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## An exchange of letters provoked by Luce Irigaray's *I Love To You*.

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### Prologue

This project developed from the Luce Irigaray readings at the Women and Geography Study Group meeting (May 2003). The extracts were from *I Love To You*, and they caused some controversy. In particular, Irigaray was condemned as heterosexist and in this heterosexism a particular type of heterosexuality and specific understandings of gender/sex difference prevailed. In arguing that we need to rethink, re-feel, re-embodiment sexual difference, the sexual difference Irigaray refers to – and even grounds in Nature in *I Love To You* – is an exclusively heterosexual one. The difference she is interested in remaking – the relation she is exploring – is that between masculine and feminine, male and female. It is her refusal to engage with any other form of sexual difference or even different forms of heterosexuality beyond the 'loving' nuclear family that leads to accusations of heterosexism, both in that meeting and in many other feminist discussions.

After the discussion – and some good food, wine and talk – two of the participants decided they would try and work through their different views in a dialogue about Irigaray's project. The discussion was based on a tentative agreement that feminist geographers could now be open about theoretical and political divergences among us. The production of this third Women in Geography Study Group publication enables us to place this diversity firmly within a feminist geographical context. In this way the diversity presented in the 1997 WGSG book in relation to theoretical understandings of gender and sex within feminist geographies is explored through a dialogue that does not seek to reduce one position to the/another.

It is this dialogue across difference that is exactly what Irigaray's wider philosophical and political project is all about. Very broadly, we might say that there are three themes at the core of Irigaray's work. The first of these is the exploration of how the feminine is the excluded other of philosophical and analytical discourse and of political institutions. The second is the recovery of the particularity of the feminine, in language in particular. And the third is to think about how the specificity of difference between masculine and feminine might be fully recognised and worked with, rather than erased and repressed. *I Love To You* starts with the first of these but then moves on to the latter two. In part, Irigaray's book celebrates the surreptitious and unacknowledged existence of a feminine which is willing to engage with difference with respect; and in part, it is an effort to imagine what a relationship between two different subjects would be like if their difference was allowed to be. How that difference is presented, though, is the nub of many debates about Irigaray's project.

Beginning from what we perceive(d) to be different positions and experiences of Irigaray, we – Kath and Gillian – thought it was important to try and engage in a dialogue about Irigaray's *I Love To You*, rather than a stand-off. The results of our efforts follow.

Hi Gillian,

I received my copy of 'I love to you' and took it to a local coffee shop in the lanes of Brighton. Amongst the bustle I began my journey into Irigaray. I have only read the prologue. I have so many questions already and I am eager to know if I have missed the point of the chapter/book?

Perhaps it is our differences that inform how we read (appreciate?) Irigaray? From the outset I feel that this is a personal and perhaps emotional response.

There are some things I really like about the prologue and I can identify with, particularly her rejection of the links between religion and the state. However there were far more aspects of the chapter that I thought were questionable, some to the point of offensive.

Irigaray argues that for 'objective determinations proper to the female gender' and partially defines these as an identity, rights and responsibilities (p. 4). This, I think, is the central point of her argument. My first question is what exactly is she referring to? This leads to perhaps an obvious 'problem' where we have a 'woman' rather than allowing for a plurality of possible sexes and genders. She contends that without the objective rights of the female gender, freedom for women is futile (p. 5). Of course my question is which women is she discussing? The differences between us are apparently erased. Her philosophical viewpoint is that women should have 'rights' and as equality is not a goal, presumably this means that men's and women's rights and responsibilities are (essentially?) different?

In erasing difference we are all presumably heterosexual and a crucial point in her argument is that of the 'limits of my gender' where happiness is found in the love between women and men (p. 13 and 15). This love between women and men means that a war between the sexes is 'quite ridiculous' (p. 3). At the outset her argument regarding homosexuality and particularly lesbian politics is offensive (but this may be just how I read it). Irigaray blames 'homo-sexual sentiment' as an insufficient way to happiness for all women. Instead homosexuality serves only a minority of women. In some ways I totally agree. I am not sure that radical lesbian separatism and the advent of political lesbianism served all heterosexual or non-heterosexual women particularly well. However, the implication appears to be that we should all subscribe to a heterosexual politics which encompasses the 'majority' of women, abandoning our own pursuit of happiness in favour of this higher (heterosexual) goal. I wonder what the reaction would be if she took ethnicity and made the same point regarding a white politics... But then it may be the universalising elements of political lesbianism that she is reacting to (i.e. the argument that all women should live apart from men). I cannot help but feel that as she criticises these politics for providing a 'model of law or the way to happiness for all women' that she herself is propagating this same agenda, which is equally specific, 'restricted and partial', yet unacknowledged (p. 3).

Having become interested in gender theory and particularly gender transgressions, I found her dependence on 'man-woman', if not opposition then difference, troublesome. To me these categories are not the start point but the congealing of enactments, interpretations, regimes and biologies and not simply 'what really exists: women and men' (p. 14). I suppose if we start from here then the need for love between a man and a woman is 'obvious'. But where does that leave those of us who don't want to fit here? Those of us who do not want to love men or do not want to exist, or simply do not live, within the dichotomous categories of man and woman? Perhaps I am focusing on the 'fabrications', 'objects' and 'secondary realities' but I am fearful of arguments that purport a 'return to ourselves as living beings who are engendered and not fabricated' (p. 14)?

