Furthermore, her research suggests that participants avoid using *elle* and *elle se* ('she herself') and their plural equivalents as active subjects, regardless of the gender of the participant. These findings held even in cases

where the cues led the participant towards a feminine subject, such as when the prompt asked them to create a sentence with the words “*robe-se-voir*” (‘dress-see oneself/to be visible’).

Participants commonly used *robe* or even *il* as the subject, giving responses such as *Il se voit déjà en robe d’avocat* (‘He can already see himself in lawyer’s robes’) or *La robe se voit bien* (‘The dress stands out’).

In her research, Irigaray also found that the vast majority of both men and women interpreted the ambiguous indirect object pronoun *lui* (‘he/she’) to indicate a masculine object in the example sentences researchers gave them (Irigaray, *I love to you* 72-3). In *Je, tu, nous*, Irigaray outlines all of these findings and more, interpreting them as support for her aforementioned belief that French speakers favor masculine pronouns in active subject positions, and even in object positions in cases where the pronoun is ambiguous. This analysis goes further, drawing a connection to cultural values, as the author states that this grammatical bias reflects the values- and in particular, the misogyny- of her society, serving as evidence of the way that society devalues women themselves as well as anything considered feminine. These quantitative findings and the conclusions Irigaray drew from them only strengthened her belief that women needed a new, more feminine variety of writing in order to better communicate and avoid using the corrupted, masculine language that society favored.

Various writers had different conceptions of what feminine writing entailed, how it would differ from traditional language, and even the definition of femininity. However, differing ideas about *écriture féminine* have themes in common: this new feminine writing would give women a better way to express themselves, which these writers believed the old style of language did not allow, and would give women better self-image, as they would be freed from the ways that the subjective, traditional style of language often disadvantaged women. The

traditional style of language had been used to oppress and negatively represent women for too long, and now they wanted women to write themselves into the text, creating opportunities to express themselves and their experiences in the world- as well as the female experience in general- in as authentic a way as possible. In contrast to traditional language with its specific meaning and highly-structured syntax, women's language was supposed to be more fluid and flexible, and not as easily pinned down to one particular meaning. In her article "Le rire de la Meduse", Cixous says, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing ... Women must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement" (Cixous, "Le rire de la Meduse" 875). Irigaray, for her part, argues for the plurality of meaning in this new feminine language by stating that order, coherence, and unity of meaning have been valued because this in fact reflects the male body, where sexual pleasure is concentrated in one organ; now, she states, women must create a language that parallels their own experiences instead, with a multiplicity of meaning that reflects the multiplicity of the sexual pleasure the female body can experience in various organs (Bora 127). Such sentiments demonstrate that this new language was meant to combat the ways that language had erased or devalued the female experience for centuries. The purpose of women's language was to break the cycle of patriarchal discourse, as Irigaray believed that continuing to speak the same language as men- indeed, the same language that had been spoken for centuries as women had consistently held an inferior place in patriarchal societies- would doom women to repeat the past rather than create progress or change (Costello 45). She and other French feminist writers theorized that they could alter and reshape the world around them by altering the way people communicated about it. They concerned themselves with particular aspects of communication-

such as representation and discourse- that had previously been, in large part, the domain of men (Bora 8).

Cixous and Irigaray became the writers most closely associated with the more abstract, lyrical style of writing that they not only conceptualized, but also embodied in their own works. For instance, when discussing the strain on mother-daughter relationships, which she often discusses as having suffered under the patriarchy, Irigaray writes this in her article “Et l’un ne bouge pas sans l’autre” (‘And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other’):

A little light enters me. Something inside me begins to stir. Barely. Something new has moved me. As though I’d taken a first step inside myself. As if a breath of air had penetrated a completely petrified being, unsticking its mass. Waking me from a long sleep. From an ancient dream. A dream which must not have been my own, but in which I was captive. Was I a participant, or was I the dream itself- another’s dream, a dream about another? (Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other” 60-61)

