NINE

SEXUALITY ON THE MARKET

An Irigarayan Analysis of Female Desire as Commodity

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> What is required of a "normal" feminine sexuality is oddly evocative of the characteristics of the status of a commodity.
>
> —Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*

> What is at stake [in theorizing sexuality] is the activity and agency, the mobility and social space, accorded to women. Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural, and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles.
>
> —Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*

When constructing the cultural terms of female sexuality, it is essential that we consider the power of commodification in women's sexual lives. While many theorists and philosophers have situated the female body as distinctly gendered (e.g., Gallop 1988; Butler 2006; Spivak 2006), a function of social constructionism (Mitchell 1985; Kristeva 1996; Chodorow 1999), and certainly a product of sexual difference (Jardine 1985; Wittig 1992; Cixous 2001), the work of Luce Irigaray most clearly and forcefully situates the terms of the female body in relationship to the social and cultural

marketplace in which women negotiate power, resistance, pleasure, and the self. Drawing upon the paradigm of "women on the market" in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, this chapter illuminates the ways in which Irigaray's philosophy of women on the market helps us to understand some of our contemporary culture's expectations of female sexuality, particularly the way that women's sexuality is disciplined, constructed, controlled, and regulated. Irigaray's work provides a basis upon which contemporary cultural phenomena about sexuality and the market can be analyzed and understood, particularly as they are communicated in women's narratives. I specifically posit that the tangled web of commodification in which women experience themselves is represented not only in distinctly market-driven contexts (e.g., the development of sexual-pharmaceutical drugs), but also in the narratives of women's erotic lives (e.g., women's qualitative constructions of partnered relationships, sexual objectification, and relationships to orgasm). By interweaving these cultural contexts with my own qualitative research,[1] this chapter illustrates the ways that Irigaray's claims about women being traded by and between men apply directly to the sexual treatment of women. Irigaray's detailed description of the economy of patriarchy, in which women are bought, sold, and traded between men, frames not only the way in which women's sexuality is *represented*, but also the way that women understand, and communicate about, themselves and their bodies. To illustrate this, I closely consider several cultural symptoms that evince women's function as commodities, starting first with topics that evoke commodification in the public display of women, as evidenced in street harassment, wedding customs, and body image conflicts, followed by the more private experiences of commodification such as faking orgasm, performance pressures, and partnered relationships, and concluding with the strongly capitalistic context of commodifying female desire found in car advertising, magazine socialization, and the development of female Viagra. The connections between Irigaray's philosophy of value and exchange (particularly the "desiring woman"), the cultural umbrella of commodification hovering over women's sexual lives and women's own narratives of their position in the sexual economy can help us to reimagine the central role of female desire in the cultural marketplace.

It is significant that Irigaray roots her constructions of gender in the body, in that, "the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object . . . [but instead constructed as] the *lived body*, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures" (Grosz 1994, 18). By shifting away from the overly reductive nature/culture dualism debate (or squabbles about social constructionism) and instead firmly situating women's bodies as the ultimate commodity for exchange by and between men, she constructs the body as a quintessential

site of social and cultural oppression. Irigaray states, "women's bodies—through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown 'infrastructure' of the elaboration of that social life and culture. The exploitation of the matter that has been sexualized female is so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except within this horizon" (Irigaray 1985, 171). Irigaray portrays women's bodies as the simultaneous embodiment of the symbolic and the material, the abstracted and the lived realities, the theoretical and the personal. Implicit in such a construction lies the inseparability of culture and self, of the way in which women literally construct themselves in relationship to their commodification, both as physical bodies and as *symbols* of value. For, "when women are exchanged, woman's body must be treated as an *abstraction*" (175). The commodification paradigm is applicable to the body as a whole (the complete physical woman), the body in parts (particular body parts), and the body in its abstract and symbolic essence.

Such commodification produces complex cultural symptoms, including imbalanced power relationships between men and women that are irreconcilably lopsided. Women become assets, items with both tangible qualities and abstracted qualities. For example, one can tangibly use her for sex, companionship, personal nurturance, and support; or one can maintain and extend one's wealth by acquiring her. In the abstract, she represents a particular amount of "worth" that enters the man into a system of symbolic exchange with other men. Irigaray argues:

> 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)

In such a paradigm, roles are prescribed for both men and women, though due to the nature of their socially inscribed relationship, they remain strictly separate, even while they *both* are caught in a network of power relations. Men gain value in their ability to possess the valuable commodity. Their role is active, in pursuit of valuable goods, always keenly perceptive of the differences in value between their commodity objects (women). Conversely,

women gain value primarily to the extent that they perform as commodities within such an economic exchange. While their role reflects a certain kind of passivity, specifically a relative inability to demand acknowledgment of their subjectivity, their role requires that they allow others (men) to determine their worth as they mirror the power of the phallus and remain complicit in the process of commodification. Though it seems reasonable to assume that some women (indeed, *many* women) resist their own commodification, it also seems evident that these women are judged to be of lower social and sexual value in the process of commodification. Thus, even women who resist commodification implicitly mark themselves as less valuable, thereby further supporting the system of exchange in its entirety. Importantly, individual acts of resistance are always subject to interpretation in the terms of the dominant economy.

