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The Feminist Futures of Reading Diffractively: How Barad's Methodology Replaces Conflict-based Readings of Beauvoir and Irigaray

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Abstract

Quantum leaps happen in texts, too. This reading of the role of the quantum leap in Karen Barad's agential realism is necessary, because arguing that the diffractive reading strategy proposed by Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology mirrors the physical phenomenon of diffraction would indeed be representationalist. Reviewing how Barad—in her own oeuvre—has transformed diffraction into an innovative reading methodology that could not only potentially challenge the epistemological underpinnings of the canonization process that is at work in feminist theory, but could also radically change the canonization practice of feminist oeuvres itself, our article embarks on a detailed examination of the ways in which the oeuvres of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray have been mistakenly categorized and canonized in a hierarchical and Oedipalized manner. This conflict-based narrative has not only paralyzed the oeuvres of Irigaray and Beauvoir, but also has had a negative impact on the canonization of sexual difference philosophy as a whole in feminist theory. By (re)reading the oeuvres diffractively, this article brings the feminist philosophies of Beauvoir and Irigaray together by invalidating the idea that the feminist canonization process always has to run along the lines of discontinuity, Oedipalization and dialectization.

Introduction: from conflict to affirmation

[1] Most feminist theorists will have a hard time when confronted with philosopher Slavoj Žižek's recent engagements with physicist-philosopher Karen Barad's work. His blatant sexist and homophobic attitude toward Barad is particularly striking, considering the fact that Žižek thinks of himself as a radically progressive philosopher. In a lecture titled "Ontological Incompleteness in Painting, Literature and Quantum Theory" held at the European Graduate School in 2012,^[1] Žižek demonstrates that he does not have his theoretical physics straight, that he does not know his references, and that he can only read "that woman" (i.e. Barad) in an Oedipal and unashamedly confrontational manner. While saying that he likes Barad's rigorous and complex interpretation of Niels Bohr's physics and philosophy, he at the same time questions Barad's seriousness to the point of asking the audience to "kick [him] in the face". Unnecessary references are then made to Barad's friendship with Judith Butler, to the "postmodern

jargon" (Žižek) that both feminist theorists share, and to their—and Wendy Brown's—lesbian sexuality, which is presented as an insult to all men. It goes without saying that Žižek is the real insulter here!

[2] Feminist theorists cannot afford not to respond to Žižek, in our opinion. The long history of feminist engagements with philosophy and science demonstrates that sexism and homophobia need to be fought against continuously and explicitly, within and outside the canon (Harding). Barad's oeuvre is not the only one that has been read through an Oedipalized focus: the philosophies and feminisms of French so-called 'equality' feminist Simone de Beauvoir and Belgian-born alleged 'difference' feminist Luce Irigaray have been interpreted in the exact same confrontational and oppositional manner. The Oedipalized misreadings and narratives of these oeuvres matter, just like Žižek's problematic reading of Barad matters, because these readings and narratives have played a crucial role in the misconstruction of feminist theory as a scenery of catfights; a domain of women engaged in bitter, dividing debates.

[3] A feminist reinterpretation of Žižek's reading of Barad, in tandem with Žižek's interpretation of French thinker Quentin Meillassoux's philosophy, could prove to be the ideal launch pad to expose the underlying Oedipal structure of such misreadings. Since Žižek himself provides us with the building blocks of such an interpretation—an interpretation that we will consequently develop in "a mode of assenting to rather than dissenting from those 'primary' texts" (Grosz 3)—his case reveals the ways in which we could put an end to Oedipalization via diffraction. *Diffraction reading* is a Baradian neologism (with roots in Donna Haraway's philosophy) and our argument in this article will be that Oedipal readings—of feminists/women and *within* feminism—can be undone by the affirmative strategy of reading diffractively.

On philosophical blind spots and deadlocks: Žižek's reading of Barad and Meillassoux

[4] Žižek's *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* is more than just a thick description of Hegelian philosophy, its theoretical predecessors and its travels through the canon of Western philosophy—although Žižek oddly enough forgot to include Beauvoir and Irigaray, two of G.W.F. Hegel's most important (but also most critical) feminist followers. *Less than Nothing* also engages with two very recent Continental philosophical inventions, namely speculative materialism, and agential realism. The first trend is by and large Meillassoux's, although many more scholars self-identify as such or are being slotted into this category (see Bryant et al.). The second movement is led by Barad. Žižek asks how they interpret Hegel and to what extent they remain under the spell of (a) Hegelianism.

[5] Žižek spends a considerable amount of time reading Meillassoux in *Less than Nothing* and he convincingly argues how Meillassoux's work falls into its own trap, or is distorted by the same kind of blind spot that Meillassoux ironically enough previously attributed to idealist philosophers (Žižek 627-8). Žižek needs to be thanked for this evaluation, and for the analysis that follows, in which he claims that Meillassoux remains trapped in the question of the subject, while aiming at nothing less than eliminating anthropocentrism. Žižek argues that Meillassoux remains confined to "the masculine side of Lacan's formulae of sexuation" (636) and to Hegelianism *precisely in his critique of Hegel* (636). What Žižek successfully demonstrates is that Meillassoux cannot succeed in his project of moving away from

"representation in the Leibnizian monad; Schelling's Nature, or the objective subject-object; Hegelian Mind; Schopenhauer's Will; the Will (or *Wills*) to Power in Nietzsche; perception loaded with memory in Bergson; Deleuze's Life, etc" (Meillassoux 37) on the basis of the charge of correlationism (a Kantianism). As feminists, however, this conflict in *brotherly machines* (see Jardine 223) should not be our main concern.

