

Irigaray anxiety

Luce Irigaray and her ethics for improper selves

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The essays Luce Irigaray has published in the recent works *Je, tu, nous, Thinking the Difference* and *I Love To You* are usually described as her more simplified work. Questions are raised concerning the extent to which Irigaray's writing, and her concerns, have evolved from the earlier, better known work in *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*.¹ Such questions should allow new perspectives on that work, on the way in which it was taken up in an Anglophone context, and the terms and times in which it was read. In what follows I consider the critical response to and problems of interpretation provoked by the later work.

Sites of anxiety

Irigaray has undertaken to formulate the conditions of possibility for a culture which would valorize sexual difference. Her work includes historical surveys of representations of women and materiality in the history of philosophy, as well as specific proposals for the reform of public, legal, civic, religious and political institutions, and for formulating new conceptual bases for ethical relations between the sexes. But in a recent interview, Irigaray refers, surprisingly, to the humility of her speaking position:

The way of using 'I' at one moment of my work is to refuse to pretend to dictate truth for others; that is, it's a certain strategy for breaking with a traditional philosophical subject and one parenthesizes the fact that it's 'he' who dictates the truth. In other words, I, Luce Irigaray, at this moment in history; I think there's a humility and a singularity at the philosophical level.²

This is a statement destined to grate on the ears of the many critics who would not identify Irigaray's tone, or theoretical gestures, as humble. Michèle Le Dœuff, for example, finds a disturbing grandiosity, a stylistic

self-inflation in the feminism of difference, which, in her view, implies an inappropriate intellectual stance. Le Dœuff's concern is that the worst pretensions of the 'Grand Subject' of philosophy, who promises a radical freedom of thought, are being repeated by some feminist theorists:

to explore the entire system of signs governing the manifestation of 'femininity' and 'virility'... It would take an angel ... to do it. We might as well acknowledge the gap between radical freedom of thought, which philosophy promises, and the narrower freedom of which 'I' am (anyone is) capable. In relation to the question of sexual difference, no one is the Great Subject of philosophy or theory and this is why work can and does take place, started by one, continued by another, disputed by many.³

Although Irigaray agrees that grandiosity is the classic philosopher's mistake, Judith Butler suggests that there is an incongruity in her work: 'The largeness and speculative character of Irigaray's claims have always put me a bit on edge ... her terms tend to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores.'⁴ This is particularly evident in Irigaray's material on divinity. Naming the 'diabolical thing' about women as their lack of a God, Irigaray declares that, 'deprived of God, [women] are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfilment.'⁵ What does she mean by 'ideal and divine fulfilment'? Margaret Whitford has emphasized the need to interpret Irigaray's comments on women's identity, subjectivity and divinity in the context of her radical redefinition of these concepts.⁶ It is easy enough to get interested in the complication of

Irigaray's redefinitions.⁷ But there are always formulations that come back at one uncomfortably in the midst of such unravelling (surely those jarring ideals of 'divine fulfilment', for example). Butler is right that Irigaray's tone and style leave the reader on edge, left with a kind of 'Irigaray anxiety'.

Le Dœuff is also concerned that feminism of difference 'has remained at the stage of programmatic utterances',⁸ and Whitford identifies the danger that 'the rather less subtle and more programmatic elements of [Irigaray's] later work could close off rather than open up dialogue with other women.'⁹

If this is a later site of Irigaray anxiety, early sites are well known. Debates about essentialism, identity politics, the privileging of sexual difference over differences of race, age and sexual orientation, overdetermined the Anglophone reception of her work. Despite the critical material refuting such readings, the most common reference one hears is still to Irigaray as the essentialist who reifies women's difference.¹⁰ A certain datedness is sometimes attributed to Irigaray, as expressed by a colleague who spoke of how she had once gone through an Irigaray phase, and by another who asked what I get out of Irigaray's work *these days*.

But the proliferation of Irigaray's recent books means that the question of what one gets out of Irigaray these days must be renegotiated. Being able to rethink *Speculum of the Other Woman* and the essays in *This Sex Which Is Not One* in the light of the more recent *I Love To You* should allow a regenerated discussion of the earlier work. Despite her claim that there is no break between her earlier work and the later texts, Irigaray recently suggested that her work could be divided into three phases. There was, she explains, a first, critical phase, of decentring the dominance of a masculine perspective on the world. There was a second phase, of defining 'those mediations that could permit the existence of a feminine subjectivity'. A new, third phase is said to correspond to the construction of an intersubjectivity respecting sexual difference. Here, the governing question would be 'how to define ... an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects'.¹¹ However, in moving to the second and third phases, critics worry that Irigaray has changed her style. Irigaray's analysis of the transitions to the second and third phases returns us to the question of Irigaray anxiety.

Alys Weinbaum and Margaret Whitford agree that Irigaray has courted danger. The move towards the programmatic has occurred in tandem with what Weinbaum describes as a 'sharp stylistic break from [her] earlier more recognizably philosophical texts'.¹² As Whitford writes: 'she now states, rather than evoking indirectly, and spells out instead of alluding'.¹³ While

some critics have been uneasy with Irigaray's grandiosity, others are also uneasy with her attempts at simplicity. While she goes on to defend Irigaray's work as a provocative gamble, Weinbaum agrees with Whitford that it 'constitut[es] a risk to readers who will be tempted to interpret these simplified statements at face value'. Whitford suggests that 'Irigaray's later work is in some ways as difficult to understand as her earlier work.' The meaning of the simplified statements 'depends on the complex analysis and infrastructure of the earlier work'.¹⁴

Although I agree with Whitford, I am trying to engage here more directly with the Irigaray of works such as *Je, tu, nous*, *Thinking the Difference* and the title essay of *I Love To You* – particularly the Irigaray who eventually proposes programmes for reshaping intersubjective relations between women, and between women and men. I'm interested in reading back into her early work the formulations concerning self/other appropriation she sets forward in the later work. For there is also the question of how 'the complex analysis and infrastructure of the earlier work' looks when read in terms of some of those 'simplified statements' of the later work.