To illuminate many of these points, I want to draw upon some of my own qualitative research about female sexuality. In 2005, I conducted a study of the relationship between sociocultural norms and women's sexual practices by asking twenty women a variety of open-ended questions about their sexuality. Their words can usefully and concretely illustrate many of the conflicts described in this essay, particularly the conflicts women experience while confronting, and reacting to, their status as commodities. For example, when considering the public context of commodification, women's descriptions of street harassment, where men mark women as objectified commodities, often conveyed simultaneous reactions of flattery and anger. For example, Ophelia said,

> Sometimes it's okay, it's flattering, and other times it's not. It just depends on what kinds of mood you're in that day. If you're in the mood where you need an ego boost, then it's flattering; and if you're not, then it's disgusting. It's just like anything else that happens to you.

Research participant Melanie added,

> Sometimes it's frustrating and sometimes it's flattering. . . . I think when the advances are from people that I feel no rapport with or interest in, and they're presented rather gracelessly or even with a kind of predatory sense to them, then it bothers me. Like a hooting car of drunkards barreling down the highway while I'm walking along is not going to make me feel very good about myself. A wolf whistle from a construction worker on a rooftop is probably going to be neutral. And if it's somebody like at a party, who doesn't really know much about me, but I can see they're checking me out from the side of the room, I want to talk to him. You know, then it's like I feel good. . . . Sometimes, though, I get really angry, and a lot of the anger is just feeling helpless like there's nothing you can do about the insult or whatever is thrown at you and they're gone. There's nothing you can do.

These examples point to the conflicts women experience when reacting to the *public* experience of feeling marked as commodities, or, as Irigaray would say, being put "on the market."

To situate these theories at the cultural level, one can see obvious parallels in contemporary wedding customs in the United States, as women's commodified status is publicly and ceremoniously displayed. The majority of weddings still include (often at the bride's request, again revealing a complicity in the process of commodification) the literal act of the bride's father "giving her away" to the groom, often accompanied by the church official asking, "Who gives this woman?" Additionally, the bride traditionally adopts the groom's last name and gives up her own last name, thus marking her as property, while a groom's name change would require months of applications and bureaucratic red tape. Upon completion of the ceremony, the official calls them "man and *wife*," again marking her in relation to, and property of, her husband. She wears an engagement ring to mark her as betrothed while the groom does not wear such a ring. During the wedding, she wears a white dress to symbolize her purity and virginity (she has, as Irigaray says, "pure exchange value"), a white veil (to symbolize her subservience to her husband), and flowers (she will bear his children). The bride's parents reenact the dowry system by paying for the wedding, proving her economic worthiness and status. She wears "something blue" to symbolize fidelity and commitment, carries a bouquet to transfer her fertility power from herself to another woman, decorates the cake with fruit and flowers, and has rice thrown at her, to symbolize being a "good woman," that is, a soon-to-be mother.[2] In total, we see the ways in which various wedding customs mark women's commodity status, indicating not only our culture's (and the groom's) willingness to place women in this economic exchange, but also women's performance of the desire to perpetuate the customs that mark them as property.[3] As the examples of wedding customs illustrate, imbalanced power relationships between men and women represent an essential aspect of marking women as objects and men as subjects, thus stripping women of subjective power and inscribing power only in their objectified state.

Perhaps an even more troubling symptom of the exchange that occurs when women are publicly "on the market" is the distorted and alienating relationship that develops between women and their bodies. For example, research participant Mitra said,

> My body image greatly affects me because I think that when I'm not feeling good about it, that's all the times that I'm focusing on it. I'm thinking about my body instead of enjoying my experience. . . . I think it's just kind of like blanking out. You're just sitting there thinking oh my god, I'm so unattractive, wondering what imperfections does your partner notice. So, I think it just takes you out of feeling anything sexual at all.

Another research participant, Charlene, added,

> If I had sex, I'd want to make sure the lights were off and that I was covered because I'm so self-conscious about my body. . . . I think, even though it seems like a cliché, like TV ads make me self-conscious. I think it's really true. We are, as a society, thin, muscular, attractive, and that is marketed to us as the way we should be. And I really think that's true. I see that in my daughters, 'cause I have two daughters and I see that in them. They want to look like Britney Spears and they want to look like this model, and in real life, most of the pictures that we see aren't even of the person. The people themselves don't really look that good. And I think we need to see that more often. We need to see what real women look like, because even though I'm conscious of that, I can't seem to make myself understand that I don't have to look perfect.

These statements help to concretize the construction of the desirable or desiring body as deeply connected to cultural (patriarchal) constraints imposed upon women, for despite an awareness of these beliefs as flawed, they nevertheless translate into women's internalized sense of self. This implies that despite women's efforts to recognize and perhaps resist commodification, the self-imposed qualities of commodification nevertheless persist. Such conflicts about self-imposed performance have been well illustrated by scholars like Judith Butler (2006) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994), who situate self-imposed performances of gender and sexuality as a necessary event in relations of patriarchy and power.

To consider women's *private* experiences with commodification, it is essential to consider the way that Irigaray illuminates the conflicts inherent in women's relationships with their own desire. Because woman is marked as object—and can only have value to the extent that she subscribes to this status—she is stripped of her own subjective desire. On the question of female desire, Irigaray states,

> Must this multiplicity of female desire and female language be understood as shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality?

