
Love's travels & traces: the 'impossible' politics of Luce Irigaray

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Recognizing you gives me measure
(Irigaray, 2000: 15)

*The point is not to stay caught in that moment of bewilderment or enchantment:
that would only reinscribe difference as an exotic, fetishized or denied quality*
(Probyn, 2003: 298)

To trace the recursive influences of Irigaray on my life and research is an act of recognition that measures both how theory travels through space-time and how our bio-geographies are imbricated in those travels. Irigaray (particularly in recent work, see 1996; 2000) re-tells a love story in order to exercise her philosophy of sexual difference. In a myriad of ways, love re-told offers a suitable vantage point from which to think through the spatialities of subjectivity, gender, and emotion. Love enacted as a politics of (im)possibility blurs mental and visceral experience, moving us beyond the everyday metaphysics of mind versus body to a more complex and intersubjective reading. This move to a certain porosity does not serve to eliminate difference. Rather, Irigaray's philosophy depends on mobile and gendered subjectivities that are always only *autonomous-in-relation-to*. That is, 'I'/she' cannot be reducible to 'you'/he', but 'we' need the intersubjective movement between us to recognize the fundamental value of our difference (Irigaray, 2000: 35). This is more than simply a theoretical manoeuvre, or wordplay; instead, Irigaray invites us to consider what takes place as we feel our way through our worldly encounters. Her insistence on this feminist geography can be read as what Elspeth Probyn (2003) has called the 'spatial imperative' of subjectivity.

Tracing Irigaray

In Irigaray's philosophy, understanding what it means 'to be' requires acknowledging the value of sexual difference. For decades, Irigaray has been committed to a project of demonstrating such difference in resistance to the veneer of sameness that permeates western philosophy (see Rose, 1993). In this process, she has signaled (through her studies of language) the ways in which the feminine is unspoken and has sought to write into this silence. I encountered Irigaray first through *The Sex which is Not One*. This writing was different from anything I had read before, and read today, it still strikes me with all the dramatic abundance and unabashed eroticism that marks *l'écriture féminine*:

She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness.... Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with readymade grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself. She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain (Irigaray, 1993b: 353).

Such words inspired and reassured. I admired her freedom not just in the content of her work, but in her presentation. Although Irigaray has published many books that line academic shelves, a glance to the back of one of her texts reveals a notable absence:

there is no bibliography. This is not to say that Irigaray doesn't cite other authors – she does, sometimes in footnotes and sometimes in endnotes – but, she does so much less than contemporary scholarship expects. This unapologetic dispensing with the obligatory list of credentials, I think, highlights her originality and passionate commitment to making space for women by truly challenging the strictures of the masculinist philosophical world. Such transformation is a part of Irigaray's overarching life project (and, she claims, the most important question of our time¹): to develop an impossible philosophy of sexual difference. It is this stance that has engendered the most criticism. In her efforts to elucidate sexual difference, she is frequently read, and I would argue misread, as essentialist, utopian and/or heterosexist. I won't review the various rebuttals to these charges here (for summaries of and responses to Irigaray's body of work see Deutscher 2002, Irigaray & Whitford 1991, Gingrich-Philbrook 2001; and for a feminist analysis of essentialism see Fuss 1990). In sum, Irigaray's particular work is to not to essentialize but to displace the body-bound definitions of women by reimagining them through metaphor – that is, she attempts to rework the use of the symbolic (language, speech) which has cast women oppositionally as purely biological, emotional, and weak and instead seeks to positively re-articulate the relationship between women and language. She casts this reworking in the realm of the impossible – this is because it can only be paradoxical to make use of a language within which women do not feature to describe their realities:

[I]nstead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality....This accounts for the fact that women find it so difficult to speak and be heard as women. They are excluded and denied by the patriarchal linguistic order. They cannot be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner (Irigaray, 1993a: 20).

While women might be abstract in language, women's subjectivities are not. Elspeth Probyn's precise words argue the point: "subjectivities are not abstract entities; they are always conducted *in situ*" (2003: 293). While Irigaray has emphasized language, she does not dismiss the body, the spaces of bodies, and/or their relations in spaces of encounter; indeed, her understanding of the body as sexuate is particularly critical and I return to this momentarily.² Nor does her emphasis on language prevent her from a practical application of her politics. While Irigaray has done significant work to shift meanings within the symbolic order, she has also explicitly and simultaneously sought to practice a realizable politics. This integrated approach has resulted in her production of both poetic texts and practical suggestions, for example for a reworking of the French legislative framework.

