

the signifying body



toward an ethics of sexual
and racial difference

penelope ingram

The Signifying Body

SUNY series in Gender Theory

Tina Chanter, editor

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*Toward an Ethics of
Sexual and Racial Difference*

Penelope Ingram

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To my parents who first taught me how to live ethically

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Introduction

Making Metaphysics Matter

The Signifying Body argues for a relationship between ontology and ethics. Rather than reinforcing the traditional view of ontology and ethics as distinct from one another, I argue that Being is revealed in and through an ethical relation with a wholly different Other. The role of language and its relation to ontology and ethics is central to this study. Martin Heidegger argues that it is possible to approach ontology and ontological questions only if we escape the representational prison house of metaphysical language. *The Signifying Body* attempts to provide a model for a new language—a language beyond metaphysics, a language of physical signification. Through a close reading of the work of Martin Heidegger, Luce Irigaray, and Frantz Fanon, I argue that representational language impedes ethics but signification enacts it. I propose a language that is ethical, not one *about* ethics but one *of* ethics, or more precisely a language that *is* ethics. This language is gestural, corporeal, proximate. It is performative, not constative. It cannot be captured or defined. It is in process. It is given. In the gift of ethical language is authentic Being-in-the world realized through a relation with the Other. Or to put it in Heideggerian terms, we could say that language discloses Being in the lighting of the ethical encounter with the Other. Being is revealed in difference, in my difference from the Other.

The work of Heidegger, Irigaray, and Fanon is central to this study because each of their respective critiques of metaphysics, phallogocentrism, and colonialism contains a fundamental critique of language,

particularly representational language. Furthermore, Heidegger's critique of metaphysical language is essential to the theories of ethics proposed by Irigaray and Fanon. Heidegger anticipated the end of philosophy, by which he meant the end of metaphysical abstraction and false objectivity, and called for a new language and a new way of thinking. Heidegger made clear that asking the question of Being within the language of metaphysics was impossible, for the question is always already circumscribed by the discourse it seeks to escape. "Philosophy, even when it becomes 'critical' through Descartes and Kant, always follows the course of metaphysical representation. It thinks from beings back to beings with a glance in passing toward Being."¹ Irigaray argues that ethics, too, is impossible without a new language, for there is no female subject of discourse and hence no possibility for an encounter between two: "the language system, or system of languages, doubled or accompanied by epistemological formalism and formal logic, takes from women and excludes them from the threshold of living in the word. . . . If this threshold (this ground that is no ground) is ever to be lived *for women's benefit*, they need language, some language."² Both Heidegger and Irigaray argue that language, particularly the language of philosophy, has been colonized by scientific discourse and mathematical logic. For Irigaray this results in the fiction of a universal/neuter subject that robs women of political, civil, and ethical identities. For Heidegger, the rise of science and technology, which trains us to think in certain ways, precludes our capacity to think otherwise. The distance and objectivity of scientific language prevents us from seeing things as they are, and technological innovation places emphasis on doing and making at the expense of thinking. Thus, "Philosophy turns into the empirical science of man, of all of what can become for man the experiential object of his technology, the technology by which he establishes himself in the world by working on it in the manifold modes of making and shaping."³ These factors inhibit our capacity to see Being. Heidegger argued for a different language, one that would disclose (or unconceal the 'lighting' of) Being to us and thus initiate a new relationship between language and the world. Language is not "mere speech"; rather, it is the "house of Being which comes to pass from Being and is pervaded by Being."⁴ It is not I that express language but rather language that expresses me.

Language is also a predominant concern for Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*, particularly the relationship between language and representation. In this text, Fanon undertakes an interrogation of representation—visual representation, and demonstrates how race and racism are discursive regimes predicated on a scopic economy. Colonial regimes make particular

use of the visibly discursive nature of race. "Colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism."⁵ The black man is robbed of a Being-for-itself because he is imprisoned by a white gaze that cannot recognize him as an ethical Other, but rather reads him according to a string of empty racial signifiers. These empty, because phantastic, signifiers constitute a visual grammar of the body, the syntax of which results in the "fact" of blackness. "Sealed into that crushing objecthood," the black man's body is fixed by pre-existing representations of blackness: "I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships."⁶ His experience of his own body is fractured by the language of a "racial epidermal schema," resulting in his "corporeal malediction."⁷

In demonstrating that race is constituted in a visual field, Fanon exposes the potential for its subversion. He demonstrates the possibility of resignification at a visual level: how the racialized gaze, which refuses reciprocal recognition, can be returned, interrupted, reversed, and resignified. If the body is a field of signification that is interpreted visually, Fanon leads us to a new language, a resignification of the body through a subversion of the look. If, as Heidegger shows, metaphysics relies on a representative economy, it has also relied on a scopic economy which regulates meaning through the visual. The dominant gaze has ordered and subsequently produced a grammar of the body justifying the racism and sexism of colonialism and patriarchy.