[6] What does matter to us is that Žižek's reading implies that Barad's and Meillassoux's positions differ: Meillassoux, in contrast to Barad, is unable to follow up on the philosophical impetus of Bohrian quantum physics. This is so, because this impetus pertains to the question of the subject. In Žižek's words:

Meillassoux is well aware that quantum physics, with its uncertainty principle and emphasis on the role the observer plays in the collapse of the wave function, seems to undermine the notion of objective reality independent of any observer and thus give an unexpected boost to Kantian transcendentalism; however, as he points out, their similarity is deceptive [...] while in Kant's transcendentalism the "observer"-subject constitutes what he observes, in quantum physics, the observer's active role itself is re-inscribed into physical reality. (Žižek 634)

[7] Discussing Žižek's reading of Barad's onto-epistemological in(ter)vention^[2] would nonetheless lead us too far afield, since Žižek's reading is plagued by a lot of internal problems (Heisenberg's uncertainty differs from Bohr's indeterminacy, for instance, and he consistently misquotes Barad throughout *Less than Nothing*).^[3] For one thing, Žižek (935) ascribes an "implicit naturalism" to Barad,^[4] which, according to Žižek, makes her disregard sexual difference. Where Barad makes her point about the subject's entanglement with/in agential reality, Žižek attributes a hierarchical reasoning to Barad (quantum physics can understand classical physicists, whereas classical physics cannot understand quantum physicists) and claims that:

[...] it would be too easy to simply privilege the 'feminine' non-All [quantum physics] and to reduce the masculine totalization-through-exception to a secondary illusion [classical physics]—here, more than ever, we should insist on (sexual) difference itself as a primary fact, as the impossible Real with regard to which both positions, 'masculine' and 'feminine,' appear as secondary, as two attempts to resolve its deadlock. (Žižek 934-5)

[8] Contrary to what Žižek believes, feminist philosophers *have* taken on the issue of sexual difference and the practice of psychoanalysis. In most general terms, feminist philosophers have dealt with the Real (symptoms, psychoses) while claiming the empirical. You may ask what this feminist attempt looks like, and whether it has been successful. Let us shuffle the cards and keep in mind that feminist work can indeed demonstrate how "[t]he structure of sexual difference is already that of diffraction" (Žižek 935). In the following sections we will first discuss how Beauvoir and Irigaray have developed a notion of sexual difference by reflecting upon the mother-daughter relationship and how this has resulted in their commentators reading a possible antinomy between their feminist philosophical positions. In the next step, we will explore what a diffractive reading can bring to both this claimed antinomy and the nature of sexual difference. Hence, diffraction—which will also be introduced as a reading methodology in one of the sections below—features on multiple levels in our article. Following Barad's methodological innovation, diffraction is "a physical phenomenon that lies at the center of some key discussions in

physics and the philosophy of physics" and "an apt metaphor for describing the methodological approach [...] of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (Barad, *Meeting* 71), thus responding to the nature of sexual difference as it comes about in differing feminist philosophies.

More blind spots and deadlocks: Beauvoir's and Irigaray's Oedipal beginnings

But, well, from all that I have seen, it appears that mother/daughter relationships are generally bad. No matter what the mother does, because...the mother wants to be a friend at the same time. As she also wants to be the one to direct her daughter. (Beauvoir qtd. in Wenzel 26)

In order to be desired and loved by men, we have to abandon the mother, replace her, eliminate her so that we can be the same. Which destroys the possibility of love between mother and daughter. (Irigaray, *Éthique* 101)^[5]

[9] It may sound counterintuitive to say that feminism has been suffering from its own feminine Oedipus complex, yet some theorists have argued that such an 'Electra complex' indeed does exist (see e.g. Faludi). This complex—whether real or constructed—obviously has had some effect on feminism's storytelling, since the narratives about the feminist philosophical oeuvres of Beauvoir and Irigaray have been clearly read along the lines of the mother-daughter divide—a divide that in its turn should be linked to the issue of feminism's generational matricide. The focus on the so-called divide between Beauvoir and Irigaray may again sound counterintuitive, since both thinkers have analyzed the problematic patriarchal relationships between women, and between mothers and daughters in particular, as can be seen in the quotations above. Beauvoir suggested that daughters almost always rebel against their mothers, and stated that this would not change unless women were seen as more than phallic mothers. Irigaray has also paid attention to the mother-daughter divide throughout her oeuvre by claiming that patriarchy destroyed the possibility of fulfilling relationships between women. In such a patriarchal world, daughters are supposed to fight for the attention of their fathers and men, and are hence stuck in a situation of eternal female, and especially motherly, rivalry.

[10] Although these patriarchal relationships between women and their daughters have been represented as examples of the 'Electra complex' in feminist literature, we agree with Irigaray, who in *Speculum de l'autre femme* argued that these matricides and sororicides have been Oedipally constructed. According to Irigaray, the neo-Freudian 'Electra complex' is in fact nothing more than a sham,^[6] since Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic model of children's sexual development and subjectivity does not take the existence of sexual difference into account. The little girl is merely a "disadvantaged little man" in Freudian theory (Irigaray, *Speculum* 26), because such a 'feminine' Oedipus complex operates via masculinized, phallic parameters. The Electra figure is therefore a mere pawn in the hands of her father when killing her mother, which makes the concept of an 'Electra complex' that supposedly features a female autonomous subject completely inconceivable. Irigaray herself opposes this kind of masculinized thinking: she wishes to revalue the relationships amongst women and leave the constructed, patriarchal Oedipal drama between mothers and daughters behind, while reopening the possibility of a "body-to-

body encounter with the mother" (Irigaray, *Sexes et parentés* 26).

[11] Since both Beauvoir and Irigaray thus seem to be preoccupied with analyzing these Oedipalized mother-daughter relationships, it comes as a surprise that the feminisms of Beauvoir and Irigaray have been read in a purely Oedipal manner: whereas Beauvoir is often depicted as the mother of French and European feminism, Irigaray is usually seen as Beauvoir's disloyal or *undutiful daughter* (see Braidotti, *Patterns*; "Embodiment"). This has everything to do with the fact that Irigaray's feminism has been interpreted as moving beyond Beauvoir's humanist equality feminism, while supposedly uncritically paying homage to the psychoanalytical—and not so feminist—'Fathers' (i.e. Freud and Jacques Lacan). The feminisms of Beauvoir and Irigaray have therefore traditionally been reconstructed in a dichotomized or binary structure.^[7] Beauvoir is usually seen as a protagonist of an equality feminism that wants to free women from patriarchal oppression by giving them equal rights, whereas Irigaray is said to plea for a feminism of difference that solely focuses on the specificity of women, and wishes to grant women specific rights on the basis of sexual difference. It is exactly this kind of dichotomized reconstruction of Beauvoir as a feminist mother versus Irigaray as her undutiful daughter that we want to get away from by rereading their oeuvres in a different, more dynamic manner.