Love's (im)possibility

When we first met to discuss this Women and Geography Study Group project some fifteen years after my first encounter with Irigaray, I had picked up her work again and this time I had love on my mind. I was reading and thinking through feminist, philosophical and sociological visions/versions of love, and, not insignificantly, I was also in love. Irigaray's meditation on this most personal of relations in *I Love to You* seemed a serendipitous gathering of these forces. This work, I mused, was a platform from which to move on the stale subject-object debates, a means to puzzle out the gendering and spatialities of emotions more generally, and a feminist ethical map for how to conduct my own love relationships. Love, Irigaray argues in *I Love to You*, is a question we need to answer because congealed within our contemporary version of love is a statement of subjugation. To parse the conventional phrase, 'I love you', is to expose love as that which seeks 'you' as an object. Love, in this paradigm, signals the intent to possess within an 'affective economy'³:

Whether it is a question of our bodies or our words, we remain subject to the power or hierarchy of the one who possesses, of the one who has more or less – knowledge or sex as well as wealth – of the one who can give or make some thing, in an economy of relations (especially amorous ones) subordinate to the object, to objects, to having. (Irigaray and Martin, 1996: 129-30).

Irigaray transforms 'I love you' into 'I love to you' in order to discourage this element of subjugation and to encourage a respectful offering, a move towards a 'syntax of communication' (1996: 113). By incorporating 'to' and transforming the transitive (a verb that requires an object) to the intransitive (a verb that does not), she argues that an intersubjective relationship can be maintained between 'I' and 'you' such that neither party is possessing or possessed: "The being is thus never the whole and is always separate (from) inasmuch as it is a function of gender. It cannot, therefore, be in a state of fusion, either in childhood or in love" (1996: 107). This maintenance of *autonomy-in-relation-to* is central to Irigaray's theorizing of gender and self.

Intersubjectivities: Entre-Nous

The attention to childhood, and particularly the material process of becoming child, is an explicit concern within Irigaray's psychoanalytically inspired philosophy and the basis for her theorizing of intersubjectivity. In *Je Tu Nous: A culture of difference* (1993), Irigaray recounts her conversation with a biology teacher, Helene Rouch. Their subject is the placenta and the mediating role this plays in the relationship between the maternal body and the uterus. According to Rouch, the placenta functions both as a means of exchange and as a means of creating space between these two entities. That is, it allows for a conversation of sorts, fostering a 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1971) for dialogue. Winnicott, a paediatrician and child psychologist, coined the term 'potential space' to describe a hypothetical third area of human life that is "neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality" (1971: 110). This is the paradoxical place where separation between mother and infant can be possible but ultimately does not occur and, in this way, the foundation for an infant's trust relationship with her/his mother is laid down. The potential space "negat[es] the idea of space and separation between the baby and the mother, and all developments derived from this phenomenon" (Winnicott, 1971: 110). For Rouch and Irigaray this possibility implies an interuterine existence of self and other. Rouch explains:

...the placenta isn't some sort of automatic protection system, which would suppress all the mother's reaction by preventing it from recognizing the embryo-fetus as other. On the contrary, there has to be a recognition of the other, of the non-self, by the mother, [...] in order for placental factors to be produced. The difference between the 'self' and other is, so to speak, continuously negotiated (Rouch in Irigaray, 1993a: 41).

This re-interpretation of the child-to-be's autonomy (an autonomy-in-relation-to) from within the mother/maternal body is radically different from, for example, the traditional Freudian psychoanalytic imaginary which accords the moment of birth with traumatic properties, a tearing away, a violent separation in order to create a discrete self. It is also different from another psychoanalytic version of child differentiation: the Lacanian mirror stage, where the child becomes aware of a coherent other (its reflected image), at a very specific point in its early development.⁴ Instead, Rouch and Irigaray, offer a re-interpretation of an originary self-other relationship. Critically, their understanding comes through a valuing of the maternal. Within some contemporary psychoanalytic thought, it is acknowledged that such feminist refiguring, emphasising the mother's significance in the development of mind, has set the scene for the emergence of the intersubjective perspective.⁵ The significance of this refiguring is the suggestion of the (im)possibility of a difference which is dependent solely on a postnatal, oedipal moment. Rather, difference, alterity, is conceived of from the start.