This passage demonstrates the style of Irigaray and many other French feminists, more poetic, abstract, and less directly tied to one specific meaning; passages like this allow for a great deal of interpretation from the reader. Such use of lyrical style and creation of women’s language vs. men’s language function as a way for these women writers to distinguish and separate their experiences from men’s experiences, which were typically treated as the norm. The use of women’s language was meant to establish and draw attention to the fact that women experienced the world differently than men: men’s experiences were not the “default” or only experiences, nor should they be the only experiences that are valued or considered valid by society. Irigaray’s term for the way society universalized the male experience while ignoring sexual difference- as evidenced in language by the use of terms such as “mankind”- was *homosexual*, combining the Greek *homo* (‘same’) with the French *homme* (‘man’) to create a new term expressing how society prioritized men’s experiences through this erasure of sexual difference, thus “sameing” women at the same time as it othered them (Johnston 619). Irigaray argues that women must

recognize and emphasize their difference in order to counteract this *homosexuality* and achieve a subjective status in society that is equal to- though not the same as- that as men (Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other” 50). In regards to what distinguishes *parler femme* from more traditional language, Irigaray focuses on audience and locus as well as fluidity and lack of concrete meaning. She describes the syntax of *parler femme* as difficult to pin down, but lacking in subject, object, or other ways to denote ownership (Fuss 70). In her book *The Sex That is Not One*, she states that *parler femme* is most often used by women among women, as this is typically the only place where women are bold enough to use it (Fuss 69). However, she points out that, even here, women will sometimes continue to use conventional men’s language, as this remains the most common variety of language, and embodies what society has taught people to value in a language.

Cixous and Irigaray draw a distinction between the language that benefits or best expresses the experiences of men and language that benefits or best expresses the experiences of women. They ascribe characteristics to feminine language that they believe are also commonly found in women themselves, as their intention would be for this new feminine language to better reflect women and femininity: they intend for the fluidity and lyrical qualities of *écriture féminine* to connect to what is essentially feminine (Bora 10). This new style of language was intended to valorize many qualities traditionally associated with women that had been devalued in society as a whole. These aims mean there is a need to define the concept of what is essentially feminine, particularly in contrast to what is essentially masculine. In the process of acknowledging and drawing attention to the distinct category that constitutes femininity, they tend to present the concept with a certain homogeneity. This simplifies the process of emphasizing how women are different from men in order to discuss certain societal issues facing

women in particular, which also allows them to present *écriture féminine*, explaining who it is for, why it is necessary, what qualities it has to distinguish it from other language, and why. Writer Marjorie Hass summarizes Irigaray's approach by saying that she identified radical elements of women's style, showed that the current dominant syntax could not capture these radical elements, and then combine these elements into a *parler femme* that women can intentionally, consciously use to communicate in a way that cannot be analyzed with traditional methods, but remains helpful and efficient as a means of transmitting and sharing ideas. Another writer, Diana Fuss, argues that Irigaray's intention in focusing on the body- which she thought of as the core of what women had in common- was highly strategic. Her aim was not to restrict women, but instead, to emphasize what made them women, and a part of them that would always be women and could not be taken away from them regardless of the influence of patriarchal culture (Fuss 67-68).

These French feminist writers' focus on the body did not match all of the scholarship or activism of their time: in the 1970s, the general trend of activism moved decidedly towards identity politics. Activists began using the term in the 1970s to describe a movement centered around taking action in an attempt to achieve social and legal equality for marginalized groups, based largely on the activists' experiences relating to gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, or other aspects of identity; this caught on quickly. However, it just as quickly faced heavy criticism from the poststructuralist movement. Many found that identity politics ignored less personal issues or unknowable aspects of the consciousness, while also reducing a person down to certain aspects of their identity, such as race or gender, in a way that unintentionally mirrored the discourse of the oppressors (Diamond 64-65). Given this reaction by poststructuralists, it appears unsurprising that, despite the growing popularity of identity politics, Irigaray in particular took an almost

opposite path, focusing insistently on sexual difference. She found the concept of “the *other*” extremely important, and poststructuralism- following the philosophy of Derrida- took issue with the way Cartesian concepts of identity took the emphasis away from the idea of the other, even omitting or excluding it; poststructuralist philosophers had used the concept of the other to discuss various groups considered outsiders in society, including women. Irigaray found that the idea of women being *other* and different from men could not be ignored when discussing feminism or women’s experiences, and she believed focusing on the concept of identity erased or negated this aspect of womanhood; one unique and significant focus of poststructuralism was “knowing difference in and for itself” (Bora 42-45).

