Neimanis, Astrida. "Posthuman Gestationality: Luce Irigaray and Water's Queer Repetitions." *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 65–108. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415.ch-003>>.

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Posthuman Gestationality: Luce Irigaray and Water's Queer Repetitions

So remember the liquid ground.

– (Irigaray 1991: 37)

Hydrological cycles

Our bodies are hydrophilic, through and through. This should hardly come as a surprise. It is almost too cliché to say these days that 60–90 per cent of our bodies is constituted of water, but perhaps it is the only reasonable place to start this chapter. About the same percentage of the earth's surface is wet and blue. Water infiltrates and inhabits the vapour we breathe, the land we work, the animal, vegetable, meteorological and other earth others with whom we share this planet. As embodied beings, we are, primarily, bodies of water in a watery world.

Yet our bodies of water are neither stagnant, nor separate, nor zipped up in some kind of impermeable sac of skin. These bodies are rather deeply imbricated in the intricate movements of water that create and sustain life on our planet. We all feel these movements viscerally, in the superabundance, acute paucity, or mere banality of the rain, sleet, and snow that dominate our weather reports; we have all learned of the cycles of transpiration, evaporation, and condensation to which these precipitous movements belong. However, while we might understand such traversals and transformations of water upon the Earth according to a high-school science classroom's version of 'the hydrological cycle', this water is in fact engaged in a multiplicity of complex and co-implicated cycles, about which more nuanced stories can be told. Within

that overarching hydrological cycle, water moves neither at a uniform speed nor as a coherent mass, but rather is differentiated, in space and in time, all the way down. When it rains, or snows, some water will soak into the ground, replenishing the surface soil for several months before rejoining the cycle; other water digs deeper – settling into subterranean aquifers for thousands of years. Some watery weathers will forego such percolation and infiltration altogether; some water evaporates almost immediately back into the skies. Other kinds of wet opt instead for a quick getaway, running along the Earth's surface towards rivers, lakes, and seas where they may finally take a breather, perhaps for a hundred years, or only several days. Frozen, some surface water becomes glacial, holding out against the warming creep of the thaw.

And still, all of these different watery routes do not account for the smaller yet immensely significant amounts of surface water that are absorbed by living beings. Biological water is in turn inaugurated into its own series of cycles – becoming plant breath, seed bath, muscle lubricant, protein folder, the fluid in your inner ear. While only comprising 0.0001 per cent of the earth's water, biological water is also the most restless, often moving on to new pathways and fresh bodies at breakneck speed (at least from a planetary perspective). Yet, these life-animating waters are perhaps what we humans know most intimately, if only ever ephemerally. These biological processes are in turn maintained by their own water relays. For us humans, this includes the collection and expulsion of maternal amniotic waters, the absorption and circulation of water within our gestating bodies, and the flow and flush of waters in the various bodily fluids that intercorporeally sustain our bodies – all of which are part of the biological and meteorological cycles of water that extracorporeally nourish our bodies.

These varied speeds and slownesses, multiple movements, and diverse incorporations of 'water' belie the difficulty of speaking of water in the abstract – as though it were one undifferentiated and amorphous thing, the same everywhere and all the time. But, undeniably, this is all *water*. *We are all bodies of water*. In fact, paying attention to hydrological cycles presents a rather queer notion: water is evidently both finite *and* inexhaustible; both the same and always becoming different, too. Our planet neither gains nor relinquishes the water it harbours, but only witnesses its continual reorganization, redistribution, and relocation. This means that the water that temporarily

comprises and sustains all of these bodies brings with it a history that is at least 3.9 billion years old and will continue far beyond the span of our own lifetimes, and the lifetimes of all those other bodies, too. So, just as our bodies find a thread of commonality and connection in and through this seemingly 'closed' system of water, we are constantly confronted by difference – the different rates, speeds, pathways, and bodily expressions that water takes on. This variability is then diffracted through vastly different ways in which water affects our (different) bodies, and how we, in turn, affect the waters with which we live. We could even say that water can only serve as a connector *because* it expresses or facilitates difference. Through the continued expression of watery difference, bodies proliferate and transform – always seeking out new expressions of watery embodiment. This 'closed' system is not really that closed after all.

In this chapter, I want to continue unpacking this seeming contradiction – that water is both exquisitely specific, yet also entirely mundane, and ubiquitous, and common. In doing so, I'm hoping we humans might better understand what it means to be implicated in this stuff. Water is not only something we take in or use (drinking, bathing, cooking), as our relation to water is usually considered when we think about the human right to water, or water justice more generally, but something we embody in a posthuman sense, too. I am interested in the swampy saturated ecologies that our bodies inescapably *are*; I want to think more about the sea inside, bodily tides, and human plumbing. How might both our difference and commonality as bodies of water help us cultivate more attentive relations to other bodies of water, both connected to and different from us – those bodies to whom we are indebted for our material existence, and to whom we pass on our own bodily matters, in turn? If we are implicated within these hydrological cycles, from where do we gather our own waters, and to what or whom do we bequeath them? With whom do we share them? My interest is in how these questions are not just matters of fact, but matters of concern – for politics, ethics, and living well with others. Negotiating an ethics of embodied difference is a resolutely feminist issue. The question that follows, however, is: how might we refract these feminist concerns through an ecological, and specifically hydrological, situatedness, too?

'Remember the liquid ground', writes Luce Irigaray (1991: 37), so the watery works of this French feminist philosopher seem a good place to begin. Irigaray

is well known for her explorations of sexuate difference¹ and the articulation of ethical relations that can be cultivated when we attend to such difference. In describing how these differences manifest, however, Irigaray simultaneously offers a phenomenology of elemental and material embodiment. I am thus curious about what Irigaray can offer to a theory of embodiment that begins with our watery constitution, particularly when the difference of bodies is a priority concern. In this chapter, I propose that we might think of Irigaray as a posthuman phenomenologist – that is, I suggest how her work on sexually different bodies might be parsed through a framework of posthuman phenomenology, providing a sort of posthuman or new materialist feminism *avant la lettre*. Her attention to materiality alongside an insistence on the becoming, unfolding and facilitative capacities of such matters reveals a fecund way of thinking embodiment that pays attention to both the material realities of fleshy bodies, while also refusing a biological or material essentialism. In doing so, Irigaray offers a helpful scaffold for elaborating the figuration of ‘bodies of water’ – my project in this book more generally.

In Luce Irigaray’s (1991) most watery text, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, she implores her (masculine) interlocutor not to forget the waters that made him possible. This provocation also includes an attentive description of the ways in which waters animate, connect, and facilitate watery bodies that are also different. Irigaray’s phenomenology thus suggests a specific ontology of bodies of water. Here, I refer to this onto-logic as an ‘amniotics’ – my way of naming the logics that entangle bodily waters in both commonality and difference. Water is articulated as always both ‘being’ and a process of ‘becoming’ – gathering water from certain bodies and flowing back into others in return. According to this onto-logic, water is also both body *and* milieu; water is what comprises bodies but also that which bathes bodies into being. Being and becoming are also proliferations of the different, and the new. To further elaborate these ideas, I also return in this chapter to the work of Gilles Deleuze, specifically his work on difference and repetition. Water, in its amniotic onto-logic, materializes this movement: it repeats, but always differently.

What emerges is an operative concept for my larger project in this book, namely, the idea of posthuman gestationality. Posthuman gestationality is a facilitative mode of being, *but one that is not necessarily tied to the female*

human. My insistence on the posthumanism of gestational waters also underscores my desire to read Irigaray beyond humanism – beyond the anthropocentrism that seems to spill at times from her pages. Moreover, athwart some of her more explicit proclamations on sexual difference and the binaristic and even heteronormative essentialism with which her work is sometimes associated, her posthuman phenomenological description of watery bodies also suggests a different kind of theory of sexual difference – one of desirous becoming that cannot be tied to a binaristic logic of two. From this desire flows my rather queer reading of Irigaray, perhaps against her own intention. Water seeps into Irigaray's work, stealthily making it strange.

Just as significantly, I wager that posthuman gestationality asks an ethical question of us, in all of our common wateriness: if we are all watery, then we all harbour the potential of watery gestationality within our corporeal selves. Again, this gestationality need not take the form of a human reprosexual womb: we may be gestational as lover, as neighbour, as accidental stranger. We learn gestationality from water; we repeat its potential in and as watery bodies, too. In the context of our world's pressing water crises, this lesson can encourage us to be more thoughtful, and more responsive, in terms of what we give back to water in all its forms, but in particular to those planetary water bodies that we (as always differentiated) currently exploit, pollute, and instrumentalize. How might we, in a partial dissolution of our own sovereign subjectivity, also become gestational for this gestational milieu?²

Elemental bodies: Irigaray as posthuman phenomenologist?

For Luce Irigaray – one of the twentieth century's key philosophers – water is paradoxically a 'liquid ground', both essential to life *and also* always shifting. Water is at once the originary condition of all possibility, but also its force of differentiation and wellspring of unknowability. Indeed, the multivalence of Irigaray's 'liquid ground' epitomizes the notable difficulty many commentators have had in coming to terms with her philosophy. Both poststructuralist and essentialist in her view of bodies, both retrograde and avant-garde in her theories of sexual difference, both celebrated for her embrace of ambiguity and dismissed for her contradictions – it is no wonder that many of us just

don't know what to do with her. At the same time, this difficulty is precisely what makes a reconsideration of her work compelling. New interests and emphases within feminist theory provide fresh ways in which to understand her writing, which makes this rereading more interesting still. Parsing her work through frameworks of posthuman embodiment, new materialisms, and feminist phenomenology not only provides the terms that help me make better sense of her project but also helps articulate 'bodies of water' as a figuration and ethical project more broadly.

Irigaray's contributions to a feminist thinking with matter arise most obviously in her attention to sexuate (*sexué*) difference and body-morphological phenomena – genital lips, mucous, womb and intrauterine space, breath, placenta, amniotic fluid, saliva – as potential sources for a rematerialized feminine subjectivity, and a revised understanding of the ontological more generally. Irigaray's insistence on sexuate difference as ontological (that is, as conditioning the possibility of existence, rather than just one variation of beings, among many) is strongly linked to a key concept in her work, which I refer to as the gestational.³ Irigaray most often presents gestationality in terms of the feminine-maternal. For Irigaray, understanding the foundational nature of sexuate difference means we must acknowledge the maternal as that which allows any other being to be. For Irigaray, maternity is a facilitative, gifting force that is not abstract, but located in and as material bodies of sexuate difference (as Braidotti [2002: 23] reminds us, the root of 'materialism' is 'mater'). Irigaray insists that if we ignore this gestational materiality, masculinist and phallogocentric ontologies of sovereign beings and subjects inevitably crumble; they would seemingly come from no place, indebted to no one. This reminder not only calls phallogocentric philosophy to task but also affirms the unacknowledged potential of the feminine. Irigaray contends that because of the phallogocentrism that has dominated philosophy and language since Plato and before, we have yet to experience sexual difference *as* difference; thus it is *yet to come*. Irigaray (1993c) presents intrauterine space as a place of fecundity that can empower and enable women to proliferate beyond the confines of their representation in phallogocentrism. Through attention to a necessarily material gestational maternal, Irigaray hopes that sexuate difference will be able to realize its difference as difference. Such difference, contends Irigaray (2002b: 171), is 'the condition of presence.' 'Sexual difference', states Irigaray

(1993a: 5), once we allow it to be *as* difference ‘would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date – at least in the West’.