The Signifying Body, as a whole, recognizes the role played by language in any investigation of Being and ethics and, at the same time, attends to the emphasis placed by Heidegger and Irigaray on the proximate, and by Irigaray and Fanon on the corporeal. The bodies in the texts of Jordan, Coetzee, Morrison, and DeLillo, through a language of physical signification, exhibit what Heidegger considers to be "authentic Being-in-the-world" and allow us to glimpse Being in and through the relation of these beings to one another. That is, they show us examples of the authentic existence that is the condition by which Heidegger argues we can perceive Being, and I argue we can achieve an ethical relation with the Other. Moreover, the signifying language that leads to an ethical exchange within the confines of the literary text enables the reader, herself, to undergo the experience of authentic Being-in-the-world. For it is through the act of reading that we experience the possibility of "authentic Being ethically."

Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference requires a futural becoming of male and female subjects, but such a becoming is also tied to an escape from metaphysical conceptions of the subject, which privilege the masculine. It is the elision of the question of sexual difference from the question of Being that has resulted in women being cast as the support or ground of Being.⁸ Irigaray's demand for a sexuete ontology relies upon a language that will accommodate the feminine and thereby enable a culture of difference.

We must go back to a moment of prediscursive experience, recommence everything, all the categories by which we understand things, the world, subject-object divisions, recommence everything and pause at the 'mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity.' . . . This operation is absolutely necessary in order to bring the maternal-feminine into language: at the level of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, and so on. Which requires passage through the night, a light that remains in obscurity.⁹

Although Irigaray accuses Heidegger of reproducing the grounding of Being in his "forgetting of air," that is, of failing to acknowledge the material feminine element that serves as Being's outside, I argue here that Heideggerian ontology enables us to think matter beyond representation and thus achieve a nongrounded metaphysics. Reconceiving the relation between matter and representation is central to a formulation of ethical difference, for it is only by imagining matter not tied to representation that we can foresee an ontology without ground, from which multiple expressions of difference in Being can arise. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that through this recasting of the material, Heideggerian metaphysics not only can make way for an ethics of sexual difference, such as theorized by Irigaray,¹⁰ but also can, importantly, make way for an ethics of racial difference, which is a key concern for Fanon.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon argues that the black man is deprived of an ontology. Racial difference, like sexual difference, has not been given ontological weight because traditional metaphysics, in its failure to distinguish ontic from ontological difference, has not only understood Being on a masculine model, parading as an unmarked universal, it has also thought Being in terms of another false universal: whiteness. The black man¹¹, according to Fanon, is deprived of Being itself because his existence is always already inscribed in and through his relation to the white man.

Every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this has not been given sufficient attention by those who have discussed the question. In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. . . . Ontology—once it is finally permitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man . . . his metaphysics . . . were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.¹²

Because sex and race have been considered ontic differences, that is characteristics or attributes of beings, and not ontological ones, elements of Being itself, true racial and sexual difference do not exist. As a consequence an ethical relation with the wholly Other is precluded. According to Fanon, the black man exists only insofar as the white man can have something to define himself against. In Irigarayan terms, we would say that the black man is the other of the white man's Same, not the Other of his Other. Irigaray argues that sexual difference operates in a similar way. It can be seen to enable metaphysical logic because Being grounds itself in an origin that is feminized (the maternal origin), but the feminine itself has no place in such a metaphysics. The female subject, like the black subject, "has no ontological resistance"; it does not exist. *The Signifying Body* examines the role of grounding in order to make the case that representation and the representational language of metaphysics preclude ethics. The notion of grounding is essential to Irigaray's critique of metaphysics, and she follows Heidegger in observing the dependency in metaphysical thinking of assuming a prior ground to ontology, even in the act of asking the question of that grounding. I take seriously Irigaray's exhortation to imagine a metaphysics without ground, from which an ethical relation with the Other can follow, and I consider Heidegger's interrogation of metaphysical language to be the first step. Rather than reinforcing the traditional view of ontology and ethics as distinct from one another, I propose we consider Being *as* the ethical relation with the wholly different Other.

