Lyotard and Irigaray
Challenging the (White) Male Philosophical Metanarrative Voice

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It is not possible in this article to explore all of the difficult and intricate ramifications of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s and Luce Irigaray’s innovative and exciting challenge to hegemonic metanarrative voices. However, I maintain that although Lyotard (1997) and Irigaray (1985) challenge the “violence” resulting from the performativity, to use Judith Butler’s turn of phrase, of hegemonic voices in different ways, their approaches are complementary in terms of recognizing and celebrating difference and attempting to keep it in play. Indeed, more specifically, I find that Lyotard’s paralogical framework can be appropriated to effectively serve feminist attempts at critiquing the metanarrative and hegemonic voice of androcentricity. Working with a hermeneutics of suspicion, I will first provide a sense of how this androcentric voice is metanarratively configured, that is, uncover that which it attempts to conceal; and, second, I will briefly explore how Lyotard’s paralogy complements Irigaray’s critique of the dominance of the male philosophical voice. In other words, I will show how Lyotard’s and Irigaray’s work combine to create and sustain a space for difference. Although neither Lyotard nor Irigaray draws from the recent explosive and iconoclastic field of “white studies,” a neglect that might be offered as a critique of their work, I will show the relevance of their work in relationship to the theoretical work being done within the critical field of white studies, which is designed to deconstruct and historicize the hegemonic metanarrative voice of whiteness. As we shall see, not only is the hegemonic metanarrative voice critiqued in this article gendered in a particular fashion, but it is also configured along a racial axis of whiteness. Let me start with a bit of historical stage setting. Although feminists and race theorists are familiar with the way that women and nonwhites have been “silenced” and “Othered” within the sphere of white male Western philosophy, the following stage setting creates a helpful framework for those not familiar with white/race studies and/or feminist philosophy.

In a way reminiscent of Derrida’s Specters of Marx, I would like to provide a sketch of a different kind of specter, a ghost which is embodied, raciated, and gendered in specific ways. Although embodied, it has the ability to hide its visibility, to remain unmarked and unnamed. This is a function of its power and dominance; its hegemony enables it to conceal not only its own identity, but its haunting history of exclusion and marginalization of other voices. It is not that these marginalized voices have not been speaking; rather,
they have been unheard vis-à-vis the “chatter” of a dominant discourse. In other words, “silence” is not a function of not having anything significant to say. “Silence” is produced relative to the plenitudinous sound of a hegemonic discourse. Silence, on this score, is not simply the absence of sound; rather, “silence” is the sound (voice) which goes unheard because of the audible and muffling pervasiveness and dominance of a particular sound (voice).

In *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, which is a powerful anthology that explores the possibility of radical feminist philosophical alterity, Janet A. Kourany (1998) argues that

[p]hilosophy as we know it today in the West is largely the product of the work of misogynist men of the past, men who were either unresponsive to the needs and interests of women, or whose ideas were downright antithetical to those needs and interests. (ix)

When one explores the constructed textual histories of Western philosophy, histories in which masculinity is deeply inscribed on every page, there is very little evidence of philosophical agency exhibited by women. In “Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History,” Eileen O’Neill’s (1998) suspicions have pervasive implications. She writes:

No justification exists for the wholesale exclusion of women philosophers from the history of our discipline. Perhaps all of this should make us suspicious about our histories; about the implicit claim that our criteria of selection justify our inclusion of philosophers as major, minor, or well-forgotten figures; about our ranking of issues and argumentative strategies as central, groundbreaking, useful, or misguided. (39)

O’Neill presents a bibliographic and doxographic overview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women philosophers from England, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Switzerland, and Russia. Silences, however, abound. Their voices are not generally heard within the hegemonic audible space of male philosophical “chatter.” Indeed, the reader is inundated with the names of women philosophers that have seemed to disappear, having the status of mere phantasmic beings: Hypatia, Margaret Cavendish, Marie de Gournay, Anna Maria van Schurman, Queen Christina of Sweden, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Judith Drake, Catherine Trotter Cockburn, Catherine Macaulay, Lady Mary Shepherd, Emilie du Chatelet, Gabrielle Suchon, Anne Conway, and others. All of these women, within a metanarrative or master narrative that constructed them as inferior and incapable of rational thought and thereby unfit for philosophy, addressed philosophical issues and concerns discussed and debated during their day. Much of their work was published in scholarly journals of the period and some in the form of books. But what happened to these works? How did they become textually marginalized and silenced? O’Neill (1998) argues:

To begin with, the socially encouraged practice of anonymous authorship for women clearly did not help to put them on the map of philoso-
phy. Instead, it frequently led to misattributions (Conway), charges of plagiarism (Cavendish), charges that the woman philosopher had been “helped” by a prominent male philosopher (du Chatelet), or, most commonly, neglect pure and simple. (33)

But this alone does not explain why women philosophers are not indelibly fixed in our narratives concerning the history of Western philosophy. O’Neill also discusses the effects of the “purification” process in Western philosophy that took place in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During these periods, women philosophers thought deeply about mystical theological and philosophical issues, and issues involving woman’s nature and role in the social order of things. But such concerns were either no longer labeled “philosophical” or seen as precritical. Indeed, according to O’Neill:

German historians, taking Kantianism as the culmination of early modern philosophy and providing the project for future philosophical inquiry, viewed treatments of “the woman question” as precritical work, of purely anthropological interest. In sum, by the nineteenth century, much of the published material by women, once deemed philosophical, no longer seemed so. (34)

Lastly, concerning the factors contributing toward the almost complete disappearance of women from the history of early modern philosophy, O’Neill delineates such factors as the construction of the “feminine” as weak, and hence “feminine philosophy” as weak and inferior in content and style, and the threat that women philosophers presented to the early burgeoning of a democratic political order. Concerning the latter, she writes:

To be admitted into the sphere of philosophy, publicly via published texts, was to partake of a singular form of public power: to be a philosopher was to be a shaper of culture. But what if the sphere of philosophy became democratized? What if, for example, “philosopher queens” ruled in the polis? To imagine such a dismantling of male hegemony at the birth of modern democracy was more than even Condorcet, its staunchest supporter, could manage. Even he claimed that while women had displayed “genius” in a number of fields, so far none had done so in philosophy. (38–39)

In short, women were deemed inferior and incapable of philosophical thought. It is well-known that Aristotle thought of women as underdeveloped men. And Jean-Jacques Rousseau counsels that “if you want right guidance, always follow the leadings of nature. Everything that characterizes sex should be respected as established by nature” (Antony 1998, 65). This “natural teleological” assumption has had devastating implications for women. According to Arthur Schopenhauer:

You need only look at the way woman is formed to see that she is not meant to undergo great labor either of mind or body. She pays the debt
of life not by what she does but by what she suffers: by the pains of childbearing, by caring for the child, by submission to her husband to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion. That woman is meant by nature to obey may be seen by the fact that every woman who is placed in the unnatural position of complete independence immediately attaches herself to some man by whom she allows herself to be guided and ruled. If she is young, it will be a lover; if she is old, it will be a priest or a lawyer. (Castell 1946, 149)

Perhaps this in no small measure helps to account for the antagonism Schopenhauer showed toward his mother, Johanna Schopenhauer. After all, she was a gifted writer, though this information is often silenced. As Christian Battersby (1989) notes:

Intriguingly, Arthur Schopenhauer’s own mother, Johanna, was a writer of quite popular novels and travel journals. After the death of her husband, she ran a literary salon in Weimar that counted Goethe amongst its patrons. Her son had to wait until he was in his sixties before his own writings began to be popular, and he was consequently jealous of his mother’s literary reputation and power. (110)

Immanuel Kant was quite clear on the essential nature of women where he argued, “Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy [sic] the merits that are proper to her sex” (Kourany 1998, 65). And Sigmund Freud is notorious for his psychoanalytic construction of women’s behavior as compensatory, for they are always attempting to compensate for their lack of a penis/phallic power. Indeed, women are defined as a lack. Critiquing Freud’s psychoanalytic paradigm, Irigaray (1985) observes, “About woman and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say. Her lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value” (23). The point here is that women have been defined within hegemonic, homosocial spaces of theory construction. As such:

Women can be good only insofar as they are considered as women; considered as human (i.e., according to the standards set by men), they are necessarily inferior. Women are human, but only in the way a broken wing is a wing; they are at best defective tokens of the human type. (Kourany 1998, 64)

The androcentric norms of the above male philosophers are designed not only to “rationally” support women’s “natural inferiority,” but to inculcate women with a false sense of who and what they are. This is a form of “epistemic violence,” to use Ruth Frankenberg’s turn of phrase. Women have come to know themselves as the “second sex,” as possessing “penis envy,” and as responsible for “The Fall” of man. In short, many male philosophers have failed to consider how their own androcentricity mediates the epistemic
status of their truth claims. They have failed to recognize the historicity and positionality of their experiences and how such experiences shape their philosophical views. Indeed, such views are presumed universally and metanarratively normative. The hegemonic voice of male philosophers can be heard throughout philosophy’s major subfields: history of philosophy, philosophy of persons, ethics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, aesthetics, and the philosophy of religion. Concerning this last subfield, Nancy Frankenberry (1998) asks:

What gets valorized as worth knowing? What are the criteria evoked? Who has the authority to establish meaning? Who is the presumed subject of belief? How does the social position of the subject affect the content of religious belief? What is the impact upon religious life of the subject’s sexed body? (192)

Comprehending the close link between knowledge and power, Frankenberry argues that within the philosophy of religion, particularly of the Anglo-American sort, the divine, despite deanthropomorphizing efforts, “remains stubbornly gendered male” (177). She argues that “the metaphors and models employed by mainstream philosophers of religion often trade uncritically on intrinsically hierarchical patterns of relations. Metaphors such as Father, King, Lord, Bridegroom, Husband, and God-He go unmarked” (178). And with respect to the so-called divine attributes, “none receives more discussion in the literature than that of ‘omnipotence,’ by which some version of ‘perfect power’ is meant” (178).

The reader should keep in mind, however, that the above male philosophers deemed themselves superior not simply because of their maleness, but also because of their whiteness. The recent plethora of work done in the burgeoning field of white studies has made an effective contribution toward demonstrating how whiteness assumes to think and to speak for the entire world. Despite postmodernist and deconstructionist emphasis on locating meaning within a system of differences, whiteness attempts to transcend differences, constituting itself as the transcendental signified. In short, whiteness irrupts difference and attempts to fix reference or meaning around its raciated (white) center. Constituting itself as the site of absolute presence, whiteness functions as an epistemological and ontological anchorage. As such, whiteness assumes the authority to marginalize other identities, discourses, narratives, perspectives, and voices. By whiteness’s constituting itself as center, nonwhite voices are Othered, marginalized, and rendered voiceless. Whiteness creates a binary relationship of self-Other, subject-object, dominator-dominated, center-margin, universal-particular, white-black, etc. But this binary logic does not stop here. Poststructurally speaking, the bipolar terms are arranged in a hierarchy where self is superior to Other, subject is superior to object, white is superior to black, etc. Like male philosophical normative assumptions, whiteness, deeming itself the sovereign voice, conceals its status as raciated, located, and positioned. Theorizing about the tripartite dimensions of whiteness, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) argues:
First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, or race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (1)

Failing to come to terms with the contingent status of whiteness, Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall (1999) warn:

For whites to fail to consider whiteness as a historical, constructed, and dynamic category is to risk treating it as normal (rather than normalizing), uniform (not immeasurably variable), paradigmatic (instead of fundamental to racism), and given (rather than dutifully maintained). Scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg, David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Vron Ware have begun to ask about the history of whiteness, the systems and practices that maintain it, and how it might be possible to resist racializing regimes and accompanying privilege: to resist the power of whiteness. (3)

The reader will note that there is no attempt here to make whiteness into a Platonic form. The point here is that we must distinguish between whiteness as a phenotypical marker and the whiteness of whiteness (Lazarre 1996). The latter, the whiteness of whiteness, involves the signification of whiteness as a presumed supreme value code. Whiteness, on this score, signifies that which has been deemed aesthetically, epistemologically, anthropologically, and ontologically superior. This does not mean that the whiteness of whiteness stands over and above particular historical, cultural, and political acts of individual white people. Hence, I am not saying that “whiteness” is an abstract essential thing which has a subject position; it is always individual concrete performative acts by white people and white value–laden institutions that undergird the whiteness of whiteness. This is still consistent with the contention that whiteness is a historico-socially discursive (and nondiscursive) construction. Moreover, this position does not contradict the poststructuralist overtones of my critique of whiteness. It is true that not all whites (that is, phenotypically identified white people) are white supremacists. However, as whiteness studies theorists have demonstrated, to live within a sociohistorical context (or knowledge-power social nexus) in which whiteness is believed to be superior is to benefit (consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally) from the whiteness of one’s skin color. In other words, although the power of whiteness is fueled by white racism, to be a white racist is not confined to conscious performances of white supremacy.