Unsurprisingly, this focus on feminine morphology, and the maternal in particular, has raised more than a few feminist eyebrows through the years: isn’t this just another repetition of woman as womb – uncontainable and abjectly excessive (see Showalter 1981, de Lauretis 1987)? As Elizabeth Stephens (2014: 188) reminds us in her appraisal of Irigaray’s matters, ‘feminine materiality and biology are not simply or unproblematically a source of difference or resistance; they are also the rationale for women’s historical silencing and exclusion’. For this reason, any celebration of bodily matters needs to consider carefully the histories that it inadvertently repeats. Serious engagements with Irigaray’s work have mostly come to reject reading her attention to female bodily morphology as naive biological essentialism whereby women are defined by their anatomies,⁴ but this does not mean any kind of consensus about how best to conceptualize her project has been reached. Some have suggested, for example, that the use of female bodily morphology in Irigaray is instead a clever rhetorical strategy, that is, either synecdoche or catachresis that does not *really* equate woman with her anatomy (see Gallop 1988), or similarly, as a ‘strategic essentialism’ (see Whitford 1991; Braidotti 2003; Butler 1993) that offers a resymbolization of the female body, as a ‘tactical intervention’ (see Lorraine 1999: 93). These readings of Irigaray certainly do not deny that the materiality of feminine bodies matters, yet the mattering of that matter is still not fully accounted for. In calling attention to women’s material bodily difference as primarily rhetorical, strategic or tactical, it seems that these readings acknowledge the difference of feminine embodiment only reluctantly, for effect, without true commitment. Relegated to such a position, how can materiality be fully embraced as a teacher and a guide?

Another way of rejecting a biological reductionism in Irigaray has been to focus on her invocations of ‘woman to come’ and to read these through a Deleuzian framework of virtuality.⁵ Despite Irigaray’s rejection of Deleuzian thought, there is a strong resonance between her descriptions of feminine embodiment and Deleuze’s concept of the virtual.⁶ We recall that virtuality is not a wide open ‘anything goes’, but rather the cloud of indetermination that hovers around an actualized body (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 148; see chapter 1). For some commentators, this is the way in which Irigaray figures

‘woman.’⁷ For Irigaray, ‘woman’ means both woman as we know her and woman in her potentiality. Even as virtual, however, Irigaray’s woman is still connected to her fleshy matter, where that virtuality inheres in woman’s specific material embodiment. We see such an understanding of woman, for example, in Irigaray’s (1985b: 120) insistence that the question ‘what is a woman?’ cannot be answered, even if we can describe or map her current situation.

These Deleuzian inflections help shift our understanding of Irigaray’s project towards a more posthuman reading, but the real, lived matter of Irigaray’s bodies still requires an adequate account. Some suggest accounting for this materialization demands rethinking what we mean by essentialism. This is partly what Alison Stone (2003, 2006) is up to in her appraisal of Irigaray’s ‘realist essentialism’, while Helen Fielding (2000) and Gail Weiss (1999), each in her own way, suggests that essentialism, when read through the phenomenological experience of the body, posits a female body or morphology that is far from determinate, stable or reductively biologized; the open-ended becoming-ness of bodies, in other words, does not have to contradict their matter. Kirby (1997: 69–81) expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the dualistic treatment of material bodies in commentaries on Irigaray’s work, while Braidotti (2002) and Grosz (2004, 2005) both find in her writing a strong resonance with process ontologies of becoming, and a productive elaboration of sexuate difference as an engine for the material proliferation of life-in-the-plural. In a particularly prescient early commentary, Margrit Shildrick (1997) notes that a key element of Irigaray’s strategy is dismantling the nature/culture dichotomy ‘that positions the biological as static, ahistorical and determinate, and culture as representative of development and change’. Shildrick continues: ‘Against the convention, what her work stresses consistently is that culture also demands – indeed, depends on – constant repetition and sameness, while the biological is inherently interactive and dynamic’ (177). Many other commentaries have taken on and explored Irigaray’s notion of the ‘sensible transcendental’ to suggest that unlike other posthuman theories of immanence, Irigaray eschews abstraction and remains committed to lived experience (see Haynes 2012). And, as Rachel Jones (2011) comprehensively elaborates, the key to understanding the ways in which Irigaray’s matters are not just naive biologism lies in her insistence on the term ‘sexuate’ – a deliberate blurring of the binaries of mind/body and nature/culture. On Jones’s reading, ‘sexuate

difference... articulates both nature and culture, and the relations between them' (6). In short, the biological is also always semiotic – inscribed and inscripting.

I will return to pick up on the implications of many of these readings throughout this chapter. In the meantime, the point is that all of these readings reject matter in Irigaray as inert, or deterministic – yet nonetheless hold that it is 'real'. While themselves emerging from a variety of theoretical orientations, these conversations collectively offer a provocative way to think through Irigaray's bodies that doesn't sidestep the matter of its matter.⁸

Irigaray's writings predate feminist posthumanism or new materialisms as named theoretical orientations,⁹ yet the above readings of her work also anticipate these more recent feminist theoretical frames. They place Irigaray convincingly within the (multivalent and transversal) genealogies of posthuman and new materialist feminisms,¹⁰ which are emerging as another way of interpreting Irigaray's work within some new scholarship (see Stephens 2014; Parker 2015; Jones 2011, 2015). Making these connections reminds us of the thick temporal foldings of feminist thinking and acknowledges the debts that the proclaimed 'new-ness' of these theoretical orientations can sometimes paper over. Reading Irigaray through posthumanism and new materialism can thus potentially inflect a genealogy of posthumanism with an important feminist difference, but also give us helpful theoretical scaffolds for explaining Irigaray's relation to matter. Instead of falling back on dichotomous positions (essentialist *or* constructivist; biologically reductive *or* virtually to-come), we can read Irigaray's work as prefiguring matter as dynamic and facilitative, while still attentive to semiotic systems of power. The being and becoming of bodies in her work – lips that touch, placentas that welcome, breath that connects – could be understood in Barad's terms of matter's 'agential realism' or Bennett's 'vibrancy'. Matter, in other words, is engaged in both 'bringing new things into the world' and the 'reconfiguring of that world' (Barad 2007: 170); it is hardly the 'dead or thoroughly instrumentalized' (Bennett 2010: ix) stuff we might imagine it to be. (After all, it is Irigaray [1985b: 115] who first laments that 'certain properties of the 'vital' have been deadened into the 'constancy' required to give it form'.) Alongside the more recent work of Vicki Kirby (2013) and Elizabeth A. Wilson (2008), Irigaray posits embodied matters as problem-solving and responsive, where their engagement in a

body's becomings is never teleological or deterministic, but like the 'woman' Irigaray interpellates in her work, is always still 'to come'.

Again, this doesn't mean that matter (for Irigaray, or in the world at large) can do or be anything. Specific matters gather their own chemical, physical, and biological properties that limit the ways they can act in the world at a given time, or become as and with other kinds of bodies. Similarly, the cultural meaning of woman is not arbitrary; it tends towards certain engagements and unfoldings that are in part oriented by woman's specific embodied matters, such as the genital lips or the placenta. But crucially, this meaning is neither locked nor fixed. (A penis is not a vulva, but in a nice paraphrase of Spinoza, we still don't fully know what either can do. Moreover, as trans* embodiment demonstrates, nor is the link between woman and placenta, or even vulva, a foregone imperative, even if this connection is a *tendency* in our contemporary moment that meaningfully participates in securing a particular symbolic order.¹¹) This indeterminacy is not a problem for Irigaray, but precisely an engine for her theory of difference and differentiating becoming. It is precisely because of the open possibilities afforded by this specific biological matter (e.g. the placenta's gestation of life-in-the-plural; the erogenous flesh that enables woman to 'touch herself all the time' [Irigaray 1985b: 24]) that woman remains ultimately unknowable. In short, the matter of the body is not a static trap but an opportunity and a generative force.

Reading Irigaray's matters through a posthuman or new materialist ontological orientation begins to untangle some of the problematic ways in which her work has been received. On such a reading, matter and meaning can be understood as always entangled – emerging from a persistent mangle of ideas and material properties, both of which exert limits and neither of which can tell the whole story alone. Here, materiality is not essentialized, but as Irigaray (1985b: 51) herself insists, '*Matter ... [is] what always begins anew to nourish speculation, what functions as the resource of reflection*' but also as its 'waste' or 'discard'. Matter is what makes thinking possible, but is too often then quickly forgotten, or reduced to instrumentalized resource or finite facticity.

I wonder, though, if we can push our interpretation further still. What if we read Irigaray as practising a kind of *feminist posthuman phenomenology*? That is, what if we understand Irigaray as a posthuman phenomenologist, whose

theoretical and methodological orientations are not unlike the trajectories I describe in Chapter 1? To understand her, first, as phenomenologist is not a stretch: like Maurice Merleau-Ponty (whom I discuss in the previous chapter as a key precursor for posthuman phenomenology), Irigaray insists that our bodies are our best teachers in terms of finding the means for scraping away at this sediment. She tells us, for example, that ‘our body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it’ (Irigaray 1985b: 214). She insists that one ‘pay attention’ to oneself, ‘without letting convention, or habit, distract you’ (1985b: 206), and that this requires ‘a certain recourse ... to the phenomenological method’ (Irigaray 2000: 156). Moreover, it is ‘a cultivation of our sensory perceptions with a view to paying a greater respect to the world and to the other(s)’ that provides the methodological orientation for an ecological ethics and ethics of sexuate difference (Irigaray 2015: 102). As Alison Stone (2015: 117, 118) points out, Irigaray ‘returns to the world’ in a kind of ‘everyday realism’ (2015: 117, 118) – a key premise for an embodied phenomenology like Merleau-Ponty’s – and that this return demands our perception as specifically *bodily* beings. Stone, too, makes explicit the resonance between Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty and suggests that as phenomenological, their work depends upon an entanglement of perceiving bodies and contextual worlds, both dependent on one another: ‘To perceive things and the world’, explains Stone (2015: 119), ‘is to apprehend them through the sense that we have only as embodied beings, while, being embodied, we are inescapably located within the world.’

