Receptacle/*Chōra*: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato's *Timaeus*

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*This essay undertakes a reexamination of the notion of the receptacle/*chōra *in Plato's* Timaeus, *asking what its value may be to feminists seeking to understand the topology of the feminine in Western philosophy. As the source of cosmic motion as well as a restless figurality, labile and polyvocal, the receptacle/*chōra *offers a fecund zone of destabilization that allows for an immanent critique of ancient metaphysics. Engaging with Derridean, Irigarayan, and Kristevan analyses, Bianchi explores whether receptacle/*chōra *can exceed its reduction to the maternal-feminine, and remain answerable to contemporary theoretical concerns.*

The notion of the receptacle/*chōra* in Plato's *Timaeus* has received modest and largely ambivalent attention from feminist commentators. Appearing midway in the dialogue, receptacle/*chōra* is a labile and unstable notion with undeniable feminine and maternal resonances; occupying a zone and role between Being and Becoming, it is neither, having no predicates, knowable only via a sort of dreamlike awareness or "bastard reasoning" (Plato 1977, 52b).[1] In this capacity, it provides the substrate upon and the space in which the eternal realm of Being makes its mark and instantiates itself on the way to the creation of the sensible world. It is thus an ignoble, slippery concept, a vision of the feminine locked into a strictly ungraspable maternal role, which would appear to afford feminists in search of amenable material for a rich or critical understanding of the role of women or the feminine in the history of Western philosophy little purchase. Julia Kristeva (2002a), notably, has deployed the notion of *chōra* in the elaboration of her linguistic, psychoanalytic notion of the semiotic to describe the maternal body, but it is thoroughly recontextualized, and bears little resemblance to the notion that occupies such a central place and does so much

work in this important dialogue. Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz have also analyzed the *Timaeus* for its production and designation of the feminine and the maternal in and for one of Western philosophy's founding gestures. For Irigaray, the dialogue assists in disclosing symbolic and structural topologies of sexual difference within which women are, according to her, still entrapped and enjoined to confront (Irigaray 1985a). Butler (1993) investigated the *Timaeus* to trace a philosophical genealogy of materiality in which sexuality and sexual difference are irreducibly configured and intertwined, while Grosz (1995) deepened the Irigarayan call to refigure women's relationship to spatiality, dwelling in space and buildings. Space, for Grosz, needs to be construed and built in a way that is not dependent upon an expropriation of feminine corporeality, and the concomitant identification of the feminine with spatiality, as the strictly inconceivable condition of being in the world.

The genealogical significance of the *Timeaus* creation story and its sexual topographies should not be underestimated. While the mythical cosmology of Plato's *Republic* may be better known and more widely celebrated, Aristotle continually returned to the *Timaeus* in constituting his own cosmology. This creation story, and its central mythophilosophical family romance, has thus reverberated across the millennia. Its structure, philosophemes, and mythemes persisted in the vastly influential Aristotelian cosmology, physics, and biology. This structure crucially involves a relegation of the feminine to a position of a barely knowable, shifting, errant function in the production of a metaphysical system and world in which only men are able to participate as fully agentic, reasoning beings.

In this essay, I readdress the receptacle/*chōra* in the central passages of the *Timaeus* in a close reading that takes its inspiration principally from the psychoanalytic feminism of Irigaray, as well as Derridean deconstruction. In closely examining the Platonic text in its specific tropisms, I seek not only to limn the specific topologies of sexual difference therein, but also to tease out the specific values and limitations of receptacle/*chōra* as a feminist theoretical tool or site from which to enrich an account of what we might call (following Irigaray) the operation of the "feminine" in Western philosophy. In particular, I wish to draw attention to the receptacle/*chōra*'s quality of being in motion; qua source of motion, it is also the source of time and change for the world of Becoming. Both Plato and Aristotle analogize the moving, changing, cosmos with a living being. Noting that the source of motion for this cosmic organism carries in the Platonic cosmology an irreducibly feminine mark provides a context, and a corrective, for the later Aristotle's dominative and profoundly masculinist notion of the Prime Mover as the source of cosmic motion. Further, this motile generativity of the receptacle/*chōra* is not restricted to the material register, but insofar as its ungraspability generates a surfeit of figures in the text, receptacle/*chōra* is also a site of linguistic productivity. I will further elaborate

this generativity, simultaneously figural and corporeal and irreducibly feminine, in dialogue with the Irigarayan figure of the two lips and through rapprochement with Kristeva's psychoanalytic deployment of *chōra* in and with the maternal body. At the close of this article, I therefore briefly explore some ramifications of my reading for themes in contemporary feminist theory, including reproductive politics, geographical displacement, and the troubled relationship of identity and land. I hope to show that receptacle/*chōra* may be understood not merely as a violent abstraction and expropriation of feminine corporeality, but also, critically reapproached, as offering a fecund and generative philosophical terrain in which a feminist rethinking of corporeality, spatiality, figurality, temporality, and life may take (its) place.

The Cosmogony of the *Timaeus*

Timaeus's task in Plato's dialogue is to show how it came to pass that an eternal realm could initially give rise to the world we see around us, the world of experience, the realm of Becoming. This realm is not eternal. It is subject to change and coming to be, and therefore—so the argument goes—it must have originally come to be, and there must necessarily be some cause of this original coming to be. However, Plato faces an epistemological difficulty here, because any account of origins can only be known through opinion and belief, and not through reason and truth, hence even the best cosmogony can only be a "likely story" (*eikota muthon*) (29d). The origin of the cosmos identified by Plato is a maker and father, *poiētēs kai patēr* (28c), a god of goodness who sought to create order from disorder, having found "all that was visible" in a state of "discordant and undisciplined motion," and implanted the highest and best faculty of reason into soul, and soul into body, thus creating a cosmos described as a "living being with soul and intelligence" (30a–b). The demiurge then creates the gods, the earthly creatures, and the two sexes, the better of which, he states, is man. As in Aristotle's cosmogony, we find a hierarchical ranking of men, women, and animals, but for Plato each is a progressively diluted admixture of the Same with the Different—the multitudinous, unpredictable, elemental riot, whose vicissitudes the embodied soul must master in order to secure eternal happiness.