The contention that whiteness embodies a set of practices (both discursive and nondiscursive) might be illustrated within the context of Anglo-American and European philosophy. Both traditions are constituted in and through discourse governed by white males. Their power is manifested not only in terms of controlling the structure and meaning of discourse, but also at the level of institutional organizational hegemony and canon formation. However, this reality goes unmarked. In prominent Western philosophical
texts (for example, Bertrand Russell’s [1945] A History of Western Philosophy and Will Durant’s [1962] The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers), white male philosophers are generally depicted as rational agents, ruminating in perfect freedom, and unencumbered by murky relationships of race, gender, privilege, and power. Their whiteness and maleness become the norm. And it is from this site of presumed absolute normativity that white male philosophers theorize, as if from an Archimedian point, about the limits of human knowledge, the nature of God, the self, the basic constitution of reality, the nature of beauty, and so on. Once these theories become institutionalized and canonized, that is, cut off, as it were, from their raciated and gendered value-laden foundation, we often assume that they are beyond critique, deconstruction, and reformulation. Such theories, in the language of social constructionists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1995), assume an ontological status through a process of reification (36). Whiteness and maleness are then rendered incognito and silent. In the spirit of O’Neill, one wonders about the voices of black male/female philosophers. I have yet to see a major text on the history of Western philosophy that includes such names as Thomas Nelson Baker, Gilbert Haven Jones, Alain Leroy Locke, Forest Oran Wiggins, Cornelius Lacy Golightly, William Thomas Fontaine, Eugene Clay Holmes, Albert Millard Dunham, Frances Hammon, W. E. B. Du Bois, David Walker, Alexander Crummell, Joyce M. Cook, and Angela Y. Davis. One would at least expect to come across the name of the African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, who was born in 1703 and died in the 1760s. Amo led a very distinguished philosophical career in Europe, and yet his voice and his name have undergone a process of historical erasure. Perhaps many black philosophers have had experiences similar to the black philosopher Broadus Butler, who, in 1952, applied to teach philosophy in a “white” university and was told: “Why don’t you go where you will be among your own kind?” (Harris 1983, ix).

Although Irigaray has done a wonderful job of calling into question the history of Western philosophy as an expression of an androcentric discursive field, she leaves unproblematized the power of whiteness and how it has structured the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, in the language of Irigaray, to what extent do the “discursive utterances” of white male philosophers conceal raciated conditions under which such utterances are produced? Although Judith Butler, an insightful feminist theorist, has given some attention to white hegemony (Butler 1993, 182), one wonders whether she sees whiteness (as she sees gender) as constituted through acts of repetition and performance. One wonders whether white performativity acts as the fulcrum upon which turns much of the history of Anglo-American and European philosophy. After all, Hume, Kant, Locke, and Hegel (to name only a few) are notorious for their belief in the “natural inferiority” of blacks of African descent. Indeed, within the conceptual frameworks of Hume, Kant, and Locke, the idea of a black philosopher would be deemed a contradiction in terms. After all, philosophy is an honorific term indicative of the presence of the supreme capacity to reason. Blacks, as the racist theory goes (and still believed by many), were incapable of reason. As we have seen, blacks and white women were both deemed devoid of the capacity for critical cognition.
Despite Hume’s rejection of what might be termed a realist theory of causality, he was quite certain that blacks were inferior. In his essay “Of National Characters,” Hume maintains:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negro as a man of learning; but ‘tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (cited in West 1999, 83)

So, despite Hume’s empiricist orientation, with its emphasis on the importance of experience, he appears quite willing to speak universally (that is, imply the quantifier “all”) of black people with respect to their “inferiority.” And though Kant says that Hume woke him from his dogmatic slumbers, Hume does not appear to have awakened Kant from his antiblack racism. In his Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime, Kant writes:

Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a simple example in which a negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. (cited in West 1999, 83–84)

Moreover, in reply to advice that a Black person gave to Father Labat, Kant commented, “And it might be that there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid” (cited in West 1999, 84). One wonders whether Kant really thought that the categorical imperative applied to blacks and whether Hume thought that his moral psychology applied to blacks. It is my assumption, given their essentialist views of blacks as an ersatz form of human being, that they did not. With regard to John Locke, it is interesting that Frederick Douglass used Locke’s theories to declare his self-ownership. With cutting irony, the philosopher Charles Mills (1998) notes that this was “the same John Locke who was an investor in the Atlantic slave trade and author of the Carolina Constitution, which—in seeming contradiction to his later prescriptions in the Second Treatise—enshrined hereditary slavery” (199). We must not forget Hegel, who strips Africa of any Geist. Can it be said that the logical progression of Spirit is to render Africa enslaved? Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997) writes:
It is clear, then, that nowhere is the direct conjunction/intersection of the philosophical and the political and economic interests in the European denigration and exploitation of Africans so evident and shameless as in Hegel. Since Africa, for Hegel, “is the Gold-land compressed within itself,” the continent and its peoples become, all at once, a treasure island and a terra nulla, a virgin territory brimming with natural and human raw material passively waiting for Europe to exploit and turn it into mini-European territories. (9–10)