But if we are to take on board the above understandings of Irigaray’s matters as aligning with posthumanism, and if, as our own bodily waters suggest to us, we understand bodies in a posthuman vein, then any descriptions of them and by them should also strive to push beyond the borders of humanism. In other words, to accept Irigaray as phenomenologist also demands that we affirm a posthuman understanding of embodiment. And – as I hope will become clear – if Irigaray is a phenomenologist, then she makes the case for posthuman embodiment all the more strong: bodies are not only beings but intra-active becomings, and any essential qualities and boundaries that we might ascribe to them are always provisional and open to revision. Bodies will always exceed what they ‘are’, across time, space, and species.

My aim here is not to classify Irigaray 'once and for all', or to find the 'right' way to read her. Rather, I am interested in how considering her in these terms can both activate a different kind of phenomenology and also insist on a kind of posthumanism that is necessarily embodied, sensible, and lived. My parallel objective is of course to see if reading Irigaray in this way can also help us better imagine and understand our own posthuman embodiment as not only virtual, becoming, or materially intra-active in general; I also want to see what this can teach us about living as watery bodies in a watery world. Given that we humans are composed mostly of water, it seems imperative to ask how our theories of embodiment might foster (or hinder) care, concern, and responsibility towards the diverse planetary bodies of water that sustain us.

We'll get to all this. But first, we might slip into these questions by noting that Irigaray's phenomenologies are also elemental conversations – and thus already pushing beyond humanist understandings of embodiment. Irigaray's attention to matter is not limited to the human body; she is also explicitly interested in elemental phenomena – such as air and breath, the earth, fire, water, and the sea.¹² Irigaray not only provides deep descriptions of the way our bodies are in the world, but at the same time follows the rhizomes that travel between and through the phenomena she describes. Thus, she accounts for our bodily extensions into – and their indebtedness to – other bodies. As bodies of porosity, we are constantly interpermeating our surroundings. Irigaray's (1992: 39) is 'a body of air filled by palpitating blue', 'eating the sun' (43); a body 'animated throughout' and 'changed by a cloud' (99); a body that is an 'atmosphere of flesh' (24). In these ways, we can begin to see Irigaray's phenomenology as also an ecological and elemental one.

In some instances, these connections of our human bodies with other natural bodies do indeed seem metaphorical – that is, descriptions of the way that the sexuate difference of bodies is mirrored in (rather than contiguous with) the nature of weather, plants, and animals (see Stone 2003, 2006). Yet crucially, the language Irigaray deploys always remains connected to the materiality of the phenomena she describes. Take breathing, for example. When Irigaray (2002a: 80) suggests that woman engenders with her breath and shares her breath even before she shares the nourishment of her body, this is a true description of some women's bodily experience, even as Irigaray's prose opens to a broader metaphorical or metonymical significance.

As always more than metaphorical, we can trace in Irigaray's work a contiguity or continuity (rather than analogy) with the elemental. She writes that 'we are made up of these elements [air, water, fire, and earth] and we live them' (Irigaray 1993b: 57); she reminds us that the gift of breath comes not only from human bodies but from vegetable bodies as well (Irigaray 2002a: 51). As elemental bodies, human bodies drink the rain and feel the drought; the winds that bend tree branches strengthen and make supple our own swaying spines; the warmth of the sun encourages our growth, as it does algae on a pond's surface, or seeds germinating in the soil. In other words, we might more accurately say that Irigaray's attention to bodily matters is *also* an attunement to the matter of our elemental milieu.

Between Irigaray's attention to the elemental, on the one hand, and her concern for the distinctly feminine morphological body, on the other, a certain slippage emerges. The image of mucus, for example, can be mapped both according to a female morphology and a mechanics of elemental fluids, while the air that masculinist philosophy forgets is both an elemental milieu and the fuel of human lung-power. Her descriptions of fleshy human corporeality in terms of 'elemental passions' can be read as an extended material metaphor that is effective precisely because our physiological reality is intimately connected to a meteorological and geophysical one. To use posthuman feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo's (2010: 2) term, Irigaray's phenomenology of embodiment is thus fundamentally *transcorporeal*, where 'the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"'. By describing bodies in these terms, Irigaray's phenomenology becomes posthuman, as the bodies we live are porous and reciprocally indebted. Human embodiment is always more-than-human too: we are imbricated with elemental and environmental matters in relations of contiguity and belonging, rather than hierarchy.

Within a feminist posthumanism, however, transcorporeality is never 'merely' a matter of physical or chemical exchange. Gathering up feminist theoretical insights on embodiment across decades, we know that matter is never 'just' brute matter; when matters of the body overlap with and transit through a more expansive elemental milieu, this transcorporeality is also a semiotic and symbolic one. Meanings ebb and flow, gather and disperse. Matters organize along, align with and push against vectors of power and subjectification that are also embodied. Matters remain hybrid

mixtures of world and word. In short, this would mean that any posthuman phenomenology of embodiment that acknowledges the transit of matters between human and more-than-human bodies would also need to account for the flows of significance, too. We might ask: what kinds of ethics and politics, alliances and relationalities, are materialized in these transcorporeal tangles of embodiment? What might acknowledging these transits as a mode of living our elemental embodiment open or invite, in terms of our relationships to different kinds of bodies? And, if we already recognize that water is both common and intricately different, how does Irigaray help us parse these material meanings?

My suggestion is thus to turn to Irigaray's phenomenologies of watery embodiment more specifically to see what they might teach us about the logics of difference and connection – across materially but also socially, culturally and otherwise situated bodies. An ineradicable alterity that is also sustained and gestated by an aqueous commonality is, I propose, what rethinking Irigaray's bodies of water can help us to imagine.

Love letters to watery others: *Marine Lover* of *Friedrich Nietzsche*

A key element of Irigaray's descriptions of both the elemental and the bodily-morphological is the notion of fluidity. Arguably, fluidity is the clearest way in which Irigaray fuses her elemental philosophy and philosophy of sexual difference into a cogent theoretical position. Some commentators thus focus on the seeming dichotomy that Irigaray installs between the fluid feminine and the static, solidified masculine (see Caldwell 2002; Olkowski 2000). This attention is hardly surprising, as Irigaray's writings on fluidity certainly gesture in this direction. For example, in 'The Mechanics of Fluids,' Irigaray's (1985b: 112) focus is on the 'flowing' and 'fluctuating' woman, while in other texts, she accentuates the feminine who describes her body as 'fluid and ever mobile,' and 'secreting a flow' (1992: 25, 15). For Irigaray, feminine bodies are fluid, both figuratively in their non-subsumability into a masculine paradigm, and literally in their genital mucosity, their placental interchanges, and their amniotic flows. This leakiness is what makes woman always a woman-to-come. The feminine cannot be known as feminine (as sexuate difference) within a

phallogocentric logic because this logic is predicated on rigid and static forms, solid truth and knowable entities. Because the real properties of fluids cannot be accommodated within phallogocentrism, neither can the (virtual) reality of women and the feminine.

The 'fluid feminine' is not, however, a source to be uncritically celebrated. As Elizabeth Stephens (2014: 193) points out, for Irigaray, fluidity as an aspect of feminine biology is also 'the very category by which the exclusion of the feminine is effected'; that is, it is the same phallogocentric logic that labels women as unruly and uncontainable. Yet at the same time as the fluidity of the feminine keeps women outside of hegemonic ontology, this fluidity is also what we need to embrace, posits Irigaray, if we are going to move towards a future of sexuate difference that serves as a mutually loving and respectful source of fecundity, creativity, and support for both the masculine and the feminine. Moreover, while the fluid passing between the two sides (two lips) of the woman engenders her continual becoming, this passage of fluid between 'me' (feminine) and 'you' (masculine) is also crucial for the mutual sustenance of both¹³ sexes (1992: 15). The fluid can engender positive sexuate difference and hold the masculine and the feminine in a respectful relationship that evades comparison and subordination. Subsequently, if a fruitful and fecund relation of sexuate difference depends on fluidity, clearly the fluid must also have a distinct relation to the masculine. Sexuate difference according to Irigaray's own logic cannot be cultivated by women alone, because the very basis of this difference is a positive (rather than comparative or subordinating) relation between others.

This brief introduction to Irigaray's fluids highlights two key things: first, the material and the semiotic are always intimately imbricated; and second, the relationship between fluidity and sexuate difference is not ... cut and dry. The ways in which materiality works with, athwart, against and through meaning-making, are more complicated than saying we all just need to 'go with the flow'. Simply focusing on the relation between fluidity and the feminine is not enough; we also have the challenge of acknowledging both a feminine material fluidity and a masculine one, but also of accounting for the difference of a feminine fluidity without reifying the ways in which the fluid underwrites exclusion.

One way to begin parsing this complexity is to switch focus from fluidity to *water*. While these two ideas can easily be (and often are) elided, they are

not synonyms. For some critics, fluidity is a quality that encompasses the whole of Irigaray's oeuvre – a way of thinking elementality more generally, as a material-semiotic philosophical proposition (see Stone 2015). To think Irigaray with water, however, demands a more vigilant attention not only to the materiality of bodies, but to the ways in which these bodies comprise an elemental-environmental hydrocommons. In other words, I am more interested in water as materiality, than in fluid as a property. Water, as we know, is a shape-shifter – moving from solid to liquid and gas, and taking up residence in and as bodies of all kinds. Water is undoubtedly related to the fluid, but as the materialization of an abstract property, it allows us to think the mattering of this matter in more specific and situated ways – in terms of the bodies it animates, the operations it makes possible, and the limits it encounters. We can begin this exploration by diving into Irigaray's (1991) immemorial waters in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*.