The concept of *écriture féminine* has a great deal to do with the female body specifically, as the body was conceptualized by the French feminist movement as the root of the differences between men and women. Aforementioned philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an important influence on French feminism, emphasized the importance of the body in regards to how one interacts with oneself and with the world; Irigaray specifically tied this to language in her own work, believing that the exclusion of sexual difference from language, and from patriarchal discourses in general, constituted a root cause of oppression (Squires 8). She found that language, humans’ main system of communication, should reflect the ways in which humans themselves differed, rather than having only one system that she found better served the needs and reflected the experiences of men. Irigaray believed that, given what she regarded as crucial and essential differences between men and women, a new language would be highly helpful: giving women a better way to express themselves would allow better communication between men and women.

Irigaray further engages with many of these ideas and in her book *Je, tu, nous*, a work in which she lays out many of her thoughts and ideologies regarding language as a crucial cultural medium. In the very first chapter, she argues not only for the non-arbitrary nature of feminine vs. masculine grammatical gender, but also states that feminine grammatical gender is made to “disappear as subjective expression,” most likely referring to the fact that if there is any grammatically or naturally masculine presence in a group, prescriptive grammar holds that a speaker or writer must use masculine pronouns and adjectives. She finds that a large portion of the vocabulary associated with women in languages such as French, her native language, is negative, objectifying, and sometimes derogatory. This leads to her conclusion that women need *écriture féminine*, as they are excluded from this patriarchal linguistic order in a way that keeps them from being able to speak in a manner that will be seen as coherent and successfully get them the attention and respect of those around them (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 20). Women, argues Irigaray, need to escape the restriction of acting as the object of men’s discourse, and require language that allows them to discuss themselves, putting the feminine in the subject position. She states, “What this means implies is that the female body is not to remain the object of men’s discourse or their various arts but that it become the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself” (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 59). She examines the question of what type of equality women should truly aim for, and finds that they should desire not to possess what men possess or have the qualities of men, but instead to maintain their difference and to create an equal subjectivity. In recommending this, she envisions a society in which women remain entirely distinct from men, but are not considered in any way inferior to men.

The author believes women who attempt to assert themselves in a conversation in the patriarchal linguistic order end up taking a supposedly neutral position, except that in the case of

many languages, including French, they in fact take a masculine position, as people have been culturally conditioned to consider masculine the “default” or “neutral” position. Thus, she claims that women who do this deny their feminine identities. Instead of forcing women into these supposedly neutral positions, Irigaray believes language must be free of any rules that attempt to restrict or cancel out sexual identity if women truly wish to achieve liberation. She argues that this goal must be achieved by examining various languages individually to determine which aspects require modification (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 33). She reiterates that, in French, women must remain “among themselves” in order for a plural to be feminine or in order to have a relationship to “the subjectively female world” due to the aforementioned French grammatical rule that any mixed-gender group is described using masculine pronouns, adjectives, etc. (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 34) She points out while analyzing certain aspects of her own quantitative work that even the “it” of sentences such as “it is snowing” or “it is necessary” always uses the masculine form in French; she characterizes this as another way in which supposedly “neutral” language often has masculine characteristics (Irigaray, *Je, tu nous* 30). These quantitative experiments and emphasis on discussing gender-biased structures and vocabulary within French allowed Irigaray to strengthen her argument regarding the presence of patriarchal bias in the language, which she further used to lead into her argument for the necessity of a new, particular “women’s language.” The French feminists had a rather unique interpretation of the significance of language to their society. They focused on bringing attention to the ways in which language acted as a highly subjective tool, both reflecting and re-enforcing the misogynistic biases present in their society. This linguistic feminism explored the subjectivities of language in new and seemingly progressive ways.