[12] An altered dynamics has actually already been hinted at by Irigaray in *Je, tu, nous*—a book that opens with Irigaray paying homage to Beauvoir:

What woman has not read *Le deuxième sexe*? What woman hasn't been inspired by it? Hasn't become, perhaps, a feminist? Simone de Beauvoir was in fact one of the first women of our century to remind us of the meaning of the exploitation of women and she encouraged each woman who, accidentally, had discovered her book, to feel less alone and more certain to not let herself be subjected or let herself be taken in. (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 9)

[13] Irigaray's tone, however, soon changes, and after stating that she never was that "close" to Beauvoir (10), she explains that Beauvoir's rejection (of the younger feminist philosopher of difference embodied by, among others, Irigaray herself) may have something to do with her own particular philosophical and psychoanalytical background,^[8] which has convinced her of the fact that identity is always sexualized. Irigaray then partially rejects equality feminism by stating that "demanding equality, as women" appears to be "a faulty expression of a real objective" (12). There is nonetheless an interesting process of *(dis)identification* (see Henry and Van der Tuin) at work here: instead of focusing on these Oedipalized dialectics, one could highlight the fact that Irigaray *works through* Beauvoirian feminism in a critical yet productive manner, and transforms it *from the inside out*. Or as Irigaray stated it herself:

To pay respect to Simone de Beauvoir is to follow the theoretical and practical work for social justice that she has done in her own way; and it doesn't mean that we have to close the horizon of liberation that she has opened up for so many women, and men... (Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 14)

[14] There are of course notable differences between Beauvoir's and Irigaray's feminist philosophies, and we certainly want to respect the singularity of their feminisms, but we also wish to refrain from Oedipalizing their oeuvres, as has traditionally been done. Irigaray undeniably affirms the continuity

between her oeuvre and that of Beauvoir, and it is precisely this aspect that convinces us of the fact that there must be other ways of relating to oeuvres than reading them in a conflict-based, Oedipalized manner. At the same time, we wish to do justice to the fact that the current-day feminist philosopher cannot but also make provision for the ways in which other feminist philosophers feature in these oeuvres and how colleagues have related feminist philosophical oeuvres to one another. It is in the nature of feminist philosophy to be generational. The question is *how* this generationality is actualized.

Diffraction as a feminist reading methodology

[15] What would a reading strategy that steers clear of conflict-based misreadings look like? We are looking for a method that would first of all allow us to reread Beauvoir's and Irigaray's oeuvres in a more continuous manner, so that their philosophies could be freed from the typical equality versus difference perspective they have usually been read through. We are furthermore seeking an explicit *feminist* reading strategy that would take us *through and beyond* the Oedipal scenery and its generational dialectics (see Ahmed 118), and that would open up both oeuvres to each other's philosophical ideas. To come to a truly different, more open and fluid reading method than the one that is central to, for example, critical discourse analysis, one has to cherish "another kind of critical consciousness" (Haraway, *Modest Witness* 273); a consciousness or vision that is "committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of Same" (273). In other words, we need to find a method that allows us to read these oeuvres in a dialogical manner without reducing them to each other's replicas. It is this idea of a different consciousness that brings us back to *diffraction*, and the philosophies of Haraway and Barad.

[16] Working in the Hegelian tradition of the master-slave dialectics and addressing its "sadistic perversity" (233), Haraway in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, as well as in her seminal article "Situated Knowledges", engages with the concept of vision and makes the thought-provoking claim that any perspective is always already embodied. Haraway therefore wishes to reconceptualize vision and objectivity in a feminist manner and proposes "politics and epistemologies of location" (Haraway, *Simians* 195) that accentuate the embodiment, locatedness and partiality of women's experiences, knowledge and objectivity claims. She calls these politics and epistemologies *situated*.

[17] Such a feminist move is performed in "The Promises of Monsters", where Haraway mentions the concept of diffraction for the first time by describing it as a "more subtle vision" (Haraway 70) than reflexivity. This critical diffractive vision or consciousness is defined as follows:

Diffraction does not produce 'the same' displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear. (70)^[9]

[18] Thinking diffractively hence differs from reflexivity, and it is this distinction that is further explored in *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*. Haraway here argues for a replacement of reflexivity in its traditional sense with the concept of diffraction—which stands for the diffracted difference patterns that arise when light, water, or sound waves encounter a physical obstacle in physics experiments or in the

world at large. Quantum physics extends this reading, with the help of the famous two-slit experiment, on the basis of the research finding that, under certain circumstances, particles, and even *single* particles, can produce diffraction patterns (Barad, *Meeting* 83). Because of the fact that diffraction creates change and upholds differences, Haraway uses diffraction as "an optical metaphor for the effort to make difference in the world" (*Modest Witness*, 16).

[19] Stating that "reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere [...]" and is not critical enough (16), Haraway leaves the Hegelian master-slave mode behind. Rather than being trapped in a logic of sameness, reflexivity in its traditional sense not only prefers the semiotic over the material, but also overemphasizes the dichotomy between the knowing subject and its object of research. Haraway's project of situated knowledges, on the other hand, requires a mode of research that enables the researcher to register that "[w]hat boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies" (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 595). Diffraction allows for precisely this.