Marine Lover is an 'amorous dialogue' between the textual avatars (presumably) of Irigaray and Nietzsche. In it, Irigaray illuminates how Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return betrays a fear and disavowal of the watery element to which his birth is nonetheless indebted. As a result, Nietzsche's eternal return will never be able to return difference *as* difference. On Irigaray's reading, Nietzsche tethers himself to a desiccated future of the self-same, where death and entropy are the only outcomes.¹⁴

Such are the themes as swim in this most aqueous text of desire and disavowal. But waters in this text flow multivalently, with various depths and registers. Perhaps most obviously, water is used in this text as a way of situating multiple 'feminines'. In *Marine Lover*, we encounter women as beings-in-the-present, but we also encounter a woman-in-the-future, whom we do not yet know and who is 'still to come'. In other words, the text describes both an actual woman – that is, the specular woman of Nietzsche's eternal return who is refused admittance into his 'economy' (Lorraine 1999: 66) – and a virtual woman – the woman demanding a different potentiality than the possibility offered to her by the eternal return of the self-same. Alongside these two feminines we also encounter some sense of a 'first woman', a maternal primordial feminine who engenders and gestates both the actual and the virtual. In Irigaray's original French text, of course, this connection is highlighted by the homonymic relation between 'mer' (sea) and 'mère' (mother). This multiple-woman is

then diffracted through the multiple ways in which the fluid, water, and the sea figure in *Marine Lover*, as these move between descriptions of waters that are feminine, waters in which the feminine lives, and womb-like waters both feminine and maternal. The feminine is the rapturous sea that moves about endlessly (Irigaray 1991: 13); she is the maternal waters out of which the Overman and the masculine are born, and whose depths they now fear (52, 67), yet she is also the fluid woman whom man uses, unacknowledged, for sustenance, and whom he attempts to solidify in his image. So, on the one hand, we see how Irigaray uses water to mark off the qualitative difference of the feminine – even in her own differing. While in man's world, 'it is always hot, dry and hard' (13), the feminine sea is multiple, flowing, gestating, and sustaining.¹⁵

Yet, on the other hand, while these waters seem mostly feminine, the masculine is aqueous too, even in his fearful forgetfulness. In these pages we glimpse how the masculine variously emerges from the water, is afraid of and repulsed by the water, depends physiologically upon water, and is returned to the water. While clearly the masculine comes from and is indebted to the forgotten sea/the fluid feminine, no clear moment of separation of the masculine from his immemorial waters, and no clear renunciation of his watery beginnings, is offered. The masculine returns to the sea too; as phallogocentric fisherman (48), as a drowning man engulfed by waters he cannot escape (66–67), as a swimmer-to-come once he stops resisting the current (37). The sea is both danger and saviour, a threat and a buoy. And to complicate the watery figuration further, the narrator describes the masculine as not only *in*, but *of* water, too. She acknowledges the saliva in his mouth that enables him to speak, even as it/she is forgotten once speech is underway (37), and asks, 'where have you drawn what flows out of you?' (38). In other words, while it is the sea to which the masculine must return for sustenance, this sustenance not only immerses him, but permeates him as well, an incorporated and intimate aspect of his bodily being. Even when he would prefer to 'freeze rather than flow' (33), the watery element is still a part of the masculine, despite its tendency to solidification.¹⁶

And how could it not be? As a phenomenologist, Irigaray describes our bodily waters as lived. The masculine, too, experiences embodiment as a composition of blood, bile, tears, saliva, perspiration, ejaculate, urine,

and breathy vapour. The masculine, too, flows with and interpermeates the elements.¹⁷ No matter what disavowal is enacted, water comprises and is required of all biological bodies. Water is necessary for maintaining our cell structure, for facilitating necessary chemical reactions in the body, for physically transporting nutrients and oxygen through the body, and for enabling waste elimination. We drink, we move, we urinate, salivate, ejaculate, perspire; intake, movement, output.¹⁸ Whether masculine or feminine, we are all in debt to this water, for it is only because of it that we move, we grow, we live, we have a body at all. Irigaray's descriptions subtly remind us of these material necessities.

As posthuman phenomenologist, Irigaray is also interested in the symbolic economies of these waters, and their latent potentiality. Similar to her remarks in 'Mechanics of Fluids', where Irigaray (1985b: 113) considers the fluid potentiality of sperm that has been coopted and reified in a logic of solids, in *Marine Lover* her descriptions of a frozen and solidified masculine implicitly ponder the masculine's fluidity-in-the-future: What might water mean for the ethical and political potentiality of the masculine, Irigaray leads us to wonder, if it were acknowledged and mobilized rather than disavowed and feared? In short, while Irigaray's references to the watery masculine in *Marine Lover* are not as prominent as the connection of the fluid to the feminine, and while we must, following Irigaray, always pay attention to the *difference* of feminine and masculine waters, it is clearly not only the feminine that is caught up in these watery currents. While what Irigaray's interlocutor thinks he fears is drowning, Irigaray reminds him – quietly, almost imperceptibly – that what he should really fear is thirst.

Such thirst, Irigaray moreover suggests, can only be slaked through a meeting of the sexually different. 'Between you and me, me and you', *Marine Lover's* narrator hence laments, 'you want me to make a dam' (Irigaray 1991: 56). This dam would halt the flow of water between the masculine and feminine, the flow that is vital, Irigaray suggests, both for the maintenance of sexuate difference in a respectful relation and also for the continued fecundity, development and growth of both. Sexuate difference needs to be facilitated, gestated by this watery transit. This alerts us to a third way in which *Marine Lover* mobilizes the aqueous: water is also productive of difference. Water, we could say, *gestates* difference. For Irigaray, not only are the masculine *and*

the feminine both of water, but water also comprises the watery gestational element that conditions these sexually different beings in the first place. This third aspect of watery embodiment – as productive of difference – is especially alive in Irigaray's descriptions of the sea. In *Marine Lover*, the sea engenders both the feminine and the masculine; out of the sea they both emerge.

Of course, this 'third' body of water – the gestational – is thus not exactly a 'third,' for it distinctly overlaps with the feminine fluid and comprises one of the manifestations of feminine waters which we encountered above. Might Irigaray be asking us to consider our bodies' watery origins as both maternal womb and watery element more generally?¹⁹ This connection is most helpfully explored through the way in which both the sea and the maternal womb are described by Irigaray as abyssal, unknowable depths, a bottom that 'has never been sounded' (60–61). Irigaray, for example, asks her interlocutor in *Marine Lover* whether his 'most dangerous beyond' is not in fact 'the unexplored reaches of the farthest ocean' (38). These unknowable depths are also 'that dark home where you began to be' (57).

While on the one hand this unknowability gestures towards the 'mystery' (40) or inability of a masculinist philosophy to contain or definitively represent the feminine, it also references the resistance of oceanic abyssal depths to full representation. Our watery beginnings – maternal or planetary – will never be fully or definitively revealed. As Irigaray writes elsewhere, we do not *see* our first beginnings in our maternal amniotic habitat,²⁰ and the moment at which this watery world passes from the realm of the concealed to the realm of the revealed for us will always be ambiguous. Even in an age of new digital imaging and obstetrical technologies, 'the origin' is always just a matter of telling the story one way, rather than another. All of our apparatuses of knowledge²¹ – our new technologies, but also our cultural or religious inheritances, our languages, our sensitive guts, and our delicate hearts – will select and enact separations between one body and the next, but the precise moment of passage remains obfuscated. And, like the maternal abyss, the sea is also a kind of mystery that can never be definitely captured by any apparatus of knowledge. The deepest reaches of the Pacific in their darkness, in their inaccessibility, are less known to us than the moon. Even recent footage of these depths gathered in bionic submersibles can only illuminate with their spotlights one small patch of this darkness at a time. What could stitching these moments together in some

ocular patchwork reveal? Again, nothing definitive; as the next moment is revealed, the previous one is already becoming different. Over 60 per cent of the earth is covered by ocean more than a mile deep, which makes it by far the largest habitat on earth; yet, what lies beneath the surface of our oceans remains largely unknown.

A material feminine womb thus reverberates in and with the unknowability of planetary waters more generally. In this unknowability, the potential for difference and the birth of difference lies latent. This, Irigaray tells us, is Nietzsche's oversight. Yet, to conclude our reading of *Marine Lover* here – with waters that are both feminine and gestational – might be too hasty. Doesn't this just retie a phenomenology of watery bodies to the feminine, and to a reprosexual feminine womb at that? Charges of biological essentialism seep slowly back in. What happened to the potential of masculine waters? What of the waters in-between? As I've already suggested, the slippage between the feminine maternal womb and the sea more generally might be about *more than the actual feminine-maternal*. To move beyond a biological or essentialist reductionism, however, requires a posthuman, transcorporeal reading of this relation.

In the first place, this means paying attention to how the gestational in *Marine Lover* is not simply overlaid upon the maternal-feminine as either perfect coincidence or convenient analogy. These maternal origins are rather *contiguous* with deeper and wider seas. If we were to trace a genealogy of our own gestation, it would have no definitive starting point, no clear beginning of beginnings. The waters that gestate one body have come from other bodies, gestated by earlier waters, gestated by waters that precede those. Aqueous origins are diffuse and multiple. As such, gestation cannot be reduced to a single instance in an actualized female womb. Although Irigaray makes clear in *Marine Lover* (and elsewhere) the undeniable relation between the maternal and the gestational, the sea is not simply a metaphor for the female mother or the womb; it has also provided the womb's very condition of possibility, and continues to leak into our human wombs, in various extended traces. This phenomenological realization is accounted for by environmental activist Sandra Steingraber, who muses about her own amniocentesis procedure: 'I drink water and it becomes blood plasma ... Before it is drinking water, amniotic fluid is the creeks and rivers that fill reservoirs ... The blood of cows

and chickens is in this tube. The nectar gathered by bees and hummingbirds is in this tube. Whatever is inside the hummingbird eggs is also inside my womb' (Steingraber quoted in Alaimo 2010: 104). These insights are implicit in Irigaray's own descriptions of our immemorial waters.

Moving beyond a naïve biologism also means more deeply considering the implications of the unknowability that Irigaray describes in relation to both maternal and planetary seas, and the difference these watery bodies gestate. Near the end of her love letter, Irigaray rhetorically asks, 'Where does difference begin? Where is it (elle)? Where am I? ... How can one master that dark place where you find birth? Where you begin to be' (67). With these questions (and tellingly, the last one is an affirmation rather than a query), Irigaray reminds us that difference begins in the sea: I (the feminine) begin in the sea; you (the masculine) begin in the sea; and difference/it (elle) also begins in the sea. Irigaray thus seems to be suggesting that while the gestational is feminine, the copula in this formulation does not invoke a reciprocal symmetry; the gestational is more (and perhaps less) than the many manifestations of the feminine that Irigaray describes. And this observation in turn brings us back to the flows of water between the feminine and masculine traced already above. Irigaray (1993a: 5, 1993b: 15, 2002b: 128) insists repeatedly that the fecundity of gestation is not limited simply to the moment of birth, but is rather an ongoing regeneration. This is why, as cited above, the narrator of *Marine Lover* laments the move to erect a dam between 'me' and 'you': the gestational, remember, is also a connecting flow between the sexes which ensures their mutual sustenance and proliferation.