Much like the anatomical references already addressed, the concept of *écriture féminine* might appear essentialist at first glance, as many have interpreted these writers' construction of this alternate version of language as simply a statement that women have such extreme differences from men that they require an entirely different method of communication. However, other interpretations of *écriture féminine* point out that the concept of *écriture féminine* has deep roots in constructionism, meaning it should be viewed through the lens of the same principles as French feminists' discussions of biological sex. The idea of "feminine writing" stems from the French feminists' aforementioned firm belief in language as a method of constructing, and not merely reflecting, reality. Indeed, they did not necessarily believe in an objective, unmediated "reality" for language to reflect. Without this crucial tenet of their philosophy, the language used- by women in particular- to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences would not form such a meaningful part of French feminist arguments. Language matters to these writers because of its power to either maintain the status quo or create change. Some have accused French feminists of embodying gynocriticism, a form of literary analysis focusing exclusively on work by female authors in a framework based around women, taking no other viewpoints into account. However, Costello points out that true adherents to the gynocriticism movement, which also existed in academia, did not believe language merited as much attention as French feminists gave it, because the gynocentric theorists characterized language- where they specifically considered it at all- as simply an objective, adequate way of accurately representing women's experiences. Some scholars have, in fact, used French feminism as a way of explicitly criticizing gynocriticism's biological understanding of sex and dependence on the author's biological sex; Costello argues that the redefinition of sexual difference as linguistic, rather than biological, and avoidance of biological essentialism attracted many feminist U.S. literary critics to the approach

taken by French feminism, contrary to the popular opinion that French feminism actually embodies essentialism (Costello 24-25, 28). The idea of feminine writing played an important part in this linguistic interpretation of sexual difference, which differentiated French feminism from earlier or differing sects of feminism, and in fact allowed it to distance itself from biological essentialism.

Despite accusations to the contrary, an anti-essentialist interpretation of French feminist works and ideology is not merely possible, but plausible. Many have pointed to the distinct “female” language of *écriture féminine* or various anatomical references to assert that these works rely too heavily on biology to explain gender roles, discounting the movement for using counterproductive or exclusionary strategies. However, other critics have found that scholars can read the work as presenting a view diametrically opposed to such biological essentialism, and indeed many of French feminism’s supporters value it precisely because of the way it distances itself from essentialist approaches due to writers’ insistence on constructionism throughout every aspect of their discussions. Readers must view the approaches taken in these works by Irigaray and her fellow writers through the lens of the particular historical and philosophical context in which they wrote in order to account for how these arguments arose in the form that they did; this allows scholars to accept possible anti-essentialist interpretations of the work produced by this movement and avoid overlooking nuances of the work that do not align with the accusations of biological essentialism that the movement has historically attracted. Indeed, the French feminist movement attracted not only accusations of essentialism, but also accusations that these writers were not feminists at all. As earlier stated, some of these writers do not attach this label to themselves, and certain groups which had many prominent French feminist writers among their

membership, such as Psych et po, did criticize the movement on the grounds of their belief that feminists simply adopted masculinity or wanted to emulate men (Moses 249).

This antifeminist argument does appear to align with Irigaray's belief that women, while attempting to achieve equal status to men, should never attempt to become more similar to them, given that this group had filled the role of the oppressor in many patriarchal societies for centuries. However, thoroughly responding to the question of whether readers should consider these writers feminists requires further examination, including a definition of the term "feminist." In examining this issue, I prefer the definition of the term used by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi). According to this definition, I would argue that the French feminists do, in fact, merit the label of feminist. Though many of them do not tend to assign themselves this label, the arguments presented appear to center only on the strategies espoused by the mainstream feminist movement as they encountered it. Additionally, many of those across various groups fighting for liberation and equality during the 1970s, spanning a variety of ideologies, did not wish to associate themselves with the official mainstream movement, as it dealt with a great deal of infighting and other issues leading to a lack of cooperation among different groups (Greenwald 86). The label "feminist" still brought up highly contentious issues in France at the time. French feminists were not alone in disavowing the label, and their work makes clear that they did, in fact, share mainstream feminists' goal of social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, despite disagreeing with the mainstream movement over how exactly to achieve this goal. Like the form of their arguments, their choice to distance themselves from the mainstream feminist movement in certain ways should be seen in its particular political, social, and historical context. The shared goal of equality holds more weight