By reading Irigaray and Fanon in relation to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, I hope to shed light on and ask new questions of each. For Heidegger, the nature of our ontological existence can only be revealed or disclosed to us through authentic Being-in-the-world. We must get

beyond the so-called objective distance inherent in metaphysical conceptions of Being and practice ways of Being-in-the-world that originate through relation and proximity. Irigaray maintains that an ethical relation with the Other also depends on proximity, an opening, a nearness that will prevent a reduction of difference to the same. Heidegger's critique of representational language can allow us to reexamine the ethical relation of difference, but it is also fruitful to bring ethics to bear on Heidegger's ontological inquiry. Indeed, it is Fanon, as we shall see, who allows the possibility for ontology to be glimpsed in and through the process of reciprocal recognition with the Other. However philosophically catachrestic it may be to posit such a question, I would like to ask whether ethics can lead us to ontology. Might it be in the relation with the Other that Being is revealed? Or to put it another way, I am suggesting that the Being that is, to use Heidegger's phrase, "unconcealed" through this new language is ethics: Being is the ethical relation with the wholly different Other.

As he makes clear in his "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger eschewed ethics because he considered ethical questions to be tainted by the scientific logic of metaphysics, the same logic that his inquiry into ontology seeks to get beyond or before. However, there is clearly a relation between Irigaray's ethics and Heidegger's "fundamental" ontology. Certainly, the emphasis on nearness and *mitsein* in Heidegger's work can be understood as harbingers of Irigaray's ethical project. But the connection is more apparent if we consider Heidegger's use of the root of the word ethics (*ethos*)—abode or dwelling place, in his discussion of Heraclitus.

If the name "ethics," in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ethos*, should now say that "ethics" ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, as one who *eksists*¹³, is in itself the original ethics. However, this thinking is not ethics in the first instance, because it is ontology. For ontology always thinks solely the being (*on*) in its Being.¹⁴

Irigarayan ethics should be seen as consistent with this view.¹⁵ Irigaray is as invested as Heidegger in revisiting the foundational suppositions of metaphysics and the exclusions upon which such foundations rest: "From my point of view, it is not necessary to separate truth from ethicality, to separate, in other words, ethicality from the question of the other's to be. Since the other is—is already, perhaps will be, has been, has in himself a seed of the to be in so far as he exists—I must respect him as the other which he is."¹⁶

Thus both Heidegger and Irigaray can be seen to think ontology and ethics together. It is not the concept of ethics or ontology that impedes such a relationship, but rather the terminology, the language, we have heretofore used to express that relationship. This is why Heidegger and Irigaray take language as a primary point of departure in their analyses of ontology and ethics and why I would suggest that any attempt to practically engage with their philosophies requires a new model of language. To say, then, that ontology is ethics or Being is ethics is to use these terms in a nonmetaphysical sense. If Heidegger's inquiry into the meaning of Being is to lead us away from Being as presence and the copula—Being *is*, then the project implies a new understanding, a new conception, of Being. Thus when I say Being *is* ethics I risk the copula because Being is no longer Being, as it has heretofore been understood, and ethics is no longer ethics. Both terms, exceeding their metaphysical underpinnings, cause us also to reexamine the copula—the *to be* itself. But, of course, writing this phrase, "Being is ethics," cannot in itself effect such a transformation. Each element of the phrase is still attached to its sign and its representation. The task before us then is to loose the signifier from the signified, to escape the fixity of representation by an ever-changing signification. It is such a possibility that Heidegger augurs when he calls for the "end of philosophy" or the closure of metaphysics. Interestingly, ethical difference is also made possible by the development of such a language.

In placing these philosophers side by side I hope to enact the kind of "revealing" or recognition that each considers fundamental to ontological becoming and the ethical relation. It is ethics itself that might be glimpsed in the expression of the relation between Irigaray, Heidegger, and Fanon. Although *Black Skin White Masks* is shaped by different circumstances and seems to be engaged with different questions, I would argue that Fanon is preoccupied with many of the issues central to the philosophies of Heidegger and Irigaray, particularly their attention to language, ontology, and ethics. I hope that in reading his work with theirs we might see the significance of his analysis of racial difference to ontological and ethical becoming. Indeed, Fanon's work on race and the failure of ethics in the colonial situation is important to any discussion of ethical difference. As many critics have remarked, Irigaray's ethical model is compromised by her limited conception of difference, specifically her failure to attend to racial difference.¹⁷ One of Irigaray's most recent works, *Between East and West*, is an attempt to rectify this omission. Irigaray sees an analogy between a masculinist culture of the same and white Western hegemony. However, she warns that multiculturalism, rather than allowing for difference, seeks to subsume differences into a broader, albeit fragmented, universal. Penelope Deutscher argues