[20] In a recent interview, Haraway attaches an even more vital meaning to diffraction, namely that of engaging in critical scholarship by combining different fields of study and by letting "different reading skills [...] constantly interrupt each other productively" (Schneider 149). Such productive interruptions thoroughly affect "[t]he visual technology typically work[ing] by reducing the other to a flawless, perfectly controlled mirror of the self, in a dialectic of master-slave set out clearly by Hegel [...] in *Phenomenology of Spirit*" (Haraway, *Primate Visions* 233). In an attempt to avoid being lured into "natural object [woman, animal, other] and designed product [man, self] reflect[ing] each other in the infinite regress of face-to-face mirrors, ground by the law of Hegel's master-servant dialectic" (60), Haraway breaks away from the repetitive logic of feminist standpoint theory (which is a Hegelianism). The road to the non-linear logic of diffraction can be named "an-Oedipal",^[10] also on the basis of the break with Hegel, and it efficiently tackles the either/or-models that have been used to read Beauvoir as either the good or bad mother of feminism (Braidotti, *Patterns* 170), and that have made Irigaray into her disloyal daughter—i.e. Beauvoir's negative.

[21] However, in order to really understand what diffractive reading is all about, we will have to discuss Karen Barad's neologism of *intra-action*, used throughout her work. Barad not only completes Haraway's conceptualization of diffraction as a metaphor and methodology, but adds something new to it, as we will show. Barad's conceptualization of diffraction is first of all connected to her critique of *representationalism*: like Haraway, Barad wants to move away from the traditional representationalist ontology and epistemology where the knowing subject, the object that is being represented, and the produced representations or knowledge are seen as separately existing entities (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 122-3). What is problematic about representationalist theories is that they work with a "geometrical optics of reflection" (122), as if the created representations (which we also found in Haraway's break with Hegelian dialectics) immediately mirror reality, and as if there is such a thing as pure and objective knowledge. In a move similar to Haraway, Barad opts for a feminist conceptualization of objectivity by replacing reflection with diffraction and specifying an agential realist onto-epistemology.

[22] "*Diffractively reading*" (122, our emphasis) Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's ideas about

discursive practices, power, and matter, Barad not only wishes to bring matter and materiality back into the spotlight, but also hopes to deconstruct the nature-culture dichotomy and the anthropocentrism that supports it. Her posthumanist agential realism is a "relational ontology" (130) which proposes that phenomena and discursive practices are always already in a relationship of "intra-action" (133), rather than being non-related, ontologically separate entities. According to Barad, this agential realist model not only shows us that *matter matters*, i.e. that "materiality is an active factor in processes of materialization", and that "[n]ature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances" (145); but it also highlights the relationality between discursive practices and materiality.

[23] Intra-action, according to Barad, is a more powerful notion than *interaction*. Whereas an interactive model supposes that interaction takes place between ontologically separated objects, an intra-active model tackles the boundaries between these objects, and proposes that phenomena are always already entangled (133). Barad's intra-active ontology can be neatly summarized by the following passage:

The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. (135)

[24] Reading the oeuvres of Beauvoir and Irigaray diffractively would therefore stimulate the intra-activity between them. Both oeuvres could become more powerful in a feminist sense, theoretically and politically speaking, if one were to highlight their relationality and continuity. Furthermore, when it comes to diffraction, Barad not only refers to this notion as a different kind of optics and consciousness,^[11] but she also—more explicitly than Haraway—uses diffraction as her own critical reading method: Barad uses performativity "as a diffraction grating" to read different oeuvres "through one another" (129). According to Barad, reading diffractively is not a comparative method, nor is it about taking different disciplinary approaches and domains—or in our case, oeuvres— together in an additive, "bidirectional" manner (Barad, *Meeting* 92), or in an oppositional way. Reading diffractively is rather based on a transdisciplinary and conversational approach (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 92-3),^[12] and thus tries to get away from the negational logic in reading theories and/or oeuvres against one another.

[25] A diffractive method, according to Barad, hence pays attention to the specificity of the argumentation and the "fine details" (93) of theories and/or oeuvres with the aim of dodging a hierarchic logic in which one oeuvre or approach would be prioritized (93). This is exactly what we wish to achieve when rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray diffractively: we do not want to prioritize Irigaray's feminist philosophy because her feminism might seem more actual and less masculinized, or, reversely, label Beauvoir's humanist feminism as superior because it seems to be easier to put into practice. Diffractive reading is a strategy that not only helps us with discarding Oedipal narratives, generational dialectics, and dichotomized binaries, but it also shows us that the oeuvres of Beauvoir and Irigaray can cross-fertilize each other, without having to fear that they would eventually get caught up in a reflective logic of sameness.

On productive interruptions and diffraction: Beauvoir's and Irigaray's an-Oedipal relatings

[26] When reading the oeuvres of Beauvoir and Irigaray diffractively, there is one philosophical issue in particular that seems to be driving them apart, namely their different conceptualizations of alterity. These conceptualizations—that are obviously a crucial feminist philosophical issue—nonetheless also provide us with the opportunity to open up both oeuvres for one another, and let them break out of the either/or-framework they have been read through.

[27] The differences between Beauvoir's and Irigaray's conceptualizations of alterity appear to be unbridgeable: Irigaray criticizes Beauvoir for staying in the phallogocentric "model of the one and the many" (Irigaray and Guynn 11); a model that takes the mastery of the masculine subject for granted, while wishing to undo woman's otherness by making her equal to man. Beauvoir's ideas about woman as the Other are built on a "singular model" of subjectivity (11), whereas Irigaray wants to move towards a different model; a "model of the two" that leaves the differences between the subjects intact (11). Irigaray is equally provocative in "'Je-Luce Irigaray'" (Hirsh et al.), where she intensifies the drama between her and Beauvoir by claiming that her own conceptualization of otherness is completely different, or in Irigaray's words: "She [i.e. Beauvoir] refuses to be the Other and I [i.e. Irigaray] demand to be the radical Other in order to exit from a horizon" (114). In addition to this comment, Irigaray also claims that Beauvoir's woman as Other stays "within the dimension of immanence" (113). This not only goes against Beauvoir's own statements in *Le deuxième sexe*, where she claims transcendence for women, but it also does not go along with Irigaray's previous statements in *Je, tu, nous* (12)—statements that imply that Beauvoir's equality feminism would lead to the "neutralization" of the sexes, because her project is founded on a reductive and masculinist conceptualization of transcendence.^[13] This philosophical impasse has everything to do with their Hegelian heritage, and it is through an analysis of Beauvoir's and Irigaray's positions concerning Hegel that we can get the dialogue between these oeuvres going.