Could it be, then, that through her descriptions of our bodies of water in *Marine Lover*, Irigaray queers the simple relations between the feminine and the fluid that are too easily extrapolated from her work? Irigaray invites us here to think more deeply about these bodies, their difference in relation to their interconnectedness, and their gestational capacities alongside the obfuscation of any definitive origin or starting point. We are furthermore invited to consider how water is the element that crucially underpins these relations: as we are created and gestate in an amniotic sac, nutrients are delivered to us by water that enables us to grow. Our waste is removed by similar waterways, and we are protected from external harm by our amniotic waters, waters that are not disembodied or neutral but are themselves in a body of water, a body that is

specifically a maternal one.²² How is our experience outside of our amniotic beginnings any different? Water continues to be our buffer, our vital conduit, our solvent, our gestational medium. The maternal waters in which we as bodies are created and nurtured are a part of the greater element of water which continues to sustain us, protect us, and nurture us, both intra- and intercorporeally, after we emerge from these wombs. We might understand this passage as one from a smaller womb to a larger one, or from one tiny sea to a greater one. Yet this is a passage of neither severance nor separation, but rather one of diffusion, evaporation, condensation, incorporation ... We are created in water, we gestate in water, we are born into an atmosphere of the same water although more diffuse, we take in water, we harbour it, it sustains and protects us, it leaves us ... at the same time as we are always, to some extent, in it. The passage from body of water to body of water (always *as* body of water) is never synecdochal or metaphoric; it is radically material. These complex and shared cyclings – body, to body, to body – comprise our planetary hydrocommons.

Gestationality is a watery key. We have used it to untie waters from a limited biological/symbolic feminine. My next proposal is that we can turn it further still, to unlock a reading of sexuate difference that is not only released from a heteronormative binaristic view of bodies, but which also opens to something generatively posthuman. Turning with this posthuman turn, however, requires first a stronger scaffold for elaborating water's queer logic of difference and repetition, and its connection to sexuate difference.

Gestationality as (sexuate) difference and repetition

For Irigaray, difference begins in the gestational watery elemental. But our bodies of water also tell us that this 'beginning' is already always part of overlapping and interconnected cycles of repetition: we know that water on the earth is finite. Except for perhaps some minute amounts of vapour that may enter our atmosphere from the cosmos, all the water that is here, on, in and hovering above our planet, has always been here. *Each watery singularity has been somewhere, sometime before.* Yet, while the water that moves through these cycles is always 'the same', it is by no means undifferentiated. What repeats is always difference.

That this suggestion of the difference and repetition of our bodies of water should emerge from a reading of Irigaray's love letter to Nietzsche is hardly surprising. *Marine Lover* expounds a critique of Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, whereby in his elision of the feminine, the masculine philosopher enacts a forgetting of where he comes from and his own conditions of possibility. As a result, all that can return is the self-same.²³ Irigaray instead calls us to remember our gestational waters – a gestationality that is enacted through a repetition of waters that engenders difference. We could say what she articulates is the repetition of difference.

However, read alongside Irigaray's philosophical commitments to the unknowability of the feminine body – that is, its perpetual yet-to-come – the entire notion that difference could *repeat* as anything other than 'itself' may seem jarring. Does not the very notion of unknowability suggest something that has never been before, something unfamiliar and surprising? And does not repetition suggest the return of the same? Certainly, this would be a commonplace understanding of repetition according to representational logic: repetition re-presents, re-capitulates, re-states. The same old story, over and over again. This is precisely the 're-turn' that Irigaray criticizes in Nietzsche. My proposal for thinking with this seeming impossibility is to return to Deleuze. I noted above that despite Irigaray's own rejection of a Deleuzian mode of thinking, the concept of Deleuzian virtuality is a helpful way to understand her figuration of woman, and for understanding the way that materiality can also gather latent possibility – even unknowability. Here, I suggest that Deleuze's own explicit challenge to the logic of representation in his theory of difference and repetition can also help us make sense of Irigaray's gestational waters.

In the first place it is worth noting that Deleuze's theory of difference and repetition is heavily indebted to his reading of Nietzsche's eternal return (see Deleuze 1994, 2002). According to Deleuze, the eternal return is a question of selection among differences. The eternal return is a dissolution of identity and representation and instead is the affirmation of difference. Freed from representational logic, the only thing that can truly return is the will to power, or the force of differentiation. Deleuze takes these primary ideas from Nietzsche. Building on them, he shows us how through distribution and temporal displacement, difference is all that could ever truly repeat.

Repetition produces a spatial and temporal force of differing-from-itself (e.g. Deleuze 1994: 220), whereby differentiation – that is, an internal, intensive force of differing – can emerge.²⁴ This leads directly to Deleuze's (1994: xiv, 28–29) challenge of our commonplace understanding of difference, which we normally posit in terms of an original that would provide the basis for what is (oppositionally, analogically, comparatively) different. Just as our common understanding of 'bare repetition' leads us to conceptualize repetition primarily in terms of the identical (or: what repeats is the 'same', only at a different time, perhaps in a different place), difference is only ever thought secondarily and negatively as a 'not-this'. Deleuze challenges us instead to think difference *in itself* by ungrounding the notion of the privileged model that would mediate difference. Through repetition, difference is selected and distributed, again, always differing from itself. Accordingly, there is nothing that unifies 'the different' except its repetition or force of *becoming* or capacity to produce (28, 41). For Deleuze, then, the eternal return is necessarily the eternal return of the different (41–42; 241–244).

In Deleuze's terms, the hydrological cycle we described as multiple in terms of its embodied strata (the maternal amniotic waters, the waters within the gestating body, the waters that intercorporeally sustain the body, the waters that extracorporeally nourish the body, and so on) might be understood as a 'system of simulacra'. Deleuze (1994: 278) describes such systems as constituent of series that communicate through their differences, and display linkages and internal resonances: 'none is either opposed or analogous to another. Each is constituted by differences, and communicates with the others through differences of differences'. Among these various series, because there is no original that enjoys a privilege over others (278), origin remains an open question, since 'the sole origin is difference' (125). In terms of water, then, these moments or expressions of water (what gestates us, what sustains us, what surrounds and connects us) all coexist. The movement of water holds the *was*, *is*, and *yet-to-come* together in its materiality. This means we can understand water as not only engendering difference (as the gestational 'was') but also as its expression (the gestated 'is') and its potential (the unknowable 'yet-to-come').

Because a differentiating movement is always at work, water's continually unfolding embodiments as expressions of water's 'eternal return' are hardly

instantiations of ‘the self-same’. Water takes up singular expressions: evaporation, condensation, precipitation, transpiration; the water I drink, the water that carries nutrients to my foetal body, the water that cushions my body as I bump into a chair, the water that protects the body within my body (which in itself is its own singular body of water); the water we excrete and expel, and which returns, always differing, becoming different, to other strata – ebbing, dripping, raining, flushing. As mentioned, our planet produces no water in addition to that which was always already here, yet it is not in spite of, but rather because of, water’s closed system that the difference of water continues to generate itself, to differenc/tiate itself. At the same time, however, it is only the *actuality* of water that is a ‘closed system’. Because of water’s latent virtual dimension, the potentiality of water’s expressions can never be fully known; because water is always becoming (drawing on its latent virtual potential), it is always seeking out differentiation. As much as it may repeat the morphological blueprint, genomic pattern, or chemical structure of its ‘parent’, every gestated body of water is a unique iteration. This difference implies the radical unknowability of the ‘not yet’. In this sense, water is always an ‘open system’ as well.²⁵ And let there be no mistake about this differentiation: our own lived experiences as human and more-than-human bodies remind us at every turn how my womb is different, how your tears are different, how the Pacific ocean, the mud on my shoes, the drops of fog that are collected by nets in the mountains of Chile to quench the thirst of bodies on her arid coastal plains – how all these waters are different. Even, or especially, as they repeat.

Despite their different appraisals of Nietzsche’s eternal return, both Deleuze’s and Irigaray’s accounts of difference and repetition resonate in their rejection of representational logic and insistence on the creative force of repetition to produce something different – something yet to come and never fully knowable in advance. Yet, what Deleuze’s theory at first glance seems to leave out is sexuate difference. Irigaray, however, figures this difference in relation to our bodies of water in three possible ways. To recap what we found in *Marine Lover*, sexuate difference might, first of all, manifest in the actualization of water bodies. For example, semen is not female mucus – neither in semiotic nor in physiological terms. Whereas feminine waters tend to flow and connect, masculine waters tend to freeze, harden, and evaporate. These qualities and processes, she argues, certainly link the sedimentation of

phallogocentrism to the necessary disavowal of the feminine discussed above, but they are also grounded in materiality. As Irigaray describes, feminine genital mucous remains fluid in its continuous passage between her two lips; meanwhile masculine semen, if not passed on to another living body, becomes sticky until hard.

Feminine waters highlighted by Irigaray also include cyclical menstruation and amniotic waters. These point to the second possible way in which waters are for Irigaray sexually different, namely, in the maternal gestational waters of the feminine. As humans, our very becoming relies on water, but significantly, one specific singularization, one specific moment of water is needed for this: we require a watery gestational medium of the feminine-maternal that is not possible without sexual difference. Despite all of our new reproductive technologies, the elaboration of human life still requires a certain feminine water, a certain gestational medium.²⁶ As Irigaray reminds us, only because of sexual difference can our hydrological cycles of difference and repetition, at least in the human realm, continue.

A pause is called for here, before moving on to sexuate difference's third aspect. As various commentators have argued, Irigaray's work, particularly in its more recent articulations, can be understood as espousing a certain heterosexism and deepened reification of binaristic gender and sexuality. As she herself claims, an ethical relation of immanence calls for a triple dialectic: 'One for the male subject, one for the female subject, and one for their relationship as a couple or in a community' (Irigaray 1994: 39). Or: 'the most fundamental locus of irreducibility is between a man and a woman' (Irigaray 1996: 139).²⁷ Not only does this entrenchment provide little consideration of bodies that do not align simply with either of the gendered sexual poles that Irigaray presents, but Irigaray's position also treads upon dubious ground in concomitantly arguing for the primacy of sexual difference amongst other expressions of difference. In Irigaray's (2002a: 98) words, sexuate difference is 'insurmountable', and 'unsurpassable': again, 'the most universal and irreducible difference... is the one that exists between the genders'.²⁸ Given these important criticisms, how are we to understand the first two ways in which sexual difference might play out in relation to the difference and repetition of our bodies of water, outlined above? In highlighting how the feminine *differs from* the masculine fluid, and how one actualization of the feminine fluid – the maternal – requires

specific attention, do not these two proposals also enact an entrenchment of sexual difference as binaristic, materially reified and comparative – thus propping up precisely the kind of dualistic thinking we’re hoping water can help us dissolve? Even though, according to Irigaray, feminine waters hold a virtuality in respect to themselves (that is, they include a dimension of the ‘yet-to-come’), the virtuality of masculine waters still requires affirmation within a theory of sexuate difference. But even more significantly, the virtuality of *sexuate difference itself* would appear on this understanding to have no place at all. Put simply, *sexuate difference itself*, in respect to the relation between the sexes, seems to be for Irigaray an actualized, sedimented relation through-and-through – a relation between the a priori poles of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

I’m not hinting that a comparative difference of feminine and masculine has no political value. As Braidotti (2002) quite rightly points out, these kinds of differences still matter in our current social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, so to disembody any theory of sexual difference from such considerations (including the everyday misogynies and gender-based violences as which they can manifest) is absurd.²⁹ Moreover, in these same contexts where the labours of maternal bodies are still undervalued and denigrated, where these bodies are still and increasingly subject to marginalization and technologized colonialism, and where they still enact a profound material connection between a present life and a becoming life in an (as of yet) non-substitutable way, there is still reason to attend to the specificity of maternal bodies within a broader ethics of responsivity to other kinds of life.³⁰ In other words, I am unwilling to enact yet another effacement of the maternal, even if – as will become clear – I don’t want to hold it up as the essentialized model of gestationality.