On a final point her self-pity was extraordinary. She appears to suggest that her 'followers' (subordinates?) need to be more understanding of her ideas, more appreciative of her and more uncritical in order to get her to the position she feels she deserves. Certainly women are under-recognised, but is blatant self praise and adoring blind support what should be strived for? Maybe I am simply guilty of not properly understanding her arguments and the intentions behind them (p. 10)?

This is probably a naïve response but it appears that there is no space for me or anyone who does not love men as partners in Irigaray's visions. I would be really interested to hear your views.

Kath

Hello Kath,

I've been looking forward to writing to you but also feel quite a bit of trepidation. We've spoken with a lot of enthusiasm about exploring the different kinds of feminism we cleave to, about talking through those differences rather than politely ignoring them or doing work that runs along parallel tracks and refuses to connect. But now it comes to it, to starting a dialogue, it feels really difficult. Especially because you've found Irigaray not just wrong, not just arrogant – but offensive. It seems to me – or at least this is what I find when I read theorist/philosopher types, writers who have to hook you in some way other than having intriguing empirical materials to offer – that something happens between a reader and writer that isn't just some kind of cool assessment of rigour or logic or coverage. You don't write a referee's report on authors you read for ideas. Instead something more subjective, more emotional, more difficult to articulate happens. Sometimes you're just bored, or puzzled, sometimes all I can say is that I just don't get it – and sometimes I feel like I've got it and I'm seething against it. Seething, offended. Enraged. And sometimes, other times, I get grabbed. I get grabbed. And Irigaray's project grabs me. It reaches out and offers me something that I can't find elsewhere. So that even though I can see all sorts of problems, issues, difficulties with her work, nonetheless there's something there that pulls me in. I'm still buying her in hardback to read what she's saying. And sometimes what she says is outrageous – there are some really extraordinary statements still to come in *I Love to You*, I warn you! But I return to her as a most fecund and creative writer. I have my own explanation for why that is, and you've explained your reaction very clearly. But the intensities of our reactions are something else.

So I find that responding to your reaction is difficult. I suppose because I don't think I can argue you out of it. Also because I don't want to – if you hate it because you feel excluded from it, then why should I force you to participate in this reading? And also because I think you might be right.

But. But I do think that Irigaray is offering us – I mean women – something. I think she's probably offering rather less than she thinks she is, to rather fewer women – she's deeply engaged with a tradition of Western philosophy and the Western societies that tradition is embedded in, and she doesn't acknowledge that specificity often enough for my taste. But she's offering some suggestions for changing how we live in quite profound ways, so that we tolerate difference. I think this is the fundamental task that we – including women – need to undertake, for planetary survival. (Two of my holiday reading books were Irigaray's *The Way of Love*, and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The two seemed kind of connected as I sheltered from the sun during a weirdly hot June, reading newspaper headlines about yet more would-be immigrants to Italy from North Africa drowning in the Mediterranean.) So I'm prepared to listen. Also, I find it interesting that she seems to be marginalised in some discourses that you'd think, on the face of it, she should be pretty central to. I'm thinking firstly of feminism itself. I recently read an essay by Wendy Brown on 'the state of feminism today', and her whole argument was only sustainable if she ignored the thirty-year project of Irigaray – which she did. Maybe Irigaray's paranoia about her reception is not so misplaced! And I also work with a bunch of people interested in the potentialities of non-human/natural objects. I hear a lot about Latour and Stengers and Serres, but Irigaray's work on objects – on bodies and their potentialities – is notable only by its absence. I kind of feel that if such influential academic positions are ignoring Irigaray, then maybe she has something really important to say. Or, of course, maybe she simply doesn't.

The prologue of *I Love To You* doesn't start well, though, does it? Irigaray comes over as absolutely certain of her position, of how right she is and how wrong others are. I don't like this tone, and it's certainly at odds with the much more receptive stance she advocates by the end of this book. However, as I read her, what she's saying in that prologue is that women don't yet have an identity, a subjectivity, that can create democratic, free, accessible, affiliations. Instead, to

paraphrase a sentence from page 9, what is offered us is already within a horizon that annihilates our identity and our will. So she criticises women-only groups for being too close to that-which-is-already-offered. Instead, Irigaray wants 'a future fit for living' (page 6), 'a direction that is just and fecund' (page 4). 'What women need most', she says, 'are mediations and modes of distancing' (page 5). Constantly sensitive to the immediate needs of others, women are not given space to retain a sense of their own self – while also attending to the needs of others. And this is the nub of what she's saying to me – that women have to have space to be themselves, but without losing their ability to engage with others who are different, irreducibly different. That possibility – a different way of being feminine – fascinates me.