Having asked this question, I will return to the question of 'Irigaray anxiety'. Beyond new concerns about the simplistic or programmatic elements in the later work, it is obvious that certain refrains in the later work must reinforce, or provoke anew, interpretation of Irigaray in terms of old debates – particularly the debates about essentialism and identity politics. Statements from Irigaray about the need to cultivate women's identity, including a civic identity, have proliferated relentlessly in the later work, provoking a classic 'Irigaray anxiety'. Take Irigaray's comment, in the prologue to *I Love To You*, that what is required is

more than the attainment of the immediate needs and desires of a woman.... It is, rather, a question of awakening her to an identity and to rights and responsibilities corresponding to her gender.

And again in 'A Chance to Live', in *Thinking the Difference*:

Woman must be able to express herself in words, images and symbols in this intersubjective relationship with her mother, then with other women, if she is to enter into a non-destructive relationship with men. This very special economy of woman's identity must be permitted, known and defined.¹⁵

Further, I will add some additional concerns which seem likely to arise from certain formulations in *I Love To You*. In her early work Irigaray discussed phallogocentric figures of the feminine. When she suggested that the feminine had been 'appropriated' by the masculine,

she incurred considerable criticism. If Irigaray spoke of an 'appropriated' feminine, did she not presuppose some femininity 'proper' to women which 'had been' appropriated? Irigaray now often addresses the field of intersubjective relations. She discusses the ways in which one subject 'appropriates' another. Again, this raises the question of the metaphors of the proper which it seems to imply. Here, the pertinent question would be: what are 'proper' boundaries between subjects?

Irreducibility and mediation

Stepping back to review Irigaray's corpus, and placing early work such as *Speculum of the Other Woman* in the context of her recent concerns, it now seems Irigaray has offered a sustained account of the modalities of narcissism, the attempts at self-loving, 'self-capture' by the subject, in which she is particularly sensitive to the price paid by the other, by others.

Summarizing Irigaray's concerns, one might say that a subject who identifies with too phantasmatic or impossible an ideal – of masculinity, of unified subjectivity, of autonomous identity – displaces the spectre of lack onto the figure of the other. Irigaray could be said to have investigated the way in which one draws on desirable reflections of the self in the attempt to coincide with a desired, ideal self. She counsels against the confusion of *identification* with *identity*, describing it as 'idealistic delusion that produces a great deal of social entropy'.¹⁶ In her view, identificatory structures are appropriative of difference, and her interest lies in generating concepts for hypothetical identity structures which are not appropriative of the other.

Irigaray can be seen, then, as a theorist particularly sensitive to the price paid by others when the other serves to reflect a contrasting inverted image of the self to sustain his or her identity. A 'masculine' identity, constituted in this way, she said back in *Speculum*, could be said thereby to 'need *its* other, a sort of inverted or negative alter ego'. This poses the question: out of what matter is fashioned the reflecting surface, and what must have happened to that 'matter' for it to have become so implicated in the self-capture of the subject? In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she declared, famously, that the feminine 'is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex'.¹⁷ The feminine was the archetypal other sustaining an archetypal masculine subject.

But the feminine is also described as a remainder exceeding its appropriation as the other. It is a device that we see in the formulation of questions such as: *What has been appropriated?*, *What has been*

atrophied? One can therefore argue that were it not for the atrophy, feminine others might be otherwise, not produced relative to the self-capture of the masculine subject. In this way, one carves out the hypothetical conceptual space for representations of femininity in terms of other modes of difference. Irigaray makes this move without having to essentialize the notion of a feminine which 'has been' atrophied, as some kind of specific identity subsisting its own atrophy. Appropriation is not seen merely as a matter of 'overlay' which could be stripped away again to expose an essential feminine underneath, waiting to be uncovered.

Irigaray has attempted, from her earliest work, to take up this question of how we can speak of a missing 'x' which 'has been' appropriated. 'X' stands in not for the misrepresented truth of woman but for the *absence* of such a truth – for the truth, if you like, that there is no truth. X, in other words, stands in not for an identity but for a foreclosed possibility.

'Sexual difference' is also the name for relations between women and men, which Irigaray argues are not possible so long as femininity represents atrophy. The idea of 'sexual difference' in this sense doesn't represent an ideal of monolithic, radically distinct sexual identities occupied by women and men, but instead an ideal for a culture in which sexed subjects would be primarily oriented towards the other, as opposed to drawing on the other primarily to provide succour for one's identity. Irigaray describes this as a proposal to reconstruct society or the social community through encounters between 'a sexuate two', each of whom is irreducible to the other. Rather than appropriating the other, each would see the other as 'you who'll never be me or mine'.¹⁸

Some obvious concerns arise from the position just outlined. First, the reader must ask why Irigaray so emphasizes sexual difference. Between man and woman, she says, there is:

a type of irreducibility that doesn't exist between a woman and a woman... Between us there is really a mystery. Yes, there's an irreducible mystery between man and woman. It's not at all the same kind of mystery that exists between woman and woman or between man and man.