[28] Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* is filled with references to Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, and he has been one of Irigaray's favorite discussion partners as well. Whereas Irigaray's relationship with Hegel has always been one of criticism, many of Beauvoir's commentators have argued that Beauvoir's position concerning Hegelianism has been quite vague: this scholarly debate revolves around the question of whether Beauvoir has fully appropriated Hegel's master-slave dialectics, and equated woman as Other to Hegel's slave. If the latter case is true, then Beauvoir's concepts of transcendence and otherness might have also been infected by Hegel's phallogocentrism, or so the story goes.^[14]

[29] The dispute therefore mainly revolves around Beauvoir's interpretation of the master-slave dialectics—and Beauvoir's take on the master-slave dialectics in *Le deuxième sexe* is indeed ambiguous. Beauvoir (*Le deuxième sexe* / 22) starts by stating that "woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal", and she repeats this idea of the Other being a mere servant to man throughout the first book. When Beauvoir talks about the fact that woman in patriarchal systems has been regarded as the link between man and nature, and has therefore been doomed to reproduction, she even argues that "[c]ertain passages where Hegel's dialectics defines the relationship of master versus slave would apply much better to the relationship of man versus woman" (97). This claim entails that woman, being a

"dependent consciousness" (Beauvoir 97), really has been *mastered* by man at a certain point in time. However, Beauvoir later contrastingly notes that the real master-slave dialectics has developed primarily between men, or in Beauvoir's words: woman "escaped slavery", because "she, in a certain way, kept man dependent on her even though she relied on him" (110), which means that man and woman seem to have been in a relationship of asymmetrical, but reciprocal, codependency. Unlike the slave in Hegel's paradigm, woman also never demands "reciprocal recognition" (190); she really was and is the "absolute Other" (191). Woman then seems to be placed outside the master-slave paradigm. Yet, if this paradigm is not an example of how men have oppressed women, why would Beauvoir feel the need to refer to it?

[30] Reading Beauvoir and Irigaray diffractively could help us get out of this impasse: from *Speculum* onwards, Irigaray has rigorously criticized Hegel for his patriarchal ideas about woman, the family, morality and politics. And this critical, subversive attitude towards Hegelianism has been underlined by the majority of Irigaray's commentators,^[15] which implies that her dialogue with Hegel is much less ambiguous than Beauvoir's. Irigaray's comments on Hegel's master-slave dialectics are usually accompanied by a more general critique of his interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*—and although we do not wish to dwell on Irigaray's own interpretation of the former tragedy for too long, Antigone is obviously the paradigmatic female figure to which Irigaray comes back whenever she is criticizing Hegel's dialectics of recognition.

[31] Irigaray's earliest analysis of Hegel's dialectics can be found in *Speculum*'s provokingly titled chapter "The Eternal Irony of the Community": Irigaray here attacks Hegel for making woman into "[t]he woman-mother" (*Speculum* 275); a non-citizen, and an ethical agent that is not allowed to be self-conscious in his patriarchal philosophy. In addition to that, Irigaray shows us how Hegel interpreted Antigone's acts versus her deceased brother Polyneices, and Thebes' patriarch Creon. According to Hegel, a dialectics of recognition arises between Antigone and Polyneices, once Antigone has defied human and state law (represented by Creon) by burying her brother. Yet, this is all a "*Hegelian dream*" (269), because the recognition that takes place between these two sexually different, yet related subjects, is "without reciprocity" (270): Antigone—like most women in patriarchy—is only allowed to be the "the *living mirror*, the source that reflects the development of the autonomy of the self-same" in Hegel's philosophy (275). She buries her brother, and acts ethically, but she is not recognized properly for this act, nor given full subjectivity. This is why Irigaray depicts Antigone as "the antiwoman" (*Éthique* 115): she is merely "a production of a culture that has been written by only men" (115).

[32] Is Antigone then the mere slave of her masters, stuck in recognizing the subjectivity of Polyneices and Creon? Not exactly: there is a subversive aspect attached to Antigone's actions, too. She is not only a figure of political revolt, but she also refuses to let Creon master her, and resists becoming a phallic wife and mother by committing suicide.^[16] Antigone is "neither master nor slave" (115): she "risks nothing" and hangs herself in order to become a subject on her own terms (116). Could this all not help reveal what Beauvoir is trying to say in her master-slave interpretation? Might Beauvoir also be moving beyond Hegel's dialectics by slyly deconstructing his philosophy and claiming that woman as the Other is not even a part of this phallic dialectics?

[33] Up until now, we have shown that Beauvoir's woman is placed outside the master-slave dialectics:¹⁷ like Irigaray's Antigone, Beauvoir's woman is not risking her life—she is not like Hegel's slave. Diffracted through Irigaray's idea of how culture has established itself on a metaphysical matricide, one could say that Beauvoir productively uses Hegel's master-slave paradigm to show that such a dialectics could never completely capture the relationship between women and men. These subjects have been interdependent throughout history, but because of woman's link to nature and life, this interdependence has never been acknowledged by man, and their relationship has been remolded into a patriarchal, single dialectics in which woman became the radical other of man. It is this aspect that makes woman differ from the slave—and her relationship with man is much more asymmetrical than the one between master and slave: the latter still experiences some symmetry (albeit a hierarchical one), because they each have to recognize the other as either master or slave to know where they stand, whereas man's dependence on woman has been completely silenced by and in patriarchy. This interpretation suits the overall framework of *Le deuxième sexe*, in which Beauvoir not only looks for a way to make women into subjects of their own, but also hopes to establish a new form of reciprocal erotic ethics in which the alterity of the other would be respected (see Vintges).