Plato then separates causes into the intelligent and good, and the casual and random motions of matter, with the former to be mastered by the latter by means of persuasion. At this point in Timaeus's narrative there is a call for a return to the beginning of the cosmogony, a call for a new or other original principle (*heteran archēn*), to take account of these vicissitudes of necessity, named by Plato the "errant" (*planōmēs*) cause. The first hint that this other principle, this other beginning, this necessity or errant cause should be read under a feminine sign is given by the fact that it is this same errancy, straying, or wandering (*planōmenon*) that is attributed to the womb at the very end of

the dialogue, in a passage that is the locus classicus for all studies of the histori-cally feminine malady of hysteria. John Sallis has thematized the proliferation of beginnings in the *Timaeus*, observing that "in the *Timaeus* nothing is more vigorously interrogated than the question of beginning" (1999, 5).[2] Sallis's own vigorous interrogations of the *Timaeus*, however, fail to consider in any substantive way that in this text the question of beginning is also irreducibly interwoven with figures of femininity and sexual difference.

Timaeus's return generates, in addition to the two original "forms" (*eidei*)—the intelligible and unchanging realm of forms, and its copy, the visible world of becoming—a third form he calls the receptacle (*hupodochē*), which is "the nurse of all becoming" (49a).[3] Timaeus's return to the beginning thus uncov-ers a three-term structure of kinship, a family romance that replaces the prior autogenetic picture of a father-creator causing an unchanging, eternal world to give rise spontaneously to a sensible world of becoming and change. This receptacle is difficult to describe. It is "invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp" (51a–b). Recognition of such a receptacle in the formation of the cosmos has specific ontological consequences. The receptacle itself "must always be called in the same manner; for from its own proper quality (*dunameōs*) it never departs (*ouk existatai*) at all" (50b).[4] While it is always changing, indeed part of what it gives in creation is movement and change, any specific change remains, strictly speaking, unaccomplished, unrealizable, unhypostatizable. In this way, the plu-ripotent *hupodochē* never takes on any permanent shape or form, but is—and this is merely one of many names that Plato found for it even in the face of his prohibition on different names[5]—a molding stuff or plastic material (*ekmageion*) for receiving the figures (*eisionta*) that enter and leave it (50c).

The Feminine Figurations of the *Ekmageion*

Ekmageion is a difficult word to translate adequately. It denotes an impress or mold, that is, something that creates an impression in something else. At *Laws* 800b and 801d (1967), Plato uses it in the sense of a model or exemplary case. It also that which receives the impression, that on which an impression is made. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates offered the *ekmageion* as a figure for the inscription of memories, "the gift of Mnemosyne, mother of the muses" (Plato 1921, 191d). Sampling some translations of the *Timaeus*, we find Desmond Lee (1977) gives "neutral plastic material" while R. G. Bury (1975) gives "molding-stuff" and Benjamin Jowett (2003) merely "recipient."[6] The primary meaning of *ekmage-ion*, or at least the first given by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, is, by contrast, that of a napkin or wiping cloth: something that instead of creating marks, rather removes them. The verb from which it is derived, *ekmassō*, means to wipe clean; in the middle voice, to wipe away one's tears. It also means to

mold or model in wax or plaster, to take an impression of or imprint an image. The verb *massō*, in turn, means to touch or handle, to work with hands or knead, and here its internal connection to figuration more generally may be discerned. To figure, after all, is derived from the Latin *figura*, from *fingere*, to mold. *Ekmageion* therefore holds together at once, and indeterminately, the mutually contradictory meanings of mark receiving, mark giving, and mark removing. It offers the possibility that it may even mark itself, perhaps indeterminately generating its own impresses as well as receiving them from elsewhere, while continually erasing so that the process may begin anew. It signifies, then, a capacity to be marked, a passive undergoing, moved and inscribed by Being, but also an indeterminate agentic capacity for inscription and erasure. Recalling the *Theatetus*, it may also be a vehicle for memories, for remembering and also for forgetting. In this figuration, the *ekmageion* then appears as a site of at least four registers of becoming: first, artifactual production that takes place as the hands model and mold an object; second, linguistic production, as marking, stamping, semiosis, naming, analogy, metalepsis, metonymy, and metaphor; third, given its structural role in a familial cosmogony, the feminine/maternal genesis of natural beings; and last, as inaugurating the possibility of the persistence of memory and thus the phenomena of temporality.

In its capacity both to receive and to erase marks, the wax tablet holds together the properties of solidity and fluidity in its labile passage from solid to liquid form and back again. To help further elaborate the gendered stakes of this figure, we may turn to Irigaray's explorations of the embodied topologies of these states of matter.[7] In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray described the secret fluidity—"blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire . . . light" that "threaten to deform, propagate, evaporate, consume" the masculine subject (1985a, 237). In order to affirm masculine identity, the woman/mother must solidify, liquid become ice, a clear reflective surface or mirror that will protect and preserve him from "any possible assimilation into that shapeless flux that dampens, soaks, floods, channels, electrifies, lights up the apartness in the blaze of its embrace" (238). Later in the same volume, she commented on the passage at hand from the *Timaeus*: "She is always a clean slate ready for the father's impressions, which she forgets as they are made. Unstable, inconsistent, fickle, unfaithful, she seems ready to receive all beings into herself. Keeping no trace of them. Without memory. She herself is without figure or proper form. . . . Needed to define essence, her function requires that she herself have no definition" (307). While the *hupodochē* or *ekmageion* must therefore be in an indeterminate state, neither solid nor liquid, or both solid and liquid, but in any case in(de)finitely labile and malleable, in order to function as the unsupported support of masculine form, it must also present a smooth, featureless, reflective surface: "Yet it is certainly the mirror which, memoryless, forgetful of all traces and imprints, re-presents the image of

things set before it. And as far as the intelligible goes, has the mirror any other function than to define things by withdrawing itself from specific characterization?" (308). Despite the *ekmageion*'s fluid lability, Irigaray puts emphasis on how the symbolic regime of sexual difference requires a congelation, a freezing into stasis in order that the receptacle may provide a safe and stable reflective container and mirror for masculinity.

In addition to this understanding of *ekmageion* as reflective surface, we should also recall that the definition of *ekmassō* in the middle voice, that peculiar reflexive voice in Greek between active and passive, is a wiping away of tears. That tears are a specific figure for the *ekmageion*'s mark has particular resonance: the expression, a distinctly feminine expression of emotion, an overflow of grief, joy or compassion; a *jouissance* disclosing the body's boundary as a space of infinite production; a dissolving into fluidity that threatens to deform the smooth surface of the mirror and render unstable any distinction between self and other, inside and outside; an act of mourning and remembrance that fails to solidify into a memorial, a mark made, the distinction between maker and substrate itself dissolved in the reflexivity of the middle voice, and simultaneously wiped away, forgotten.[8] Of the relationship between such corporeal fluidity and language, Kristeva wrote, "milk and tears . . . are the metaphors of nonspeech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for" (2002b, 322). Signifying, inscribing, articulating, but not yet fully in language, this zone between active and passive voices, where the distinction between activity and passivity itself is dissolved, is thus marked by a dissolution and a fluidity that carries an irreducibly feminine mark.

