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Rethinking the Ill Body in Phallocentric Western Culture: A Critical Engagement with Luce Irigaray

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Capstone Essay
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This capstone critically engages with the work of prolific, contemporary continental philosopher Luce Irigaray on subjectivity and the body in order to challenge widely held notions of the ill body in phallocentric culture. Within my project, phallocentrism means the privileging of an erect, rational, individually autonomous body with defined boundaries. Using sociologist Ken Plummer's journal during his liver disease, I extend Irigaray's critique of phallocentrism to the experience of illness in Western culture. Ill bodies occupy a space analogous to that of female bodies within Irigaray's theory, because phallocentrism subordinates ill bodies to the normative phallic body that is functional, bounded, and under control. I read Plummer's text as an example of Irigaray's "sensible transcendental": a non-religious transcendence grounded in the body's sensibility. I argue for the potential of a sensible transcendental in the mode of "speaking the sick body" to disrupt troublesome phallocentric bodily ideals, and further that the sensible transcendental may be an especially useful model for ill bodies because these bodies are in an immediate state of change.
I am indebted first and foremost to my advisor, Margaret Kamitsuka, who offered constant support, expert guidance, and needed perspective throughout. Thank you for taking me on as a late advisee without having once taught me, and for pointing me toward Irigaray. Thanks to Tatum for suffering many hours of obscure discussion on this topic. You are one of the most brilliant people I know. Thank you to Corey Barnes and the capstone class. I am deeply humbled by each of your intellects and willingness to help. Finally, I cannot thank my friends and family enough for supporting me throughout this year and always.

I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.
Sarah Kahn
In this capstone, I use the work of Luce Irigaray as a theoretical lens through which to address the experience of illness in Western culture. I use her category of the “feminine” theoretically rather than literally. Understood in this way, the feminine body in Irigaray’s work directly parallels the ill body; both suffer from a lack of voice in phallocentrism.

Phallocentrism refers to the foundation of (Western) thought on the phallus as signifier of meaning; phallocentrism is the idea that representational thought, including language, is centered on theoretical qualities of the phallus. My main interlocutor, Luce Irigaray, is a contemporary French theorist whose work spans the fields of philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and religion and has been particularly influential in spheres of feminist philosophy of religion.¹ Irigaray's work weaves together concepts and genres and deliberately evades straightforward meaning. Readings of Irigaray's thought vary greatly; while I must engage in some analysis of her thought, it is not this paper's primary goal. I reference scholarly readings of Irigaray's texts in order to clarify her thought when necessary for my topic—for example, on the issues of sexual difference and divinity in her work. Recent scholarship has taken Irigaray to task on her strict adherence to sexual difference as the most immediate and, thus, significant oppressive force;² this paper responds to this critique by extending Irigaray’s work on difference past gender. Illness represents an instance where bodies of all gender identities fail to live up to phallocentric ideals.

¹ For an introduction to Irigaray’s work and its reception, see Morny Joy, Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).
I see my project as dealing with both abstract and concrete concepts. For example, I will follow some feminist scholars in questioning how the body is defined and delimited in Western culture; the body in my paper will refer both to specific bodies and the cultural, theoretical, social category of the body. I deal with illness not only as an individual occurrence and experience, but also as a universal phenomenon with which we are all familiar. The scholars I most heavily rely on, including Irigaray, see patriarchal culture as holding bodies to troublesome ideals in various ways. Insofar as they critique a widespread cultural, social, political, philosophical, religious, linguistic force, their work deals with both the abstract and the immediately concrete.

Irigaray's work generally responds to the absence of feminine embodied subjectivity in phallocentric culture. Ill bodies, too, suffer from a lack of linguistic and representational possibility and thus are barred from becoming full subjects in phallocentric culture. To extend Irigaray's work on sexual difference, I will examine some specific characteristics that she identifies with non-conforming bodies. While scholars disagree on what Irigaray means with her bodily imagery, I interpret Irigaray not as appealing to only certain bodies but as appealing to repressed bodies generally. Similarly, I extend her claim that patriarchal culture values women’s bodies for their functioning value in order to claim the same for all bodies. While she appears to many interpreters to limit these characteristics to traditionally assigned female bodies, I will follow scholars who interpret this work as potentially not literal. I use Plummer’s experience to evaluate the viability of Irigaray’s remedies for subjectivity of ill bodies.

In the first section, “The Experience of Illness in Phallocentric Culture,” I introduce sociologist Ken Plummer’s journal from his experience with liver disease, highlighting the
phallic characteristics of his body that underlie his experience. I discuss how these conceptions become challenged and modified through the process of illness and healing.

Next, in the section “Irigaray’s Feminine and the Ill Body,” I introduce Luce Irigaray’s critique of phallocentrism and explain how she ties phallocentric and non-phallocentric characteristics to the body. I demonstrate the parallels between the theoretical category of the feminine in Irigaray’s thought and the category of the ill body (again both the specific body of Plummer and the cultural, theoretical, social category of the ill body). Finally, in the last section, “A Proposal for Rethinking the Ill Body,” I turn to Irigaray’s remedy for the problem of female subjectivity: the “sensible transcendental.” Drawing on secondary scholarship, I first explain the concept of the sensible transcendental. I move then to my critical reading of Plummer’s journal as operating under a sensible transcendental mode. I argue that for some ill bodies in Western culture, this non-religious transcendence may offer a compelling vehicle for a non-phallocentric conception of the body.

I. The Experience of Illness in Phallocentrism

To lay the ground for my discussion of Irigaray and illness, I will introduce the illness narrative of scholar Ken Plummer. While the terms phallocentric and non-phallocentric will make more sense at the discussion of Irigaray in the second section, I first draw out corresponding imagery in Plummer’s text. Although I do not claim to speak for all bodies in any way throughout this paper, I use Plummer’s experience as an example of how our social and cultural world can determine our experience of illness and our bodies. Here, I follow feminist scholar Paula Cooey, who holds that, to a large degree, “even
pain and pleasure are socially construed.” In this case, Plummer’s journal documents the challenges that illness presented to his conception of his own body. In Irigarayan terminology that I will clarify more in the next section, Plummer comes to understand his body as non-phallocentric: for example as multiple, porous, and out of his sole control. He also comes to recognize meanings of his illness outside of dualistic failure and function. In identifying these themes within Plummer’s narrative, I am arguing that Plummer’s changed perspective reveals a normative, phallocentric conception of his functioning, healthy body as bounded and individually controlled. It is important to note that I will be reading Plummer’s narrative in order to expose the underlying bias of his phallic conception of his body, rather than within its originally intended context of social and philosophical theory. All quotations in the following section refer to Plummer’s journal, which I will cite in-text.