that Irigaray's analysis falls short because she fails to model her theory of cultural difference on or after her model of sexual difference. Irigaray's conception of sexual difference does not refer to real differences between men and women, but rather depends upon an ideal future difference, the conditions for which are not yet in place. We currently live in a masculinist culture that does not recognize the feminine. By contrast, the theory of racial and cultural difference articulated in *Between East and West* depends upon conceptions of race and culture already in place. Irigaray's "defense of a multicultural integration that does not assimilate difference assumes as a viable referent (rather than an open reference to that which is to come) the differences between cultures."¹⁸ Thus Irigaray's theory of cultural difference risks devolving into the rigid binaries she critiques in relation to sexual difference, or at best a proliferation of "differences" which become facets of the same. Deutscher argues that the task in thinking racial and cultural difference is to "ask how cultural difference can *not* be represented today."¹⁹ I understand the issue, instead, to be to imagine a way to articulate cultural and racial differences that are not *representable*. As we will see in the pages that follow, Heidegger's critique of metaphysics enables us to consider how an ethics of sexual and racial difference might be possible if we rethink representation and its limits.

Representation and Ontology

In his interrogation of metaphysics, Heidegger recast a question that had plagued metaphysicians for centuries. Whereas Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Nietzsche, and others had each inquired into the nature of the world—How does the subject know the world? What principles does it act in accordance with?—Heidegger reminded us that the more fundamental question had not been asked. How does this subject, this being, come to be? We cannot inquire into the nature of the world and the subject's relation to it until we inquire into the nature of the subject itself. How does the subject come to be, so as to be able to act in and be acted upon by this world? Indeed, if we can think of presence at all in order to pose it as a question we must surely first inquire into the presencing of that presence: how it is that this presence or being comes to be presenced? The mistake made by metaphysicians in the past, according to Heidegger, had been to assume an already posited ground or Being even in the act of asking about the nature of that being.

One of our first tasks will be to prove that if we posit an "I" or subject as that which is proximally given, we shall com-

pletely miss the phenomenal content of Dasein. *Ontologically*, every idea of a 'subject'—unless refined by a previous ontological determination of its basic character—still posits the *subjectum* along with it, no matter how vigorous one's ontical protestations against the 'soul substance' or the 'reification of consciousness.' The Thinghood itself which such reification implies must have its ontological origin demonstrated if we are to be in a position to ask what we are to understand *positively* when we think of the unreified Being of the subject, the soul, the consciousness, the spirit, the person.²⁰

For Heidegger it was necessary to ask how it is that this given, Being, is given without resorting to ontotheological logic, that thinks itself in terms that are given of this world and not outside of it, hence invalidating the claim to a higher being outside this world or ground. Put simply then, for Heidegger, Being exceeds our capacity to represent it. The error, according to Heidegger, that metaphysicians have made since Descartes is assuming that Being itself was capable of being represented by a knowing being subject whose very Being makes representation or self-knowledge possible. In taking itself as its own ground the subject becomes both the subject and object of its own investigation.

In Heidegger's view, the role played by representation in the metaphysical tradition cannot be underestimated. Because the Cartesian model requires a self-knowing subject—"I think therefore I am"—Being is dependent on a prior system of representation. Representational thinking allows only what can be adequately presented or thought to a self-present subject to be thought. Thus a being present to itself is the condition of subjectivity for the Cartesian subject.

In the *ego cogito sum*, the *cogitare* is understood in this essential and new sense. The *subiectum*, the fundamental certainty, is the being-represented-together-with—made secure at any time—of representing man together with the entity represented, whether something human or non-human, i.e., together with the objective. The fundamental certainty is the *me cogitare=me esse* that is at any time indubitably representable and represented. This is the fundamental equation of all reckoning belonging to the representing that is itself making itself secure. In this fundamental certainty man is sure that, as the representer of all representing, and therewith as the realm of all representedness, and hence of all certainty and truth, he is made safe and secure, i.e., *is*.²¹