That she puts this self-other relationality in the form of female-male love worries me as it does you. But not for the same reasons, I think. I read her as saying quite clearly that this yet-to-be realised kind of femininity, that can care for self and others, does not yet exist, and that women need to build it. So to me she is very clearly not condoning heterosexuality as it currently exists. But she says very little, as I read her, about how men need to change too to secure her 'just and fecund' future (most men, that is. I still can't quite work out how I feel about her praise for old Renzo). At one level of course I find this great – so much is written that's implicitly about men or Man, I'm mightily relieved that Irigaray doesn't bother about men that much. On the other hand, if there is to be a new future, man must presumably change too if his errors and arrogance are not to continue. But how should he change and still remain the irreducibly other of femininity?

I guess one thing we might share is an uninterest in answering that question! So maybe this is a good place to stop.

Hi Gillian,

Thank you for your response. I certainly have responded emotionally to Irigaray, I suppose I do see her as an important figure one whose ideas are influential (if under-acknowledged!). Perhaps my reaction was one of shock more than outrage. I am quite incredulous that her project appears so narrow in its focus. It feels like she excludes from the potential 'grabbing' in ways that I don't think are necessary. This response continues along a similar theme.

Irigaray's 'Love Between Us' (Chapter 1) offers possibilities of 'salvation' through love (pg. 29). Her challenge to institutions, such as the state, and her move away from the purposes of the family being the accumulation of capital was stimulating. I also really liked the idea of questioning/changing the horizon rather than that which is contained within it. Nonetheless, I was disappointed that beyond the 'horizon' Irigaray wished to challenge was the 'natural' division of men and women. She purports the existence of a 'natural identity' to which a cultural identity (as 'woman') should be true. Is Irigaray referring to a particular 'essence'? What if a woman (or a man for that matter) wishes to renounce her (or his) 'natural identity'? What of those who do not want to be 'faithful to our gender' (p. 30)? Moreover, it seems she is asking for the impossible and emphasising the individual in asking women to perfect their gender. This is a vague assertion that does not appear to offer any concrete answers or methods or even what a perfect gender would look like. On the other hand, had she offered definitive answers I am sure that these would have been equally problematic. The question then, perhaps, is should she have suggested the perfection of gender at all?

I found p.32, where she discusses 'the children of lovers' quite offensive to anyone who was not conceived in a 'perfect' spiritual and emotional bond between a woman and a man. It appeared she was rendering children who were conceived in a particular way superior. She does not appear to recognise the fluidity of couples and love that varies across space and time. Is love as stable and fixed as she suggests or is there a diversity to love that holds multifaceted possibilities?

To finish on a more 'upbeat' note, I liked the concluding sentence of the chapter and the idea of not sacrificing 'desire for death, power or money' and building our private lives and political ethics on this (p. 33). Perhaps Irigaray can partially 'grab' me after all?

Kath

Hello again, and I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you. I've been swamped with work – you know the feeling I guess – deadline after deadline, demand after demand, things I thought I'd finished returning for more work.... and that was just at home.

So reading Irigaray this morning once again brought her peculiarity as an author to the fore. I've been feeling nearly overwhelmed with responsibilities, and with all the everyday toil and labour they entail – and then I read Irigaray demanding a new humanity, a new way of loving. Her work comes from a very different place from the kinds of sociology or feminist geography that might offer analyses of those routine and insistent demands made on me as academic, mother, partner, daughter. It's basically a demand to start all over again, an insistence that all these difficulties have one cause – albeit an incredibly complex cause. She's a kind of utopic writer I think. You're right that she doesn't prescribe the exact form of her hoped-for new world, but she does pitch her argument right over there. So it's either inspirational or totally ungrounded in social realities...

And I have to admit that the moment I find most inspirational is when she talks about children conceived in love – the bit you queried. I agree with you that she is making judgements about some children being 'better' than others, or at least more competent, but I have to say that I do think different kinds of parenting do make some sort of a difference to how a child feels about herself and the world. (Although, as any parent will tell you, she's way off the mark in assuming that a child's character is shaped in any straightforwardly deterministic way by the behaviour of their parents!) The reason I want to pause over her discussion of children, though, is because it's a pretty rare moment in the kinds of feminism that are current now when the fact of having children is acknowledged as springing from, and as containing, something extraordinarily precious. Of course children are fantastically hard work, they make incessant demands, they refuse to do what you ask them, tell them, order them to do from the day they're born (and indeed before then). And of course, as Irigaray herself says, the labour of childcare is still profoundly coded as feminine. The inequalities of that labour have been elaborated at great length by feminist social scientists. But that elaboration also has some effects that I feel a little uneasy about – for example, at work I'm the only mother on the academic staff. And if I talk about my kids – which I do not choose to do very often – I've found that the kinds of topics that are most easy to chat with non-parent colleagues about are when the children cause problems: they're ill so I can't make a meeting, their childminder is on holiday, they wake up in the night so I'm exhausted, nursery fees are so expensive. All things about children as work. What I can't say – and what I'm hesitating writing about here too – is the extraordinary pleasure and joy they bring, the love they're surrounded by. I don't say that they 'create' or 'produce' love in some kind of causal process; I want to phrase it differently – 'surrounded by love' – because that is closer to what Irigaray says and her words are very close to my experience. I never wanted children until I was in a relationship with my partner. I don't know if we're really 'spiritual enough', my partner and I – in fact I'm pretty sure we're not! – but we certainly wanted to share our treasure, and the notion of children being those who 'love announces and awaits' makes me catch my breath every time I read it.