The reduction of the African to that of raw materials (land) is a motif critiqued by Irigaray (1985) vis-à-vis women. She writes:

For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire, by “subjects”: workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth. (31–32)

Thus far, what is the upshot of this? What is needed is a rewriting of the narrative history of Western philosophy, a narrative history that sees philosophers as sociohistorically embodied thinkers with gendered and raciated political commitments and culturally informed philosophical frames of reference. Along with this, of course, is needed the historicization, contextualization, and democratization of reason; that is, the rejection that reason is metanarratively transhistorical and is the exclusive property of white males. Indeed, there is a need to move beyond the totalizing theorizations of white male philosophers, theorizations that demean and dehumanize women and black people. There is the need to recognize philosophical reflections as various local narratives or language games that are ensconced, as Lyotard might say, within a space of “contextual pragmatics.” In this way, philosophy, unlike how it is practiced within current androcentric white spaces of theory construction, will come to value difference over uniform identity, particularity over universality, multiple narrative voices over the metanarrative voice, situated knowledge (though not a flagrant and irresponsible doctrine of anything goes) over transsituational knowledge, etc. Also, what is needed are deep academic institutional revisions. Without infrastructural changes, phallocentrism will go unabated. Feminist philosophical frameworks will maintain their position as Othered. Counterdiscourses will be allowed to speak, but phallocentrism will maintain its position as normative. What is needed is a serious institutional space designed to nurture the philosophical identities of women. There is the need for (1) coequal philosophic representation, not simply a placating nod of acknowledgment, (2) the restructuring of philosophical syllabi and curricula, and (3) the power to define and institutionalize the philosophical concerns, interests, and values of feminist (and
womanist) philosophers. The reader will note that I am aware that whiteness, as an uninterrogated norm, functions to “Other” and “silence” all “people of color” (not just blacks). However, my focus on blacks indicates my standpoint. In other words, as a raciated black male, I am politically and existentially invested in philosophically and historically deracinating the white male hegemonic voice.

At this juncture, I will explore how Lyotard’s and Irigaray’s views militate against and help to explode the metanarrative voices of whiteness and androcentricity. Whiteness, as has been shown, involves a totalizing system of universal normativity. The totalization of whiteness (and androcentricity) can often be experienced as a form of terror. African American theorist bell hooks (1998) has argued that “all black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness” (50). The point here is that there are close links between totalizing systems (for example, whiteness and androcentricity) and the feeling of being terrorized and threatened. After all, totalizing systems eschew differences (along with fissures, fractures, and experimentation), diversity, innovation, and the possibility of, as Lyotard would say, “heretofore unexperienced intensities.” Linking the desire for totality and terror, Lyotard says:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games . . . only the transcendental illusion . . . can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But . . . the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high price for the nostalgia for the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. . . . Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (cited in Gray 1996, 377)

To deliver on a promissory note stated at the beginning of this article, Lyotard’s paralogy and his conception of pagan politics challenge ahistorical and metanarrative voices. For Lyotard, such voices are “violent” to the extent that they tend to silence and derail other voices and other narratives, which possess their own locationality, legitimacy, and logicality. In short, Lyotard celebrates the notion of language games over that of a univocal master-game, as it were, played only by those who speak master-discourses. On this score, Lyotard’s paralogy, unlike whiteness and androcentricity, is antifoundationalist and antiessentialist. Whiteness and androcentricity function like Plato’s ontology. The two metanarratives establish an appearance-reality distinction. On the one hand, whiteness and maleness (that which is ontologically superior) possess universal value. On the other hand, nonwhiteness and “femaleness” (that which is ontologically inferior) possess a particularity bordering on mere appearance. Lyotard’s paralogy, however, disrupts such a Platonic distinction; for there is no way to stand outside of historical context and
divide reality into “forms” and “appearances.” Such a distinction is itself made within the framework of a certain metanarrative. “There is no place,” as Lyotard (1999) writes, “from which one could photograph the whole thing” (43). Once we have effectively dismantled the metanarrative of white male normativity and structural power, the presumed deep ontological binary reality-appearance distinction (white males–blacks/white females) will perhaps disappear. Metanarratives, after all, are not transcendentally given; they are subject to dismantlement and deconstruction. Lyotard’s pagan politics and paralogy allow for the proliferation of a diversity of voices, realities, and justices, not a single metavoice dictating the nature and limits of “Value,” “Reality” and “The Good.” Lyotard emphasizes “incommensurables, undecidables, conditions of incomplete information, fracta, discontinuities, and paradoxes” (Gallagher 1993, 298). In short, no single metavoice prevails. Although I find the “linguistification,” as it were, of minorities somewhat problematic, Lyotard writes, “Basically, minorities are not social ensembles; they are territories of language. Every one of us belongs to several minorities, and what is very important, none prevails. It is only then that we can say that the society is just” (95). On this score, the dominant and hegemonic voice of whiteness, in terms of its discursive and nondiscursive manifestations, is a signifier of sociopolitical injustice.