Irigaray read the *ekmageion* as a necessarily entrapping structure for femininity, a frozen figure providing a smooth reflective surface ready for masculine imprimatur, but whose capacity for fluidity renders it unable to hold on to itself through time or memory. But the multiplying resonances of the *ekmageion* also illustrate not merely stasis and dissolution, but the generativity of figuration. This dimension of the receptacle/*chōra* is expressed in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, in which she characterized *chōra* as semiotic, as a necessary pre-ordering of drives preceding signification. As such, it "precedes and underlies figuration," it is "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic" (2002a, 36). While the symbolic law of language does not penetrate *chōra*, it was nonetheless for Kristeva a site of an ordering, an "extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (35). Among the oppositions held together in the figure of the *ekmageion*; solidity and fluidity, receptivity and generativity, inscription and erasure, the figures of molding and writing in the *ekmageion* instantiate a passage between materialization and naming, between the genesis of worldly things, and figuration in language itself.[9] This figure of figuring, of *fingere*, *massō*, discloses a tactile and tangible

dimension of language; figures are molded with the hands in immediacy of corporeal engagement, the massage of the flesh, the kneading of dough, or the molding of clay. It is also through multiple figures, analogies, in this indeterminate discourse between philosophy and myth, that the *ekmageion*/receptacle/ *chōra* is given to us to understand according to Plato's "bastard reasoning." In the *ekmageion*, then, we can clearly discern the compresence of restless materialization, of molding, of birthing, of dissolution, of the chiasm of the touching-touched,[10] and a fecund and restless figuring, semiosis, producing in language, not quite of the realm of *logos*, but perhaps, at least, *muthos*. The *ekmageion* is not merely a site, a zone of inscription, but also the very power that generates, drives, and articulates becoming in its movement of dispersal.

Refiguring Receptacle as *Chōra*

Despite the difficulties Plato encountered in grasping or adequately describing the *hupodochē*, and despite his admonition that it should always be called in the same manner, he produces a surfeit of figures (gold, the nurse, the mother, the *ekmageion*, the neutral substrate for a fragrant ointment), before reformulating it as *chōra*, space.[11] Receptacle, *hupodochē* is derived from the verb *hupodechomai*, indicating the hospitality of entertaining or welcoming under one's roof, and, which, said of a woman, also means to conceive or become pregnant. *Chōra*, by contrast, means space, place, position, but also a land, territory, or country, and especially the country opposed to the town. Receptacle and space are hardly cognates, so this reformulation deserves our close attention.

In his essay on these passages of the *Timaeus* entitled "Chora," Jacques Derrida privileged this particular name, *chōra*, even while he insisted that the "multiplicity of metaphors (or also of mythemes in general) signifies in these places not only that the proper meaning can only become intelligible via these detours, but that the opposition between the proper and the figurative loses its value" (1997, 31). Among the many figures given by Plato, *chōra* is certainly a privileged term along with *hupodochē*, though it appears second and thus has the character of a reformulation, final formulation, or else a supplement. Derrida also refused any identification of *chōra* with a feminine principle or element, on the grounds that it is neither sensible nor intelligible, and therefore cannot be an existent or subject that could be or have a gender. For Derrida, *chōra* must be not anthropomorphized; it is a third *genos*, genus, genre (beyond myth or philosophy), or gender, and as such a "neutral space of a place without place, a place where everything is marked but which would be 'in itself' unmarked" (23). Contra Derrida, who nonetheless acknowledged that every reading of *chōra* will be anachronistic if not anachronous—*chōra* "anachronizes being" (17)—the reading undertaken in this essay yields explicitly to what he called "retrospective projections" or "teleological retrospection" (16), in that our

very interest in the notion of *chōra* lies in its explicit and multivocal feminine resonances, and its potential for feminist thinking.

Conceding that the distinction between the proper and the figurative has perhaps lost its value here, or, at the very least, is bracketed, let us pay close attention to these properly feminine figures in the *Timaeus*. As noted above, the *hupodochē* connotes welcoming into the home, the *oikos* or domestic sphere, the Greek sphere of women (Emmanuel Levinas emphasized the connection between such hospitality and the feminine, calling femininity "the very welcome of the dwelling" [1969, 158]). Said of a woman, *hupodechomai* means to become pregnant, to have received the male seed, providing the fertile ground for reproduction, *genesis*. *Chōra*, however, denotes the country as opposed to the city, the properly masculine public sphere of the *polis*. We may thus discern a commonality between the apparently unrelated *hupodochē* and *chōra*: each term lies beyond the *polis*, providing internal and external limits on, and conditions of possibility for, an ideally transparent realm of masculine discourse, commerce, sociality, and law.

We will recall that receptacle/*chōra* is knowable only through a dreamlike awareness or "bastard reasoning." It appears (as Derrida observed, almost exactly in the middle of the text) as a result of this reasoning beyond paternal law, where paternity can no longer be assured and truth no longer authorized because a space, a chasm, a *mise en abyme* is opened between the forms and the world, the intelligible and the sensible, the demiurge and its creation (Derrida 1997, 20–21). Here, we might articulate the transformation from *hupodochē* to *chōra* as the protective interiority of the receptacle giving way to vertiginous space, to an interval between realms, an exteriority without orientation, feature, or form; the nonpositional condition of positionality in general. It is not "void," as Plato made clear this cannot exist. So, how can we characterize the sudden shift to the language of *chōra*—land, country, space, place, room, territory, position, location?