And again:

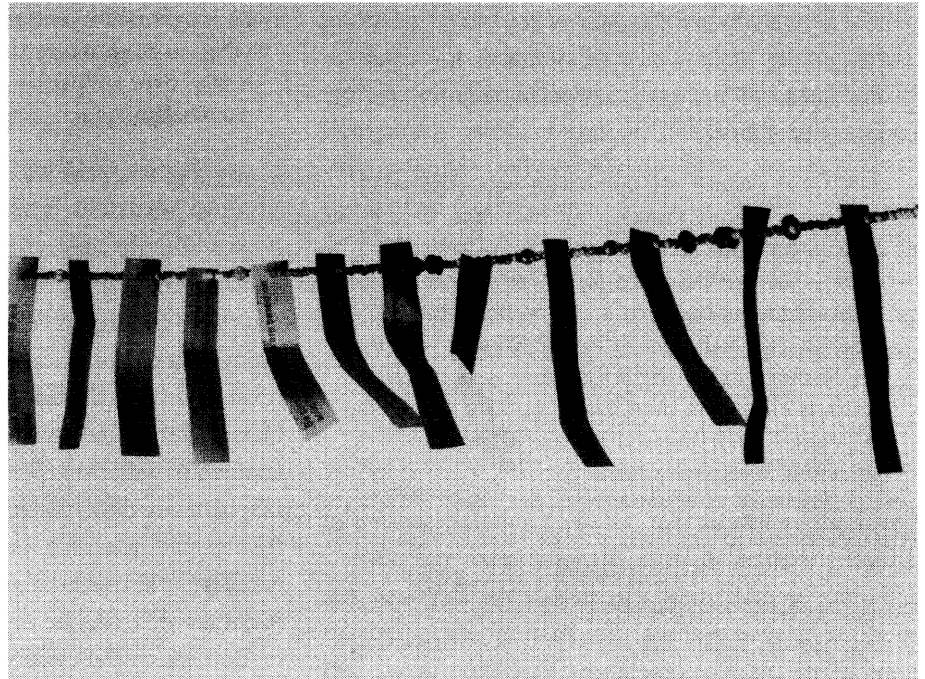
Sometimes [Renzo Imbeni] has it that the [irreducible] difference not be a sexuate man–woman difference, while I always try to return the difference to that... This is by far the most important: ... a completely new relation and without any ... submission of one sex to the other.¹⁹

Irigaray can't claim, as she has at times, that sexual difference is *the* difference which cuts through all cultures without implying that 'sexual difference' is a stable 'x' signifying in the same core way, throughout all cultures, whatever its local variability.

Furthermore, it is one thing to argue, as Irigaray does, that, to change relations of sexual difference, no isolated modification to law or language is ever sufficient; that one would have to see

modified language, law, religion, economic exchange, civil codes, the media, formal and informal ethical codes, and so on. Irigaray's insistence on this kind of point is what I find useful in her turn to the programmatic. It is another thing to argue (as she also does) that the effects of traditional representations of masculinity and femininity pervade and mediate not just the man-woman relation but also relations among woman and relations among men, and differences of age, culture, race and sexuality. It is surely another thing again, when Irigaray converts that refrain into one with a quite different tone, into the refrain that men and women are 'more' irreducible to each other. One can only resist when Irigaray starts giving such particular emphasis, as we have recently seen, to formulations hierarchizing difference.

Second, some sections of *I Love To You* appear to depart from the focus in Irigaray's early work on the way in which an othered femininity sustains the specular self-capture of masculinity, the analysis of woman as appropriated subject, cast in the role of man's other. By contrast, Irigaray's recent work sometimes analyses woman as appropriating subject. Both men and women are said to be prone to the day-to-day appropriative relations in which I am less interested in the other than in the recognition, love or identity which the other seems to give me. In *I Love To You* Irigaray describes this as cultural cannibalism, ethical failure between subjects. She offers as instances a series of self-other relations which risk 'annihilating the alterity of the other', transforming him or her into the object, or the 'mine'; that which comprises 'my field of



Polly Apfelbaum, *All is Not Yet Lost*, 1988

existential or material properties'. This series of relations includes: 'I love you, I desire you, I take you, I seduce you, I order you, I instruct you, and so on.'²⁰

Women are prone to this tendency precisely because they are caught up in the specular self-capture of masculinity. Already appropriated in man's self-capture, abandoned in that sense to atrophy, they are, she claims, likely to turn to the other with the question 'Am I loved?' Surprisingly, Irigaray's description of women apparently concurs with the Freud who asserted that there were 'fundamental differences between the male and female sexes in respect of their object choice in love'. Women's need, Freud claimed, does not lie in loving but in being loved.²¹ What do we find in Irigaray's work but formulations such as: 'The typical sentence produced by a woman is: Do you love me?''²² Analysing woman as appropriative seems to lead to a restaging of woman as the narcissist turning to others to sustain her ego.

The emphasis in Irigaray's early work on woman as 'appropriated' seems to have shifted. However, elements in the early work do also suggest an interest in figuring woman as appropriating, not only as appropriated. For example, in 'And The One Doesn't Stir Without the Other', Irigaray's retelling of the Oedipal narrative, she describes an archetypal mother who appropriates her daughter in her desire to 'vanquish [her] own infirmity'. In Irigaray's narrative, the young girl does not turn away from her mother towards her father because of her discovery of her mother's lack. Instead, she turns away because her mother suffocates her. Irigaray describes a woman

unable to relate to her daughter in any but a paralysing and engulfing mode which subordinates her daughter to the needs of her own atrophied identity. As the daughter laments to the mother:

didn't you quench my thirst with your paralysis?
And never having known your own face, didn't you
nourish me with lifelessness.... Of necessity I
became the uninhabitable region of your reflections.
You wanted me to grow up, to walk, to run in
order to vanquish your infirmity. So that your body
would move to the rhythm of your desire to see
yourself alive, you imprisoned me in your blindness
to yourself... Imprisoned by your desire for a
reflection, I became a statue.²³

Irigaray reminds us that, left in a cultural position of atrophy, women do turn to appropriate the other – feminine or masculine – to sustain the self, and that there is a responsibility to analyse women's 'inappropriate' relations to others. However, as we will see, this in turn raises the question of what an appropriate relation to the other might be.