Still, while these two initial proposals of how sexuate difference might proliferate and repeat through Irigaray’s bodies of water can be illuminating and are politically vital, these proposals are coming up against a critical limit, in the possible solidification of *sexuate difference itself*. So, unless we want to expunge questions of sexuate difference from a discussion of the political and ethical potential of all bodies of water, then we need *more* than a comparative analysis of the sexuate difference of bodies of water that holds the masculine and feminine infinitely apart. Our task: How might we think about the sexuate difference of our bodies of water beyond the dichotomous chasm that Irigaray’s descriptions seem to suggest?

Again, I propose that the germ of such a way of thinking can be found in Irigaray's own posthuman phenomenological descriptions, even if some of her own pronouncements on sexual difference (particularly in her later work) seem to contravene this notion. Reading Irigaray alongside Deleuze, once more, can help not only acknowledge a theory of sexuate difference within watery embodiment, but in fact offer one that is decidedly posthuman, on a number of levels.³¹ We can start by looking more closely at the idea of sexual reproduction. This will lead us to a third way in which difference can be configured as sexuate – thus both affirming Irigaray's insistence on sexuate difference and amplifying how this aspect is also nascent in Deleuze.

The feminine-maternal is required for the gestation of difference for the simple reason that as humans, in a biological sense we reproduce sexually. Our early experiences of gestation are within feminine-maternal waters, as Irigaray repeatedly describes. Sexual reproduction, it would therefore seem, is the repetition that engenders difference. But does sexual reproduction demand sexuate dualism? What if sexual reproduction were more inclusively thought of as the meeting of at least two bodies of difference in order to proliferate further life?³² What if such reproduction were thought as gestationality – as the giving over of one's own materiality for this proliferation of further life, different to one's own?

Despite my suggestion that Deleuze's theory of difference and repetition eludes these questions, a closer look at his ideas on sexed reproduction provides some interesting possibilities along this line. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994a) links his conception of sexed reproduction to an explanation of embryology. On Deleuze's explication, the embryonic egg or larva is not a less-differentiated blob that becomes increasingly more differentiated as it progresses, but rather the egg is the virtual subject; the egg holds all the potential only a fraction of which will ever be actualized in the subject: 'Every embryo is a chimera, capable or functioning as a sketch and of living that which is unliveable for the adult of every species' (250); 'there are systematic vital movements, torsions and drifts, that only the embryo can sustain' (118). In other words, the virtual precedes the actual, and the virtual is always in excess of the actual, despite being materially tied to it. Because the egg is already part of the interpermeating cycles of difference and repetition, this egg is already differentiated. But – and this is the key point – as egg, sexual

difference is at the threshold of the virtual. More accurately then, it is *both* differentiated (as an egg, as a body) *and also* still becoming differentiated – the source of latent potential and virtuality. The egg expresses a kind of material virtuality, condensed and intensified, within/as the actual. This is not the same as saying that the feminine is virtual, as is the masculine. Instead, it suggests that *sexual difference is itself virtual*. Sexuate difference, in this respect, is not only an accomplishment (as it can be, in the case of actualized, sexually different bodies), but perhaps more importantly is also *an always-yet-to-come*. To think *sexuate difference itself* as virtual does not tie us to sexual duality and dimorphism, but nor (crucially) does it efface sexual difference altogether. Sexuate difference is rather in excess of this actualized dimorphism (currently) required for sexual reproduction. We do not (and should not, as Braidotti reminds us) do away with sexual difference, but we should be wary of pinning down too precisely what it is, what potential it holds, what it means.

Could Irigaray's phenomenology accommodate this proposal towards which Deleuze gestures? Again, this possibility returns us to an expanded understanding of gestationality. Although Irigaray's later work does indeed seem to argue for the primacy of this sexual dimorphism, we recall that her descriptions of the watery gestational in *Marine Lover* nonetheless invite us to consider sexuate difference itself as more than reproduction by sexually dimorphic bodies. Her descriptions of the (explicitly material) watery flow *between* the sexes, we recall, suggest a kind of material virtuality not unlike Deleuze's egg. Irigaray's proposition is, however, a better expression of the lived *transcorporeality* that such gestation demands. While Deleuze's description of the egg, or the larval subject, provides the opening to rethinking sexual difference and gestation as virtual, it is Irigaray who insists most adamantly that gestationality is a co-creation between at least two. Deleuze, after all, bases his theory on the image of a rather lonely and singular egg. Feminist philosopher Tamsin Lorraine (1999), too, has noted this nuanced difference: while 'Deleuze's images of a line of flight and the highly populated desert are oddly solipsistic', she argues, Irigaray, on the other hand, insists on incorporating 'the participatory communion of mutually constitutive creativity'; Irigaray's version 'attends to how her line of flight implicates and forms a web with the lines of flight of others' in an act of co-gestation (163–164).³³ Irigaray (1991: 38), in other words, foregrounds the necessity of *co-creation* in repetition and difference;

her concern is with the flow between others of (sexuate) difference: 'Where have you drawn what flows out of you?', she asks. Irigaray's careful attention to what both facilitates and thwarts relationality between two not only makes this mutual imbrication clear; it also foregrounds gestationality *as a becoming between bodies*, or in excess of actualized bodies, as an ineluctable condition of the proliferation of difference.³⁴

Irigaray, admittedly, still seems to insist that this force of becoming happens between the specifically masculine and the specifically feminine, but this insistence has no option but to begin to dissolve, if we are to take seriously her phenomenological proposition that gestationality extends beyond the human reprosexual womb.³⁵ Moreover, if 'woman' (and thus 'man') are still to come, then we must admit the possibility of sexuate difference composing itself in ever new ways – indeed, this is a future of sexuate difference that is already clearly in the making, and one that Irigaray's thought must accommodate in order for it to retain value as an ethics of sexual difference. In other words, I find it exciting to swim with Irigaray beyond the bounds of where she may have intended I stop. Gestationality as difference and repetition is also clearly about sexuate difference, but this difference holds no guarantees for what, where, how, or when this difference might become. Sexuate difference, too, remains an open question.³⁶ Reading Irigaray attentively, we discover that thinking through the maternal-feminine is necessary in our current social, cultural, and political epoch, but there is nonetheless still a watery space for a deeper and less determinate understanding of gestationality. In fact, if we wish to extend Irigaray beyond humanism, such an understanding is vital. We'll return to consider how this expanded view of sexuate difference as gestationality has implications for a posthuman ecological ethics at the end of the chapter.

The onto-logic of amniotics (queering water's repetitions)

We could also tell the story this way: water connects bodies – across times and spaces, through various complex movements and cycles to other bodies and beings in diverse exchanges, gifts, thefts, and forsakings. We could think of this work of water as flow, or more specifically, as a logic of connection or

communication. Drawing on posthuman feminist theories of embodiment, as I described in Chapter 1, this is the movement most closely associated with transcorporeality, to use Stacy Alaimo's term, where transit occurs as and by means of fluidity. While a dominant post-Enlightenment Western epistemological ocularcentrism suggests that bodies are (and should be) separate and discrete, water is in fact digging stealth channels through us all. This connection may be immediate and direct, or delayed and removed, but it nonetheless reveals itself as a thread of interpermeation and commonality that facilitates the possibility of something like an *embodied hydrocommons*. But this word – interpermeation – already alerts us to the idea that connection is not just about the pathways that might join up separate nodes in network. Through interpermeation, all bodies are changed. Water, as we've noted, also facilitates the becoming of bodies; it literally bathes them into being. A transcorporeal interpermeation is not only a transit across bodies in space; it is also a transcorporeal gestationality across times. Water not only flows between, and connects bodies; it also facilitates new kinds of bodies. And in this engendering of new watery bodies, water becomes difference. In other words, instead of simply 'flowing', water suggests a more complex logic of interpermeation, gestationality, and differentiation.

Significantly, these interpermeations and differentiations also affirm that water, while proposing an elementality in common for all bodies of water, is not some amorphous matter. Just as bodies need water, water needs a body – it needs to take up expression as bodies of water that are specifically situated, even in all of their porous transits. This suggests that water must also embody a kind of membrane logic. One way we could think about this membrane logic is as something I'm proposing to call amniotics. An amnion is the innermost membrane that encloses the embryo of a mammal, bird, or reptile (animals otherwise known as amniotes), and it contains the amniotic fluid that surrounds the gestating foetuses of these amniotes. In other words, the amnion facilitates the watery world necessary for the gestation of all life for those creatures who have left that water in favour of a terrestrial habitat (even if, in the case of some of these beings, like whales, they have since returned to the sea – a journey I examine more closely in the next chapter). The amnion literally establishes the watery environment, the fluid gestational habitat, necessary for the proliferation of life. But it also establishes a separation between one

body and its gestating other. This is not a definitive separation; the amnion is a membrane that facilitates and in fact demands the interpermeation and passage of life-proliferating matter and force.

In one sense, these are the facts that comprise the stories of biology. The importance of water for the gestation, maintenance, and proliferation of bodily life is hardly news to anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the life sciences. But water's biological workings also reverberate in an important philosophical proposition – in an *onto-logic* – that helps us rethink dominant Western ontologies that privilege a static and separated way of bodily being. An onto-logic is a common way of being that is expressed across a difference of beings.³⁷ As opposed to the way in which 'ontology' might be traditionally understood, an onto-logic does not propose to solve the question of 'Being,' nor does it purport to reveal or describe all of being's facets or potential expressions. An onto-logic can rather gather or highlight something that helps us understand a common *how, where, when, and thanks to whom* that certain seemingly disparate beings share.