Perhaps the most decisive distinction is itself topological: *hupodochē*, receptacle, envelops with a boundary, it presents a kind of invagination, a cave, an opening into interiority, an invitation to filling, inscription, penetration. *Chōra* denotes rather an exteriority, an opening out, giving room, dimension, depth, and magnitude—spacing—but also, as indicated by the related verb *chōrizō*, separating, dividing, differentiating, and severing. *Chōra* thus provides the possibility of distinguishing up and down, here and there, an originary separation and dispersal of Being into beings with position with respect to one another. There is also an affinity with the Hesiodic originary *chaos*, or gap, as mentioned by Nader El-Bizri in his recent essay on *chōra* (2001, 475). To put it another way, *chōra* gives extension, spatial differentiation, or from our modern perspective dimensionality in general, perhaps even something like space-time. That *chōra* might temporalize—give time, as well as space—is a possibility not

considered or perhaps even considerable by Plato, though as Derrida's notion of *différance* teaches us, temporal deferral is always at issue in and inseparable from spatializing difference. Shared by the two notions, *hupodochē* and *chōra*, then, is a sense of creating a position for, giving place to the Forms in their dispersal, and in this giving place there is also a sense of the dependence of place on a boundary for its constitution, more explicitly for *hupodochē* than for *chōra*, perhaps, until we remember that what spaces out also divides and differentiates, *chōrizei*. *Hupodochē/chōra* thus discloses the interdependence and co-constitution of space and boundary, as well as a dual movement: inviting in, receiving, holding, appropriating on the one hand, and opening out, providing space, giving, dispersing on the other.

Derrida noted that *chōra* cannot be thought of as either subject or support for beings, for belonging to neither Being nor Becoming it is not a being at all, and although we cannot help catching or conceiving it "via the anthropomorphic schemas of the verb *to receive* and the verb *to give*," it is "anything but a support or a subject which would *give place* by receiving or by conceiving, or indeed by letting itself be conceived" (2001, 17). He then cautioned against the ontological effect suggested by this giving of place: "There is *chōra*, one can even ponder over its *physis* and its *dynamis*, or at least ponder these in a preliminary way, but *what is* there is not; and we will come back later to what this *there is* can give us to think, this there is which by the way *gives* nothing in giving place or in giving to think; whereby it will be risky to see in it the equivalent of an *es gibt*" (18). The first question to ask, here, though, is whether the Heideggerian *es gibt* is anything like an "anthropomorphic schema"—and indeed, because we are in ontological territory here, the answer must be no. As a formula for understanding being, *es gibt*—"it gives," understood as "there is"—precisely does not rely upon an anthropomorphic or economic schema of subjects, giver and recipient, but points to a more originary and fundamental giving, the giving of being as such. The second question is whether it is then possible to conceive of a scene of giving and receiving that is neither anthropomorphic nor ontological.

What this choice does not acknowledge is the indeterminate directionality, the simultaneous giving *and* receiving implicated by *hupodochē/chōra*. For such giving and receiving to take place the distinctions required by the anthropomorphic schema between subjects and objects of giving are undermined. Despite Plato's figuring of receptacle as a mother, it *is* not, is not a subject, and cannot be one in this sense. Holding together *hupodochē* and *chōra*, we see that it/she both gives and receives, disperses and appropriates, without subjectivity, and without ontology, and that it is irreducibly marked by sexual difference, carrying a feminine sign. What, then, can perhaps only remain in the realm of suggestion, is *hupodochē/chōra* as an indeterminate, incalculable movement, a ceaseless receiving/giving without arrival, without possession, property, or

ownership, without subjectivity. The thinking of *chōra*, however, also occasions a reexamination of the possibility of abstraction from the concrete, or the possibility of separation of generality and particularity, the question of difference in general from the question of sexual difference. That receptacle/*chōra* is marked by feminine sexual difference, a specific kind of difference—one that Plato relentlessly insisted upon—places certain limits on this abstract and speculative register, calling us to think through the specificity, materiality, historicity, and particularity of the "feminine" together with and alongside the possibility of thinking the in-between of Being and Becoming.

Receptacle/*Chōra* and Motion

As we have seen, receptacle/*chōra* is a restless, labile notion, indeterminately yet ceaselessly giving, receiving, marking, erasing, and eluding our attempts to "determine the truth." It remains, then, for us to explore this quality of motion of receptacle/*chōra* in Plato's narrative of creation. That the question of *chōra's* motion, or indeed the general problem of the beginning of motion in the cosmos, has remained largely unthematized by commentators (with the notable exception of Kristeva, who did not, however, speak of *chōra* with an eye to fidelity to Plato) is somewhat surprising. The motion of the cosmos is, after all, the sign of its life, of change, of that by which time might be measured; it is the very condition of Becoming in relation to Being.[12] That motion in the *Timaeus* may itself be read under a feminine sign, and through what figures, is the concern of this section. Before returning to Plato, we should recall that Aristotle attributed the source of cosmic motion to the prime mover, paternal and masculine. That motion itself may have a feminine origin in Plato thus throws this later development into the sharpest relief.

Plato described an originary elemental chaos prior to the intervention of the demiurge and the coming of order. He restated and developed the cosmogonic narrative as follows:

> Before the heavens came to be, there were being (*on*), space (*chōra*), and becoming (*genesis*), three things, existing in three ways. The nurse of becoming was watered and fired and received the shapes of earth and air, and undergoing all the other affections that accompany them, appeared both manifold, and filled throughout with powers (*dunamia*) neither similar nor balanced, with no part of itself in equilibrium, but every part oscillating unevenly. It/she was shaken by these, and it/she moreover shook them in turn. These moving things were forever borne this way and that, and dispersed, just like that which is shaken and winnowed by baskets and other instruments (*organōn*) for cleaning

corn: the solid and heavy are borne one way, and the loose and
light settle in another place. In this way the four [elements] came
to be shaken by the receiver, itself moving like an instrument
(*organon*) that furnishes shaking; the most unlike were greatly
divided (*horizein*) one from the other, the most alike were pushed
toward one another, with the result that therefore these kinds
were held in different and again different space (*chōra*), even
before everything in the universe was ordered and generated out
of them. And on the one hand, even before this, all things were
in a state without reason and measure, but when on the other
hand the whole ordering was taken in hand, mastered, fire first,
and water and earth and air, holding some trace of themselves,
were altogether in truth in a state just as would be expected in
the absence of a god; and insofar as this was their nature, he first
patterned (*diaschematisato*) them with form (*eidos*) and number.
According to his power, god composed them to be most beautiful
and best from that which they were not—such an account must
always be granted by us above all else.[13] (52d–53b)

God has not touched the cosmos yet—but already the elements, or at least
a trace of the elements, exist in virtue of a kind of interpenetration of their
"shapes" and the receptacle, which is passively "wetted" and "fired" and receives
both the shapes and their "affectations" (*pathē*). In subsequent passages, Plato
described how these shapes are the ideal figures, the simplest polyhedra that
can convert into one another in virtue of being all composed of the simplest
possible plane figure, the triangle. So, even prior to the creator's work there is a
spontaneous admixture of mathematical form and receptacle. The elements are
not yet patterned, ordered, and beautiful but instead shake and are shaken in all
directions by the nurse/receptacle and possess yet only a "trace of themselves."
However, the shaking, oscillating motion that is likened to the women's labor
of winnowing grain with a sieve or basket, means that they separate, and come
to occupy different regions of space (*chōra*).