A third point. Irigaray has come to appeal increasingly to the concept of a culture of mediation, of mediation between subjects. She asserts the need for the reorganization of codes of laws, civic duties and ethics to mediate relations between women and between women and men.²⁴

In *I Love To You*, Irigaray marks the relations I would have with the other in such ideal circumstances with an emblematic linguistic modification. My relations with the other, she says, would exchange an 'I love you' for an 'I love towards you'; an 'I give you' for an 'I give towards you'; 'I tell you' for 'I speak towards you'; and so on. The linguistically mediating 'to' is the emblem of the mediation between self and other, of the non-reduction of the other to my self-capture, my domain, such that intersubjective relations might not be structured in terms of cultural cannibalism. Irigaray designates the role of the emblematic *to* as follows:

I love to you thus means: I do not take you for a direct object, nor for an indirect object by revolving around you. It is, rather, around myself that I have to revolve in order to maintain the *to you* thanks to the return to me. Not with my prey – you become mine – but with the intention of respecting my nature, my history, my intentionality, while also respecting yours... The 'to' is the guarantor of two intentionalities: mine and yours.

What Irigaray indicts in *I Love To You* as cultural cannibalism is taking the other as object, as prey or possession, or as the 'you' becoming 'mine', or 'same', in a mode of 'I ask myself if I am loved'. This is

an introverted intentionality, going toward the other so as to return ruminating, sadly and endlessly, over solipsistic questions in a sort of cultural cannibalism.²⁵

Irigaray's appeal was not always so overtly to an ethics of mediation: think of essays in *This Sex Which Is Not One* in which Irigaray privileges a model of interconnectedness between feminine subjects. 'I love you', says Irigaray in 'When Our Lips Speak Together', 'body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed', 'One is never separable from the other'. In this essay, the speaker's voice mocks the masculine logic whose concern is with the exact number of subjects: the fact that there are two. 'In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh?' asks the speaker; 'I'm touching you, that's quite enough to let me know that you are my body'.²⁶

Because of these early, well-known evocations, the reader might well be surprised at the ideals Irigaray defends in her latest work – most of all, the politics of *mediation* between selves and others, between women and men, and between women. But a gesturing towards a politics of mediation is also locatable in the early work. For example, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' is an essay which evokes an ideal for the *entre-femmes* in which 'the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one'. As the daughter says to the mother there:

I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other – together.

Furthermore, an early evocation of the consumption/cannibalism metaphor can be seen in that essay:

We've again disappeared into this act of eating each other.... Will there never be love between us other than this filling up of holes? To close up and seal off everything that could happen between us, is that your only desire? To reduce us to consuming and being consumed, is that your only need?²⁷

In current debates, much of the sense that Irigaray's themes and priorities have changed is probably attributable to the specificities of the Anglophone reception of her work in the 1980s. Because 'Two Lips' was by far the best-known, most discussed paper, commentary initially focused on the Irigarayan evocation of indistinguishability between feminine subjects. Yet Irigaray had simultaneously evoked an ideal of distance and separation between those subjects, and the 'politics of mediation' which Irigaray introduces

in her later work is consistent with those early directions.

The impropriety of the proper

However, some elements of Irigaray's conception of the constitution of the subject do bring into question how the ideal of mediation and non-appropriation of the other is to be grounded theoretically in her work. Irigaray was trained in Lacanian psychoanalysis, although she is also its critic.²⁸ Let us recall, then, a 'first principle' of Lacanian psychoanalysis: that there is no 'self' before the other, but rather a fragmented mess of a body in bits and pieces, a conglomeration of flows of incorporation and expulsion, with no discrete bodily, or subjective, boundaries. What begins to give us a sense of self is our encounter with an image of a whole, unified, body – an encounter with either a mirror image or with the image of the mother, for example.

Any sense of recognition or primordial identification is a 'false' one since the unified, whole, discrete image identified with is not an 'accurate' reflection of the uncontrolled, un-unified body. The sense of recognition is 'false' in that we do not 'recognize' ourselves, but, rather, through that process of 'recognition', develop an internal image of a unified self with which we identify. In other words, the self does not precede its own 'recognition' but is the product of it. And, on the strength of the intersubjective structure instituted by the 'mirror phase', we are produced as subjects who never quite meet up with, or coincide with, our images and social identities – neither our images of self, nor our symbolic, social positions. Identity – both imaginary or symbolic – will always be that with which we are never at one.²⁹

Even at the most primordial level, then, there is not even a self 'prior to' or separate from the other, on this account. Discussing Lacan's mirror phase, Merleau-Ponty points out that the adult never entirely resolves the initial lack of boundaries between self and other. Evidence of this is to be found in many adult emotions and responses: for example, in jealousy and empathy, in pride in the other's achievements, and in love. 'To love', says Merleau-Ponty, 'is inevitably to enter into an undivided situation with another.' Love is an encroachment on the other, exerting influence, 'deciding to a certain extent on behalf of [the other]' and impinging on the other. By 'impingement', he means that the beloved becomes intermingled with one's 'proper' subjective boundaries: 'From the moment when one is joined with someone else, one suffers from her suffering... One is not what he would

be without that love... One can no longer say "This is mine, this is yours"; the roles cannot be absolutely separated.'³⁰ Does this not echo Irigaray's descriptions of everyday infringements of self–other boundaries as appropriations, cultural cannibalisms, the 'je t'aime' as opposed to the 'j'aime à toi'? If so, the following problem arises: given that love, empathy, pity, jealousy, pride and other adult forms of transitivity are manifestations of breakdowns of boundaries between self and other, what justifies the *moral loading* on expressions like 'infringement', 'appropriation' and, of course, 'cannibalism'? How can the transformation of this material into an *ethics of non-appropriation* be legitimate? Isn't the impingement on the other, in this sense, inevitable? Is there any kind of a self which is *not* an impingement on the other?