than the smaller, more complicated matter of which labels they chose to adopt for themselves. Additionally, in light of the philosophical background previously outlined, it is evident that the ideology of French feminism has deep roots in constructionism, placing emphasis on the importance of sociohistorical context rather than nature; this contradicts Delphy's aforementioned argument that the French feminists did not deserve the label of feminist because they treated gender as explainable by some natural "essence" rather than by societal construction, making their approach or beliefs incompatible with those of contemporary feminism. I argue that the French feminists should in fact be considered feminists in light of this constructionist context, readings of their works that do align with the tenets of today's feminism, and, most importantly, the core goal of equality, which they share with other feminists across a wide variety of time periods and locations.

Chapter 3

Transgenderism & the Implications of French Feminist Ideology Today

A great number of the core French feminist texts discussed here, and associated with the movement in general, were published in the 1970s. Many of the most well-known French feminist writers no longer publish new work, and of course, the feminist movement and its approaches to accomplishing the goal of equality have continued to grow and change over the course of the last four decades. This begs the question of whether the ideologies outlined by French feminists in their own work have stood the test of time, and what feminist theorists and activists today can take from their ideas in order to incorporate aspects of this movement into today's feminism. Irigaray's focus on sexual difference has made her work a topic of much contention in queer theory, particularly in regards to the discussion of transgender, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people (often abbreviated as TIGNC). Many in this field have pointed out the cissexism of arguing for two unchangeable categories, "male" and "female," based solely on sex, and presenting these as essential facts of human existence (Johnston 618). This leaves no room for any sort of movement between, or simply existing between, the two categories, which does not seem to allow for an Irigarayan discussion of the TIGNC experience. Irigaray has also received criticism from queer theorists for prioritizing heterosexual couples in her work, as she finds that a couple who exists across this most crucial difference is the most "creative and mysterious" (Johnston 619).

Queer theorist Tim Johnston, however, argues that one must take into account that Irigaray's conception of heterosexuality does not match the current accepted societal definition, as a heterosexual relationship in a world where the two sexes are entirely equal would differ greatly from the heterosexual relationship as we currently understand it. Altering gender roles

would, by necessity, greatly alter relationships as well. He also argues for this as another reason that scholars should not consider Irigaray an essentialist, as her work does not glorify or advocate for the maintenance of gender roles as they currently stand; instead, she imagines an entirely new future, certain implications of which one cannot fully understand when reading her ideas in the context of the current dominant *homosexual* point of view (Johnston 622). Her explanation of the proposed phrase “I love to you,” which is also the title of one of her books, demonstrates this, as she says, “I love to you means I maintain a relation of indirection to you. I do not subjugate or consume you” (Irigaray, *I love to you* 109). She further elaborates, “The ‘to’ prevents the relation of transitivity, bereft of the other’s irreducibility or potential reciprocity” (Irigaray, *I love to you* 109). Irigaray outlines a concept of a new variety of relationship, where no one finds themselves in the role of the object, and the dynamic between the parties is equal in more ways than the current patriarchal structure could allow for, and ways that may even at first seem difficult to comprehend in readers’ own current sociocultural contexts; thus, she does not merely reduce people to their current gender roles, but instead theorizes entirely new ones, meaning that scholars can analyze and use her work today without having concerns over cissexism or heterosexism.