In his article “My Multiple Sick Bodies: Symbolic Interactionism, Autoethnography and Embodiment,” Ken Plummer recalls his experience with end-stage alcoholic-related liver disease. Plummer’s words, drawn from his journal, represent his “body speaking” (75-76). This wording is significant, because it indicates a voice intimately connected to his body rather than distanced from the body. Excerpts from his journal reflect Plummer’s coming to grips with his new, ill self; the experience of his failing body prompted Plummer to “ponder more and more the meanings and natures of life” (90) and to uncover many social meanings of illness “from illness as opportunity to illness as stigma” (80).

Throughout his illness and recovery, Plummer’s ill body undermines normative ideals that

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“the old Ken” (81) had presumably taken for granted. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to focus on the control or ownership of the body, oneness⁵, and the notion of the body as a bounded, contained entity. I will also discuss how Plummer places his body along a binary spectrum of failure and function based on these themes. As Plummer notes, “material objects like blood and livers come to be interpreted and given sense” through social processes: “never simply a discourse but an active process of narrating, symbolizing, storying, even performing these material objects” (84). Plummer’s experience of his own illness is mediated through the normative ideals of Western culture; Plummer’s sole presence within his body, control of his body, and perceived limits of his body—taken for granted while healthy—become challenged by his liver failure. Although I have isolated these facets of phallocentrism’s normative body, I hold that they are experienced together inseparably; closure, oneness, and ownership mean a healthy, functioning body in Western culture. The subversion of these ideals in Plummer’s narrative coincides with his perception that his body is failing.

Throughout Plummer’s journal, the prominent theme of his body’s shifting boundaries presents itself in various ways. After initially noticing symptoms including blackening legs, general pain and exhaustion, facial emaciation, and his growing “beer gut,” Plummer visits the hospital to learn that that he had developed ascites—the abnormal

⁵ Although I will discuss Irigaray below, I want to note that I use “oneness” here to mean the notion that one body contains one identity. I use the term self-consciously to reflect Irigaray’s frequent use of the word. For Irigaray, oneness denotes phallic self-sameness. In other words, the phallic subject is one whose body contains one complete subject. The phallic subject only interacts with others by way of, and in reference to, himself. The phallic subject is a personified phallus in its oneness. By contrast, the feminine reflects the imagery of lips, which are whole yet also divided, two and one simultaneously. The most concentrated discussion of the phallic subject and the feminine, see Luce Irigaray, “Volume Fluidity,” in Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 227-240.
accumulation of fluid in his abdomen—and has ten liters of fluid removed through a pipe (80). Although intended to heal, this initial encounter with his body’s fluids crossing his body’s boundaries leaves Plummer feeling “Drained, threatened, sick” (80). In recovery, Plummer recalls multiple instances when the conceived boundaries of his body are transgressed in the name of healing: for example, the “cutting of surgery” or the image of his bile flowing through tubes (83). Another time, Plummer experiences the uncontrollable release of blood from his body in particularly vivid imagery; he describes “Blood pouring involuntarily from me: a red liquid spewing from my mouth to half fill a sink” (83) and “Deep thick red blood from inside my gut gushing out into the white sink involuntarily with no warning” (84). The sometimes very visible flow of liquid out of Plummer’s body challenges his conception of the limits of his body; he describes the flow of liquids as “shifting momentarily the borders of my body” (87). His experience with blood makes evident the close relationship of the sense of a bounded body with that of a controlled, healthy body; despite the inward and outward flows of liquid that transgress the skin on a daily basis, these experiences cause Plummer’s conception of his body’s limits to change.

The experience of his body’s fluids escaping its conceived boundaries is distressing to Plummer—even when these processes directly facilitate his healing as in the draining—because it challenges his authority over his body’s limits. In addition to fluids, the boundaries of Plummer’s body are crossed in the healing process by a new liver. Plummer feels a lack of control over his body with the replacement of his liver with that of an eighteen-year-old. Ruminating over his transplanted organ, Plummer wonders if the soul of the donor accompanies the liver (88). He feels he is no longer solely present in his body; the life of the donor continues to live in him, making him “‘two beings now in one’” (88). At
other times, Plummer feels that he has relinquished control of his body to the hospital and its machines (81). He describes his body as sometimes “not really open to my mind moving it or owning it” (81), especially when, in surgery, his body was an “appendage served by others and machines” (87). In recovery, when he must re-learn everyday tasks, Plummer feels he is reclaiming his body, bringing it “back under control again” (82)—a re-assembling or re-birth (81). Physically unable to control his body, Plummer feels like a different body—a “cyborg body...under siege” (80). Despite feeling “always at the centre of the control” of his body, he says he “also felt it was invaded by forces outside of my control” (88). This feeling of invasion reflects an awareness of the body as strictly delimited, with clear distinctions of inside and outside. Normal bodily experience for Plummer is one of a single subject at the reins. The loss of liquids is experienced as a lack of control, and the cutting of surgery and liver transplant feel invasive. For Plummer, then, the healthy, “old Ken[’s]” body is one that he has sole control over and that is defined by outer limits.