If there is no self which is 'pure' of an incorporation of the other, any theme of the proper or property of the boundaries of the subject is destabilized. What is there about identity which is 'proper' to me, such that the other, confusing the boundaries between us with the plaintive 'I ask myself if I am loved?', could be said to have *appropriated* me? Irigaray specifically questions certain formulations of love as inappropriate. But how to indict the subject's confusion of those boundaries when we are always improper selves? How to distinguish between inevitable incorporation and unethical appropriation of the other? Irigaray's is a difficult and tenuous ethics because, in Derrida's words, 'One eats [the other] regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him.' Irigaray's could never amount to an ethics of non-appropriation of the other. For Irigaray, as for Derrida, 'this carrying of the mortal other "in me outside me" instructs or institutes my self and my relation to myself'.³¹

I am proposing here that the debate about whether Irigaray is being too simplistic and too programmatic be redirected into one about what the programme actually is and what its internal problems are. In particular, I am asking what the nature of the distance is between self and other implied in the programme of the 'j'aime à toi'.

Those who have been cast in the position of other – such as Irigaray's emblematic 'atrophied' woman – go on to cannibalize another other in order to sustain their own attempt at self-capture. We need, then, so the theory goes, some kind of mechanism which interrupts a reactive cannibalization of the other in a compensating attempt at plenitude. In her later work, Irigaray cultivates a programme for such an interruption. She suggests that the kind of mechanism which could serve such a function is a certain relationship to a sexuate

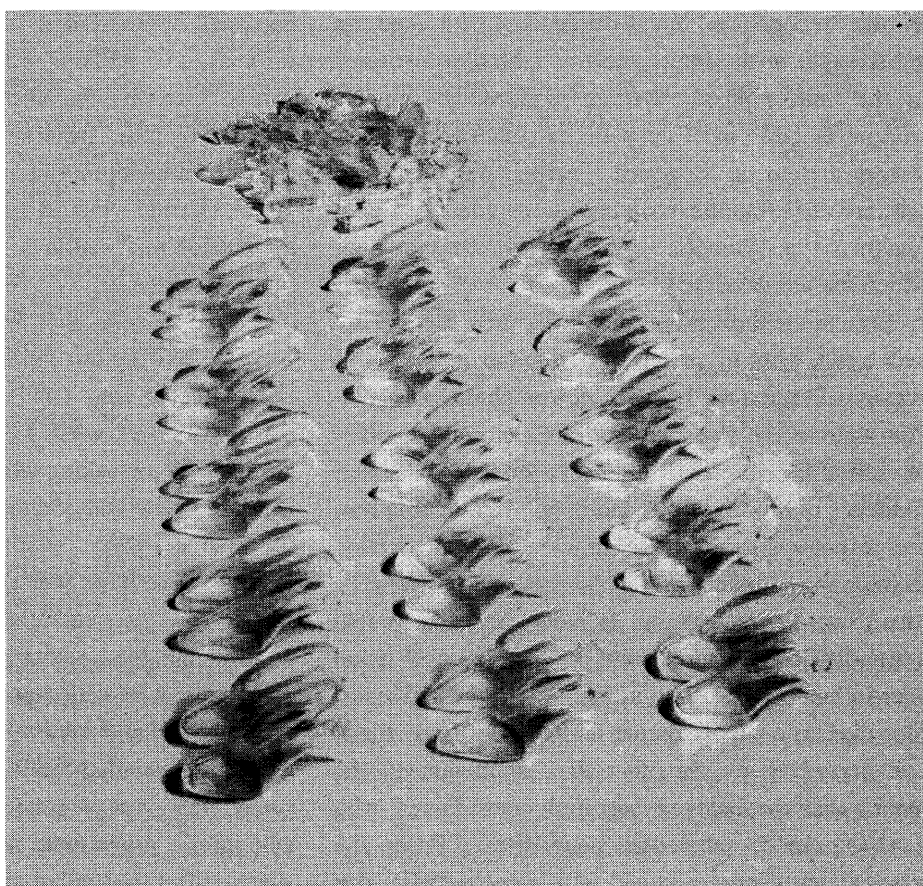
collectivity in which one participates; participation in the sexuate 'genre' in which subjects would situate themselves as sexed. As a woman, I would be participating in the genre of women; or as a man, in the genre of men. Participation in one's genre would operate as a mediating factor in all kinds of relations between selves and others. Sexuate genre would have to be recognized at a social and institutional level – specifically through modifications to legal, religious, economic, linguistic, political and civil institutions – hence the bill of sexuate rights printed in *Je, tu, nous* and *Thinking the Difference*

Irigaray is gaining a renewed notoriety for *going on* saying things like 'women must be roused to an identity'. On her view, participation in my sexuate genre is a way of reinforcing my identity. Any intimation of a possible return to the ideal of 'reinforcing women's identity' raises eyebrows, particularly in the wake of the spectre of an ego psychology whose ideal is the so-called 'strong ego', and also in the wake of that spectre constituted by the 'metaphysics of identity'. But these spectres, respectively the targets of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, are spectres precisely because the ideals of a strong ego or a self-present subject involve, firstly, the disavowal of the necessary fragility and failure of such a subject, and secondly, the disavowal of the dependence of a subject, with pretensions to strong identity, on the cannibalized other to sustain these pretensions. These appropriative modes of 'reinforcing identity' are the product of the subject's inability to reconcile him- or herself with lack.

By contrast, although Irigaray does argue that participation in the sexuate genre would serve to reinforce identity, she phrases the stakes of such a participation very differently – as we have seen, in terms of a means of reconciliation with being 'not-whole'. The recent Irigarayan notion

of being 'sexuate' is an attempt to formulate the concept of an identity-mechanism for the sexes which would not collapse into ideals of wholeness and totality, imaginary specular capture of the other, and disavowed orthopaedic props. Remember, she states, not to confuse identity with identification. Hers is an ideal for an identity structure where the self would not cannibalize the other in its own reinforcement.