In “One of the Things at Stake in Women’s Struggles,” Lyotard’s (1998) antimetanarrative and counterandrocentric feminist sensibilities are quite evident. Lyotard raises an interesting problematic where he says, “Perhaps what we call feminine writing is only a variation on a genre that is masculine and remains so: the essay” (111). Many feminists are aware of the issues at stake here. I would argue that Irigaray attempts to escape this problematic to the extent that she explodes the notion of an “essay.” Her writing collapses theory (indeed, deploys theory against itself), prose and poetic style, texture and textuality, and narrative drama all in one piece of writing. Surely, this approach to writing explodes the traditional structure of many standard syllogistic and logocentric philosophical essays. As Irigaray (1985) says, “This ‘style,’ or ‘writing,’ of women tends to put the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms” (79). She elaborates as follows:

It is always fluid, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbors that create a dynamics. Its “style” resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its “style” cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position. (79)

Lyotard is also aware of the power and limits of androcentric philosophical discursivity. For example, he writes:

It is a philosopher who is speaking here about relations between men and women. He is trying to escape what is masculine in the very posing of such a question. However, his flight and his strategies probably re-
main masculine. He knows that the so-called question of a masculine/feminine opposition, and probably the opposition itself, will only disappear as he stops philosophizing: for it exists as opposition only by philosophical (and political) method, that is, by the male way of thinking. (111)

Moreover, Lyotard is critical of the spectator motif and how it functions within the context of the pornographic construction and objectification of women (113). Irigaray also critically asks, “Does ‘surveying’ have anything to do with desire, or not? Can pleasure be measured, bounded, triangulated, or not?” (10). In Foucauldian terms, men have the power to define reality (man as homo mensura) and are able to banish and confine women to spaces of dehumanization. Women, on this score, are confined to a semiotic space of dehumanization and degradation. Lyotard writes:

The feminine (women, children, foreigners, slaves) [can be] banished outside the confines of the corpus socians and attributed only those properties this corpus will have nothing to do with: savagery, sensitivity, matter and the kitchen, impulsion, hysteria, silence, maenadic dances, lying, diabolical beauty, ornamentation, lasciviousness, witchcraft and weakness. The masculine corpus attributes active principles to itself—so say Hegel, Freud and all the others: we must seize the object that seems human but which, in fact, must become human since it is not. (114–15)

Lyotard (1998) is also aware of how important it is to create new and innovative ways of attacking androcentricity. He is aware that the father’s house, as it were, cannot be effectively deconstructed by using the father’s tools. He argues:

In the face of the “irrational,” the master-warrior-speaker, is reinstated in his pedagogical task: he needs a frontier to conquer and savages to civilize. Let us free him instead from his armour of words and death; let us temper him in a large patchwork of affective elements that must be intensified. One should not attack him head-on but wage a guerrilla war of skirmishes and raids in a space and time other than those imposed for millennia by the masculine logos. (118)

As Irigaray is also acutely aware, “The philosopher, as philosopher, is a secret accomplice of the phallocrat” (Lyotard 1998, 118). The philosopher speaks a metalanguage that “is already the language of masculinity in the western, and particularly Greek, sense” (Lyotard 1998, 119). Lyotard sanctions Irigaray’s project of calling into question the androcentric foundation of Western philosophy where he writes, “The congruence between the constitution of politics as an institution, a specifically masculine order, and the institution of philosophy as a constituting discourse can be established historically” (119). Lyotard sees a definite relationship of complicity between what he calls “political phallocracy” and philosophical metalanguage: “The activity men reserve for themselves arbitrarily as fact is posited legally as the right to decide meaning” (119).
The reader will note that Lyotard does not use the phrase “white male” when critiquing androcentricity. He should have been more attentive to the (white) raciated dimensions of androcentric power. After all, there were no special privileges that came with being a black male vis-à-vis white males. To be a black male in the so-called New World was/is emblematic of powerlessness and invisibility. Despite this limitation, Lyotard’s (1998) paralogical framework reduces male power (and potentially white male power), male epistemic discursive formations, and male vision of a certain ontological order to a fragment “in a patchwork where it becomes impossible to establish and validly determine any major order” (120). With clear feminist and postmodernist insight, Lyotard concludes:

Deceitful like Eubulides and like realities, women are discovering something that could cause the greatest revolution in the West, something that (masculine) domination has never ceased to stifle: there is no signifier; or else, the class above all classes is just one among many; or again, we Westerners must rework our space-time and all our logic on the basis of noncentralism, non-finality, non-truth. A United Nations vote denounced Zionism as racism, to the great scandal of the West which suddenly found itself in the minority. One day a UN vote will denounce as male sexism the primacy accorded theoretical discourse to the great scandal . . . of us all. (120)

Although Lyotard’s paralogy contests fixity and metanarrativity, I wonder about its effectiveness to keep voices at bay that are bent upon usurping other voices. After all, Lyotard’s rejection of the episteme of representation certainly leaves us with incommensurable language games. As Seyla Benhabib (1984) writes:

One must accept, in other words, an “agonistics” of language: “. . . to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech-acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics.” This cognitive option yields a “polytheism of values,” and a politics of justice beyond consensus, characterized by Lyotard vaguely as the “temporary contract.” (111)

Benhabib’s critique of Lyotard is well-taken. Indeed, for example, the male hegemonic voice (or the stubborn antiblack racist voice) may not remain content within its own language game. The feminist voice and the androcentric voice cannot simply coexist, as it were, particularly when the latter is forever finding new ways to reinscribe its power. Benhabib maintains that “their very presence next to each other poses moral as well as cognitive problems . . . we cannot extricate ourselves from an answer by gazing in wonderment at the plurality of language games and life forms” (119, n. 35). I find Lyotard’s critique of metanarrativity very attractive and his openness to the “unknown” as creating a space for multiple creative possibilities, but, like Benhabib, I am not convinced that Lyotard’s paralogy and pagan politics will not fall prey to a form of neoconservatism. As Benhabib maintains:
The polytheism of language games either assumes that culture and society are harmonious wholes, or that the struggles within them are plays only. But there are times when philosophy cannot afford to be a “gay science,” for reality itself becomes deadly serious. To deny that the play of language games may not turn into a matter of life and death, and that the intellectual cannot remain the priest of many gods but must take a stance, is cynical. (124)

What should be clear is that Lyotard’s paralogical framework, despite the above criticism, complements a feminist critique of androcentric hegemony. Indeed, as I have briefly shown, his paralogical framework would welcome Irigaray’s counterhegemonic explorations into the meaning of the feminine. As indicated by way of Benhabib’s critique, however, I believe that Irigaray would be skeptical of Lyotard’s paralogical framework, which would reduce feminist critique to only one language game among others. If she adopted Lyotard’s position, this would render her critique of phallocentrism rather benign. This, it seems to me, captures the importance of Benhabib’s remarks. Given the political and deeply existential importance of feminism, Irigaray would question the claim that the two discourses (phallocentrism and feminism) are autonomous and hermetically sealed language games. On the other hand, this does not mean that she wishes to reinscribe her nonphallocentric framework as a metanarrative voice to replace the metanarrativity of phallocentrism. If she adopted the broader implications of Lyotard’s paralogy, this would leave her critique of phallocentrism insufficient. Phallocentrist and feminist discourses are entangled within a struggle that raises issues of oppression, freedom, autonomy, heteronomy, identity, life, and death. The binary discourses and the political realities at stake need to be worked through within the crucible of an open and democratic (non-male-dominant) dialogical space.

Like Lyotard, Irigaray is aware of the androcentric semiotic space within which women have been constructed. For Irigaray, women have been defined as passive objects within an economy of male dominance. Speaking of how women have been socially constructed, Irigaray (1985) writes that their “lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value” (23). Within the discursive economy of male power, women represent a hole which is devoid of fullness, a hole which, both literally and symbolically, can be filled only by men. Lyotard’s reference to the spectator motif is important here; for the woman has nothing to be seen. Irigaray (1997) writes:

Woman’s castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her having nothing. In her having nothing penile, in seeing that she has No Thing. Nothing like man. That is to say, no sex/organ that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth. (431)

Irigaray is by no means unaware of the possibility of disrupting the economy of male representations and allowing for a space of playful heterogeneity; for
even as a “nothing” women have the power “that might cause the ultimate destruction, the splintering, the break in their [male] systems of ‘presence,’ of ‘re-presentation’ and ‘representation’” (433). Critiquing Freud, Irigaray is not duped into accepting the construction of women as a lack. Pointing to profound issues of power, control, and the epistemology of the ocular metaphor, Irigaray is aware of the tight links between “the omnipotence of gazing, knowing... the eye-penis... the phallic gaze” (428).