I hope this doesn't sound all sloppy and daft. And I'd want to emphasise that Irigaray does not imply that children are somehow the culmination or the necessary outcome of good (hetero) relationships. Indeed, she says explicitly that reducing love to reproduction is to reduce love to its basest level (page 32). But in the midst of my everyday toil and trouble, reading something that

affirms a source of how things may be, and perhaps in some ways already are, different, radically different and loving, feels very important to me. So for all the difficulties of parenting (and recognising of course that my difficulties are puny in relation to those of many other mothers), Irigaray reminds me that the love that is shared with our kids is maybe an emotion that can work to make radical change. So I've picked out that particular bit for personal reasons. And rambled on at excessive length about it!

So to move on to things that you've raised. Well, the major thing, which is her focus on male-female love, which is simply assumed throughout this chapter. It is offensive, isn't it, read on its own? I read it now in conjunction with other parts of her work, including some things later in this book which I'd be very interested to hear how you react to, because I think they mitigate its offensiveness somewhat. Briefly, Irigaray's sense of difference between men and women is actually grounded in their different bodies. I should immediately say that she doesn't see those bodies as determining masculine and feminine identity but rather as forming a kind of potentiality from which sexual difference can be nurtured in various ways. Now I know that human anatomy certainly doesn't offer a simply binary model of sexual difference... but, but, can we ignore our embodied selves totally, as if they had no role at all in who we are? I don't think so, and I think Irigaray tries very hard to place bodily difference as part of being human. The price she pays, if you like, for doing that is to pay close attention to differences between bodies and to conclude that sexed difference is fundamental. What she doesn't do is say that masculinity and femininity as we currently know them, even in all their diversity, are fundamental. I don't know what you think about this move. But I'd be very interested to hear.

Gillian

Hi Gillian,

I was inspired by your response (as well as the idea of a deadline) so I decided to reply immediately! I really like the idea of stepping back to find inspiration, new ways of thinking and what a 'new world' could look like. Before you start reading, I have to apologise for the length of this letter - I got a bit carried away!

I want to start on your point about different forms of writing and agree that authors write from different perspectives and different audiences will read critically and perhaps unfairly. In this reply I have tried to see how Irigaray's work could potentially be challenged and reworked by sexed and sexual diversity. Before I start into/onto Irigaray again, I want to pause to consider some of the comments and questions that you have posed. I really like the idea that 'an emotion that can work to make radical change' - that emotion being love. I was heartened to see that books and inspirational words resonate with you on an emotional and personal level as they do me. It doesn't sound 'sloppy or daft' but brings to light what we often miss out on in academia, and what Irigaray wants us to address, I think: love, joy and in Chapter 3, sexual energy! (On a more minor point, while parenting does, I think, make a difference to the children, the insult of Irigaray's writing lies in the way she hierarchises parenting types. Parenting does make a difference but surely the difference children feel about themselves is related to the practices of parenting rather than the (hetero)sexuality of (2) parents?)

I appreciate that there is a great love associated with children but I can't help feeling that this is not the only love, joy (or sex). I suppose I want to take that idea and move it beyond mother/child love to other forms, which brings us back to my problem with her categories and the notion that masculinity and femininity, if not fundamental, are linked to particular bodies. For me, although I don't want to ignore our embodied selves, neither do I want to fit all embodiments into particular categories - not just of masculinities and femininities but also of men and women. Maybe I am

coming from the 'margins' but can these 'outsides' question these philosophies and hopefully reshape rather than dismiss, or be dismissed by, them?

We certainly have very different emotions with regard to Irigaray's writing. Although you clearly have far more experience and knowledge of Irigaray, it is clear that our very different positionings are also informing our readings. Particularly, the resonances I read in your responses which relate to your experiences of motherhood and partnership that I have yet to experience or identify with. I know we bring ourselves to each book and it is interesting how reading 'academic' books can sometimes be an inspirational and emotionally charged experience. For me, Irigaray continues to be emotionally charged but in a very different way. I often feel unintentionally excluded by Irigaray's work and I feel that others who transgress gender/sex boundaries may be even more alienated. I find myself angry at some of her words, particularly when I feel written out or overlooked. But, perhaps that is because I cannot identify with them, be that by virtue of experience, academic or otherwise. However, I am slowly beginning to appreciate Irigaray. Her ideas are provocative and perhaps could be applicable beyond the seemingly strict frame of the man/woman, heterosexual reference that she continually imposes...

When I began Chapter 2, I was almost hopeful of contestations to the two sex model reinforced and (re)produced in the earlier chapter. Irigaray begins by saying that 'The natural is *at least* two' (p. 35, my emphasis). She goes on to argue that whilst man is often seen as the universal, the one, man is only one half of the whole. However, throughout the chapter the man/woman binary is reinstated.