This can be summed up in four points. First, Irigaray takes as a utopian political ideal a reconstruction of the nature of identity. Second, she seems to understand the situation of the self in the context of genre as a non-identificatory identity structure. It is not grounded in a subject's identification with what it is not, a structure which simultaneously consolidates identity and lack. Rather than 'identifying with' one's genre, a subject would be coextensive with her or his sexuate genre. Third, Irigaray's claim is that this would only be possible with a recognition of two sexuate genres at the level of all social institutions, thus her interest in institutional and policy reform. And fourth, taking genre to be an identity-structure which does not intertwine identity with lack, she is claiming that a subject who situated him- or herself in the context of genre would be less impelled to appropriate the other to sustain the self. If we return to the theme of love,



Rachel Lachowicz, *Broken Glass*, 1993

for example, we see that Irigaray connects the issue of how we might love differently (less appropriatively) with the issue of institutional reform: 'love ... requires that the rights of both male and female be written into the legal code'.³² Irigaray's utopian reform of identity is thus connected with her ideal for how a subject relates to the other. In particular, her claim is that one's situation of oneself in the context of the sexuate genre with which one is coextensive might enable one better to respect the other's difference. Accordingly, we see comments such as the following:

Because I'm able to situate [difference] there [with sexual difference] ... I'm able to respect the differences everywhere: differences between the other races, differences between the generations and so on.³³

Non-appropriation: eating well

In other words, Irigaray's argument is specifically that the problem is not with ideals of 'identity', baldly put, but with *appropriative* ideals of identity. Is Irigaray to be aligned with an identity politics? She defends the need for an identity structure which is not appropriated of the other. But this makes her insistence that 'we need identity' compatible, at least in spirit, with the critique that 'identity politics' represent gestures where I appropriate the other woman as she who is the same as myself, or, at worst, she for whom I speak, she whose truth I presume to know as woman.

This renders all the more preposterous statements from Irigaray that sexual difference is 'more irreducible' than any other kind of difference. She herself emphasizes the imperative to 'respect the differences everywhere' – of other races, generations, and so on. Sexual difference now construed as 'sexuate genre' has simply become the identity-field in terms of which I am better equipped to 'recognise differences everywhere' rather than preying on the other to reinforce myself.

This is also pertinent to Irigaray's apparent downplaying of the differences among women in favour of an apparently homogenizing conception of 'women's identity'. Tina Chanter has commented that some of the early emphasis placed by Irigaray on 'patriarchy's exclusion of women *as women*' led to critics thinking that her writing 'fails to recognise that female sexuality is experienced differently, at different times, in different cultures'.³⁴ Chanter defends Irigaray by locating her earliest refusals to 'define women' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*.³⁵ Irigaray's work on cultivating women's identity in terms of their sexuate genre must, I have suggested, reopen the same questions. Yet

again it seems clear that the intended 'function' of the concept of genre is that of *non-appropriation* – of men by women, of women by men, and also in the *entre-femmes*.

Essentialism has been one name for the gesture of assuming the sameness of women, but the specific intent of Irigaray's concept of genre is that it serves as a means to represent women *without* assuming the sameness of women. Genre is the very thing Irigaray believes might interrupt assumptions about the sameness of women, and about the sameness of the other to the self. Respecting the other as irreducible is her ethical imperative. Theorists like Le Dœuff, who too easily points out the paradox that she who speaks in the name of woman's difference submerges the differences among women,³⁶ aren't attending to the intent of the project. Developing the concept of women's genre, of sexual difference, is precisely the conceptual structure intended to allow a woman to respect another woman's difference to her.

Lastly, it is with precisely this conceptual apparatus that Irigaray avoids positing a domain which is intrinsic, essential or proper to a subject. In proposing an ethics of non-appropriation, she is specifically negotiating a means of locating 'appropriation' without having to assert that which is '*proper*' to a subject as having 'been' appropriated. Irigaray legitimates her account of non-appropriation not through an account of the pre- or non-appropriated other or self but, rather, through the assertion of the 'need' for mediation between subjects. The substantive account given is not of the real or discrete subject but, rather, of the form that a utopian mode of mediation between subjects would take.

Alys Weinbaum emphasizes how in recent work, including essays in *Je, tu, nous* and *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray intertwines metaphors of mediation and interconnection. She discusses two instances of Irigaray's evocation of ethical relations between subjects: Irigaray's re-narrativization of the relation between analysand and psychoanalyst, and the relation of maternity. Irigaray rejects as undesirable child-mother relations which are conceptualized in terms of merging or fusion between child and mother. Her ideal is a relation where it is possible for child and mother (or analyst and analysand, or indeed any other couple – man and woman, or woman and woman) to recognize and respect each other as subjects rather than, as Weinbaum points out, the interaction representing the annihilation of either one.³⁷ This being Irigaray's ideal for ethical relations between subjects, what is unusual is her appeal to a refigured

concept of the placental relationship between mother and foetus as an emblem of that ideal.

Pro-abortion arguments typically emphasize that mother and foetus are not two separate 'subjects'. Irigaray refigures the placental relationship as a relationship between two entirely interconnected entities.³⁸ The placental relation becomes a figure for ethical relations between subjects. The foetal relation, Irigaray suggests, has an almost 'ethical character'.³⁹ Foetus and mother are intrinsically interconnected, and yet conceptually separate such that one can speak of exchange between them. As Irigaray summarizes the discussion of the placenta by Hélène Rouch, 'the placental economy is ... an organized economy, one not in a state of fusion, which respects the one and the other'.⁴⁰ So figured, Irigaray appeals to the placental relationship as an emblem of how to reconceive the relations between all subjects. We have some experience in the difficulty of conceptualizing the relation between entities in the foetus-mother relation as in some ways separate, in other ways not conceptually separable. Irigaray deploys the placenta metaphor in her difficult attempt to think all self-other relations in terms of a simultaneous separability and non-separability of boundaries. The placenta itself is the emblem of the importance of mediating structures between simultaneously separate and non-separable entities. The placenta represents Irigaray's concept of the mediating role of genre between sexed subjects. My ability to contextualize myself as coextensive with my sexuate genre would mediate my relations with others, and would facilitate less appropriative exchanges, because of my being less driven by the need to sustain identity.