   We will recall that the realm of forms is eternal and unchanging, and that
we (and Plato) are therefore faced with the question of the source of motion,
change, and indeed time if the story of creation of the world of becoming is to
be told. We find, then, that it is space, now figured as the "nurse of becoming,"
that originally furnishes motion in the cosmos, but it is an unbalanced, disor-
derly motion. This nurse does not tend or nurture, but the motion she provides
is rather a shaking, like a bad mother shaking an infant. The motion is then
refigured as the feminine labor of sorting grain, using the feminine technology
of a woven basket that shakes. The feminine element here, to ventriloquize
Irigaray, is not one, but slides from figure to figure: *hupodochē*, *ekmageion*, mother,

nurse, winnower, *chōra*. While the motion is not yet that of periodized genera-tion, not measurable or regular, it does gives rise to boundaries (*horizein*), and different regions of space are thus established. *Chōra*, then, effects through self-motion a sort of self-differentiation out of disequilibration, and blindly and chaotically spaces itself through the powers/potentials (*dunamis*) of its constituents, almost despite itself. Like an instrument (*organon*), it undertakes work (*ergon*), albeit a directionless, feminine labor that nonetheless results in a sort of proto-ordering of the world of Becoming, and provides the motion and change that is the condition of possibility of the life of the cosmos. While there is not yet proportion, measure, or number by which time could be counted, we can nonetheless discern a kind of temporality here, in the self-spacing of *chōra*, a duration in which work is done and boundaries established—a process as yet immeasurable, but also necessarily and irreducibly temporal. The nurse is thus a nurse of becoming in a double sense, in that she is one kind of reality, *chōra*, nurturing another, *genesis*, but that also the nurse herself becomes, changes or develops as *chōra*'s work of self-differentiation proceeds.

The temporality we find issuing from *chōra* may thus be distinguished from the two temporal modalities Kristeva identified as associated with female subjectivity, namely cyclical and monumental time. Cyclical time is regular, repetitive, rhythmic, while monumental time is "solid," "faultless and impen-etrable" (2002b, 354). The world encountered by the demiurge at the beginning of the dialogue is "discordant and disordered motion" (*kinoumenon plēmmelōs kai ataktōs*). *Plēmmelōs* is a musical term, denoting playing a false note or being out of tune, and more generally erring, faulty, harsh, or offending. It may be contrasted with the harmonious periodicity and ordered regularity issued by the creator, and by which time becomes measurable. What I wish to emphasize, however, is the marking of errancy as feminine, and indeed the marking of the feminine as errant, striking cacophonous, arrhythmic notes in an assuredly masculine harmony, as immeasurable disorderly motion. While Plato uses figures of human work and technology, it is the distinctively feminine labors of nursing and grain sorting, and the distinctively feminine artifact of the woven basket, that give shape and name, or perhaps more strictly give motion qua "life" to the strictly unknowable "wandering cause" of the receptacle and *chōra*, and thus to the cosmos itself.

Chōra and Feminism

The reading and analysis I have undertaken of receptacle/*chōra* as an irreducibly feminine errant cause of cosmic motion, as a site of figural and ontic/ontologi-cal generativity, and as revelatory of an originary chiasmus of appropriation and dispersal, suggests that it may be a potent theoretical locus through which to reread and perhaps displace a metaphysical architecture handed down to

us by the Greeks. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, *chōra*'s errancy persists symptomatically in the hierarchical teleological cosmos of Aristotle, despite his reduction of *chōra* to *topos*, place, on the one hand, and to *hulē*, matter, on the other.[14] Contemporary feminist theory takes place, however, in a vastly different philosophical and historical landscape, in which such notions as subjectivity, consciousness, freedom, equality, power, nation, capital, race, gender, sexuality, globalization, not to mention the terminologies of the various sciences and other disciplines, including psychoanalysis, anthropology, phenomenology, structuralism and poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, postmodernism—the late modern list proliferates—circulate in a way quite illegible in the terms of antiquity. However, it may be a symptom of the lateness of Western modernity itself to return not simply to the systematic philosophy of the Greeks, but to what lies beyond in myth (Freud), in the Presocratics (Nietzsche, Heidegger), to precisely this territory, *chōra*, *between* myth and philosophy, in order to begin to illuminate the topologies of thinking under whose grip we have unconsciously labored, and thus to begin to loosen their hold. With respect to the specific topologies of sexual difference in Western philosophy, Irigaray's work most explicitly undertakes this project. The problems Irigaray and others in feminist theory addressed have included questions of identity, of how to construe subjectivity in relation to sex and gender, race, and other forms of difference, in relation to embodiment and sexuality, in relation to the environment, and of the possibility of both the ethical relationship to the other and of political transformation. In relation to these issues, receptacle/*chōra* invites us to think through what it may mean to be in space, to *be there as a woman*, to the role, place, shape, and constitution of the feminine within sexual difference, and points furthermore to a fundamental inseparability between questions of becoming, of coming to be, and sexual difference. In relation to the very modern problem of subjectivity, I want to suggest that we may read the ancient receptacle/*chōra* as positing or figuring an originary relationality between self and other, a restless streaming back and forth, giving and receiving, that may be understood as both carnal, embodied, actual, singular, and as abstract, potential, generalizable, without subsuming one side of the chiasm to the other.

Although the receptacle/*chōra* may point beyond itself toward endless refiguration, may signify or even be a name or metonym for *différance*, that figuration is nonetheless circumscribed by receptacle/*chōra*'s decidedly maternal-feminine role in the Platonic cosmogony and cosmology. While I take it as axiomatic that any version of the feminine in which it is reduced to the maternal cannot be adequate to a feminist philosophical practice, this cosmogonical narrative of creation offers an opportunity for attending to the figuration of feminine generativity, or, put another way, the feminine generativity of figuration. By way of conclusion, then, I will review some feminist engagements with the suggestive notion of *chōra*, discuss how in its vexed relationship to maternity

it may be displaced or salvaged for feminist philosophy, and explore how it may assist in feminist theorizing of specific political issues, such as reproductive rights and geographical exile.