Irigaray promises to question the horizons of our thinking and I agree that the 'sensible (common sense) is not as simple or as unitary as people think' (p. 37). She then moves on to contend that the natural, whilst not simple or universal, is at least two. Whilst she argues that all life on earth is divided in two and implicates that reproduces sexually, plants and bacteria do not always reproduce sexually and so not all life on earth is divided dichotomously for sexual reproduction. Perhaps, then, it could be contended that sexual difference does not 'cut across all realms of the living' (p. 37)? Perhaps, rather than accepting 'biological divisions', we need to question these 'horizons' also? I do not want to assert that biology (or reproduction) is unimportant; I want to enable us to ponder how they come to be important rather than foreclosing the debate. Sexual difference is not necessarily dichotomous and it is a shame Irigaray does not allow her phrase 'at least two' (p. 35) to incorporate these diversities. So perhaps in relation to your comments that sexed difference is fundamental- it is possible to say 'yes' but it is not only two...

Irigaray moves from this to explore how corporeal morphology connects to a woman's spirituality as an extension of the natural economy. Irigaray's contention that these could/should form a 'different economy ... that would amount to attentiveness and to fidelity' (p. 38) is based in an understanding of men and women as primarily different. However, whilst this difference appears permanent and fixed, Irigaray argues that movements of growth are always familiar to 'corporeal existence in a natural milieu' (p. 38). From this, Irigaray reasons that we need to become aware of being a man and a woman and wanting to be [as?] one. In this way 'who I am' regulates my intentions, but how do I come to know 'who I am' within the frame of man or woman? Moreover, through (re)creating the self/other as man/woman, all the other others are invisibilised, ignored, erased and their contestations of these binaries silenced. From this, her proposal of universally valid values based on natural realities to replace patriarchy is problematic. If these values are based on a man/woman binary who are these values excluding/marginalising? What new constraints could they place on specific 'men' and 'women', including the need to cultivate spiritually the 'other'? Where would same-sex relations fit in this model?

I like Irigaray's argument that we should consider the 'culture of life' (p. 39) rather than leaving sex to metaphysics or religion and uncultured or instinctual fate. The idea of accomplishing womanhood in relation to specific genealogies and histories is interesting but the singular 'history' and 'genealogy' on which she bases these appears to close down possibilities. Is there one destiny

for each person? How is this destiny decided? How does this sit alongside the culture of life and the responsibilities of the individual envisaged by Irigaray? If womanhood is an accomplishment, can anyone accomplish 'womanhood'? Finally, what challenges does this pose to dichotomous sexual difference? I am not sure these questions have answers but perhaps they illustrate the boundaries of Irigaray's vision?

I agree, as Irigaray argues in Chapter 3, that we need to move beyond motherhood to intersubjective exchanges between individuals. However, do these exchanges have to reify the boundaries between men and women?

Irigaray argues for 'a culture of the female' (p. 47) but is there a possibility of a plurality of cultures? Who does 'a culture of the female' preclude? What of those who embody masculine cultures? The presumption that all women are mothers and it is here that we gain our adult identity is problematic but I wonder if at present in 'Western' societies women are gaining their adult identities in different places. However, when I consider my own experiences and 'adult status' I was struck that these are perhaps quite 'masculine' in terms of career, status, money, property, relationship (in no particular order!). So while I do see Irigaray's point of the necessity of 'at least two' cultures, could we move beyond the man/woman division in these visions? In Irigaray's argument I see little if any room for this; her assertion is that 'sexual difference is immediate and natural given' and that 'human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else' (p. 47). Whilst I was going to mention intersex, the hijras, XXY 'women' to challenge her argument, perhaps more significant is that this view narrows her argument. By focusing on the 'majority' she overlooks the potential of those who do not 'fit' men and women either in embodiment or gender characteristics.

I wonder if the 'universal' man or woman that Irigaray purports as something that is 'in' us (p. 48) is also (simultaneously) something that could be fluid, individually appropriated, adapted and adopted, something that does not need to be linked to embodiments? Could these 'universals' be something that we can move between? Not in any superficial sense but in the 'real' appropriation of these 'universals' that Irigaray is proposing? Or is the distance between them necessary for the dialogue and intersubjectivities between sexes? If we consider sexed difference as '*at least two*' (p. 48, my emphasis) perhaps we can open up Irigaray's arguments moving them beyond their basis in binary oppositions and making them applicable beyond man/woman divisions, rather than (as I wanted to do when starting this book) dismiss her contentions outright?

To finish this section, her notion of 'secondary differences' includes race but not sexuality. Where does sexual diversity fit in a primary/secondary division of needs where heterosexuality is understood as a need (Chapter 2)? I wonder if this is because alternative sexualities contest her dichotomous frame and pose a fundamental challenge to her argument? Personally I do not think they necessarily have to, although her assertions regarding 'natural' sexual difference and the presumption of opposites does need to be questioned if I, and others, are to be included in the cultures of (fe)males.