As with Lyotard, Irigaray emphasizes the space of instabilities, ruptures, and new possibilities that are not mere reformations and reconfigurations of existing male philosophical metanarratives. But what, for Irigaray, exists beyond the male hegemonic scopic economy? Critiquing the history of philosophy, at least Western philosophy, is part of the answer. The process involves a major reassessment of key philosophical discourse:

Whence the necessity of “reopening” the figures of philosophical discourse—idea, substance, subject, transcendental subjectivity, absolute knowledge—in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a “masculine subject.” (Irigaray 1985, 74)

Irigaray is interested in disrupting the entire male dramaturgical structure of philosophy. She wants to expose the “scenography” that makes male philosophical discourse intelligible. She wants to trace the meaning and source of “representation as defined in philosophy, that is the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues” (Irigaray 1985, 75).

Part of the problem with answering the question of what exists for women on the other side, as it were, of male scopic economy involves the fact that women’s experiences cannot be adequately expressed within an androcentric semiotic field of representation. This is evident where Irigaray is asked, “What is a woman?” She retorts, “I believe I’ve already answered that there is no way I would ‘answer’ that question. The question ‘what is...?’ is the question—the metaphysical question—to which the feminine does not allow itself to submit” (Irigaray 1985, 122). In other words, the male normative structure of the question already presupposes a certain normative androcentric response. Lyotard’s (1999) delineation of the differend is significant here. As he explains:

In the differend, something “asks” to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be alloyed to institute idioms which do not yet exist. (13)
That which “does not yet exist” has part of its source in what Irigaray refers to as the “elsewhere.” And is this “elsewhere” not also linked to what she refers to as “a disruptive excess”? The point here is that women must engage in a potentially revolutionary act of mimicry. It involves a form of resubmission:

It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means “to unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of “matter,” but also of “sexual pleasure.” (Irigaray 1985, 76)

Despite Irigaray’s powerful critique of Western philosophy’s male metanarrative voice, one wonders what she thinks about whiteness and the role that it has played and performed within the context of Western philosophy. Indeed, has she ever explored the possibility of conceptualizing whiteness as a form of phallic power? It is within this context that one wonders to what extent feminist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir, Eileen O’Neill, Shulamith Firestone, and others have failed to self-reflexively take into consideration their own whiteness, as a signifier of power, within the very process of attempting to create radical alterity. Given Irigaray’s project to rupture male dominant paradigms, emphasize difference, proliferate new meanings, and explore different modes of representation, it is clear that she would be critical, as with Lyotard, of the metanarrative power and structure of whiteness.

The explorations of both Lyotard and Irigaray call into question (both explicitly and implicitly) the hegemony of metanarratives. Indeed, as we have seen, both are critical of the metanarrativity of phallocentrism and its capacity to represent women in terms that reinforce androcentric power. And although neither Lyotard nor Irigaray explicitly critiques the metanarrativity and hegemonic power of whiteness, it is reasonable to assume, given their antiessentialist celebration of difference, that they would desire to decenter whiteness. In a Lyotardian pagan universe, after all, whiteness would be relegated to the confines of contextual pragmatics with its own “pagan instructions,” not viewed as a universal metanarrative voice having the power to represent and control other voices. And Irigaray might very well stress the need to explore the “scenography” of whiteness and explore the “architectonics of its theatre.” Within the framework of whiteness, the self-Other binary relationship remains hierarchical. Irigaray’s mutual gift giving has no place within such a context. Indeed, Irigaray’s conception of nearness would be vitiated under the metanarrative sovereignty of whiteness; for black people (the Other in this case) are constructed as things trapped within an economy of exchange value, alienated from themselves and from the rest of the civilized world, that is, “civilized” as defined by whiteness. Lastly, it is within
this theatre of whiteness that black bodies have been scarred, denigrated, and judged. And is it not Irigaray (1985) who reminds us that “if one of us sits in judgment, our existence comes to an end”? (217).

References