[34] Diffracted through an Irigarayan perspective, it becomes obvious that we are still waiting for such a dialectics to come into being. Irigaray already hinted at the importance of moving towards a different dialectics that could take the duality of the sexes into account when stating in *Speculum* that "a single dialectics would no longer be sufficient in order to articulate their copulation" (278). Irigaray tells us in *J'aime à toi* that we need "a double dialectics" that would make room for both the horizons or the different worlds of each subject (106), in order to really "escape from the relationships between master(s)-slave(s)" (107). This longing for a future *double dialectics* could be diffractively read into *Le deuxième sexe*: when discussing how woman could be liberated (without however having to give up her femininity), Beauvoir (*Le deuxième sexe II* 504) states that "[t]he free woman is still in the process of being born [...]", and that "the future remains wide open" (504). This means that a dialectics such as this, that could embody the encounter between two subjects, is still in the making, largely because of the fact that woman is still looking for a way to assert her subjectivity. Woman wants "to emerge into the light of transcendence," as men have been able to do for centuries (508), yet, this does not mean that Beauvoir is claiming that women should become *like* men: she in fact ends *Le deuxième sexe* with a critique of the continuous devaluation of femininity, and with the striking statement that "certain differences between man and woman will always remain" (521). Beauvoir hence does not deny the existence of sexual difference: it is just woman as an absolute and inferior Other that she wishes to get rid of, and this becomes clear when read through an Irigarayan perspective.

[35] Irigaray's double dialectics—or the "triple dialectical process," that consists of a separate dialectics for each subject (*Conversations* 127), and a double dialectics for the both of them—has been the central topic of her later works and essays, such as *Éthique*, *J'aime à toi*, *The Way of Love*, *Sharing the World* and "The Ecstasy of the Between-Us". This new dialectical model is based on the existence of two sexually different subjects. According to Irigaray, "there are always at least two worlds," (*Sharing the World* x), and we, as subjects, are "always already affected by the existence of the other" (xv). Yet, this

"double human subjectivity" (xvi) has not been acknowledged in Western culture and philosophy, which has made authentic encounters between subjects impossible. Irigaray's own *philosophie féminine*—through which we are reading Beauvoir's project—unveils another dialectics of recognition that bases itself on upholding the negative between the subjects. This negative should of course not be confused with Hegel's negative, as is explained in *J'aime à toi*:

The negative in sexual difference is an acceptance of the limits of my gender (*genre*) and recognition of the other's irreducibility. It cannot be overcome, but it offers us a positive access [...] to the other. (Irigaray, *J'aime à toi* 32-33)

[36] The negative, or "the insurmountable place" (Irigaray, *The Way of Love* 168) between the two, has to be respected by these subjects; they have to guard their "limits in order to let the other be as other" (Irigaray, *Sharing the World* 133), and should not appropriate the other as an object, but rather acknowledge her/his transcendence. A real ethics of recognition would let the irreducible differences between the subjects blossom, and let a "between-us" come into being (Irigaray, "Ecstasy" 53).

[37] Although it is hard to push Beauvoir's conceptualization of transcendence towards Irigaray's transcendence as a horizon of the other that should never be appropriated, we are still able to say that Beauvoir is not clinging onto a masculine conceptualization of transcendence, and that her philosophy goes towards a *philosophie féminine*-like model of female subjectivity and a double dialectics. And the cross-fertilization between Beauvoir and Irigaray obviously does not stop there: we can actually push both philosophies further when it comes to their ideas about erotic ethics, and Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference in particular.

[38] The carnal aspect of sexual love is definitely present in *Le deuxième sexe*: man and woman can become one, and can reach "fusion" in carnal love (Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II* 147). According to Beauvoir, "[e]roticism is a movement towards the *Other*" (205), and the "erotic attraction" between two subjects can be sustained if both subjects recognize each other as equals in their difference. Beauvoir's alterity-focused perspective comes in handy when looking at Irigaray's "sexual or carnal ethics" (Irigaray, *Éthique* 23), which has a prominent place in *Éthique* and *J'aime à toi*. Interestingly, this ethics is first of all an "ethics of sexual difference" (19), and this model, which is based on a double dialectics, still has to be discovered, according to Irigaray. Once the importance of sexual difference—"one of the questions, if not the question of our time" (13)—has been grasped, it could radically alter our ontology, ethics and politics: it would not only be an impulse to start thinking about female subjectivity, but it would also enable us to work towards a new "economy of desire," (15) in which both subjects are able to find each other in "double desire" (16).

[39] That this carnal ethics is based on a double dialectics becomes clear when Irigaray states that such an ethics would respect the otherness and transcendence of each subject. In this new economy of desire, "a possible place for each sex, body, and flesh" should be constituted (24); these subjects "each must be a place" for one another (46), without destroying "the interval (of attraction) between the two" (58). Both subjects could truly find each other as interconnected others in this union, but this can only happen when we step outside that single dialectics, in which love exists "in the One," (69), and where

woman is only allowed to envelop man, and not herself. An ethics of sexual difference must focus on "loving as two" (70), and should make room for a double dialectics in which subjects could envelop each other, or as Irigaray stated it: "Between the one and the other, there should be a mutual envelopment in movement" (58). It literally "takes two to love" (73), and, like Beauvoir's ethics, Irigaray's carnal ethics seems to be exceptionally suited for male and female subjects to recognize one another—on the condition that their love blossoms in a double dialectics.

[40] Reading Beauvoir and Irigaray diffractively really seems to be a fruitful exercise, but there are nonetheless some more obscure elements in Irigaray's ethics that should be dealt with as well. It is, for instance, not always clear in Irigaray's oeuvre where and how an ethics of sexual difference could come into being. Such an ethics has to unfold itself in a double dialectics, but how does this guarantee that the male subject in such a dialectics would recognize the other in its transcendence, if he used to have objectifying tendencies and powers in patriarchy?