At other times within his journal, Plummer more directly reflects on his altered subjectivity in illness that stems from his changing sense of body. He describes the multiple, different “new worlds that illness inevitably takes you into” (85). Due to the lack of control he experiences, Plummer feels he is in a “new world of feeling” and shifted consciousness (78-79). His previously functioning “worlds of movement, clothing, hair, drinking, eating, sleeping, washing, talking, thinking, and feeling – all moved into a different key” (78-79). His “illness world” (78) is one “where nothing worked; everything I touched seemed to break or fall” (88). The world where his body did not function as before was one of “constant flux and movement,” “uncertainty;” (85) “The world became a strange void in which I shuffled and fell” (88). These worlds develop as a result of Plummer’s functioning,
and are characterized by the perception of his body as failing in various ways. When his body is “broken” (83), “sick and failing” (80), and “in need of repair” (86), he lives in worlds of uncertainty and flux. These worlds mean a “very different body” (81), an “utterly estranged sick body” (81), “the cyborg body and the hallucinating body” (81), where he is “certainly not the old Ken” (81). The “multiple bodies” (80) brought on by illness correspond to these different worlds. Plummer also feels that he has a fundamentally different body with the inability to retain fluids; he says that his “old body had gone” when “None of my orifices were working on their own” (87). Similarly, he feels that he has become “‘two beings now in one’”—two bodies becoming one body because of the transplanted liver (86).

The experience of his shifted bodily boundaries, coupled with relinquished control, leave Plummer feeling like he is a fundamentally different person(s). This makes sense when we hear that Plummer conceives of his body as his “shape,” “container,” “border,” “shell and armor” (86). When we consider that Plummer’s instinct is to conceive of his body as an outer limit, holding him in and “holding it all together” (86), it makes sense that challenges to this understanding force him to change his conception of his body and likewise his subjectivity. Towards the end of his healing process, Plummer reflects on the different understandings his illness prompted. His illness was, for him, a “journey of exploration” (79), in which he finds the interconnectedness of all bodies. Through the dependence he feels on other bodies—probably meaning his liver donor’s and those of hospital staff and loved ones—Plummer understands that “The reflexive self dwells in a network of bodies and others” where it becomes “identifiably multiple” (85). Plummer’s illness forces him to adjust his conception of his own body from an autonomous body that
retains its borders to in flux and multiple bodies. The changes in Plummer’s conception of his body correspond to the changes in his subjectivity—from healthy Ken to multiple Kens in flux. Through the imagery he chooses to describe his experience, Plummer reveals a conception of his healthy body as phallic, meaning here one, coherent, under control, and bounded. His use of this imagery to describe his body, as well as the imagery that describes the ill body as being out of control, being fundamentally not-one, and having shifted boundaries, parallels Irigaray’s category of the feminine.

II. Irigaray’s Feminine as the Ill Body

In order to locate Irigaray’s feminine imagery within Plummer’s experience, I will first provide a brief introduction to Luce Irigaray’s thought and then demonstrate the ways in which ill bodies are “feminized” in her account of phallocentric culture. Irigaray sees phallocentrism as denying full subjectivity within symbolic thought to women in their sexual, embodied difference from men. Although her strict adherence to binary sexual

6 The issue of what exactly Irigaray means by “woman” and “the feminine” is at the center of the questions of essentialism and heterosexism in her work. It is beyond the scope of the current paper to fully address what Irigaray means; however, a large part of Irigaray’s criticism of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan focuses on his refusal to associate the signifier phallus with the physical penis. Irigaray appears to create a more direct slide between feminine bodily imagery—the breasts, mucous membranes, vulvae, and lips—and its signifiers. Diana Fuss argues that Irigaray strategically uses essentialist language, but never herself defines woman’s essence. Rather, her use of bodily language is neither literal nor metaphorical, but metonymic. See Diana J. Fuss, “‘Essentially Speaking’: Lucy Irigaray’s Language of Essence,” Hypatia 3 no. 3 (1989): 62-81. Danielle Poe posits that for Irigaray, sexual difference is not natural because it is biologically determined, but because it is always present in individuals. She, along with Amy Hollywood in Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2002), sees Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference as historically variable, not static. See Poe, “Can Luce Irigaray’s Notion of Sexual Difference Be Applied to Transsexual and
difference has troubled many of her readers, Irigaray argues that bringing female bodily specificity into discourse (language and symbolic representation) will help to establish women as full subjects. Here, I extend Irigaray’s argument to apply to ill bodies within the embodied difference of illness. In other words, I take Irigaray’s critique of phallocentrism to be a primarily symbolic one that can apply to other forms of embodied difference than simply the sexual and argue that ill bodies occupy the same place as what she calls the feminine. While Irigaray’s focus on sexual difference as the most universal and fundamental form of embodied difference has troubled scholars, the embodied difference of illness is universal and thus deserving of attention.

In her first major work to be translated into English, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray engages in a widespread cultural critique of Western thought in general.7 Discussing the general trend of ignorance and neglect of the feminine in authors from Freud to Plato, Irigaray argues that the entire foundation of Western thought is conceived on masculine terms. Beginning with a discussion of Freud, Irigaray points out that the leading psychoanalytic explanation of the feminine revolves around the absence of the penis and resulting envy.8 Throughout his theory of the psychological and social development of individuals, the feminine is explained solely in relation to the masculine.9 Generally, the phallus (symbolic representation of the penis) “functions all too often in

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7 A fully detailed account of Irigaray’s critique is outside the scope of this paper; for an introduction, see Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
9 For example, the clitoris is explained as a defective, inadequate small penis and the breasts and vagina are described as secondary organs. See ibid., 22-23.
psychoanalysis as the guarantee of sense, the sense of sense(s), the ‘figure,’ the ‘form,’ the ‘ultimate signifier;’”\(^{10}\) this means that all metaphysical thought refers back to phallic meaning. When individuals speak—necessarily as selves or subjects—it is always as phallic subjects; those concerned with truth, meaning, form, and coherence. Subjectivity refers to the assumption of a “self” in language and discourse—the symbolic realm. Subjectivity means the position one must take in order to enter into language or symbolic thought. For Irigaray, the speaking “subject” in Western thought is always symbolically phallic.\(^{11}\) Those individuals with penises have a natural advantage in phallocentrism, since phallocentrism is the general culture of privileging the phallic. Irigaray argues that phallocentrism is present in all claims to truth throughout the history of philosophy. For Irigaray, the term “phallocentrism” is almost synonymous with “economy of the same” or “self-sameness” and the “economy of truth.” All refer to the idea that discourse is centered on the masculine, phallic subject, and that relations with others (women) serve to reflect back this masculine subjectivity. So, for example, Freud describes female sexuality in terms of the clitoris being a defective penis rather than retaining its difference from the penis. Female sexuality in other places is equated with motherhood, an assumption that Irigaray attributes to motherhood’s physical “preserving, regenerating, and rejuvenating” of man through reproduction.\(^{12}\) Phallocentrism also maintains binary logic, inscribing the dualistic

\(^{10}\) Irigaray, Speculum, 44.