As we have seen, Plato's reformulation of receptacle as *chōra* may be read as a reversal of movement, from that which receives, invites into interiority, and appropriates to that which opens out into exteriority, spaces, and disperses. Irigaray has explored at length the resonances of these notions of space and place with the topography of the female body, in particular the maternal body. For Irigaray, there was no easy identification between *chōra* and its feminine figures, for, as Butler noted, these figures were for Irigaray specular, and any attempt to locate woman, the feminine, in a definite place, to designate a fixed role for her, was immediately and mistakenly to reduce her to a reproductive function, to perform a violent catachresis which displaced and erased everything about her that was not in the service of maternity or nurturance, everything that resisted and exceeded such a reduction.

For Irigaray, then, a radical indeterminacy persisting between the literal and the figural was a starting point for understanding the condition of women and femininity in general; the female sex is the sex which is not one, not a sex at all, and if a sex, then certainly not unitary nor unifiable: "Whence the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units. . . . *She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition" (1985b, 26). The figure Irigaray offered to represent women's lack of unicity is that of the famous "two lips." The two lips are explicitly feminine, figural, topological, and carnal, and yet even their carnality is not determinate in that they are most obviously the vaginal lips, but also the lips of the mouth. They mark, yet indeterminately mark, the body's liminality, the boundary between inside and outside; they are neither (both) shut nor (and) open, neither (both) one nor (and) two; and they are offered as a polemical intervention into the symbolic regime in the Lacanian sense, whose dominant metaphor or figure is the rigid and unitary symbol of identity, power, property, and agency—the phallus.

We might say that Plato's bastard reasoning is indeed at work here—the father is done away with as guarantor of reason and legitimacy, the distinction between literal and figural is unsustainable, and the two lips cannot be properly known or collapsed into any one of their referents or figures any more than receptacle/*chōra* can. In both cases, we are faced with a ceaseless shifting among a range of meanings, and the figure in each case signifies an unstable and restless commerce across an indeterminate boundary. The feminine corporeality of the two lips certainly denotes a biological capacity for reproduction, but it does so alongside a genitality which may be purely pleasurable and which therefore exceeds the reproductive function, as well as an orality that

may also be differently generative and differently pleasurable. By contrast, the feminine generativity of the receptacle/*chōra* is inalienably tied to the reproductive, maternal function. Any attempt to assess the value of receptacle/*chōra* for feminist philosophy must therefore take seriously and grapple with its irreducibly maternal role in Plato's creation story.

In Kristeva's psychoanalytic thinking, the body of the mother is the ordering principle of the semiotic *chōra*, that realm in which drives are expressed by means of a mobile, rhythmic, vocal, and gestural organization is semiotic and not yet symbolic. According to Butler, Kristeva took literally Plato's figuration of *chōra* as mother or nurse, as maternal body, giving it a definite corporeal location and role in the infant's development. Kristeva's *chōra* is explicitly somatic and maternal—rhythmic, reflecting the mother's heartbeat and other bodily processes; vocal, reflecting her voice; gestural, reflecting her movements. Plato's *chōra* is, by contrast, in chaotic unbalanced motion without rhythm or periodicity, and has no vocality or limbs with which to gesture. However, reapproaching Kristeva's mobilization of *chōra* as the maternal body through the reading of receptacle/*chōra* offered in this essay might also help think through the maternal situation in such a way that yields feminist phenomenological and ethical insights without collapsing the feminine into a maternity that is natural, literal, or essential, though to speak of the feminine with reference to the maternal may perhaps always risk a certain essentialism. It seems to me, however, that the greater risk for feminist philosophy is to ignore the specifically female capacity for reproduction, and to refuse to think through this capacity as a philosophical issue. After all, it is simply a fallacy to imagine that a capacity *specific* to women is the same thing as an *essence* of woman.

For Kristeva, the mother's body is the site of a certain unrepresentable experience, a prelinguistic semiotic ordering, a site of drives struggling for articulation, separation, "a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" (2002c, 304).[15] Motherhood, Kristeva said, is not just a designation of the paternal, symbolic law, but seems to be "impelled *also* by a nonsymbolic, nonpaternal causality" (305). In a phenomenological and poetic register, Kristeva wrote of the experience of the maternal body as a "continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language" (2002b, 324). Further, maternity, pregnancy and parturition, is an experience of the abyssal, strictly inarticulable: "What connection is there between myself, or even more unassumingly between my body and this internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord has been severed, is an accessible other? . . . To say that there are no sexual relationships constitutes a skimpy assertion when confronting the flash that bedazzles me when I confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alien. Trying to think through that abyss: staggering vertigo" (324–25). Against Butler's claim, then, that for Kristeva *chōra* is *literally* the body of the mother, naturalized and essential, we

may read this maternal body as strictly only apprehensible *as chōra*, as restless motility, as the dispersal and separation of *choriston*, as an impossible traversal of the unthinkable and unrepresentable abyss between self and other, and as a vertiginous abyss within flesh, within being, within language itself. There can be no *literal* identification of *chōra* with the maternal body, because, on this reading, maternity, the maternal body, is *literally* unthinkable. Rather than collapsing *chōra* into one of its figures, the phenomenological attention Kristeva paid the maternal body was enabled via a detour through Plato's attempt, between philosophy and myth, to articulate the unthinkable abyss in which becoming is made possible. However hazardous, I would like as a series of concluding gestures to push further the maternal phenomenology enabled by the Kristevan deployment of *chōra*, and suggest that receptacle/*chōra* may offer feminist theory a site or zone for conceiving a chiasmatic, impossible relation to the other that has consequences both ethical and political.

Kristeva's maternal understanding of *chōra* as a generative zone of motility, inarticulate yet articulating, permits a disclosure of a hidden problematic within subjectivity. This is, precisely, being's impossible and abyssal self-diremption in maternity. For Kristeva, maternity is the place where the self becomes alien, where the alterity within selfhood is manifested as an issue for ethics, but where any moment or event that would found the distinction between self and other, at which self is stretched to its limit and turns into, gives rise to, becomes other, is strictly unthinkable. Her insight shows us that the choric maternal body is not merely that against which the infant founds its separateness or in which the masculine may seek containment, but on the other side of the chiasmus we find receptacle/*chōra* giving figuration to a specifically feminine, though not essentially feminine, modality of being.