> A sexuality denied? The question has no simple answer. The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) "subject" to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of "femininity" is prescribed by this masculine specula(riz)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman's desire, which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt. (Irigaray 1985, 30).

The disconnect here between men's idea of women's desire and women's own understanding of their desire becomes especially pronounced when women are banished from actually possessing their own range of desirous feelings and emotions. Necessary to the commodification process, woman cannot "have" her own desire, while man "has" his own desire. She has to subvert her own desires and replace them with man's desires, thus rendering her own desires foreign, shameful, and not fully explored or understood. As Irigaray says, women's original, subjective desires are relegated to waste and excess, replaced by the powerful (masculine) desire that renders her an object and him a subject. In essence, she can only experience desire to the extent that she submits to her own objectification. She can find pleasure only in the context of self-objectification or objectification directed toward her by men.

To concretize such a claim, one only has to consider the specific example of orgasm as it is experienced in the physical female body. Here, we see women alienated from themselves, scrambling to participate appropriately in the sexual exchange, and very often feeling inadequate and inauthentic. As Irigaray suggests in "Women on the Market," that which marks woman as a desirable and marketable sexual object thereby serves as the ultimate currency. In other words, the market economy requires ways for various commodities to demonstrate their worth, to stand out from other similar commodities, to increase their value as commodities. Within the sexual economy, from which women are rarely excluded, orgasm serves just that function. The specific act of orgasm not only facilitates the achievement of "fragmentary" pleasure for woman herself, but also reflects back, within the heteronormative patriarchal model, the power and abilities of the masculinized partner. Woman becomes a mirror, and "the likeness here is only a measure expressing the *fabricated* character of the commodity, its transformation by man's (social, symbolic) 'labor'" (177).

An interesting multiplication happens here, as orgasm (as an extension of the woman) becomes a commodity in and of itself. Women's bodies are expected to produce and perform it, regardless of their actual physical experience. The male partner, in essence, searches for her orgasm as the confirmation of his own masculinized, sexualized power. Much in the same

way that women "bear" children, we see women "bearing" orgasm, bringing to life that which confirms and excites the male subjectivity. He sees himself replicated and made powerful by the product of the woman's body, and as such, that product (whether child or orgasm) becomes something to seek and attach value to. Woman is relegated secondary to her bodily productions.[4] Man maintains himself as the "laborer," in possession of the literal and symbolic energy necessary to construct his mirror, while woman, in essence, constructs herself only as a vehicle through which she can validate and reflect back upon this male labor. Both in the context of childbirth and in the demand for orgasm, we see striking and forceful similarities: the construction of man as active and woman as passive/receiving/submissive (e.g., common cultural myths that sperm "penetrate" the egg, while the egg plays no active role in selecting the sperm;[5] the doctor "delivers" the baby; man "gives" her an orgasm); the incessant need for man to symbolically recreate himself (e.g., the baby as his secondary mirror; orgasm as confirmation of sexual skill); and demands for female performance (e.g., a "real" woman must construct her identity as a *biological* mother; infertility constructed as the woman's fault;[6] orgasm—and that which leads up to the orgasm—performed specifically in response to male efforts at stimulation). As Irigaray argues, "metamorphosed in identical *sublimations*, samples of the same indistinguishable work, all these objects now manifest just one thing, namely, that in their production a force of human labor has been expended, that labor has accumulated in them" (177).

Importantly, it does not matter whether the woman herself actually experiences orgasm, or whether the sexual exchange satisfies her desires. Consider Mitra's thoughts on orgasm:

> I fake often because, you know, he's going to feel bad about himself or he's going to feel like I haven't enjoyed myself, so I just feel like I need to have one to make him happy, or sometimes it's just like if you're tired, and that's like the signifier to be done. . . . I feel like orgasm is what sex is for men and they think that that's what it is for women too. So, I feel like I could never really tell him that I'm faking, because, you know, men like to think, oh no one's ever faking with me. And he's a good lover, it's not like he doesn't care about his partner's sexual satisfaction and I think that makes me all the more compelled to fake. To me, it's much better to just fake it. Everyone's ego is intact and you can just move on.

Her desires become alienated from her subjective reality. Indeed, these desires—and all things she constructs as erotic—are likely deeply connected to her position as a passive, objectified commodity, such that her erotic

subjectivity embraces, and even celebrates, her subjugation. For example, research participant Julie said, "I think I have sex more than the average woman, and rougher than the average woman. Definitely. I really like rough sex. It's not light like play spanking, you know, like *Playboy* magazine-ish spanking. It's real pain and real domination and submission for real. And I don't think that most people do that, but I'm okay with that." Here, Julie constructs her submission as pleasurable, even telling me that she enjoys her partner breaking her ribs during sex, again raising questions about the role of self-identified resistance: Is sadomasochism a way of working through subjugation, or simply a more intense representation of that same subjugation? Can sexual acts both please and harm women?