\(^{11}\) This point is reflected in the title of the second chapter of Speculum, “Any Theory of the ‘Subject’ has Always Been Appropriated by the ‘Masculine,’” 133-146. The category of the “phallic” is symbolic and physical. Scholars have struggled with this issue in Irigaray’s writing, and I will address this further as it pertains to the symbolic nature of Irigaray’s work.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 53.
categories of presence versus absence, inside versus outside, visible versus invisible which are physically and metaphorically based on the erect penis.

For Irigaray, the fact that language and thought are dominated and founded by men means that women do not have the representational resources needed to express their own subjectivity given their bodily specificity. This subjectivity would defy phallic standards of rationality and coherence and require a radical shift in language and society. Here, Irigaray turns to imagery grounded in what—for her—represents the feminine body. This imagery not only begins to bring female bodies—thus, female subjectivity—into language, but also undermines phallic values in the process. Against phallic oneness, Irigaray introduces imagery of the woman, “who doesn’t have one sex organ, or a unified sexuality...Body, breasts, pubis, clitoris, labia, vulva, vagina, neck of the uterus, womb...all these foil any attempt at reducing sexual multiplicity to some proper noun, to some proper meaning, to some concept.” Irigaray further says that for the woman, “two does not divide into ones.” These images both attempt to describe the experience of feminine bodily specificity and also to undermine the phallic model; when she describes lips as “strangers to dichotomy and oppositions,” we can read her as both describing the physical property of feminine bodies and also extending this physicality into a subversive symbol. Irigaray’s oeuvre is rich with imagery like this, which I will argue below represents the “sensible transcendental.” I will discuss other examples below as they relate to Plummer’s experience.

14 Ibid., 236. This quote appears to refer physically to lips, but I believe carries symbolic weight as well.
While the issue of sexual difference underlies and frames Irigaray's entire project, scholars have struggled with Irigaray's focus on sexual difference as immediate and universal. An important question for interpreters of Irigaray becomes the extent to which the symbolic categories of phallic and non-phallic are allied with the categories of masculine and feminine. Throughout her work, Irigaray employs fluid language for these categories, such that clearly defining which bodies count as "phallic" or "feminine" becomes difficult. Scholars wonder if Irigaray's "feminine" is merely a biological category, or if it is symbolic and applicable to different genders.\textsuperscript{16} Regardless of Irigaray's intention, I follow Margaret Whitford's interpretation of Irigaray's thought as symbolically charged and not necessarily aligned with biology.\textsuperscript{17}

I identify the central phallic ideals of visibility, coherence, unity, solidity, and functionality in Irigaray's work as ideals that also apply to ill bodies as in Plummer's text. Phallocentric culture prescribes these characteristics normatively on all bodies regardless of gender. Irigaray's critique centers on the absence of femininity from representation; in the symbolic order, women do not have their own gender.\textsuperscript{18} Irigaray identifies this lack of representation as plaguing not only psychoanalysis but also Western philosophy, language, and thought in general. To undermine the phallic mode of being that valorizes abstracted qualities of an erect penis—unity, visibility, coherence, solidity, functionality—Irigaray turns to imagery of feminine bodies. In \textit{Speculum of the Other Woman}, for example, Irigaray

\textsuperscript{16} Readers of Irigaray, especially North American feminist scholars, have struggled with her focus on sexual difference as the most immediate and universal form of embodied difference. See, for example, Fuss, "‘Essentially Speaking.’"

\textsuperscript{17} Whitford, "Irigaray’s Body Symbolic."

\textsuperscript{18} Since the only subject position available is a masculine one, when women speak within the laws of Western discourse they occupy a masculine subjectivity. According to Irigaray, no subjectivity specific to women is yet available.
evokes a female mystic celebrating the open expansiveness of her genitalia and body. She describes the ecstasy found in “that glorious slit,” the “gaping space” of the “loving body,” where an infinite whole touches herself. Elsewhere, Irigaray describes the fluidity of the female body; to phallocentric culture this fluidity is repulsive, horrific, abhorrent and shameful. This fluidity threatens to “deform, propagate, evaporate, consume him, to flow out of him and into another;” by “him,” Irigaray means the phallic subject—closed off, autonomous, in control, rational, cohesive and unified.

Irigaray also critiques the expectation of functionality placed upon (female) bodies in phallocentrism. She points out that phallocentric culture equates woman’s sexuality with reproduction, asking when culture will cease to “claim that her sexuality has value only insofar as it gathers the heritage of her maternity.” While Irigaray focuses her discussion solely on female bodies and the expectation of reproduction, we can apply her critique to any expectation of bodies to adhere to a vision of functionality. This expectation represents an appropriation of another’s body, which Irigaray condemns throughout her work. When women are fixed into the functional role of motherhood, for example, they cannot truly become subjects—the infinite possibilities for their personhood are paralyzed. Extending this critique to all bodies, we can come to understand the expectation of health as an

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20 Irigaray, Speculum, 200.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 233.
23 Ibid., 288; ibid., 237.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 146.
appropriation of another’s body by phallocentric culture. The culture of phallocentrism, in which our body is valued for its health, is the same culture that garners profit from both our health and healing, attempts to regulate our reproduction, requires us to be drafted into militaries, and polices our bodies more or less depending on appearance. Through and through, phallocentric culture appropriates all bodies. Although the specific instances of appropriation certainly vary depending on gender, the expectation of health affects us all.