Receptacle/*chōra* therefore permits maternity to appear in a phenomenological register as a possibility of being, a specifically feminine possibility to be sure, and yet one in which the unknowable origin of all our existences also finds a certain "dreamlike" articulation. In this sense, then, maternity may be taken as a possibility of human being in general (but only as an actuality undergone by *some* women). And this appearance of maternity in the modality of the possible, as a possibility of human being, therefore renders it emblematic of an ethical relation to the other, in the Levinasian sense. The ethical, for Levinas, is precisely an infinite beholdenness and responsibility to the other, and the carnality of that relation is revealed par excellence in his account of maternal sensibility. Levinas's remarks in *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* on sensibility as incarnate vulnerability, in which maternity, the "gestation of the other in the same" (1981, 75), appears as responsibility as such, illustrate the generalizability of this feminine specificity.[16]

From a feminist perspective, however, Levinas's ethical relation to the other, characterized by a being taken hostage by the other, a passivity, an asymmetry

in which I am always beholden to the other, cannot be sustainable. Of maternity, Levinas wrote, "The subjectivity of sensibility, taken as incarnation, is an abandon without return, maternity, a body suffering for another, the body as passivity and renouncement, a pure undergoing" (1981, 79). It is, however, far from clear that this scene of the passivity of maternal martyrdom was anything more than a reiteration of the idealized maternity of the Virgin that Kristeva was so concerned to interrogate in "Stabat Mater," and it certainly does not supply a space or place, a *chōra* in which women could or would dwell.

However, reconceiving such a maternal ethical relation in terms not of actual or idealized mothers, but rather in light of our reading of receptacle/*chōra*, a different scene begins to emerge. We will recall that receptacle/*chōra's* openness to imprinting, its being as feminine receptacle, is also a restless, motile generativity, generating not only in the natural register, but also in technical and linguistic registers. In the maternal position in cosmic creation, the receptacle/*chōra* receives the masculine imprimatur of the demiurge, and as such is passive, receptive, a being-seeded. But it also holds within itself the ever-present possibility of erasure, and of stamping, and of stamping itself, of an autogenesis that is not self-same, but always implicated in the detours of a chiasmus, and which does not guarantee the masculinity or the paternity of either the seed, or the offspring. In its errancy, this maternal ethical relation is not governed by any stable conception of sexual difference, nor even, strictly speaking, a stable conception of alterity as such, since such alterity is given as part of the condition of the self, as well as in the encounter with the absolute other. Reading the ethical relation in light of this feminist undertanding of receptacle/*chōra* may thus offer a new topology of ethical alterity, a chiasmatic relation to the other that is abyssal, motile, that both gives and receives, that articulates self and other, that discloses other in self, and yet remains—with Levinas—fundamentally asymmetrical, because there is no possible exterior vantage point from which to weigh or determine equality or symmetry between self and other.

In closing, I would like to indicate briefly some resonances of this reading of receptacle/*chōra* in an explicitly political register. One obvious avenue opened up by these reflections on receptacle/*chōra* and maternity is that of reproductive politics. Conceiving the relation between mother and fetus as constituted by the chiasmus of the receptacle/*chōra* reveals a fundamental indeterminability, an impossible abyss, a site where mother, fetus, and their interrelationship are restlessly open to reconfiguration, forever escaping attempts to fix a determination of self and non-self. Receptacle/*chōra* may thus usefully supplement such feminist theoretical work as that of Alys Eve Weinbaum (1999), who has mined the work of Irigaray for its mimetic renarrativizing of bodily tissue, in particular at the site of the placenta, in order to think through reproductive ethics and politics. The account of maternity in light of receptacle/*chōra* offered here

supplements Irigaray's antiessentialist strategy of mimesis by fleshing out the radical indeterminacy and unthinkability of the maternal relation, its obscure and generative dynamism, its call for endless renarrativizations. The Irigarayan project of formulating "sexuate rights" may thus be seen to cleave at once to the particularity and literality of female bodily tissue, and to the generality and figurality of the chiasmus between self and other as the ethical relation as such. Similarly, receptacle/*chōra* resonates with Drucilla Cornell's legal and juridical conception of the imaginary domain (1994), which would grant women an aesthetic, psychic, and cultural space to imagine our bodily being, its content beyond the reach of legislation, but itself nonetheless protected in law. In this context, receptacle/*chōra* may be thought of as a deepening of Cornell's articulation of the imaginary domain, in its call for endless refiguration and its resistance to definition under the law. If, as Cornell demanded, the legal, juridical realm can be configured in such a way to recognize the constitutive instability of womens' relationship (and by extension the relationship of all) to reproduction and embodment, to protect what is beyond the reach of *logos* rather than seeking to define and encase it in the calculable, then women (mothers-virgins-whores-dykes-philosopher queens) may indeed yet find space to dwell.

Moving from the specificities of the body and into the registers of the geo-political, nation, and race, we might also see the errancy of receptacle/*chōra* at work in the borderlands of Gloria Anzaldúa, where the border, the impossible space in between nations, identities, worlds, is transvalued as a space of creativity and "psychic unrest" (1999, 95). When Anzaldúa writes, "I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (44), she might also be calling upon the generativity, the irreducible non-self-sameness and self-inscription of the receptacle/*chōra*. Drawing on multiple mythic figures and images, especially feminine figures of pre-Columbian America as well as later syncretic figures, speaking in at least three languages, and in registers of poetry, history, myth, memoir, philosophy, to flesh out, to symbolize, to build a world in which she might dwell, Anzaldúa, like Plato, articulates a choric borderland between philosophy and myth. Noting the commerce and conflu-ence here between an utterly hegemonic text of Western philosophy and a text dedicated to articulating the possibility of living on and through the borders of that hegemony, we are called not to understand one in terms of the other, to subsume one to the other, but rather to pay attention to what is generated in the fertile boundary-zone of their proximity, while letting each remain in its specificity.[17] Receptacle/*chōra* does not specify historical, personal, sexual, geographical, cultural, linguistic situatedness, but neither does it permit their evacuation into the ideality of abstract Being; *logos* without *muthos*, existence without embodiment, materiality, motion, ground. Grosz's reading of *chōra* as

primarily abyss and symptom of masculinist metaphysics results in a call for women's return from exile, a restitution in which they may find a proper place in which to forge a feminist architecture, and in which to dwell. Anzaldúa's borderlands may, by contrast, be seen as resonating with the indeterminacy and motile generativity of the receptacle/*chōra*, as a zone of creativity where dwelling, living, being *as becoming*, is always already taking place.