In the context of his discussion of how we have always 'eaten the other', Derrida evokes the following relations: identifying with the other, assimilating the other, and interiorizing the other,⁴¹ and he elsewhere adds: incorporating, introjecting, subjectivizing the other in me.⁴² Irigaray's list of the ways in which the self persistently cannibalizes the other (I give you [to another], I order you, I command you, I submit you to me, I consume you, I seduce you, I marry you, I love you, I desire you, I take you, I instruct you) is comprehensive enough to suggest that Irigaray might well agree with Derrida that we have always eaten the other. Irigaray's cannibal subject is still *unethical*. Derrida does not disagree that there is a failure towards the other at the point at which I cannibalize the other. There is what he calls an 'identifying appropriation'.

But there is also a certain inevitability involved. Accordingly, Derrida proposes that:

the moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat ... but since *one must* eat in any case ... *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well*? And what does this imply? What is eating? How is this metonymy of introjection to be regulated?⁴³

Says Derrida, one eats the other regardless. But he still locates an excess and a remainder, reminding us that I never entirely cannibalize the other. Thus: 'I must and must not take the other into myself'. My incorporation, interiorization, introjection and subjectivizing of the other in me is always 'doomed to failure':

There is no successful introjection, there is no pure and simple incorporation.⁴⁴

This is not to deny that the question remains: how to eat *well*. Indeed, Derrida argues that responsibility towards the other is invoked precisely by the inevitability of 'eating' the other. But, in the end, Derrida also insists that we never interiorize, subjectivize, introject, incorporate, identify with the other, appropriate the other, 'understand' the other without thereby '*addressing oneself to the other*', 'and [so] without absolutely limiting understanding itself, the identifying appropriation'.⁴⁵

We always eat the other, but the other always exceeds our eating. Yet this does not alleviate the responsibility to eat well. For Irigaray, subjects are always 'improper' subjects with no proper boundaries. But this does not preclude the question of indicting some appropriation. Further, she is not content with an account of how the other always exceeds, or resists, my appropriation. In that sense, appropriation is always impossible. Nevertheless, Irigaray specifically wants to theorize 'how to interrupt' 'the identifying appropriation'. This is why she turns to her politics of mediation, her theory of mediation by sexuate genre and the bill of sexuate rights which would contribute to an institutionalization of genre. I am suggesting that where for Derrida the question is how to eat well, Irigaray offers an answer which is both programmatic and utopian: the politics of mediation by genre.

A politics of reform

Irigaray is not supporting a politics or an imaginary of the proper subject. The concept of genre is an attempt to conceptualize a non-appropriative self, without theorizing the subject as having 'proper' boundaries. The boundaries of a self participating in sexuate genre

are interconnected with the genre, not proper to the self. Irigaray is suggesting that there is a connection between the fantasy of the proper, autonomous self, and the self's unethical appropriation of the other to sustain that fantasy. Her utopian programme is for reconstituted identity. A self conceived as having no proper boundaries, conceived as interconnected and coextensive with sexuate genre, might not cannibalize the other as negative reflection to sustain a phantasmatic proper self.

I suggested that one constant between Irigaray's early and late work is the coordination of a theory of subjects as interconnected, fused, 'neither one nor two', with a theory of the need for mediation between subjects. The increasing focus in her later work on the area of political reform reflects Irigaray's theory that better modes of mediation between subjects need to be institutionalized. The development is both programmatic and utopian, because it lays down a 'practical' agenda of what is necessary, which is also impossible, monumental. We saw her explanation that the third phase of her work asks how to define 'an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects?'⁴⁶ Though the political reform would be extremely difficult to establish, the ethic is easily articulated. I am always interconnected with the other: I emulate, resist, envy, admire, love and desire, deny, reject, give to and receive from (etc.) him/her. The boundaries between us are never proper. Yet there must be mediation between us, the recognition of difference between us, responsibility for the one and the other. There must be ethico-political resistance to the *subordination* of the other to the self. Irigaray distinguishes interconnection from subordination. The one is inevitable, the other she resists. Both call for an ethics of responsibility towards the other.

Subordination between self and other is culturally reinforced by institutions which continue to consolidate woman as man's other. Therefore, ethics in the 'relationship between two subjects' is a matter of how social institutions come to mediate between those subjects. If the relationship is mediated by institutions which reinforce the role of woman as other, then an ethical relationship between the two subjects is inhibited. The woman's appropriation by the man is already institutionally consolidated. Further, this can incite women's proneness to a compensating appropriation of others, to succour identity. So, cultural institutions must be reshaped so that relations between self and other are differently mediated. Irigaray's political reforms arise from this view.

Rather than cultural institutions such as law, media, language, etc., reinforcing women's role as other (equal to, opposite of, or complement to the masculine), such institutions should 'recognize' two sexuate genres. The cultural institutionalization of sexuate genre would mediate relations between self and other, and ethical relations between them might be enabled. Responsibility towards the other would be better enabled in such a context, because Irigaray has argued that the irresponsibility of all subjects towards each other is incited by cultural institutions which consolidate woman as other. This not only consolidates the appropriation of women by men; it also retards women's responsibility towards other women. Such responsibility is inhibited because women are prone to turn to the other in an attempt at compensation for a culturally atrophied position. This restricts one's ability to recognize the other in ways not oriented towards the self. Women, claims Irigaray, as other, desire 'to be loved' and to be reflected. The woman's failure to recognize the other woman as different to herself, even in a feminist politics, could plausibly be seen, Irigaray seems to suggest, as a product of a woman's desire to be reflected in the other. For this reason, she turns to a politics of mediation.