Responding to the apparent biological essentialism present in Irigaray’s work, some defenders have attempted to extend Irigaray’s feminine bodily imagery more broadly. In response to Irigaray’s lips and mucous imagery, Margaret Whitford offers a reading of this imagery that questions the strict association of lips and mucous with feminine bodies. Rather than simply the feminine body, “mucous represents the most ‘unthought’ and ‘unthinkable’ of Western culture.”27 This means that Western culture’s phallocentrism precludes the possibility of symbolic representation for any bodily specificity and identity outside its ideals. Since mucous is a substance not easily categorized within phallocentric binaries (for example, solid versus fluid), it exists outside the realm of what is representable and valued in language and thought. As a symbolic image, mucous defies the typical phallic categorization of solid or fluid. Even if intended by Irigaray solely with literal reference to the female body, Whitford argues that the images have succeeded in serving as redemptive symbols for women—the entry of women’s bodies into the previously phallocentric symbolic order. So, what is important about Irigaray’s imagery for Whitford is its subversion of phallocentric binaries applied to bodies, like interior versus exterior, sight

versus touch, openness versus closure, and subject versus object. Although Whitford identifies this symbolic value primarily for women, she points to the importance of the possibility of readings of sexual difference; “what is important about the two lips is not only their literalness, but, above all, the fact that no one can agree on exactly what they mean.”

Diana Fuss also argues that “many of the properties Irigaray associates with the two lips might also describe the penis.” Specifically, the “two but not divisible into ones” may also describe a penis with foreskin. Further, the qualities Irigaray associates with the phallus may be an oversimplified symbolic representation of a phallus rather than a real penis; “As K.K. Ruthven points out...’Certainly, her theory seems to require the penis to be always inflexibly erect and quite without metaphoric variation, and also to be circumcised.’” These readings of Irigaray open her apparent dualism of sexual difference to a more fluid one; the specificities she seems to limit to feminine bodies can describe bodies typically designated male, and phallic characteristics may not describe real bodies.

A more fluid picture of sexual difference is not necessarily limited to secondary interpretations of Irigaray’s texts. At times in her writing, Irigaray herself appears to blur distinctions between masculine and feminine bodies. English-speaking defenders of Irigaray tend to interpret her idea of sexual difference in this way, and I am indebted to the work of Margaret Whitford, Morny Joy, Penelope Deutscher, Elizabeth Grosz, Danielle Poe, and others for this type of reading. In Speculum, Irigaray refers to “women. Or at least the ‘female.’” The use of quotation marks around “female” and the distinction between

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29 Ibid., 98.
30 Fuss, “‘Essentially Speaking,’” 65-66.
31 Ibid., 66.
32 Irigaray, Speculum, 192.
“women” and “female” indicates that “female” could mean a symbolic category for bodily experience that exists outside phallocentrism rather than strictly female bodies. Elsewhere in *Speculum*, she indicates that “he” may enter non-phallocentric “mystic language or discourse,” “if he follows ‘her’ lead.”33 This allows for the existence of masculine bodies outside of phallocentrism. At other times, Irigaray critiques a rigid picture of femininity; “a femininity that conforms and corresponds too exactly to an idea—idea—of woman, that is too obedient to a sex—to an Idea of sex—or to a fetish sex has already frozen into phallomorphism.”34 Soon after, she says:

Woman is not to be related to any simple designatable being, subject, or entity. Nor is the whole group (called) women. One woman + one woman + one woman will never add up to some generic entity: woman. (The/a) woman refers to what cannot be defined, enumerated, formulated or *formalized*. Woman is a common noun for which no identity can be defined.35

In these quotes, Irigaray appears to adopt a view of the feminine that is fundamentally symbolic rather than strictly biological.36 Applying Irigaray’s conception of the feminine body to all bodies, I argue that ill bodies are symbolically similar to feminized bodies. The characteristics of bodies in illness defy the phallocentric prescription of coherence, solidity, unity, and closure across gender or sex lines. Illness as defined by phallocentric culture—abnormal functioning of the body—corresponds to bodies that release fluids and smells, feel internal pain, and, in death, cease to function as living. Ill bodies exist outside of the binaries imposed by phallocentric culture, and thus are “feminine” in Irigaray’s sense of the term. The qualities that Irigaray identifies as feminine—those that symbolically undermine

34 Ibid., 229.
36 At these points in her work, it seems that any prescriptive description of either the female or male body would contradict Irigaray’s goal of disrupting phallic coherence and metaphysical truth claims.
phallocentric bodily ideals—are qualities of all human bodies. Turning back now to Plummer’s journal, I will discuss how illness amplifies these “feminine” qualities within bodies.

Within Plummer’s narrative, his changing perspective of his body corresponds to Irigaray’s feminine category and imagery. Plummer’s profound change in subjectivity corresponds with his changing body, a change that is relayed in Irigarayan language. Specifically, his illness brings him from phallocentric subjectivity to an Irigarayan “feminine” subjectivity. Plummer’s journal reflects his changing sense of body, the sensible; while before his illness, he conceives of his body as containing only his own identity, as his outer limits and a closed system, he comes to understand himself as a multiple, fluid, interconnected and dependent body. The parallels between Irigaray’s feminine and Plummer’s ill body appear not only with specific imagery—not-oneness, fluidity, non-rationality, non-visibility, etc.—but also with the subversive shift away from phallocentric subjectivity. In the next section, these parallels form the basis for my reading of Plummer’s text as expressive of Irigaray’s sensible transcendental.

III. A Proposal for Rethinking the Ill Body

In this section, I will introduce Irigaray’s concept of divinity, which she calls the sensible transcendental. I will discuss its roots in 19th Century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach’s theory of projection and argue that her use of the term “divine” lies in its authenticating, rather than theistic, value. I will explain my own interpretation of Irigaray’s “sensible transcendental” for the purpose of my topic, and finally offer a reading of
Plummer's text as sensibly transcendent. I argue that Irigaray's sensible transcendental is a useful model for bodies in Western culture suffering from illness, because it allows for ill bodies to re-conceive of themselves as non-religiously but still divinely valuable.

Readers of Irigaray, especially North American feminist scholars, struggle with the concept of “divinity” in her work. While some interpreters understand the feminine divine as separate from what they see as her more critically attuned deconstruction of phallocentrism, others interpret the feminine divine as an integral part of Irigaray’s larger deconstructive project. Specifically, the former group worries that Irigaray’s revision of the notion of divinity doubles back on the liberating critical work Irigaray accomplished in earlier texts. Feminist philosophers of religion studying Irigaray question whether her feminine divinity can sufficiently liberate women from traditional notions of divinity, which have often linked women to the body and then vilified the body in opposition to the masculine spirit. I will briefly engage with some of these interpreters in order to clarify Irigaray’s use of “divinity.