Irigaray begins Chapter 4 with a 'but, but... moment', namely the idea that all (or mostly all) human beings are dependant on money. I guess I wanted her to acknowledge the specificity of this statement as well as the global (and local) diversity in the negotiation of money. More importantly in terms of her argument, I agree we should celebrate sexual energy more and recognise the possibilities of desire, but it is a huge assumption that all individuals are subsumed to money. (I say this as I worry about my loan, paying the bills and buying a house/flat/box!) I wanted to highlight her return to sexual energy because my personal sexual energy drive and desire has little if anything to do with reproduction, and I'm imagining even heterosexual couples 'sexual energy' is not always driven by 'social production' (p. 50)! In other words, do these have to be contained solely within heterosexual reproductive frame? Is Irigaray saying that our sexual desires could also lead to radical change?



Irigaray goes on to argue for universal laws common to men and women, however, does the return to these desires have to reify the women and men as 'born' into the 'rights' of women and men (p.51)? This of course is not to deny the need for individual rights but do they have to fit into the naturalised categories of man/woman? Do these have to be proscribed at birth with no variation or movement? Again to reengage with the diversity of embodiments is not to challenge the 'nature of persons' but to recognise that on occasion the spiritual does not simply 'cultivate' the natural, it determines it and (re)inscribes it. The most obvious example of this would be transsexual embodiments that come to fit their spiritual beings. Therefore, although I like the idea of a 'world of mediation' (p.51) between genders and agree that there is a need for 'relations and communication between living persons' (p. 54), I am not convinced that this has to be dichotomously sexed.

Irigaray's acknowledgment of the importance of life leads to a return to 'attraction and retention' of energy and onto a discussion of 'another' that is 'irreducible to me and unthinkable in terms of my spirit' which I found really challenging (p. 55). However, what if the 'other' was not just 'another' but a plethora of others that we had to communicate with? What if the 'felicity within history' (p. 57), whilst significant, was supplemented with their-stories that recognise but seek to subvert dichotomous genders? On the other side of this, what are the connections and commonalities that may transgress sexed dichotomies either through individuals or groups? Are we always 'unthinkable' to each other?

Finally to return to Irigaray's call to 'real persons' who have individual rights (p. 54), perhaps rethinking power outside of domination may enable us to reconsider her own dialogue as reinforcing particular forms of power. I wanted to think about your argument that Irigaray is a 'utopic' writer and looking for space for me and others in her writing. I suppose I am also attempting to rework this vision because I think we do need inspiration amongst the hum-drum of daily life. Is it possible that the fundamentalness of sexed difference can be separated from masculinities/femininities as well as from other gender manifestations and formations? Can the utopian vision be diversified *and* take the body seriously?

I would be really interested to hear what you think about these crossovers and intersections, my seemingly endless questions, as well as my attempt to 'reshape' Irigaray...

Kath

Dear Kath,

I've been meaning to reply to you for ages, of course. But finding the time, and the energy, has been hard. Also – I'm finding it really difficult to defend Irigaray! I guess you're really making me think very hard about my allegiance to her. I don't want my enthusiasm for her to be reduced to my subject position as straight mother! I'd like to think that – like all kinds of other affinities – it's rather more complex. I did though really admire your efforts to work with her, and to multiply the number of differences she might work through by picking up on her suggestion that the human is always at least two.

To go with your productive suggestion a bit more – it reminded me of something somebody said at that WGS reading meeting we both went to – Andrea Nightingale, I think. She pointed out that it's not possible to identify just two sexes in nature – some species have only one, some more than one, and others change their sex over their life-cycle. So Irigaray's grounding of a difference between just two in 'nature' is not very sound! She should build from the 'at least' that you pick up on. We could certainly turn to a different vision of nature to keep that sense of the corporeal that Irigaray is so keen to think through, and multiply the form and shapes and relations that the corporeal invokes.

I continue to find this whole turn to the non-human and/or the natural very challenging, though. I work with lots of colleagues who are very enthusiastic about it, reading lots of Latour and Stengers and Serres, and who are very keen to argue that the natural is actually incredibly dynamic and diverse, that it's not only humans who do stuff, who travel and change, so too do all sorts of non-human, animate and non-animate things. Yet there seems to be an underlying truth claim to this, that really nature is multiple and randomly shifting, really wild – and so we should be more concerned with dynamism and flux and change too. I guess I was formed too profoundly by the cultural turn (and other stuff) not to be suspicious of such truth claims about what nature is really like! And that remains a problem for me in Irigaray too. I love her turn to the corporeal (providing the feminine is disengaged from motherhood, as you say), but to say that this turn is necessary because it provides evidence of how things really are – I hesitate at that point.

For me, the really crucial passage in this book – theoretically speaking – there are lots of others I find crucial for other reasons! – is where she talks about her understanding of the bodily, not as a determining burden but as the site of potential. Here it is, on page 107 in Chapter 9:

I am a sexed [...] being, hence assigned to a gender, to a generic identity, one which I am not necessarily in/through my sensible immediacy. And so to be born a girl in a male-dominated culture is not necessarily to be born with a sensibility appropriate to my gender. No doubt female physiology is present but not identity, which remains to be constructed. Of course, there is no question of it being constructed in repudiation of one's physiology. It is a matter of demanding a culture, of wanting and elaborating a spirituality, a subjectivity and an alterity appropriate to this gender: the female. It's not as Simone de Beauvoir said: one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (through culture), but rather: I am born a woman, but I must still become this woman that I am by nature.