Woman derives satisfaction by virtue of her *performance as a commodity*, not as an authentically orgasmic being. Orgasm—whether real or fake—allows the male subject to reflect himself, to copy himself, to *make a product*, to exchange such a product in the symbolic marketplace enacted upon the collective of women's bodies. She disciplines her body to perform such an act in order to enter herself into an appropriate economic and market exchange with her partner. Because of the nature of such an exchange, he constructs this as a "gift," a giving of pleasure that belongs to him as the investor of phallic energy (i.e., patriarchal power). For example, research participant Lori said, "I feel really good about my body and our relationship when he gives me an orgasm, and I think it kind of affirms him, too, like he's been able to accomplish this thing, my pleasure, I mean." Here, we see women divested of their power to *have* orgasm—instead relegated into the position of *receiving* it. Her body receives the labor of the "accomplished" partner; his skill translates into her bodily product. Also implicit in the model of orgasm-as-gift lies the assumption that women must "serve at the pleasure of" men, wait to receive orgasm until men deem it appropriate, and, of course, demonstrate gratitude toward the externally generated responsiveness of their own bodies. This model strips women of their power and complexity, of their capacity to orchestrate their own desires in the context of sexuality, while simultaneously overvaluing the masculinized role of putting labor into the erotic responses of women.

This, again, raises the question of female pleasure. Does woman not still take pleasure in her orgasm? Does the system in which orgasm is exchanged preclude her enjoyment and satisfaction? How do women experience themselves in the context of this socially inscribed role? On this point, Irigaray argues,

> Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of male fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But

> such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (25)

The question of what women want in such an economic exchange becomes folded into the question of what her sexual energies represent; indeed, the two remain inextricably connected. Her performance may very well be pleasurable, but it is nevertheless a performance, an investment in the phallic/patriarchal desires that make possible the occurrence of the sexual exchange. Her performances also place men in the position of needing to confirm their power through women's orgasms, a problem that reveals the intricacies of power and pleasure for both genders.

This concept of performance is essential to understanding woman's role on the market and in further deepening our understanding of the process of commodifying women's sexuality. As Audre Lorde (1993, 342) has argued, women are taught to live outside of themselves, alienated from their authentic bodily expression. Indeed, many women claim to want their own submission, even degradation. Listening to research participant Fiona, we hear a somewhat mild example of this construct: "I feel pressured by him because I feel like I should be doing it more often. Or, I should be just satisfying him, and he knows that I do enjoy it once we get started, so sometimes he feels like it's probably for my own good if he pressures me because he does know that it relaxes me when I'm done." Women also claim to want to fake orgasm, such as research participate Kate who said,

> I don't think I've faked it that often; maybe a handful of times, because I wanted to. . . . Often times I was in a situation where it did seem to matter to the person that they were performing well, or that they needed some kind of encouragement or some kind of reinforcement of their own experience. And because like, as I mentioned before, sex feels sometimes to me like a service. It's like okay, I can do that thing for you if it's this important to you.

Collectively, these narratives help to illustrate the impossibility of separating women's performance as commodities from their own "fragmentarily" experienced desires.

Necessary to the process of commodification is the near total loss of subjectivity imposed upon the commodity, the abolition of her sexual

agency, and the construction of clearly delineated boundaries within which she can experience her sexual desires. Thus, anything she does (e.g., having an orgasm, moaning with pleasure, dressing in seductive clothing, and the like) only reflects her commodified status. She does these things in order to perform as a good commodity, and her behavior is dictated by the subjectivity of man. As Irigaray notes, "Woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man's 'labor'" (175). Most importantly, *the pleasure she reports feeling* as a result of her commodification signifies the relentless ability of patriarchy to demand women's compliance with, and submission to, phallic/patriarchal power. It raises some interesting and relevant questions: What does it mean if women cannot have sexual agency? In what ways can women alter the terms of their own commodification? Is their pleasure simply a concrete expression of their oppression, and if so, what does this suggest about orgasm, satisfaction, and women's erotic lives in general? How does such a model inscribe women's relationships with each other?

To address this last question, Irigaray offers some important observations about the ways in which commodification transforms relationships *between* commodities. She asserts,

> The exchange operation cannot take place in terms of some intrinsic value of the commodity. It can only come about when two objects—two women—are in a relation of equality with a third term that is neither the one nor the other. It is thus not as "women" that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature—their current price in gold, or phalluses—and of which they would represent a plus or minus quantity. (175)

As evidenced in the cultural marketplace, particularly visual representations of women, commodified bodies rarely compete with one another based on their sense of whole personhood. Rather, as Jean Kilbourne and Mary Pipher (2000) would argue, advertisements and cultural representations of women construct them as only *one* (fetishized) part of themselves. They are the reduction of the sum to only its parts, whether specific body parts (legs, butt, thighs, smile, eyes, skin, vagina) or the specific acts that mark women as valuable (orgasm, childbearing, fertility, housecleaning, blow job, and the like). The decisive lack of wholeness—indeed, the dismembered qualities of women's commodified bodies—makes clear this point: in order to commodify and put into circulation on the market, woman must be reduced to only her most essential commodity qualities. More specifically, she must be reduced in order to be effectively compared to other women as commodity objects. This is true in the sense that women are compared to other women

in terms of beauty, but also in the sense that women are compared to *other material objects that can also be owned and possessed by men.*