While Irigaray appears at times to condemn belief as a departure from reality, she generally argues that women need to embrace a revised divinity rather than rejecting divinity outright. She writes, “Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.” Theologian Serene Jones points out that in Irigaray’s use of

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38 Ibid., 62.
Feuerbach’s model, God is merely an amalgam of idealized human characteristics, meaning that the divine is an “imagined screen.”

Following Feuerbach’s theory of projection, Irigaray argues for women’s adoption of a divine in their image. According to Irigaray, women need an ideal, the perfection or horizon of the feminine gender, in order to achieve feminine subjectivity individually and collectively as a gender. For scholar Amy Hollywood, Irigaray’s contradictory embrace and call for the deconstruction of the divine can be resolved by replacing the species as the impetus for projection in Feuerbach’s model with sexual difference in Irigaray’s appropriation. According to Hollywood, within Feuerbach’s model human beings recognize the ideal nature of the human species (including characteristics of goodness, love, justice, etc.) that spans beyond the individual’s lifetime. Caught between this ideal species nature and the failure to embody this nature on an individual and finite level, humans project these qualities outward and attribute them to the divine. In this way, ideal qualities become distanced from their human origin, and we misattribute these qualities to God. Hollywood argues that when Irigaray uses Feuerbach’s model, the

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40 Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 62.


42 Ibid., 230.

43 Ibid., 230.

44 Ibid.
universalized basis for projection becomes not human nature generally, but sexual difference.45

The interpretations of Irigaray’s divine most valuable for my own project understand the divine as a potentially a-theistic set of values. The divine for these interpreters is what grounds the culture of Western thought. Values attributed to the divine and the framework in which we imagine the divine inform the ways we imagine ourselves as subjects. Elizabeth Grosz explicitly attempts to defend Irigaray against what she sees as essentialist misreadings by positing Irigaray’s interest in the divine as directly linked to her “critique and displacement” of Western thought.46 For Grosz, Irigaray’s divine does not represent a regression to the patriarchal (Feuerbachian) God; rather, it is “part of a project of creating an ideal self-image for women” to ground a culture more in line with women’s interests.47 The feminine divine reflects women’s social and political struggles, and is almost irreligious as “a political and textual strategy for the positive reinscription of women’s bodies, identities, and futures in relation to and in exchange with the other sex.”48 Penelope Deutscher similarly reads Irigaray’s positing of the feminine divine as a critique and revision of the patriarchal divine.49 Irigaray, she argues, “is clearly attempting to change our notion of what ‘divine’ means.”50 Rather than the distanced, completely transcendent God of traditional Christian theology and Feuerbach, Irigaray’s feminine

45 Ibid., 231-232; Hollywood leaves open the definitions of man, woman, and sexual difference, pointing to a few different interpretations. Ultimately, Hollywood critiques Irigaray’s focus on sexual difference as fetishistic.
48 Ibid., 214.
50 Ibid., 98.
divine would be continuous with humanity as well as transcendent. While the traditionally transcendent God is vertically transcendent-hierarchically above humanity-Irigaray's divine would be vertically as well as horizontally transcendent. Since the divine is located within humans, and even “interchangeable with the concept of ‘woman-as-difference,’” the divine is horizontally transcendent as it exists within another human of irreducible difference.\textsuperscript{51} In other words, since the divine would exist within other people who will always be different from me, thus unknowable, I will never be able to access completely the divine within others. This horizontal and vertical model of transcendence allows Irigaray to reject the traditional transcendence of God in favor of a vision of the divine as an ideal horizon of gender identity.\textsuperscript{52} Deutscher argues that Irigaray's divine is a philosophical and ethical category that only retains otherness and a type of transcendence from conventional divinity.\textsuperscript{53} For Deutscher, this divine is completely different than the transcendent or supernatural; “it means that which is open-ended and in a process of becoming.”\textsuperscript{54} In response to charges of essentialism leveled at Irigaray's feminine divine, Deutscher argues that Irigaray never defines a universal feminine essence, but instead proposes a plurality of feminine identities.\textsuperscript{55} Further, she argues that Irigaray emphasizes the open-endedness or infinity of gender.\textsuperscript{56} Deutscher’s defense of Irigaray’s divine identifies the divine as a facet of Irigaray's larger objective: “the subversion of appropriative relationships between self

\textsuperscript{51} Deutscher, “Luce Irigaray on Divinity” 98-99.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 102-103.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
and other.” In Deutscher’s view, Irigaray follows Feuerbach’s model of projection, but with a completely different conception of the divine.

The most important element of Irigaray’s call for a feminine divine for my purposes is the valuing power she attributes to divinity in Western culture: “Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.” Irigaray is, in my interpretation, assuming divinity’s power for organizing cultural values and thus supporting human subjectivity. While some feminist scholars have questioned this stance as overly simplistic in terms of women’s liberation from patriarchy, I agree that divinized qualities, especially those of bodily realities expressed through language, can hold incredible mediating power. For example, feminist scholar Paula Cooey takes this approach to religious symbols in her 1994 book Religious Imagination and the Body. Using narratives of bodies in extreme pain, she demonstrates that religious symbols mediate the experiences of even non-religious individuals.