In her work on existential spatiality in the art of Ana Mendieta, Mariana Ortega reminds us that creativity in the "space of the exile and in-between-ness" should not be generalized, as, say, a condition of modernity, but must always remain tied to the specificities of history and place, as the materiality of Mendieta's work discloses (Ortega 2004, 37). Mendieta's *Siluetas* show us spaces that are the remains of her presence, traces of embodiment, a woman's body in the land, of a feminine occupation of territory, country, nature, land as receptacle/*chōra*, nature becoming culture, and returning to nature, a chiasmatic upsurge of culture in nature, and vice versa, where temporary and temporalizing marks are made and erased. We will recall that the temporality of receptacle/*chōra*, in its evanescence, its arrhythmia, its dissolving into fluidity, its withdrawal and figuration of loss, is tied to the possibility of memory. Such memory does not give rise to either linear or cyclical time, but neither does it merely give way to forgetting. The marks inscribed upon the *ekmageion* are wiped away like tears, the memory traces it holds remain nonsubstantialized but, like grief, they may return and subside in unpredictable waves. Like the *Siluetas*, receptacle/*chōra* may also, by a strange turn, supply a most powerful reminder of the specificity, corporeality, and materiality of time and place, history and politics, figuring loss, but also the unerasable persistence of memory in life.

NOTES

    1. I have consulted a variety of translations of the *Timaeus*, sometimes preferring the formulations of one translator over another, and sometimes substituting my own translations, but always with the overall aim of clarity and consistency. I have principally relied on Desmond Lee's translation (Plato 1977). Other editions consulted are the Loeb, translated by R.G. Bury (Plato 1975), and Benjamin Jowett's (Plato 2003). I use Lee's translation unless otherwise indicated.
    2. See also Sallis 2000, 91.
    3. *Tithēnē*, from the verb *tithēneō*, to take care of, tend, nurse, cherish, foster. The directly feminine root of this word is *titthē*, the teat or nipple of a woman's breast.
    4. Bury's translation. Bury uses "quality," Lee "characteristics," and Jowett "nature" to render *dunamis*.

5. In her analysis of this passage in *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explored the contradictions inherent in this continually violated prohibition on naming the feminine receptacle. She wrote, "In a sense, this authoritative naming of the receptacle as the unnameable constitutes a primary or founding inscription that secures this place as an inscriptional space. This naming of what cannot be named is itself a penetration into this receptacle which is at once a violent erasure, one which establishes it as an impossible yet necessary site for all further inscriptions. In this sense, the very *telling* of the story about the phallomorphic genesis of objects *enacts* that phallomorphosis and becomes an allegory of its own procedure" (1993, 44).

6. Aristotle, discussing Platonic doctrine in the *Metaphysics*, used *ekmageion* to describe the dyad of the Great and the Small qua its ability to generate numbers; Tredennick translated it as "matrix" (Aristotle 1933, 988a1).

7. Here, in Irigaray's psychoanalytic territory of the topology of gendered bodies and the unconscious processes that subtend the psychical operations by which sexual difference is itself produced, we find a distinct resonance with Freud's 'Mystic Writing-Pad' (1953)—the wax tablet that both retains and erases marks and as such provides an extended analogy for memories that are laid down, inscribed, and periodically erased while leaving their traces hidden beneath the surface, and which Derrida discussed at length in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" (1978). Derrida noted that for both Freud and Plato writing was subservient to memory, an auxiliary and supplement; however, a mode of temporality may be discerned in the rhythms of the Mystic Writing-Pad's inscriptions and erasures (1978, 226), where erasure stands in the place of death itself (230). Beneath the surface of the pad, the memory trace nonetheless remains, unconscious, a consideration not available to Plato when he used the *ekmageion* as a figure for the processes of memory in the *Theaetetus*. Reading Plato's *ekmageion* in light of Freud's Mystic Writing-Pad, we may ask the question whither the trace, the unconscious remainder? Is there a possibility that the *ekmageion*, the substrate of becoming, preserves the traces that are inscribed upon it, subjecting them to its specific distortions and errancies, knowable only through the operations by which the unconscious shows itself, such as the dream work? Or, is it rather a figure of forgetting, of the passing-away that becoming and life are heir to, and if so, does it retain the possibility of unforgetting? It perhaps also should not go unmentioned that the figure of wax, its changeability and lability, its capacity to change state and hold together contrary qualities, is the theme at the heart of Descartes' "Second Meditation" (Descartes 1968), the locus classicus for the turn to a philosophy of subjectivity in the modern era.

8. Compare with Katrin Pahl's Irigarayan work on the moments of emotionality, dissolvings into tears, in Hegel (Pahl 2001). In an uncorroborated lexical/etymological link, *ek-mageion* also has a mystical resonance, the verb *mageuō* denoting being a magician or magus, enchanting or bewitching. We might read this as illustrative of the indeterminate status of the *Timaeus*'s narrative, between myth and philosophy, both and neither.

9. Drawing a connection between genesis and naming cannot but remind us of the Judaeo-Christian creation story, the resonances of which I am unfortunately unable to pursue here.

10. Merleau-Ponty developed this corporeal chiasmus in "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" (1968), as did Irigaray in "The Invisible of the Flesh" (1993). In its tactile

quality, the *ekmageion* illustrates the embodied engagement that Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty sought to value, over and against what she saw as Merleau-Ponty's privileging of the visual in his understanding of the chiasm.

11. That Plato suddenly refigured what he called receptacle as *chōra* has not been thematized by most feminist commentators such as Irigaray (1985a), Butler (1993), Genova (1994), and Grosz (1995), who simply note the shift and do not treat it problematically.

12. As Plato wrote, "Becoming which proceeds in Time, since both of these are motions" (37d). Bury's translation.

13. My translation.

14. See Bianchi 2004. Aristotle's discussion of *chōra* appears in Book 4 of *Physics* (1969, 209b13–17).

15. My understanding of the maternal *chōra* in Kristeva is indebted to Beardsworth's (2004) careful exegesis of her thought.

16. For an excellent discussion and critique of Levinas's approach to the feminine within ethics see Chanter (1995), especially chapter 5. Although Levinas made numerous references to Plato in the course of elaborating his ethical philosophy, none of these was to the *Timaeus*. However, his discussion in *Otherwise than Being* of the "amphibology of being and entities" (1978, 38–43), in which *logos* resounds and nouns and verbs are interchangeable, could be read easily as an articulation of receptacle/*chōra*, and receptacle/*chōra* in turn could be accurately described as an amphibology of being and entities.

17. Recognizing that in life we simultaneously negotiate multiple, layered, crossing, shifting identities, sexual, racial, and so on, Butler articulated the need for "an economy of difference . . . in which the matrices, the crossroads at which various identifications are formed and displaced, force a reworking of that logic of non-contradiction by which one identification is always and only purchased at the expense of another" (1993, 118). Receptacle/*chōra* as errant matrix, apprehensible through "bastard reasoning," supplies a rich figure for imagining that economy.

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