To further demonstrate this point, mass media provides a plethora of examples in which women take on symbolic qualities of material objects. Women are often compared to, and compared against, the performance of cars, which themselves, along with boats, often acquire female nicknames. One only need imagine the wide array of car magazines that feature the inseparable dyad of the semi-nude woman and shiny, high-performance car. Symbolically, the implications are multiple—that men can own and possess women as they own and possess cars; that women are implicitly, if not explicitly, for sale; that some cars have more value or exude sexiness more than other cars; and most importantly, that the car itself, like the woman, serves as a reflection of male (patriarchal) power. If a man buys this car, he will attract female desire, the great commodity and object of trade, the means by which the phallus reflects itself, recreates itself, and nurtures its own energies. This last point proves especially important in understanding the symbolic ways in which women serve as commodity objects in the economy of sex. Commodification of women and their sexuality leads both to the objectification and circulation of women as fuckable *bodies*, but also to the circulation of the *desiring* woman who can be purchased and owned. Certainly, "the economy of exchange—of desire—is man's business" (177). In this sense, women are valuable on the market to the extent that they discipline their bodies to stand up well to comparisons with other female bodies (e.g., thinness, beauty, youth, fitness, breast shape and size, etc.), and the extent to which they perform their desire for man as their subjective possessor (e.g., "wanting" sex; "wanting" to be seen in public with him; "wanting" to wear certain clothes, "wanting" to take care of him, and so forth). As Irigaray states, "the production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he 'pays' the father or the brother, not the mother . . .), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and 'products' are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone" (171).

Women's magazines represent another key example of the ways in which women's sexuality enters into an economy of buying, selling, and trading, particularly in the sense that one commodity is compared with other similar commodities, and thus, their value assessed and revised. In popular magazines, women learn not only how to better themselves as commodities and increase their value, but also, they learn to *concretely assess their own relative value.* As Irigaray notes, "In order to have a relative value, a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity that serves as its equivalent. Its value is never found to lie within itself" (176). Ironically, however, women themselves cannot singularly increase or decrease their value—this right is reserved only to men in their evaluative role. As Edward Laumann says,

> Across all class levels, ethnic divisions, and age groups, women . . . are told by magazines that sexual pleasure should be theirs. There is considerable advice about getting and keeping men through skilled sexual practice, though in practical terms it is unclear how women will be able to introduce such skills into a relationship in which the man is the socially defined bearer of sexual high technology. (Laumann et al. 1994, 203)

Such messages, in which women are told to garner a certain social currency through sexual knowledge and skill, reinforce the idea that women should perform as products of male sexual labor. Indeed, sexual *skills* become themselves commodities, something women learn to cultivate to better market themselves within the sexual economy. In addition to general advice about how to be beautiful, women also receive messages about their literal performance as commodities and the ways in which their ability to please male partners essentially makes them more valuable, marketable, and interesting as women. Such messages appear within the hyper-commercial realm of advertising, marketing, and women's advice columns.

In a small sampling of ten major women's magazines published in March/April 2004, I noted several key trends in the performative and commodified messages directed to women about their sexuality.[7] Each of these encouraged women to behave as good commodities both by literally disciplining their bodies and by symbolically reflecting back the phallic energy invested in the women by the male subjects. First, and most expectedly, all of these women's magazines took great effort to encourage women to discipline their physical appearance, primarily through diet, wearing of stylish clothes, and looking pretty. This focus on worthiness, beauty regimens, fixing flaws, dressing in trendy ways, and losing weight functions to make women aware of their potential comparability with other women, thus placing them in direct competition with other commodities. Of particular note was the inclusion of articles aimed at specific body parts (e.g., "Work your way to a better butt!"), which again mirrors the way mass media reduces women from a complete being and instead features singular body parts that compare with other women's singular body parts. A commodity must always be aware of her differences from other commodities. The subtext is quite blatantly, "Look better than other women!"

Second, popular magazines frequently emphasized the pedigree of the perfect woman—one who typically engages in many of the male partners'

interests, supports the male ego, and praises the performance of her sexual partner. This seems similar to Irigaray's concept of the mirror, in which women serve to reflect male subjectivity and female objectification. The central message here—one that seems far more disturbing than simply telling women to look pretty—focuses on socializing women to worship their male partners, particularly in the phallic sense. *Complete Woman* advocated, "Dress to impress, tempt him with a tease, . . . be interested in his hobbies, throw a subtle compliment his way, don't be high maintenance, exhibit curiosity." *Redbook*, typically aimed at middle-aged married women, stated, "Next time you catch your man preening in the bathroom mirror, don't assume he's vain. Take it as a sign he wants *you* to assure him he's hot. . . . So lay on the compliments (and that pat on the butt or biceps)." These magazines clearly mandate penis-worship as indicative of women's commodified sexual skills. As Irigaray argues, "Woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex, constituted as a transcendental value: the phallus" (Irigaray 1985, 188). For example, *Glamour* more directly emphasized doing whatever was necessary to make the male partner feel adequate:

> Sometimes it's OK to lie: "All men are insecure about penis size. It's our competitive nature." He wants to hear that it's big. Even if it's average. *Particularly* if it's average. Even if it's—shudder to think—less than average. Complimenting a man's penis is like giving a woman flowers. We can all use a nice pick-me-up once in a while.