Central to Irigaray's reworking of the symbolic order then, is her insistence that bodies are sexuate, and as such gender is always two, irreducible to one. Because of this basic alterity, subjectivity is then also irreducible to one. This is in contradistinction to Western philosophies which posit a singular subject; instead, Irigaray argues for intersubjectivity -- a relational reading of subjectivity which expressly accounts for 'the dimension of gender as a means capable of protecting alterity' (2000: 53). That is, by emphasizing gender *as* difference (versus same and other), difference is defended and as such can be productive instead of reductive. The emphasis on gender as relational is similarly key to her argument, a conclusion Donna Haraway also reaches, if from a very different theoretical starting point:

Gender is always a relationship, not a performed category of beings or a possession that one can have. Gender does not pertain more to women than to men. Gender is the relation between variously constituted categories of men and women (and variously arrayed tropes), differentiated by nation, generation, class, lineage, colour, and much else (Haraway, 1997: 28).

Why do two feminist scholars as diverse as Haraway and Irigaray wish to argue for relationality? Irigaray supplies a possible answer: "Belonging to a gender allows me to realize, in me, for me - and equally towards the other - a dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity which escapes the dichotomy between subject and object" (2000: 21). Irigaray's goal is not to suggest that men and women necessarily have different subjectivities, but that our cultural order has made it impossible that they could (see Deutscher, 2002: 12) and that we are therefore incapable of thinking of the process of sharing between two; at the same time, we are paradoxically, unavoidably sharing between two in order to experience gender (a subjectivity created only in relation to). Irigaray's impulse is to go the heart of this impossibility and concentrate her energies there.

Spatial Imperatives & Feminist Geography

This reconceiving of self/other is an example of precisely the type of radical transformation that Irigaray engages in so effectively. It is through such daring revisioning of the symbolic domain, while demonstrating its inseparability from the material, that she has so deeply influenced feminist thought and action. She shows the way towards a feminist politics that makes use of difference, not as the other of the same (i.e. binary oppositions such as 'theory/practice' and 'subject/object) but as relational, intersubjective. This has been a vital argument for feminism because women are otherwise held to the knife-edge of otherness. If we are body, we cannot be mind. (As A.S. Byatt (2004) recently pointed out in an essay on feeling brains and thinking bodies, this neatly eliminates the possibility of an intellectual woman). If we are black, we cannot be white. If we are emotion, we cannot be reason. Irigaray's politics do not attempt to suppress or dismiss polarities, but do seek to examine the 'communicative relationship'⁶ that exists between such polarities. There is a resonance with Adrienne Rich's time-honoured idea of a lesbian continuum (Rich, 1981). Such approaches maintain tensions while acknowledging difference (see also Bondi and Davidson, 2003 as they 'trouble' the place of gender on a similar premise). It is an attempt to sustain an energetics that is based on recharging, as Irigaray argues in *I Love To You* (1996: 137), versus the (Freudian and masculinist) notion of an energetics based on discharge (see Benjamin, 1998: 26).

As a feminist geographer, I seek to consider the way that we produce and are produced by our subjective encounters in space. The recognition of difference is fundamental to the 'spatial imperative' of subjectivity:

Emphasizing the absolute spatial nature of the processes of subjectivity should also remind us of where and how we are interpellated. Instead of plastering over those differences, we need to stop and address them. Sometimes that stopping will result in silence. And that slash between dis/connections should indicate a pause -- a moment of non-recognition that may be expressed as simply as 'wow, you really are different from me'. The point is not to stay caught in that moment of bewilderment or enchantment: that would only reinscribe difference as an exotic, fetishized or denied quality" (Probyn, 2003: 298).