Western metaphysics has long disavowed its debt to what allows being to be in the first place (the maternal, the feminine, the other, the natural). Feminists and other philosophers in the margins of canonized Western philosophy have proposed various reconceptualizations of ontology to account for this disappearing act – sometimes circumscribing 'the ontological' as specifically phallogocentric (or otherwise hegemonic), and bringing to light what is cast beyond such understandings of being. Calling philosophy to task for this 'forgetting' is Irigaray's project in *Marine Lover* and other texts, too. Her insistence that woman is yet-to-come since she has never yet been allowed 'to be' on her own terms seems to suggest that woman (as we do not yet know her) lies beyond the bounds of ontology. But another way of reading Irigaray's relation to ontology is possible, whereby rather than pointing out the limits of what can be gathered by a phallogocentric conception of 'the ontological,' the category is instead exploded. This is how we might understand her descriptions of watery embodiment. In describing watery bodies for us in terms of what I'm calling an onto-logic of amniotics, Irigaray also intimates that the ontological might be widened, and significantly rethought.

The onto-logic of amniotics does not suggest that all bodies of water are the same in terms of their being, but rather that bodies of water share a *way*

of being because they are bodies of water. The amnion materializes a mode of relational being that is certainly transcorporeal – transiting across and between bodies – but a kind of transit that also nurtures and facilitates other bodies, while also differentiating them. Amniotics thus articulates three modes of watery embodiment, in a common logic: first, bodies of water as facilitative and gestational; second, bodies of water as differentiating, as well as the material accomplishment of this differentiation; and third, bodies of water as necessarily interconnecting and interpermeating, all at the same time. Amniotics asserts an aqueous logic that is at once *of*, *in*, and *between*, while at the same time requiring a force of *becoming*. My wager is therefore that water, as simultaneously that which gestates beings, that which is gestated as difference, and that which interpermeates and connects beings, might teach us something about an expanded understanding of the ontological.

Water, in all of its repetitions – in fact because of its compulsion to repeat – is in the first place facilitative and gestational. Each moment of water will inevitably give itself over to the elaboration of something different, something new. As we've already explored, this is linked to the exuberant idea of sexuate difference described above, where sexuate difference is a general facilitative capacity engendered by the meeting of different bodies, in the production of the 'not yet'. Such a reading of gestationality is owed, primarily to the fact that we all begin as bodies *in* water. Like the amniotic environment, water instantiates a milieu for the gestation of life – a life whose originary becomings float in a never-pin-pointable thick past of gathering materiality-duration. This illuminates the first important step towards an explosion of the ontological: significantly, the ontological comes to include not only 'what is', but *the condition of possibility of that becoming being in the first place*.

At the same time, according to these particular amniotics, what is ontological is always becoming different. The second key dimension of an amniotic logic is differentiation. Every repetition enacts difference. Because, as Deleuze describes, the egg/larva gestates in but also comprises a watery element, it can undergo torsions and movements and express a virtuality that only the embryonic or larval subject could withstand. This virtuality is then actualized as necessarily different: there is no pre-programming, but rather a selection of difference from the virtual. As a result what is gestated is not

a reproduction or an eternal return of the self-same, but always necessarily different because of this selection. Again, we can find here resonances with contemporary posthuman explorations of matter and difference. In Karen Barad's (2007: 176–177) terms, differentiation can be thought in terms of 'agential separability'; in matter's ongoing intra-actions, cuts between bodies are continually enacted.³⁸ These cuts produce bodies of difference, not 'once and for all', but always contingently and changeably so. Similarly, in Irigaray's phenomenology, difference isn't something that 'is', but rather something that is gestated – here, beginning in these immemorial waters. And this differentiating moment further differentiates and repeats.

Anticipating Barad's concept of agential separability, Irigaray's figuring of waters that make a difference also suggests that there is always a membrane that separates the gestational body from the body it proliferates ('between me and you ...'). This membrane is not a divisive barrier, but an interval of passage: solid enough to differentiate, but permeable enough to facilitate exchange. Importantly, although science may make a cut that identifies the amnion in a specific time and place, Irigaray has already described (and we have recalled above) how the separation between the amniotic and maternal body is always obscure. The membrane is not divisive, but nor is it decisive. This brings us back to the idea of communication, or the flow between bodies. Alongside difference, then, is the third aspect of an amniotic onto-logic, namely interpermeation. Because of the repetition of water, even the singular and differentiated expressions it gestates are nonetheless connected to one another by way of their materiality. Here, an onto-logic of amniotics makes a contribution to other feminist theories of relational bodies, as well as broader cultural theories of networked and distributed bodies. In biological terms, the amnion (which as living matter is *itself a body of water*) is a permeable and regulating membrane. Water flows from one body to another in various passages of exchange and distribution. Importantly, in an amniotic relation, the membrane that separates the gestational body from the proliferating body of repetition and difference allows passage, and serves to connect. Moreover, the water that one body gives up through gestation and facilitation of another watery being is never directly or symmetrically returned. Such debt is only repaid through the diffuse cyclings of differentiating waters. The very

asymmetry of these relations is what accounts for the necessary difference between bodies, and the active proliferation of life that accompanies their relation. As such, gestation is always part of an asymmetrical relation of giving that therefore sustains difference at the same time as it participates in material interpermeation.

Our bodies of water thus ask us to consider how the ontological expresses a multiplicity of being that extends into and through other beings in an intricate and intimate entanglement of relationality – that is, an elemental and multispecies hydrocommons of water –, while never collapsing this interconnectedness into an undifferentiated mass. The onto-logic of amniotics which we can read out of Irigaray reveals a body that rejects discrete individualism, but whose difference is never washed away. This is a crucial point; a proposal of passage and an elemental commonality of bodies alongside differences that are enacted (rather than simply ‘existing’) does not have to negate Irigaray’s claims of ontological difference as the necessary *ground* of embodiment. To say that difference becomes is not the same as saying that there is something – a neutral, undifferentiated body, say – that precedes difference. Difference has always been underway. Membrane logic, or the onto-logic of amniotics, is originary. As such, sharing a common elementality across difference is also an ‘always already’. *Remember the liquid ground* – a precondition that cannot be pinned down.

And again, while Irigaray insists on sexuate difference, we have already been pushed to imagine difference in itself as always holding a latent fecundity that I’ve described as a kind of sexuate difference as *differentiating*. I call this gestationality. But importantly, this fecundity is *called out only in our interpermeation with watery others* – an interpermeation that also generates difference. While difference may be Irigaray’s primary concern, in highlighting interpermeation as a necessary part of this onto-logic we also temper her claims about irreducible difference. We must come to understand bodies of difference *as also* bodies that flow into and through one another. In a posthuman feminist move, this is a logic of the ‘both/and’ rather than the ‘either/or’. On an amniotic understanding, this interpermeation of bodies and their necessary difference is no longer a contradiction. *Water both connects us and makes us different. As water we are connected, we are different.* Our difference is not undermined

but in fact engendered by the water that we also always carry with us, that we relinquish, share, exchange, gift, and receive.

Amniotics does not solve the question of being, or claim what being is, definitively. Amniotics can rather highlight something that helps us understand a common *how, where, when, and thanks to whom* that certain seemingly disparate beings share. My aim in elaborating this onto-logic is, in the first place, to show how human bodies share a common way of being in the world with all kinds of other bodies of water. The point is not just that ‘we are all 60–90 per cent water’; the brute materiality is not the real take-away here. More importantly, as bodies of water we share a common way of relating to other bodies – and this means that our beings and becomings are bound up in one another’s materiality, in specific ways. My second aim (particularly in calling this an onto-logic) is to follow Irigaray in exploding certain understandings of ‘the ontological’. What does it mean to say that the ontological is not just ‘what is’ but what allows another being to be, and that which connects beings to one another?

Let’s review how this rethinking of the ontological happens in my reading of Irigaray. First, as many commentators have made clear, the ‘interval’ is a key concept in her work and allows us to acknowledge the importance of difference in the maintenance of ethical relations between bodies. Bodies depend, in fact, on the difference of others. In her posthuman phenomenology, this interval is ontological. In other words, being and becoming do not exist in hierarchy. The interval is not subordinate to the bodies it articulates; and interpermeation, as a key aspect of amniotics, is not subservient to the bodies that interpermeate. What *Marine Lover* makes clear, however, is that this interval is not ‘just’ an idea, but is always materialized. The interval *is* the water that flows between ‘you’ and ‘me’. The membrane, we recall, *is* also water – enacting a cascade of watery nesting dolls, all the way down. Hence, water blurs the discrete compartmentalization of ‘entity’ and ‘relationality’. This stages a significant challenge to dominant Western understandings of ontological subjects as sovereign entities in their own right. While we may live as bodies in a relatively discrete way, we also live as bodies that are always gathering and dispersing our embodiment within currents of relation. This is not just an ‘idea’ that Irigaray suggests; it is gestated within the bodies she describes, with phenomenological attentiveness.

This dissolution of the ontological subject as whole or discrete is intensified further when we overlay the materiality of interpermeation with gestationality and difference. We recall that Irigaray figures gestational waters as some kind of 'first' waters. On this understanding, the gestational element may seem primordial because it precedes that to which it gives life. But – and this point is crucial – the gestational element is woven into the puddle of life that is gestated. As bodies of water, we carry our gestational element with us, always, beyond the gestational habitat and return it there in a series of differentiating manoeuvres. While we are 'of' water, in the gestational sense (i.e. we emerge from it), we are also always 'of' water, in the material, constitutive sense (i.e. we are comprised of it). Water can thus illuminate a way of being that is, on the one hand, derived from the disavowed gestational element that allows it to be in the first place. Yet, on the other hand, this onto-logic requires that the gestational medium persevere as constitutive of these same material beings.

Irigaray illuminates this, for example, in her description of life as 'already happening' in the gestational element. Her descriptions remind us that the liquid element is not outside of 'what is' (i.e. the real), but carried and choreographed by it, composed of it, at every instance. Her descriptions of the watery gestational sea reveal a distinctly material gestational element, despite the fact that this 'origin' is at the same time always obscured and never fully knowable. As Irigaray (1991: 61) notes, 'before coming into the light, life is already living. It is germinating long before it responds to your sun's rays.' Life is already always happening in water; what conditions us is itself always already shot through by the materiality of a lively, material real. Water here is a doubly articulated 'life force', for not only does it 'force' (gestate or engender) 'life', but it is also a 'force' that *is teeming with* 'life'. This seeming 'preontological' is one that endures, one that always, necessarily inhabits us: if we can talk about a primordial gestational element at all, it is one that we (literally) in-corp-orate. The obscurity of the gestational membrane or *aminon* is repeated (but differently) in our own material bodies of water. Irigaray's insistence here on the materiality of the gestational that we carry with us, that is always teeming with life before 'responding to your sun's rays' shows that the virtual gestational capacity and the body of the gestated 'to come' are always intimately, and materially, bound up in one another.