Reconciling Irigaray’s ideology with an acceptance of TIGNC identities proves a more difficult task. She argues that ontology (the philosophical study of being, existence or reality) is sexed, and finds that arguing for ontological multiplicity actually aligns with the logic of the one, or the *homosexuality* she wishes to overcome; she views it as this logic of the one, merely divided up into many individuals (Johnston 624). According to her belief, multiplicity cannot sufficiently challenge this dominant ideology: only acknowledging the two sexes and the differences between them will allow changes leading to a better experience for women and the

creation of the better future she envisions. Some have reconciled this by arguing that, because Irigaray conceptualizes sexual difference as the source of many other sociological differences, she could perhaps have also believed that other differences- including other types of sexual difference- would come after society had been restructured to emphasize sexual difference as she imagined; this would mean that restructuring society in this way would, at some point, improve the lives of TIGNC individuals as well. Upon close reading of Irigaray's work, however, this appears somewhat implausible, and most likely not the writer's intended meaning. In fact, she believes the concept of transgender or intersex identities simply constitutes one more way of ignoring or destroying sexual difference, saying this on the topic:

Some of our prosperous or naïve contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out this difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or 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, *This Sex Which Is Not One* 61-62)

Thus, rather than challenging the logic of the one, she finds that transgender and intersex identities form a part of the problem, and certainly do not fit into her vision of a sexual difference-based society, which has little room for the concept of personal identification. Grosz states that Irigaray does not believe it possible for an individual to truly be a member of a sex that they were not assigned at birth, regardless of that person's personal identification, surgical intervention, or other "altering" of the body (Johnston 626). This aligns with transphobic ideas that transgender individuals still "really" belong to the sex they were assigned at birth.

A definition of sex as a social construct has formed an important part of the mainstream U.S. feminist discussion on sex in more recent years. In Myra J. Hird's book *Sex, Gender, and Science*, she outlines the history of the concept of sex, demonstrating that, though many people assume that sex is merely a biological fact, the meaning of biological sex has in fact changed a

great deal over time. Prior to the eighteenth century, common belief held that men and women shared one morphological body, with male and female “seed” struggling for dominance in each person’s body. Thus, a person could fall anywhere on the single axis, with femininity at one extreme and masculinity at the other, depending on various physical and behavioral traits; in fact, there are various records in medical literature of people changing their sex during this time period (Hird 18-19). Concepts of sexual difference first gained strength in the field of botany, and scientists increasingly began to apply them to various types of beings as the field of biology emerged during the Enlightenment. Rather than one particular discovery overturning the long-held idea of sex as a single axis, this occurred as a series of shifts, particularly as anatomists began to- sometimes publicly- dissect the body and examine individual organs in ways that had not previously been possible or acceptable. Political shifts also accompanied these new approaches to examining biology, as the idea of “sexual difference” took hold and became a politically expedient way to explain why women must remain subservient even in the wake of the Enlightenment, with its focus on equality: women were simply, by nature, suited for differing things than men, now occupying an entirely different scale than men rather than falling somewhere along the same axis (Hird 22-23). Such ideas clearly took a strong hold on Western society and have shaped societal concepts of sex, gender, and relationships; feminists in recent years have called attention to the fact that this conception of sex is not “natural,” as many have assumed, but instead just as societally constructed as societal ideas of gender.

Irigaray does not necessarily provide a firm definition of each sex to explain what it means to be a woman or how an individual knows their own sex, but instead shifts away from a definition of women as “not-men” to a definition of women based entirely on sexual difference, without explaining what exactly sexual difference entails. This allows the discussion of sexual

difference to remain open-ended, leaving space for the interaction of constantly-changing social, biological, political, and other factors (Ugrina 53). However, this open-endedness might at first seem troubling for feminists who attempt to make use of French feminist ideology today: though Irigaray wrote of a theoretical future and did not wish for readers to interpret her work in terms of the current definitions of femininity and masculinity, the lack of a definition for sexual difference allows for interpretations that do align with contemporary gender roles, which could perhaps have contributed to the common accusations of French feminist essentialism (Johnston 628). On the other hand, when attempting to garner a definition of sex from these works, one must still take into account that the French feminists based their ideology entirely in construction. Given that they followed Derrida's theory that "there is no 'the' body," the French feminists fully acknowledged that language and sociohistorical context mediated everything, including the body. For this reason, it seems somewhat unusual for Irigaray to take the viewpoint that she does in regards to transgender and intersex issues: after all, if gender and the body are both constructions, then it would seem to logically follow that they would have a somewhat fluid nature that could potentially change. However, given the viewpoint presented in her own words above, this appears to be a sticking point for Irigaray, as she takes a rather rigid, not necessarily constructionist stance on the matter.