[41] Diffracted through Beauvoir, who has shown us that woman as absolute Other is closer to alterity, and that there is such a thing as a feminine approach to love and eroticism that focuses on touch, losing oneself, and fusion,^[18] it becomes clear that Irigaray similarly builds a bridge between her *philosophie féminine* that focuses on female sexuality and subjectivity, and her ethics of sexual difference. Starting from the idea that woman is "other in herself" because of her sexual plurality (Irigaray, *Ce sexe* 28), and because of the fact that she always had to envelop man and his offspring, woman intuitively knows what otherness is. In addition to that, in "The Question of the Other" and in *J'aime à toi* Irigaray claims that it is also woman's more dialogical way of communicating, i.e. the fact that she is more inclined to use a "subject-subject" pattern when addressing the other (Irigaray and Guynn 16), that makes her more aware of otherness. Both subjects should nonetheless develop their singularity; their own identity, and "return to oneself" (Irigaray, *The Way of Love* 86) first in order to recognize each other's otherness, but as we have seen, woman's proximity to otherness is crucial to this trajectory.

[42] A second issue in Irigaray's work, that could benefit from a Beauvoirian perspective, is her emphasis on the importance of carnal love between exclusively *male and female* subjects in her ethics: Irigaray has been criticized by many commentators for having constructed a heterosexist philosophy,^[19] because she—mostly in her constructive phase—talks about the era "of the couple" (Irigaray, *Éthique* 140); a couple that solely seems to consist of heterosexual men and women. This is obviously a consequence of the idea that sexual difference is the most important kind of difference out there, but does this then really mean that the phrase "I love to you" (Irigaray, *J'aime à toi* 170), i.e. the non-appropriating expression of someone's love for the other, could only be expressed between straight couples? Although it may be easier to claim that Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference could be radically rewritten into a philosophy of differences, we might be able to discover a queer space in Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference by bringing her into conversation with Beauvoir again.

[43] *Le deuxième sexe* touches upon lesbianism and love between women in the second book, and although Beauvoir uses problematic concepts such as inversion and throws the experiences of lesbians, transvestites and hermaphrodites together, her existentialist analysis is still interesting. Beauvoir not only

claims that lesbian women can live authentically; in good faith (see *Le deuxième sexe II* 174), but she also makes some intriguing claims when talking about eroticism between women: she writes that such a same-sex love can be "truly passionate" (165), and because their "caresses" seem to be less appropriating, women find each other "in exact reciprocity" (166). Although Beauvoir does not deny that such relationships can be turbulent, she nonetheless praises carnal love between women as the place where alterity is respected, where each woman can be "subject and object at the same time" (166). Beauvoir's ethics of carnality hence seem able to integrate same-sex lovers, but could we push Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference towards such a more radical direction? Yes and no: although Irigaray's ethical model could probably incorporate the idea that reciprocal recognition between two same-sex subjects might occur—especially because of her claims in *J'aime à toi* that love in carnal ethics does not have to be reproductive^[20]—it still would be extremely difficult to do so, because of the ontological foundation of Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference: sexual, or *sexuate* difference as Irigaray tends to call her project now (see e.g. the preface to *Key Writings*), is and always will be Irigaray's starting point. But that, of course, does not mean that her project also has to stop there.

Conclusion: Radical feminist philosophical futures

[44] Our diffractive reading might have reached its limits here, but that does not mean that the dialogue between Beauvoir's oeuvre and that of Irigaray has not already been productive: we have successfully broken through some of the earlier Oedipalized stories about these oeuvres. By letting Beauvoir and Irigaray push each other towards a more radical feminist philosophy that not only focuses on allowing women to become sexual subjects of their own, but also centers on a radical, dual model of recognition that wishes to acknowledge the transcendence and otherness of each subject, a line of continuity between these oeuvres has finally been revealed. That this continuity does not unproblematically privilege the feminine non-All, about which Žižek spoke pejoratively in relation to Barad, demonstrates, first, how in feminist philosophy the structure of sexual difference *is* already that of diffraction, of creating change and upholding difference. Second, we have shown that diffractive reading is able to produce a *very precise* discussion about sexual differing. Hence, how can Barad's philosophy-physics be argued to disregard precisely that?

[45] In 2012 the journal *differences* published Barad's essay "On Touching". This short essay moves Barad's work beyond *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and although the essay can easily be placed in the (un-)Heideggerian tradition of phenomenology—which is also part of Beauvoir's and Irigaray's philosophical heritage, and genuine engagement would therefore require another article on our part—"On Touching" provokes provocative insights in Barad's notion of sexual difference. Consider the essay's opening lines:

When two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer. And if the two hands belong to one person, might this not enliven an uncanny sense of the otherness of the self, a literal holding oneself at a distance in the sensation of contact, the greeting of the stranger within? So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times – are

aroused.

When two hands touch, how close are they? What is the measure of closeness? Which disciplinary knowledge formations, political parties, religious and cultural traditions, infectious disease authorities, immigration officials, and policy makers do not have a stake in, if not a measured answer to, this question? (Barad, "On Touching" 206)

[46] What we wish to affirm is that 'touch' or 'touching' is—just as diffraction—both a concept and an object for Barad. As an object, touch is rendered or even measured along the parameters set by a plethora of disciplines (including physics-philosophy). As a concept, Barad asserts, it is in the nature of touch to imply an "infinite finitude" (206), which may explain the essay's subtitle: "The Inhuman That Therefore I Am".^[21] As an infinite finitude, touch—and remember that every (auto)touch implies *being touched*—discovers something about the embodied nature of who we are and who we are in the process of becoming (as human beings, scholars, philosophers, etc). Touch has to do with limits, or boundaries, and their dynamic nature owing to the perpetual generativity of what boundaries purportedly confine. The inhuman in us, and its putting in motion of our finitude, shows once more how different the two Continental philosophies that Žižek comments on are: Barad's agential realism is irreconcilable with Meillassoux's speculative realism. This is how Žižek evaluates Meillassoux's (failed) X-ing out of the subject or subjectivity in *After Finitude*, a point we hinted at in the opening section of this article:

The point Meillassoux misses is that this impossible/Real object is the very mode of inscription of the subject into trans-subjective reality; as such, it is not transcendental, but (what Derrida would have called) arche-transcendental, an attempt to circumscribe the 'subject in becoming', the trans-subjective process of the emergence of the subject. (Žižek 642)

[47] It is our gloss that Barad's work on touch makes this trans-subjective reality precise as it argues, for example, that "life, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, is not an unfolding algorithm" as all beings "stray from all calculable paths" (Barad, "On Touching" 207-8), and that the science trying to do justice to this twisting and turning is a "material-affective" affair (208). The radically permeable and unpredictable affair of touching (and being touched) indeed acknowledges the transcendence and otherness of each subject. Read through Barad, Beauvoir's and Irigaray's philosophies of sexual difference not only appear to touch and meet one another in their (dis)identification, but are now also made intra-active in a non-conflict-based, feminist setting that could turn out to be the future playground of feminist theory...

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Endnotes

1. The lecture can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddctYDCTIIA>. See the fragment that runs for four minutes and starts at one hour and eleven minutes. Last accessed: 27th of July 2013.
2. This term has been coined in Hoel and Van der Tuin.
3. We wish to acknowledge Alex Hebing's generous sharing of his insights in Barad's work and his meticulous reading of   i  ek's misquotations of Barad during the 'Barad bond' meeting on March 6, 2013 at Utrecht University.
4. See Rick Dolphijn in this issue about Barad's "critical naturalism".
5. All the quotations from original French works have been translated by us.
6. The 'Electra complex' was first coined as a psychoanalytical concept by Carl Gustav Jung, but Freud had already described the existence of a 'feminine' Oedipus complex before him. See Freud.
7. There is an abundance of feminist literature conforming to these stifled and stifling dynamics. Some exemplary cases are Nancy Bauer's overemphasis on the discontinuity between Irigaray's and Beauvoir's feminisms (13-14); Iris Marion Young's classification (231-248), in which the feminisms of the former philosophers are seen as completely clashing with one another; and Judith Butler's readings of these oeuvres in particular—readings that are in fact *misreadings*, because of Butler's problematic, non-contextualized use of the Anglo-American sex-gender distinction as a feminist tool of assessment when evaluating the feminist philosophies of Beauvoir and Irigaray (Butler, "Sex and Gender"; "Variations"; "Performative Acts"; and *Gender Trouble*; also see Braidotti and Butler). See Geerts for an overview of the abovementioned and other stifling readings.
8. See Jardine and Beauvoir 228. Beauvoir claims to appreciate Irigaray for "trying to construct a psychoanalysis which would be feminist," but also criticizes her for lacking "audacity" to deconstruct Freudian psychoanalysis (228). This critique is repeated when Beauvoir claims that she has found "very interesting things in Irigaray," but that she is "too ready to adopt the Freudian

- notion of the inferiority of women" (qtd. in Wenzel 12).
9. Although Irigaray and Haraway differ when it comes to the question of whether vision and seeing can be re-employed for feminist goals, Irigaray nonetheless also criticizes reflection throughout her oeuvre by making use of a very particular mirror symbolic (see Halsema 91-94). Irigaray also explicitly refers to the concept of diffraction ("*diffractionner*") in *Speculum* (177) and in *Amante Marine: de Friedrich Nietzsche* (70).
 10. We borrow this term from Deleuze and Guattari.
 11. Barad here acknowledges the fact that diffraction is a Harawayian notion ("Posthumanist Performativity" 147-8, n. 3).
 12. By referring to diffractive reading as conversational, Barad touches upon an important aspect of Irigaray's feminist philosophy. Irigaray is known for rereading the philosophical (and psychoanalytical) canon by "having a fling with the philosophers" (*Ce sexe* 147), which stands for her hysterical-mimetic, deconstructive, yet also dialogical way of rereading the masters' texts.
 13. This can be deduced from Irigaray's statement in *Je, tu, nous*, where she says that "egalitarianism occasionally invests too much energy in refusing certain positive values [...]" (13-14). With this claim, Irigaray seems to imply that egalitarian feminists, such as Beauvoir, are too afraid of constructing a *philosophie féminine*, and hence can only identify with masculinist values.
 14. There are three positions in this debate: some commentators state that Beauvoir completely equates woman to Hegel's slave, and therefore falls prey to his phallogocentrism (see e.g. Jaggar and McBride). In a second interpretation woman as Other never even enters the master-slave dialectics, because there is no life and death struggle between her and man (see e.g. Chanter 47-79; Lundgren-Gothlin 67-82; and Halsema 155-158). In a third possible interpretation Beauvoir is seen as using the master-slave paradigm to unveil the system of oppression without equating woman to Hegel's slave (see e.g. Bauer 172-199).
 15. The Irigaray scholars that have paid particular attention to Irigaray's critique of Hegel are: Whitford 118-122; Chanter 80-126; Halsema, 158-189; and Jones 199-213.
 16. The fact that Antigone can be seen as someone who defended a maternal culture and respected life, has also been underlined in Irigaray, "Between Myth and History" 197-211. Similar claims have been made in *Le temps de la différence*, where Irigaray also discusses the issue of civil sexuate rights.
 17. We hence agree with Bauer's interpretation (see Bauer 172-199).
 18. See Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II* 146-147.
 19. This critique has, for instance, been uttered by Butler in almost all of her readings of Irigaray's philosophy. See endnote 6 of this article for the exact references.
 20. See e.g. Irigaray, *J'aime à toi* 35.
 21. The subtitle makes an intertextual reference to Jacques Derrida's essay "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", and "On Touching" is indeed part of what could be named a recent 'Derridean turn' in the work of Barad (see also "Quantum Entanglements").

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