This is really fundamental to her position, or at least to my engagement with her. She's not saying we are determined by our nature, our bodies, but rather that we must grow into them. Of course, she's still talking about 'the female' in the singular – but maybe as you say we can insist that within that there ranges of possibilities for different modes of femininity?

Being involved in this exchange with you means that I'm no longer sure that her work can sustain that reading. She is so determinedly focussing on just the relation between men and women. Well actually just women, since her discussion of how masculinity needs to be reconfigured in order not to repeat its current sins is limited to say the least – I think I've said that before. There's her whole discussion about men and women and language, for example. What do you think of that?!

I find her discussion of the different ways men and women use language persuasive and funny in a 'men are from venus women are from mars' kind of way (or was it the other way round?) And again, she's grounding her analysis of difference on the basis of a truth claim – not nature, this time, but science. Proper research. Again that gives me pause. But where she's moving towards in her interpretation of that research is a really good place, and one that we wanted to occupy when we started this conversation – a place where there can be communication between people who have an irreconcilable difference between them – simply that they are different, quite apart from all the other differences there are between us. A kind of communication where one is not assimilated by the other. That sounds good to me!

Ok, I think I'll stop there. Shall we talk about love next time?

Gillian

Hi Gillian,

I have to admit I liked the latter part of the book (but still performed a jig as I finished the final page!). This for me has been the most challenging response to write. I have not stuck closely to the book as I did in previous replies. This reply feels very personal, and 'mushy' (why do I think this bad??), particularly in the discussion of love!

I thought I would start this response with our 'irreconcilable differences'. To communicate without being reduced to 'the other' appears to be the message of 'I love to you' (hence the 'to', in place of 'I love you' which subsumes one partner into the other. 'To' maintains a distance thus allowing dialogue between two independent people). I really like the idea of taking this from the domain of (heterosexual) love and relationships and moving it to all dialogues/communications. (Although in Irigaray's terms it is more complex for us, as two women, to speak to each other ...). In particular, I find the respect Irigaray's arguments entail is really inspiring. The distance yet mutuality of 'You can help me become while remaining myself' (p. 112) is for me a brilliant way to consider relationships and friendships. Imagine if it was employed in other spheres, for example, in academic contexts. This would certainly offset encounters I have had in this job and help tackle attitudes I presumed had been sent to the history books! Do you think that for this chapter can/have we help/ed each other whilst retaining our individuality as we initially set out to do?

Moving to your response and the role of the body in the quote you cite, it seems Irigaray offers us the opportunity to consider how the 'sensitivity appropriate to our gender' is made but then removes it; 'there is no question of it being constructed in repudiation of one's philosophy' (p.107). Whilst, I agree that her arguments regarding men and women's use of language are convincing, I can't help questioning; what is 'appropriate' to 'our' gender? As you feel about the non-human theories that have emerged in recent years, I feel the same way about Irigaray's arguments- it appears very deterministic and universalising. Yet reading the final few chapters I wanted to engage with Irigaray outside her own heterosexual constraints. Moving beyond the dichotomisation of masculinity and femininity and outside the mere proliferation of these categories, could Irigaray's writings be used beyond the supposed dualism of men and women?

I really like Irigaray's discussion of listening, if we understand 'respective limits' (p. 117) individually, culturally, temporally or spatially and not just related to dichotomous genders/sexes! I found myself enthusiastic about the idea of listening but not presuming to know:

*'I am listening to you is to listen to your words as something unique, irreducible, especially to my own, as something new, as yet unknown.'* (p. 116)

Imagine if we all listened to each other in this way. In a way that does not look to subsume, critique and disregard. Would it create a different type of dialogue? I suppose this would be a critique of my engagement with Irigaray to this point. Have I attempted to subsume her work by 'working with her ideas'? Or in the (re)working can we 'become' without subsuming the author or being incorporated ourselves? I would be interested to hear what you think.

Irigaray's discussion of love was also really interesting and I really liked the idea of helping someone 'become' along with the fluid possibilities of love and relationships:

*'(T)he existing world... should not be considered complete, already revealed or made manifest. ... (T)he world must not be sealed already, it must still be open, the future not dictated by the past.'* (p. 117)

Love, that complex and multifarious concept, has been very unsettling to consider in this supportive yet nonetheless academic context! When I first read your response I wondered what I

could possibly say about love. Although as a daughter I am involved in the mother-daughter love Irigaray mentions, I am excluded from the other types of love she espouses. In the chapters that excited and interested me I was disappointed to read that young girls 'still dream' (apparently) 'of sharing carnal and spiritual love with a male lover (or first of all with a female lover, in some cases)' (p. 131). Irigaray (again) dismisses my experiences of romantic love as both rare and immature.