It therefore seems that neither society's current *homosexual* structure, nor Irigaray's version of sexual difference, allows for TIGNC experiences, even finding these identities complicit with monosexuality and sometimes denying the existence of such individuals (Johnston 628). Under this approach, such experiences and individuals exist only in the imagined improved future where perhaps reconstructing society around sexual difference could help to allow other differences, including other types of sexual difference, to flourish as well. This

particularly applies to and causes problems for those whose identities do not fit into the extant gender binary at all, as Irigaray's version of sexual difference hinges on and derives meaning from the two sexes remaining distinct. This belief proves a rather difficult obstacle to overcome in applying certain aspects of French feminist ideology to today's mainstream U.S. feminist movement. Some have argued that queer theory can only cooperate with feminism insofar as they both conceive sex, sexuality, and gender as separable but interrelated (Ugrina 58). Irigaray's views on transgender issues appear to link the body and her conceptualization of sex too closely with gender, not allowing for the identity of a person whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth, or those who fall entirely outside of the binary in terms of either gender or sexual characteristics.

Overall, I argue that certain aspects of Irigaray's work can, in fact, still prove useful for mainstream feminists today, as it is both possible and beneficial to interpret Irigaray's work in an anti-essentialist light. Thus, feminists can make use of certain aspects of her interesting ideas on the "sameness and othering" of women and sexual difference, among other things. However, her ideas on TIGNC individuals prove rather challenging to reconcile with today's mainstream feminism, and risk adoption by trans-exclusionary radical feminists in order to further exclusive, anti-transgender rhetoric that does not align with the ideal of equality or other goals of today's mainstream feminist movement. Because Irigaray does not acknowledge transgender identities as valid despite her belief that the body is in fact a construction, feminists seeking to use her ideas today should have an awareness of this issue in her work and acknowledge it when necessary, perhaps adapting the ideology in their own work to present a more inclusive viewpoint that better aligns with the feminism of today. However, today's academic feminist writers can and should still make use of many aspects of French feminism's unique approach to the field, as an anti-

essentialist interpretation can allow these works to remain relevant and valuable for today's feminism.

Conclusion

The question of how to define “woman” and address “women’s issues” has, of course, produced innumerable answers, all with their own vehement defenders. In the 1980s, the novel, psychoanalytically-based approach of the particular group of writers known as the French feminists caught the attention of certain scholars and spread quickly through American academia, as they attempted to carefully balance a definition of woman that would neither be too general, thus ahistorical and out of the proper sociopolitical context, nor too narrow to truly define “women.” Since then, the contributions of Luce Irigaray and the French feminist movement have proved highly contentious for several decades, and their ideas seem to have struck a chord among those fighting for women’s liberation. This group of writers made highly interesting use of linguistic feminism and the constructionism that grew increasingly popular in French philosophy during the time period in which they worked, drawing attention to the ways that language constructs reality, including the continued oppression of marginalized groups such as women. Irigaray’s quantitative experiments allowed her to demonstrate the bias inherent in French, her native language, as an example, and led her towards her imaginative conception of *écriture féminine* and a new, more equal variety of relationship between men and women, outside of society’s current patriarchal and *homosexual* structure. The French feminists emphasized a definition of women as women, attempting to create a definition based on an essence that could not be taken from women by patriarchal oppression. While this approach has attracted criticism and claims of essentialism, much like Irigaray’s anatomical references, these ideas can and should lead to an anti-essentialist rather than essentialist interpretation given the constructionist philosophical context of the work, which allows feminists today to continue using certain aspects of the work without concerns over accusations of essentialism, though they

should avoid espousing those of Irigaray's ideas which contradict the doctrine of constructionism and invalidate the identities of intersex, transgender, and non-gender-conforming individuals, not aligning with contemporary feminism's rather more inclusionary stance. In addition, much of French feminists' work centers around theory rather than activism, meaning that today's feminists could certainly do further work in applying those still-relevant aspects of this ideology to the practical issues of the contemporary world.

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