In another *Glamour* issue, similar messages were communicated:

> Be kind to this [pointer toward groin]: In a perfect world, women would fall to their knees in fits of ecstasy worshipping our private parts. But since that's unlikely, we'll settle for compliments about our size, shape (hint: it's never, ever "cute") and skill at using it, as well as your treating it like a Popsicle. And please learn the male sweet spot. If you don't know it, ask him.

Cosmopolitan magazine echoed these messages, advocating lying as a means to support the male partner: "'You're the best lover I've ever had!' . . . If this white lie is skillfully told, it will boost his ego and fire up your sex life." Here, magazines construct woman as necessarily grateful for, and aware of, the power of the phallus, and as such, always (implicitly) in reference to male sexual and physical labor. She must know what to do with it, and how to properly appreciate it, in order to validate her status as a commodity (and to beat other women in the game of "winning him").

The third theme noted involved the attention paid to the female orgasm as a necessary marker of female maturity and sexual function (or, as

Complete Woman claimed, "The Holy Grail of Sex"), as magazines encouraged women to perform their orgasms to support the male experience of sex. Irigaray's paradigm of women as products of male labor proves especially elegant here, as magazines literally teach women to discipline their bodily actions in order to please their male partners. Though emphasis was typically on learning to orgasm through intercourse (e.g., "He'll also enjoy feeling like a God among men when you come through intercourse"), magazines offered lots of advice about how women can "help" themselves. *Glamour* called having an orgasm one of life's thirty-one essential experiences, stating, "Is it possible to have a good sex life without *ever* having had an orgasm? Absolutely not. Buy a book. Get a vibrator. Drink a glass of wine. Whatever it takes, figure it out." The magazine repeated this advice in an earlier article, listing among the twelve things every woman must do this year, "Learning how to (if you don't already know): ask for a raise, roast a chicken, have an orgasm, buy a stock." A slightly more specific comment, yet remarkably laden with gendered messages, came from *Cosmopolitan*, stating, "Amazingly, only a quarter of women are *lucky enough* to have an orgasm through intercourse without clitoral stimulation. . . . For the rest of us, it doesn't matter how long he *bangs away* because without direct touch you may enjoy yourself, but an orgasm will be a *distant dream*." Notably, orgasm is framed as a product and *not* as a function of woman's (fractured, fragmentary) desire. While he "bangs away," women learn they should treat the male partner as a "God among men," worthy of phallus-worship and nuanced female sexual performance.

The fourth theme I noted highlighted the tendency to naturalize male dominance and the male sex drive, while also naturalizing women's passivity. Here, the market economy, in which women are passively traded by and between men, becomes naturalized as a function of men's "need" for sex, and women's "need" to sexually service men. In an article intended to teach women about men, *Glamour* stated (from the male perspective):

> A long spell without sex means trouble: While you may write off a sexless few months to a busy schedule, stress at work or parenthood, we need sex no matter what. Your guy may appear to be understanding and similarly stressed out, but going without it too long can crush his ego and discolor his view of the entire relationship. So even if he backs off and stops putting the moves on you, rest assured he's quietly begging you to strip down and lead the way.

Glamour also provided advice about "Your best move when you're beyond tired," saying, "When you want to fool around but are exhausted, try spooning. . . . Lift your top leg, drawing your knees up so he can enter you from behind." Clearly, the needy male sex drive takes precedence over the

woman's need to rest or relax. *Glamour* further naturalized the male sex drive and even detached it from the brain, as a twenty-year-old man argued: "I was regularly being manipulated by my penis into doing or saying whatever it took to get into a girl's underwear. Once I reached my objective, I'd simply act like a jerk." The female sex drive, or desire to have sex with multiple partners, was pathologized in *Complete Woman*: "There is no such word as 'slut': Calling women sluts is unfair; I think it might be more realistic to say she might have a problem." To emphasize the importance of female passivity, *Glamour* advises women to "Let him dress you up: Seeing what *he* thought was sexy, who *he* thought I was, was intriguing." Collectively, these themes reflect the market economy of women traded between men, as well as women compared against other women, as commodity objects, in order to assess their value. Magazines tend to naturalize female passivity, promote male discipline and control of women's bodies, and encourage outright phallus-worship. As Irigaray said, "the mirror that envelops and paralyzes the commodity specularizes, speculates (on) man's 'labor.' *Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man*. In order to serve as such, they give up their bodies to men as the supporting material of specularization, of speculation. They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and of his activity" (177).

To again concretize this point, and to further solidify the way in which female desire is itself commodified, I want to briefly consider the recent development of female sexual enhancement drugs, particularly the failed development of female Viagra. In the past several years, I have been tracking the discussion about the failures of female Viagra in the *New York Times* and have chosen some interesting points from these articles to illustrate the concrete ways in which Irigaray's model of economic exchange is represented in modern sexual technology. One of the first to report on the failure of female Viagra was a *New York Times* article from March 16, 2004 in which Anahad O'Connor stated that scientists have given up on developing a female version of Viagra, citing its inability to ignite female arousal patterns. The article stated, "[Female] Viagra's failure underscored the obvious: when it comes to sexuality, men and women to some extent are differently tuned. For men, arousal and desire are often intertwined, while for women, the two are frequently distinct." Another *New York Times* article, by Gardiner Harris (February 28, 2004), also discussing the failure of female Viagra, stated: "Although Viagra can indeed create the outward signs of arousal in many women, that seems to have little effect on a woman's willingness, or desire, to have sex." Researchers were puzzled by Viagra's inability to convince women to have sex with their partners, citing that many women do not feel arousal until they actually begin to have sex. The article concluded by saying: "Getting a woman to connect arousal and desire . . . requires exquisite timing on a man's part and a fair amount of coaxing. 'What we need to do is find a pill for engendering the perception of intimacy.'" Not only does this last statement suggest a certain kind of disease mongering, whereby pharmaceutical companies—in an effort to generate profits and hook people on lifestyle drugs—literally invent disorders to convince people they need treatment for them but it also speaks to these drug companies' tendencies to reduce female desire and female sexuality to an exclusively physiological function.[8] Here, desire is not a function of, say, any social factors of a relationship, but instead of the woman's malfunctioning brain chemistry.