It is with this understanding of the power of “the divine” that Irigaray proposes a divine projection that will support women’s subjectivity, the “sensible transcendental.” In order to become representable subjects in discourse, women must project a divine in the form of the sensible transcendental. Irigaray’s sensible transcendental is both a mode of projection—transcending yet rooted in the body—and the “divinity” itself. By the

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57 Deutscher, “Luce Irigaray on Divinity,” 104.
58 Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, 62.
59 Cooey, Religious Imagination and the Body.
60 Irigaray is inconsistent on the issue of an actual deity; she does mention some specific deities (for example in her first work, Speculum, she narrates a female mystic relating to the feminized Jesus’ wounded body), but she also states that she is not appealing to any specific divine being. See Joy, “Equality or Divinity: A False Dichotomy?”
“sensible,” Irigaray means grounded in the body and its sensible experience. Within her thought, this “sensible” applies to female bodily specificity; for example, she discusses female sexuality—the constant touching of the two “lips”—as the repressed sensible. This sensibility is repressed because the feeling of the two lips has not been adequately representable through discourse. In order for repressed feminine subjectivity to emerge into and through discourse, bodily specificity must enter discourse. The sensible transcendental, then, represents a “political and textual strategy for the positive reinscription of women’s bodies, identities, and futures.”61 This means that through language, qualities that are feminine will be projected into the transcendent realm, such that women will be able to situate themselves in relation to those values. The “sensible” aspect of the sensible transcendental is Irigaray “embracing the flesh.”62 While Irigaray sees traditional Western notions of transcendence as seeking to escape the body, the transcendence of the sensible transcendental is firmly rooted in the body’s experience. The body’s experience is what guides interactions and ethics in her sensible transcendental.

The “transcendent” element of the sensible transcendental refers to a few interrelated ideas. The individual body is transcended both vertically and horizontally in the sensible transcendental. First, on the horizontal plane, each sex is transcendent to the other because of the incomprehensibility of sexual difference. For Irigaray, one can never hope to fully know or understand the bodily experience of the sexually different “other.” “Who or what the other is,” she writes, “I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually.”63 Each sexually different individual,

63 Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, 13.
as well as each sex, transcends the other; embodied sexual difference, the sensible, is the basis for this transcendence. Rather than appropriating the other as a reflection of the self, as phallic subjectivity does with the feminine, each subject may respect the unknowable difference of the other. Respect for difference becomes a kind of transcendence, allowing each subject to flourish individually and as part of a gender. So, for Irigaray, the sensible transcendental supports an ethics based on mutual respect for embodied difference.

Second, the sensible transcendental is also vertically transcendent because it is divine. As is typical of Irigaray, her writing dances around any single definition of divinity. While interpretations of Irigaray’s use of the term vary, I take her use of divinity to be primarily based in its authenticating value. “Divine” here denotes a sense of ultimate value and what Irigaray calls “the possible” rather than an actual divine being. Throughout her work, Irigaray stresses that divinity supports masculine subjectivity and has the potential to support feminine subjectivity as well. The divine, she writes, can “upset the limits of the possible.” This means that divinity concerns what is ultimate or infinite; divinity validates and authenticates whatever qualities are projected as divine. Irigaray calls for the sensible transcendental as divine because of what divinity has meant to men in the history of Western phallocentric culture. Irigaray’s sensible transcendental projection is a “realization—here and now—in and through the body” rather than as an “inaccessible

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64 This relation, maintaining distance, allows for the other to be met with wonder. See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 72-82.
65 Ibid., 128.
66 Interpretations of Irigaray’s divine vary greatly; Elizabeth Grosz points to a few: “the source and justification of (Western knowledge),” the “ontological framework for our understanding of reality,” the “horizon for the constitution of the subject’s identity as a subject,” an “ideal of perfection,” and an “emblem of a supreme alterity that institutes ethics.” See Grosz, “Irigaray and the Divine,” 207.
transcendence.” Rather than a divine being that would support the devaluation of the body—the incorporeal and transcendent Western God—the sensible transcendental incorporates and validates the experience of the (feminine) body. The Western God, the masculine ultimate horizon for Irigaray, represents the divinization of phallic characteristics: for example, omnipotent, supra-rational or rational, dominant, and autonomous. These values—power, dominance, autonomy, rationality, and bodily transcendence—projected onto God gain cultural value. The Western version of God supports masculine subjectivity in these characteristics.

The sensible transcendental aims to disrupt traditional Western notions of divinity that Irigaray believes devalue the body by upholding a mind-body dualism. The sensible transcendental is the ultimate valuation of feminine qualities, resulting in “a horizon for self-idealization, a model to emulate” for women. Rooted in the body, the sensible transcendental is what Amy Hollywood calls “transcendence within and through immanence.” It is the process of bringing bodily specificity into the transcendent realm where this specificity can gain signifying power. For Irigaray, the transcendent realm is home to the divine. Ultimate values, projected as divine, serve as horizons towards which each gender strives. Irigaray insists that the sensible transcendental for women be rooted in the sensible and therefore always unfolding, changing, and developing. The sensible transcendental is a continual process grounded in the changing, living body. Within

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70 Interestingly, some scholars interpret Irigaray as problematically delineating these “feminine” qualities, while others argue that she deliberately leaves classification of the feminine open-ended. For examples of each position respectively, see Joy, *Divine Love*; Whitford, “Irigaray’s Body Symbolic.”
Irigaray’s feminine, development is not linear, or moving towards an ideal. Any proposed divine must be in flux in order to avoid phallic concreteness and coherence. Any sensible transcendental must be continually evolving, corresponding to the infinite permutations of bodily forms and sensations. I am arguing that the sensible transcendental is an especially useful model for bodies who experience illness because these bodies are in an immediate state of change.

I propose, then, that Plummer’s text can be read as projecting his ill body’s physicality in an Irigarayan fashion to help establish full subjectivity in his changed and changing body. Plummer’s account of his illness, his process of “speaking the body,” arguably represents the sensible transcendental because through his language, his body enters discourse. Through discourse—transcendence of the sensible—the experience of his ill body can enter the imagination of others. In this process, his body is transcended horizontally.

The vertical transcendence of the body in Plummer’s narrative occurs with his often jarring, expressive language for shifts in his body. Expressing his shifting bodily experience in words that shock, disgust, or scare readers may force readers to come to terms with the non-phallocentric reality of his body. Through his language, a non-phallocentric subjectivity of illness begins to take shape in the transcendent realm. Like Irigaray, Plummer expresses the reality of his non-phallocentric, particular bodily experience and reality in language that defies the assumptions and ideals of phallocentrism.