Mediation of self-other relations by cultural institutions which recognize two sexuate genres would not leave women in a position of atrophy. Women would not serve as a reflection of the masculine, and a woman would not recognize in other women only a reflection of herself. The politics of mediation by genre, then, is a complicated attempt by Irigaray to theorize how subjects who are always interconnected in every kind of relation, and whose boundaries are not proper, might nevertheless be responsible towards the other. Irigaray's emphasis is on the need for this to be addressed at the level of institutional reform, however utopian such a programmatic politics may be.

Like Derrida, Irigaray thematizes the necessity of responsibility between subjects understood as having always 'eaten' (interiorized, introjected, identified with, incorporated) each other. Both philosophers thematize the necessary remainder of the other to appropriation. For both, it is true that I appropriate the other, and also true that I can never succeed in appropriating the other – the other is always more than my appropriation, introjection, identification and incorporation of them. But the juxtaposition of this theme in the two philosophers highlights Irigaray's passion: to add a politics of institutional reform to a politics which emphasizes remainder and excess.

Notes

1. L. Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. A. Martin, Routledge, New York and London, 1993; *Thinking the Difference – For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. K. Montin, Athlone Press, London, 1994; *I Love To You – Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. A. Martin, Routledge, New York and London, 1996; *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G.C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985; *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. C. Porter with C. Burke, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985.
2. E. Hirsch and G. Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’: A Meeting With Luce Irigaray”, *Hypatia*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, p. 104.
3. M. Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, trans. T. Selous, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1991, p. 226.
4. J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p. 36.
5. L. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. G.C. Gill, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p. 64.
6. M. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray – Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 135.
7. For example, one finds that Irigaray does not mean that women need a God, so much as a structural function which would substitute for the symbolic role traditionally played by a masculine–paternal God. This issue is discussed in P. Deutscher, “‘The Only Diabolical Thing About Women...’: Luce Irigaray on Divinity”, *Hypatia*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1994, pp. 88–111.
8. *Hipparchia’s Choice*, p. 225.
9. M. Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, Basil Blackwell, London and Cambridge MA, 1991, p. 12.
10. Alys Weinbaum agrees: ‘the often rehearsed criticism of Irigaray in the United States (still!) focuses on her purported essentialism’ (A.E. Weinbaum, ‘Marx, Irigaray and the Politics of Reproduction’, *Differences*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1994, p. 105).
11. Hirsch and Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’”, pp. 106, 96–7.
12. Weinbaum, ‘Marx, Irigaray...’, p. 12.
13. Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 11.
14. Weinbaum, ‘Marx, Irigaray...’, p. 112; Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, pp. 11–12.
15. *I Love To You*, p. 4; *Thinking the Difference*, p. 20.
16. *Thinking the Difference*, p. 19.
17. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 22; *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 69.
18. Hirsch and Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’”, pp. 109–10.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 111.
20. *I Love To You*, p. 110.
21. S. Freud, ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’, in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 82.
22. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. C. Burke and G.C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1993, p. 134.
23. ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other’, *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, p. 64.
24. *I Love To You*, pp. 2–5.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
26. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 206, 209, 207, 208.
27. ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other’, pp. 61, 62.
28. See Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 71.
29. See J. Lacan, ‘Some Reflections on the Ego’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34, 1953; and ‘The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the I’, in *Écrits – A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, Tavistock, London, 1977. (Just as Irigaray’s reworking of Freud involves a reworking of the Oedipal narrative, Irigaray’s reworking of Lacan includes a reworking of the mirror phase. For example, Irigaray presents her own version of a mirror ‘phase’ – the specular economy. On Irigaray’s narrative, *negative* mirror images – reflections of what we are not – represented by ‘the other’ are crucial to identity. She argues that the ‘negative reflection’ of femininity-as-atrophy is one of the crucial supports of masculine identity. The masculine subject looks into a converse mirror which affirms masculine identity through a negative contrast with that feminine other which it is not.
30. M. Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Child’s Relations with Others’, *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 1964, p. 154.
31. J. Derrida, “‘Eating Well’”, or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’, in E. Cadava, P. Connor and J.-L. Nancy, eds, *Who Comes After The Subject?*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991, pp. 114–15; ‘Istrice 2: Ick bün all hier’, in *Points... Interviews 1974–1994*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1995, p. 321.
32. *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 4.
33. Hirsch and Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’”, p. 110.
34. S. Moore, ‘Getting a Bit of the Other’, in R. Chapman and J. Rutherford, eds, *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1988, p. 169; cited in T. Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, p. 175.
35. As Chanter points out, ‘Irigaray’s refusal to identify with any group that “purports to determine the ‘truth’ of the feminine, to legislate as to what it means ‘to be a woman’, and to condemn women who might have immediate objectives that differ from theirs” [*This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 166] is a testimony to the seriousness with which she takes differences at all levels. She is just as concerned to acknowledge the differences among women as she is to assert sexual difference’ (Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, p. 175).
36. Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, p. 227.
37. Weinbaum, ‘Marx, Irigaray...’, p. 109.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
39. *Je, tu, nous*, p. 41; cited in Weinbaum, ‘Marx, Irigaray...’, p. 110.
40. *Je, tu, nous*, p. 41.
41. Derrida, “‘Eating Well’”, p. 115.
42. Derrida, ‘Istrice 2: Ick bün all hier’, p. 321.
43. “‘Eating Well’”, p. 115.
44. ‘Istrice 2: Ick bün all hier’, p. 321.
45. “‘Eating Well’”, p. 115.
46. Hirsch and Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’”, pp. 96–7.