As another case in point, the increased frequency of doctors prescribing off-label testosterone to women, despite the lack of Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval and absence of long-term safety data,[9] equally reflects the medical construction of women's bodies as, simply, in need of more man-like qualities (e.g., aggressive desire to have sex, physiological arousal, among others), as reported by Lynn Crawford Cook in *the Washington Post* (September 20, 2005). For example, she quoted Judith Reichman saying, "women need estrogen for lubrication and comfort during sex. But they need testosterone to feel desire in the first place. With diminished testosterone . . . women don't just lose desire for their partners, they lose desire for *any* partner." Female Viagra fits into this model, however dysfunctionally, by suggesting that the only reason for women's lack of desire for sex is their lack of physical arousal, in essence, their lack of ability to *be like men*. Such claims certainly seem, as Susan Roko (quoted by Cook) says, "patronizing, dismissive, and irresponsibly uninformed."

To further demonstrate the danger of such drugs—and the potential ways in which they could heighten women's construction of themselves as commodities—consider women's own narratives about female Viagra. When asked if they would be willing to try such a drug if the FDA approved it for mainstream use, research participant Susan noted,

> I'd hate to see something come out that's thought to be like a panacea. Women aren't interested in sex with their partners because they're too busy taking care of the kids or doing this or doing that. Or perhaps some other kind of resentment. Or perhaps they don't have a good relationship. How are they going to feel when the pill doesn't help that?

Other participants expressed fewer reservations about taking female Viagra, such as Margaret, who stated, "I think I'd like to try it, because I think it would make a more satisfying sexual encounter. I have no fears at all about it." Research participant Mitra added, "I would try it once, and my decision after that would be based on how it made me feel. . . . Sometimes I wonder

why my interest in sex feels like it's waned. I mean everyone always talks about thirty being your peak, but I don't see it!" Other research participants expressed serious reservations about female Viagra, such as Nora, who said,

> I have issues with the pharmaceutical industry in general. I feel like there's not a pill for everything and I'm really an advocate of going back to holistic stuff, of getting back in touch with your body. I think that we're just getting farther and farther away from ever fixing anything and creating a real solvency. I think that it'll just be another distraction and it'll just add more layers to an issue. I think we need to get back to women feeling and being in their own bodies, and I think giving you another drug is only going to move it farther away from that. It's not going to fix the larger problem. It's this artificial thing. I mean, we already have enough. No. Just no. I really wish we would have more support for more sex positive stuff for women, you know? It's just a huge shift in our society that we need to create that no pill is going to come close to doing.

Research participant Dorothy added, "I'm angry that I think in some kinds of ways they're trying to market it as the natural way. Like, oh you're not orgasming, there's something wrong with you, take this pill to fix your problem." Interestingly, this anger and resistance was only directed at the pharmaceutical industry and not at their own sexual partners, again nuancing the way women construct pressure to orgasm in different contexts.

The relative failure of efforts to develop female Viagra most notably point to the frustration with the stubborn refusal of the female body to cooperate with the investment of energies to improve its productivity and efficiency. It is of great significance that drug companies position themselves in many ways as arbiters in the exchange of women between men. It is *their* labor that is a call for recognition, not just the individual man having sex with the individual woman. Thus, if we conceptualize drug companies (along with the billions of dollars invested not only in the drugs themselves but in the entire construct of marketing the drugs to people's—particularly women's—anxieties) as substituting themselves for "the man" in the context of the sexual exchange, all of Irigaray's constructions of women as the recipients of male labor become especially prescient. Women's orgasms, mediated through the invention of drug company labor (female Viagra by Pfizer), may soon be, discursively, a masculinized pharmaceutical gift. Women "bear" orgasm not only as a result of the male sexual partner's energy, but also as a result of the drug company's labor and investment in women's sexual pleasure. Such female pleasure, however, only exists to further nurture, mirror, and support *both* the male partner *and* the drug company, rendering

women and their orgasms again as commodities traded by and between men. As Irigaray stated, "A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies': her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values" (Irigaray 1985, 180). The development of female sexual enhancement drugs (or female sexual dysfunction cures) allows us to see women's bodies literally split into the "natural" and the artificial/"exchangeable," thus solidifying the unimportance of women's "natural" sexual expression. Whether women *want* sex matters less than their *performance of wanting sex*. Consequently, sexual desire and sexual expression outside the context of performance is virtually inaccessible, forced into the realm of shame, guilt, and anxiety. In this mode of "pharmaceutical sculpting," women are situated as comparable commodity objects, positioned in relative value to each other, subject to phallocentric judgment, and asked to perform as good products of male labor, with that labor being both sexual and technological. Is it surprising, then, that women are failing in their roles as, to use Irigaray's term, "desiring machines"?