By suggesting this palimpsest of onto-logics that inhere in us, as watery subjects, reading Irigaray queerly also opens up an important ethical proposition: if the relational and the gestational are folded, as a material possibility, into the bodies that relate and are gestated, it means that we, just like all bodies of water, embody the same possibility to relate to others and proliferate new instantiations of the 'not yet'. As Mielle Chandler and I (2013) have argued elsewhere, water as gestational enacts a mode of sociality that we, as human sovereign subjects, repeat. As bodies of water, we exist as 'sovereign bodies' but as water this sovereignty is also always dissolving – as it relinquishes waters to others and gestates new possibilities. In these ways, we become responsive to others, both human and more-than-human. Because of the onto-logic of water that we share with other watery bodies, we all – each of us within this more-than-human community of watery bodies – carry this capacity for facilitative responsivity, and for proliferating life yet-to-come, in our own wet materiality. Mielle and I have referred to this as 'becoming-milieu': Becoming-milieu for an other demands a reorientation of oneself as existing also for what is beyond oneself. Becoming-milieu does not entail total desubjectification (as Deleuze notes, to desubjectivize oneself completely only results in annihilation), but it does require that we loosen our commitments to our own sovereign endurance. The watery potential that we enfold within our own seemingly discrete bodies is a watery offering to unknowable futures.

Once more, this notion fundamentally challenges a dominant Western understanding of ontology that holds up the sovereign ontological subject as self-preserving (again, see Chandler and Neimanis 2013).³⁹ It also challenges the habit whereby any sense of self-effacement must be tethered to a reprosexual maternal body. Rather, water demonstrates that this gestational capacity belongs to all bodies of water. Some of us might become milieu as womb, but we might also become milieu for multispecies ecologies in our guts, or milieu for gardens that will grow from our deathly and discarded matters.⁴⁰ We can also be milieu as ally, as neighbour, as passerby, as teacher. While this might sound metaphorical, we are literally the condition for one another's possibility, as demonstrated by our watery interpermeations. In each of these relations, we have the possibility of dissolving our own sovereign self-preservation, and instead creating the conditions for an other to flourish. In

this way, we repeat the lineaments of water's gestationality, differently. Water gifts us this capacity.

Reading Irigaray alongside Deleuze helps us articulate this gestationality as a material possibility and helps us untether it from a reproximal female body. Irigaray, however, reminds us that gestational bodies are also always specific in their sexual difference, and that the ways in which these bodies are symbolically inscribed matters a lot. Gestationality is not just a brute capacity of wet matter; it is oriented and thwarted by the flows of power, meaning, and values in which we all swim. In other words, Irigaray reminds us that our capacity to differentiate, to become milieu for an other, also depends on our ethico-ontological imaginaries. In this sense, the actualizations of difference – as woman or man, or as beyond this binary logic; as straight or queer; as human or non-human animal; and as saturated with the weight of all the meanings those bodies gather and materialize – bear directly on our gestational capacities. To become milieu as womb, we know, is not just a question of biological proclivity; it is also bound up in questions of which bodies get to birth children, and under what circumstances. Similarly, to become milieu as companion, or host, or lover, is also a matter of which bodies we deem acceptable to be welcomed in our communities, our nations, our beds. Irigaray does not allow the force of a symbolic economy to be washed away in our enthusiasm for matter. Becoming milieu demands careful considerations of the ways in which our material generosity is oriented. It is also crucial that we always remember that these transcorporeal transits – in their material-semiotic inextricability – may not be benign. Not all gifts are life-affirming. As bodies of water, our capacity to proliferate the not-yet is also always bound up in our capacity to bear toxic messages. Gestation is always non-innocent.

So: what will we bequeath to these others to whom we are connected, and what will we take? How will we negotiate the levees and dams, sluices and tributaries, that guide these dissolutions-for-the-other? These are the questions that figuring ourselves as 'bodies of water' can ask of us, and questions that I hope we can aspire to rise to. Irigaray, in her reconfiguring of ontological subjects as gestational milieus, and as bodies of water that are both in common and also crucially different, helps us understand this proposition more deeply.

Bodies of water beyond humanism

*And in order to speak the meaning of the earth, is it necessary to exhaust
all her stores?*

– Irigaray (1991: 18)

Our planet's life-proliferating and life-sustaining gestational milieus are wounded. Aqueous habitats – in the Great Barrier Reef, in the Gulf of Mexico, in the Alberta tar sands, in the Niger Delta – are sacrificed to human fossil fuel dependency, while rain and snow become poisonous messengers to Arctic food chains. Seas, both tiny and grand, suffer from slow suffocation. Ancient aquifers are pumped out of the earth to be bottled and sold for profit – most recently under the banner of 'life'.⁴¹ We slake our consumerist thirst with melting glaciers, to end up rowing lifeboats down the middle of our flooded streets. Monolithic megadams displace humans and other animals to radically reshape riparian ecosystems. New islands of plastic rise out of the sea, while old caches of chemical warfare agents lie patiently beneath, slowly releasing distant memories. Understanding how water has reached this state of degradation and exploitation asks us to carefully consider our own implications within this hydrocommons – in terms of not only what we do 'to' water but as water bodies ourselves.

Irigaray invites us to consider ourselves not only as bodies composed of water but as watery bodies that have a gestational capacity to proliferate the not-yet. And, she implores us not to forget the waters that are the condition of our own possibility. Where our early twenty-first-century planetary waters are increasingly polluted, redirected for profit, and otherwise instrumentalized, Irigaray's plea seems all the more pressing. She insists that 'the first ecological gesture is to live and situate ourselves as living beings among other living beings' (Irigaray 2015: 101). Such a situation depends, for Irigaray, on a deep respect for sexuate difference where 'the sexuation of the living is thus an essential key to an ecological ethics' (101); 'if we consider ourselves as neuter individuals, we cannot behave in an ecological way' (103). The deep ethics at the heart of Irigaray's work thus reinforces the need for work in the environmental humanities, as well as in feminist new materialisms and

posthumanisms, not to forget the ethics of sexuate difference that Irigaray's philosophy has so carefully staked.

We might still ask, however, whether Irigaray's bodies of water move sufficiently beyond an anthropocentric view. While Irigaray offers a radical rethinking of the embodiment of difference through invocations of a kind of elemental materiality, she herself clarifies that a 'decisive aspect' of her work 'is precisely to define what could be a really human sexuality' (Irigaray and Parker 2015: 116). The achievement of 'our humanity' (Irigaray and Parker 2015: 116) and 'the life and culture of the human species' (Irigaray 1992: 3) are her focus. She does not dismiss concern for the more-than-human – and her work is certainly *elementally grounded* – but it is hard to ignore the ethico-ontological hierarchy she seemingly installs: 'Cultivating our sexuate belonging inclines us to respect and cultivate transcendence, first, towards a differently sexuate human and, then, towards any sort of otherness, especially that of living beings' (Irigaray and Parker 2015: 116).

Moving beyond anthropocentrism would not be a simple turn towards geophysical bodies of water. As many kinds of environmentalisms have demonstrated, we can express concern for a lake or a river without fundamentally challenging the environmental ontological imaginaries that allow those watery bodies to be resourced and exploited in the first place. Such concern is no better than a band-aid (which we all know comes off most easily in the bath). No, what we need is to move beyond humanism as the anchor of ontology and ethics – that is, we need not only to extend care beyond human bodies of water but to challenge the commitments of humanism more generally. This would mean dissolving the ground of who gets to count as human in the first place, and the order of things that accompanies any such proposition. This would mean destabilizing Self-Sufficient Man from his place of ontological authority, and recasting the terms of sovereign ontological subjectivity. Such a concern would be both against anthropocentrism and also against phallogocentrism and related instantiations of what Val Plumwood (1993) has called the 'Master Model' – an order of things built on dualisms, hierarchy, and chains of meaning. Moving beyond humanism would require committing not only to other kinds of elemental and ecological bodies of water but also in general to queer ways of being, and to swamping the solid ground of Western ontological frameworks.

Caring for water requires thinking with water's rich biodiversity in all of the bodies as which it lives – human and more-than-human. Irigaray (2015: 103) insists that 'sexuate difference is the first biodiversity that we must take into account'. My proposal has been that thinking with water as gestational of difference and also the actualisation thereof (both being and becoming, both body and milieu) makes it impossible to compartmentalize sexuate difference within discrete bodies. A posthuman theory of sexuate difference shows that difference is a capacity, a tendency – even a desire – to differ, more than it is any actual outcome of that desire (an idea I will return to in the next chapter, in relation to water and evolution). Moreover, as we saw above, rethinking sexuate difference according to broader terms of gestationality refuses a synonymous or entirely overlapping relation to the feminine-maternal. The maternal seas are *diffracted through* an elemental gestational milieu (rather than overlaid in a one-to-one relation). Taking the lineaments of gestation as paradigmatic need not be a 'biologically essentialist' or heteronormative move. Sexuate difference as gestationality could suggest instead a queer, multispecies, posthuman, and elemental proliferation of life-in-the-plural.

All living bodies of water—amniotes and also birds and reptiles, fish, insects and arthropods, plant life, fungi, bacteria and protoctists – owe their corporeal existence to gestation in a watery milieu, which is evidenced in a plurality of processes that extend beyond human wombs. This extension of what might count as a logic of 'amniotics' is even more radical when we include all of the bodies transiting and transforming in our planetary hydrological cycles: ocean, aquifer, hailstorm, morning dew. Each of these watery bodies dissolves for-the-other. Gestationality is posthuman. Making this claim challenges the idea that corporeal generosity, or even ethical orientation, originates and ends with the human. Rather, like *and as* water, we take up and repeat water's logics, differently.

I do not intend to suggest that Irigaray offers us a fully developed theory of posthuman gestationality in this sense, but by inviting us to think about our own bodies of water in the context of deeper, more-than-human gestational waters, where the human body of water is contiguous with rather than analogous to these gestational species-seas, nor does her philosophy necessarily refuse this possibility. Such posthuman intimations, in fledgling form, can be found in Irigaray's references to a gestational element that continues to be carried, as

water, within the differentiated-gestated, and the ongoing process of gestation that is required for maintaining the fecundity of sexual difference. We might even push the amniotics we read in Irigaray to make room for the human genderqueer bodies, sexes, and sexualities that already exist as actualities in the present – also gestated in water, also embodying this water, also proliferating and facilitating new forms of being. In turn, considering Irigaray's 'liquid ground' in the context of more-than-human life proposes the possibility for extending such an ethics of difference beyond human sexuate difference, and towards our planetary waters. While Irigaray's work may only be suggestive in this sense, it nonetheless opens a path for thinking through life as not only our own, but as distributed through, indebted to, and facilitative of lives that reach far beyond the bounds of our amniote skin.