71 Margaret Whitford sees this process occur in those feminist scholars who engage with Irigaray’s feminine bodily imagery; even if it is limited to that small group, the effect of the imagery is powerful because it allows a particular embodied subjectivity (the sensible) to enter the symbolic realm. See Whitford, “Irigaray’s Body Symbolic.”
While no individual account can speak definitely for ill bodies as a whole, I suggest that Plummer’s account of his experience can be read as an initial tracing out of a sensible transcendental for ill bodies. In disrupting his own phallic conception of his body, Plummer exhibits qualities that Irigaray attributes to feminine bodies. Reflecting Irigaray’s imagery, Plummer’s body becomes more fluid in various ways. Previously hidden bodily fluids—blood, bile, etc.—are now visible and cross the imagined boundaries of his body. The crossing of these boundaries by fluids and also by machines, tubes, and surgeons disrupt his notion of his body as bounded. Plummer experiences a lack of conscious or rational control of his body that he had taken for granted in his health; an Irigarayan subversion of traditional (phallic) logic is at play in his expressing his changing bodily experience. Like Irigaray’s female, Plummer experiences his ill body as multiple. Related in Irigarayan language, we might say Plummer’s ill body is not-one. Not only do multiple identities exist within Plummer corresponding to bodily experiences, but also his identity as singular actor becomes one inseparable from his community. Plummer comes to share his body with his transplant donor in a unique way that I see as parallel to Irigaray’s imagery of feminine lips (two, not divisible to ones). Operating like Irigaray’s proposed sensible transcendental, Plummer expresses his sensible—the reality of his ill body—through the transcendent—language.

For many ill or differently functioning bodies, imagining an actual deity in terms of their own physicality is powerful and needed. While many religious scholars have

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72 My advisor Margaret Kamitsuka has pointed out that this sharing of the body and other symptoms accentuating Plummer’s lack of control (like the release of blood) parallel the experience of pregnancy.
proposed vertically transcendent divinities, I propose that a more sensible
transcendental projection in the form of language is at work for Plummer. The experiences
of individuals like Plummer, who ponders but ultimately recoils from the notion of the
“religious,” require what I will call a non-religious transcendence. This transcendence
occurs through an Irigarayan expression of subjectivity and the body in non-phallocentric
terms. While conceiving of his body as a phallic unit leads Plummer to feel uncertainty, fear,
and disgust, his shifted bodily consciousness brings him to a sense of interconnectedness
with others and opportunity within illness. Through illness he comes to understand himself
as supported by those to whom he trusts his body’s control. Reflecting on the experience,
he is able to understand himself as dependent on others both socially and in intimate
physicality (the sharing of his very body). Although in many ways, the physicality of
Plummer’s body changes drastically with the onset of disease, Plummer most likely
experienced non-phallic bodily realities (for example, the controllable and uncontrollable
flow of liquids with drinking, sweating, urinating, etc.) on a daily basis. It is only when these
non-phallic processes occur in illness that they appear to be met with more explicit
recognition and unease for Plummer. By articulating his body’s specificity in the
transcendent realm of language, Plummer is able to come to terms with his body in its ill
state, tracing out a sensible transcendental of his ill body. Reflecting Irigaray, the sensible
transcendental works for Plummer on an individual level by mediating his own bodily
experience. But even for this expressly non-religious individual, bodily qualities expressed
in language gain the status of transcendence. Plummer’s text can be read as reflecting

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Irigaray’s sensible transcendental because he is establishing his non-phallic bodily reality in the transcendent realm.

While what I see in Plummer’s sensible transcendental is fluid borders, a disrupted sense of interiority and exteriority, interconnectedness and interdependence, embracing loss of control and cohabitation of the body, these values in themselves do not represent the sensible transcendental. Rather, the sensible transcendental here lies in his process of narrating his body’s non-phallocentric physicality. Expressing the body’s particularity in language moves the sensible to the transcendent. Language transcends the individual body horizontally and vertically. As with Irigaray, this physicality largely subverts phallic logic. So, rather than a body that is a phallic one (cohesive, bounded, controlled) the feminine body and ill body are both not-one. Each projects its physicality through language into the transcendent realm.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, I will offer a brief outline of my paper and consider possible further implications. By examining the parallel language used for the ill body in the journal of sociologist Ken Plummer and the feminine body in theorist Luce Irigaray’s work, I have proposed Irigaray’s sensible transcendental as a possible remedy for the problem of lack of representation in phallocentric Western culture. I have offered my reading of Plummer’s text with Irigaray’s critique of phallocentrism as a critical lens. Her critique of phallocentrism, the privileging of phallic qualities in Western culture at large, has informed my interpretation of Plummer’s subjectivity throughout his liver disease and healing. My
reading of Plummer's journal discussed some of the manifestations of his underlying, phallocentric conception of his body, and outlined his shift in perspective. After connecting the language he uses to language Irigaray uses for the feminine, I argued that Plummer’s ill body occupies an analogous place to the feminine within Irigaray’s work. I finally turned to Irigaray’s remedy for the absence of women’s subjectivity from Western culture, the sensible transcendental. My paper offers one interpretation of Plummer’s text through the lens of Irigarayian theory.

This paper represents just one instance of a possible sensible transcendental. I think the first way to develop this topic further would be to include many more perspectives. Including narratives of more ill bodies would complicate this issue and likely lead to a richer set of conclusions. Another possible area of expansion would be to extend its scope to the other contemporary “French feminist” authors with whom Irigaray is often linked, including Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Another issue that I would have liked to develop in this paper with more time is the issue of pain; I have argued here that language has power to mediate the experience of the body and illness in powerful ways, but I have not specifically examined the experience of pain. Given more time, I would like to look specifically at pain as a factor of illness; to what extent is pain socially determined and how might the sensible transcendental include the experience of pain? Nevertheless, I close by stressing again the importance of language in determining the experience of bodies in Western culture; I hope to have shown one way that language can act as a powerful cultural and social mediator. Using language, ill bodies and all bodies can move otherwise repressed sensible realities to the transcendent realm of cultural recognition and value. Following Irigaray, I believe that the sensible transcendental process of “narrating, symbolizing,
storying, even performing”\textsuperscript{74} the body can positively influence the experience ill and healthy bodies in Western culture.

\textsuperscript{74} Plummer, “My Multiple Sick Bodies,” 84.
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