In sum, Irigaray's model of a market economy in which women are traded by and between men helps to illuminate the conditions of modern female sexuality. It is crucial to consider Irigaray's contributions to understanding women's sexuality, and particularly their desire, as subject to the process of commodification, as the sexualized female body moves through the world both discursively and literally. By reading the public, private, and commercial contexts of commodification, we can explore the multifaceted symptoms of marking the female body as an object of trade. Irigaray's model of women's commodification helps us to understand why such a system of exchange alienates women from their bodies and their sexual desire, places them in competition with each other, teaches them to discipline and control their bodies to perform as good commodities, and puts them out of touch with any desire that does not directly nurture their roles as commodities. At the same time, Irigaray helps to raise some relevant questions about the meaning of desire and subjectivity in light of this commodification: How, and why, does the economy of sexuality persist? What does it mean to inhabit a body marked as feminine in the context of increasing rigidity, control, and discipline of all things female? If women learn to internalize, and be complicit in, their own commodification, how can we conceptualize *non*complicity, *non*compliance, *anti*capitalistic impulses, *anti*patriarchal practices? Irigaray leaves us with this thought:

> It is useless, then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expected to surprise them. . . . And if you ask them insistently what

they are thinking about, they can only reply: Nothing. Everything. Thus what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything. Always something more and something else besides that *one*—sexual organ, for example—that you give them, attribute to them. . . . [It] really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse. . . . The question has no simple answer. (Irigaray 1985, 29–30)

NOTES

1. This research draws upon twenty qualitative interviews (approved in advance by the Institutional Review Board and thoroughly examined for ethical soundness and respect for participants) conducted in 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Participants were recruited through a local entertainment and arts listing, and were paid twenty dollars for their participation in the study. Each interview involved a two-hour, detailed, audio-recorded exchange in which women were asked numerous open-ended questions about their sexuality, including issues of satisfaction, pleasure, power, relationships, and ideas about the sexual culture at large. The women's ages ranged evenly from eighteen to fifty-nine, and I oversampled sexual minority and racial/ethnic minority women. All accounts provided here rely upon the exact words of participants.

2. For a full explanation of the historical roots of various wedding traditions, see www.superweddings.com/article-customsandtraditions.html and the "Indie Bride Guide" feature of the June–July 2006 issue of *Bust Magazine*.

3. Another poignant example of women being complicit in their own commodification is the extent to which many women report feeling loved, protected, and nurtured when their boyfriends or husbands exhibit possessive jealousy. One woman I interviewed (Lori) described her friend as "feeling so good when her boyfriend got enraged at bars when other guys look at her, you know, like he owns her and no one else can look at her. She really thinks this is a sign of his love for her or something."

4. See also Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). This text speaks to the ways in which women's bodies become mechanisms for machine-like production.

5. See Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," *Signs* 16 (1991): 485–501 for a discussion of how sperm have been anthropomorphized as men, while eggs have been treated as "miniature women."

6. According to research conducted by the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, infertility equally affects men and women, thereby implying that any given case of infertility has an equal chance of being the "fault" of the man or woman involved in attempting to conceive.

7. Magazines were selected from the "Women's Magazines" section of Borders bookstore during the months of February and March 2004 (which typically meant the magazines were dated March or April). I selected ten magazines that represented a diverse cross-section of target groups (e.g., age, race, and so forth). Magazines included: *Cleo* (Winter 2003–2004), *Company* (April 2004), *Complete Woman* (February–March 2004), *Cosmopolitan* (March and April 2004), *Glamour* (March and April 2004), *Redbook* (March and April 2004), and *Teen People* (March 2004).

8. For more on disease mongering, see Leonore Tiefer, "Female Sexual Dysfunction: A Case Study of Disease Mongering and Activist Resistance," *PLoS Med* 3 (2006): e178. Also, see Moynihan and Cassels (2005).

9. Off-label prescriptions of testosterone as a treatment for women's sexual dysfunction have long been considered unsafe. See Tiefer (2006) for a complete discussion.

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TEN

FISHING AND THINKING, OR AN INTERIORITY OF MY OWN

Luce Irigaray's Speculâme de l'autre femme (renversé, inversé, rétroversé)

Claire Potter

So thinking, so speculating, I found my way back to my house by the river.

—Virginia Woolf, *Women and Fiction*

Je ne revient à soi que grâce au détour par l'autre.

—Luce Irigaray, *Le Praticable de la Scène*

INTRODUCTION

But, you may say, we asked you to speak about the philosophy of Luce Irigaray—what has that got to do with either fishing and thinking or a room of one's own?[1] I will try to explain. I was not sitting like Virginia Woolf on the banks of a river letting down my little line of thought into the water and pondering the words "women and fiction," but instead I was at my desk, staring at the wall, wondering about the philosophy of Luce Irigaray and how it might relate to both women and fiction and to a woman sitting at her desk thinking about them.