It is an (im)possible affair: to recognize without being mired in that recognition. To measure the self by moving through other's spaces. As Probyn points out, we see our selves as a very private project, but in fact our subjectivities are intensely communal, 'a public affair' (2003: 290). We cannot have it otherwise. Love is one such manifestation of this publicly private state. Irigaray writes in an essay on women's health: "Love may perhaps require secrecy, but it also needs culture and a social context....Such progress is necessary for the development of the human order" (Irigaray, 1993a: 104). Thinking

through love, feeling our way in or out of all love's guises, is a project that feminist geography stands to learn from.

Irigaray's focus on intersubjectivity is not naively presuming an as yet undiscovered harmony in a unified world, but it is about recognizing the elastic links between us (i.e. the relations *between* difference, difference *as* relationship). This requires a movement beyond notions of 'human entity' as simply the bounded thinking subject. As Donna Haraway remarks: "Oddly, embedded relationality is the prophylaxis for both relativism and transcendence. Nothing comes without its world, so trying to know those worlds is crucial" (Haraway, 1997: 37). Intersubjectivity specifically acknowledges the relational nature of subjectivity. Love's travels, an emotion in motion that traces a movement between us, is a means to find our way through the intersubjective, shared spaces of contemporary life. Irigaray, in her continual push to exceed the possible, to dwell within the impossible, in her efforts to know the worlds of this particular culture, offers notes towards transformation, towards cultural change, a critical process within the various (personal and political) projects of feminism.

Acknowledgements.

This writing comes out of my Ph.D research, funded by a Commonwealth Scholarship at the University of Edinburgh. I thank Kristi Ozero for a first and important read of this paper, as well as Liz Bondi, Jane Jacobs, and my WGSG colleagues for their subsequent and helpful comments, encouragement and support. I also thank the Feminist Geography Reading Group at Edinburgh for providing a thoughtful and dynamic forum for exercising and sharing ideas.

Finally, this paper is for all those I seek to *love to*...

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1 In "The Neglect of Female Genealogies" (Irigaray, 1993a: 15).

2 Probyn notes that the role of feminist work on the body has broadened our knowledge about how subjectivities work: "The body then becomes a site for the production of knowledge, feelings, emotions and history, all of which are central to subjectivity. As we'll see, the body cannot be thought of as a contained entity; it is in constant contact with others. This then provides the basis for considering subjectivity as a relational matter" (2003: 290).

3 Sarah Ahmed argues: "emotions do not reside in a given subject or object. Emotions are economic; they circulate between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" (Ahmed, 2002: 2). While Ahmed acknowledges the influence of psychoanalysis and her debt to Lacan is evident, she makes this term her own, distinguishing her argument from Lacan (and from Freud) by refusing a return to the subject: "This is extremely important: it suggests that the sideways, forwards and backwards movement of affective economies is not contained within the contours of a subject, but moves across or between subjects, objects, signs and others, which themselves are not locatable or found within the present. The unconscious is hence not the unconscious of a subject, but the failure of presence – or the failure 'to be' in the present - that constitutes the relationality of subject, objects, signs and others" (Ahmed, 2002: 3).

4 Jacques Lacan theorized that between 6 and 18 months, children see themselves in a mirror or an equivalent and thus identify themselves with this visibly unified subject. The paradox is that the moment of recognition is also a moment of misrecognition as the child sees something which is 'other' to its self. For further discussion of Lacan's theories, see David Macey's (1994) *Introduction to Lacan's The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* or Liz Bondi's (1999) entry on Lacanian Theory in the *Feminist Glossary of Human Geography*.

5 Jessica Benjamin writes: "The idea that the self-other dialogue is the fundamental basis for the development of mind has evolved in tandem with our revaluing of the early maternal dyad, its affective and communicative possibilities. In the classical psychoanalytic emphasis on the father, the mother's work in maintaining and producing life was taken for granted, rather than represented, and so the alienation of the subject from that which created and maintained 'his' life was reproduced" (Benjamin, 1998: xv). She emphasizes then, the importance of the mother in the constitution of the mind even as the mother's subjectivity is unrepresented.

⁶ Writing of the communicative relationship, Benjamin describes it as a 'dialogue that recognizes the other' (1998: xv). Ultimately, this dialogue leads not to synthesis, but to difference (Benjamin, 1998: 108).