Neither does Irigaray address my current position in 'a thing called love'. The complexities (and excitements) of 'falling' in love are bypassed as she moves to issues of longevity, commitment and compatible intentionalities (p.112). What is not considered is that this process may be complicated, hard work and potentially unsuccessful. Perhaps the complexities (and spatialities) of these processes need further consideration in an era of speed dating, city living, careerism, consumerism, one night stands, nightclubs and 'pulling'? If the practices and places of 'love' are not dictated, maybe the processes of 'finding' are also not, as Irigaray has put it, 'sealed already' (p. 117)? Although Irigaray does mention speaking before 'carnal acts' (p. 123), could we consider 'finding' as part of our becoming? Is it possible to question, as certain feminists have, the need to find *someone*, the need to be two or, in Irigaray's terms, the need for 'you' to 'help me become' (p. 112)? What do you think?!

Whilst offering us the possibility of 'governing love' Irigaray does not engage with love outside her rigid heterosexual frame but I am sure I have ranted about this enough! On a final note, however, I wanted to proliferate the possibilities of love, for example love for friends, knowledge, work (!), pets, landscapes, pictures, places, possessions and so on. At the Women in Geography Study Group weekend the prospect of considering love was thought-provoking. It is a subject that we encounter daily and that can assume a huge importance in our everyday lives but is rarely discussed in academic theory about our daily practices. Isn't it interesting that we discuss emotions, talk about sexuality (and sex in some cases) but very rarely about love? Is it taboo, another topic that is not 'real' geography, or perhaps as I have found writing this response, daunting and personal?!

After my last marathon effort I think I had better leave it there. I am dubious about concluding with clear or firm answers. I think the processes of writing these letters documented a dialogue that I hope will be ongoing, although I am excited and nervous about how 'we' will be read. I have really enjoyed engaging with (to?) you through Irigaray. I look forward to your final response and hearing what you think about love, relationships and academia!

Kath

Hi Kath.

I think we've agreed that this should be our final exchange – and I'm resisting the temptation to try and sum anything up! So I'll start with a response to your last letter, which is to say that I am really glad you liked the last part of *I Love To You*. I find the first part difficult, not only (and more so now) for the reasons you would suggest, but also for all that stuff about Hegel and so on – too obscure for me. But the last part is really wonderful, it just shines with a sense of an alternative mode of being.

There's something about doing this in letter form – and about taking our time over it, which wasn't planned, was it! – which corresponds to that mediating 'to'. Letters take a while to compose (although I haven't drafted and redrafted them – only twiddled with bits here and there), and I guess we've both read and re-read each other's and our own over a period of months. That time and space between us produces a certain kind of intervention that I think has been good for this

process of discussion. I've read your letters and mulled them over and re-read them, singly and together, and they're not directly you either, are they, we've both talked about the limits of what we can say in letters, in letters that we think might be published, so the letter form itself is another mediation.

I suppose the question this exchange has distilled for me is whether Irigaray's ability to theorise that alternative way of relating actually depends on her heterosexism or not. Teresa de Lauretis somewhere uses a distinction I've always found helpful when working with writers whose usefulness for feminism isn't clear. She uses it in relation to Foucault, I think. Foucault famously never directly discussed the production of gendered subjectivities, and de Lauretis asks, is this an absence of omission or commission? That is, is it just a kind of oversight, that his theoretical tools can be used by others to rectify, or is it actually fundamental to how his conceptual edifice is built? Is it incidental or fundamental? So, in Irigaray's case, is her heterosexism incidental or fundamental to her vision of loving to you? For me, the answer is that it's incidental, and I think I can say that for two reasons now. Firstly, I return to my earlier justification that, in describing this new kind of relationality, she is not depending on sexual difference as it is currently constituted. Although she does seem to be drawing on some characteristics of women's speech that she thinks exist currently but in hidden or distorted or unheard ways, she's clear that those characteristics are just potentialities now, potentialities that need development, nurturance, listeners, if they are to become a model for something new and very different. So she isn't depending on male-female differences in that sense. And secondly, your reading of her account of nature being at least two, and then multiplying the differences from which new modes of relating might be drawn, seems a really creative move. It's beyond Irigaray in one sense (since she does only focus on two), but it takes us to the same marvellous end point – an end point we both really like, or even love!

And talking of love and your suggestion that Irigaray's vision of straight relationships is, well, rather straight (a vision of true love?!), there's a brilliant essay in a book called *Intimacy* edited by Lauren Berlant on adultery, arguing that all the discussion now, all the self-help manuals and counselling and magazine discussion now, about working on relationships to make them successful, listening, living with difference, etc etc, is actually about producing docile emotional workers who tolerate their everyday unhappiness – as opposed to the crazy dissenters, those who have wild and out of control affairs, who live by the heart and not by capitalist rationality. I think you'd like it!

I'm not trying to assimilate your argument into my enthusiasm, really. You've really brought home to me the exclusions and erasures in Irigaray's work. I've listened to your anger and it's shifted my own relation to Irigaray's work. But something in me still really loves Irigaray's sense of something totally new being possible, but something new that has its traces in what women – not men – are doing now. Although I think it produces some conceptual problems for her (as I've noted earlier), I do like her uninterest in men! It's a refreshing change to read someone so focussed on women.

I'm going to stop here. But thank you for this exchange.