Carnal Difference

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Abstract:
In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray suggests that “sexual difference … could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through.” Thinking through the issue of sexual difference, she continues, would signal the beginning of a newly fertile and creative era, “the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics” (1993a: 5). Irigaray’s insistence on sexual difference has been justifiably problematic for many of her readers, particularly in relation to arguments for the cultural and historical performativity of gender and sexuality. Irigaray explicitly states, however, that she is “not advocating a return to a more repressive, moralising conception of sexuality. On the contrary, what we need is to work out an art of the sexual, a sexed culture” (1993: 3)

This paper asks: is it possible to accept Irigaray’s call for a differently sexed culture without imposing a proper, real or natural gender or sexual identity? Might it be possible to speculate differently about sexual difference, utilising the ingredients that lie within Irigaray’s work? In answer, I propose *carnal difference* as a means for moving beyond sexual difference. Carnal difference formulates difference in erotic terms by emphasising the irreducibility of bodies, and the inability of one to entirely consume or incorporate the other in a carnal encounter or exchange. This paper not only explicates a theoretical model for carnal difference; it also attempts to put into practice a *poetics* of carnal difference. This is an exploratory, experimental and speculative philosophy that requires a poetic logic, not an analytical one, and so privileges a mode of writing that is subjective and playful. The intention is to demonstrate that the philosophical inconsistencies and ambiguities of carnal difference might be meaningful and productive.
Carnal Difference

Irigaray begins *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* with the statement: “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age… Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through” (1993a: 5). Thinking through sexual difference, she continues, would signal the beginning of a newly fertile and creative era, “the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics” (1993a: 5). In *I Love to You*, she suggests that a refusal to think through sexual difference would prove a “deadly business” (1996: 37). Sexual difference, Irigaray argues, manifests as an irreducible difference between men and women. She writes: “I will never be in a man’s place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other — they are irreducible one to the other … The other who is forever unknowable to me is the one who differs from me sexually” (1993a: 13).

In much of her work, Irigaray attempts to establish sexual difference as a positive to counter masculine constructions of the feminine. In *Je, Tu, Nous* for example, she argues that within patriarchal culture there is only one gender, whereas sexual difference offers at least two (1993c: 20). In *I Love to You*, Irigaray describes sexual difference as universal, natural, immediate and vital. Without sexual difference, she argues, there will be no continuation of humanity. It is worth noting that Irigaray conceives of sexual difference in two distinct ways. Firstly, sexual difference refers to the construction, and sublimation, of the feminine in relation to the masculine. Secondly, Irigaray identifies sexual difference as an ethics or a poetics that is not yet realised, “the opening-up of a period of History yet to come” (1996: 57). These two distinct conceptions of sexual difference, meet in *Je, Tu, Nous* when Irigaray writes: “Women’s exploitation is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference” (1993c: 12). In this way, Irigaray’s position on irreducible difference can be read as a strategic one: before we can consider beyond the genders, we must rethink between them. Notwithstanding, Irigaray’s statements on the primacy of sexual difference are forthright. In *I Love to You*, she writes:

> The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem … Sexual difference probably represents the most universal question we can address. Our era is faced with the task of dealing with this issue, because across the whole world, there are, there are only, men and women (1996: 47).

The emphatic phrase *nothing else* negates the value of sexual difference as a model for plurality, an interpretation that gains credence when sexual difference is read in relation to Irigaray’s construction of feminine subjectivity as multiple. The potential of sexual difference is further undermined when, in response to alternative constructions of the subjectivity of gender and of sex, Irigaray refers to those who “would like to wipe out [sexual] difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex.” Her response to this is that this “opiate of the masses … annihilates the other” and is a reduction to “identity, equality and sameness, especially between man and woman” (1996: 61-2). Despite the bullishness
of such sentiments, and acknowledging the resistances Irigaray’s work offers to the readings I want to make, this paper asks whether it possible to accept Irigaray’s call for a differently sexed culture – a new poetics of sexual difference — without the imposition of a proper, a real or a natural gender or sexual identity? Might it be possible to speculate differently about the deadly business sexual difference, utilising ingredients that lie within Irigaray’s work?

Irigaray’s insistence on sexual difference in such limiting terms has been justifiably problematic for many of her readers, particularly in relation to arguments for the cultural and historical performativity of gender and sexuality. Carolyn Burke refers to the “bafflement, exclusion or antagonism” Irigaray’s writing provokes (1994: 249). Anecdotally, Penelope Deutscher comments on the dismissals she encounters: “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 got out of Irigaray these days” (1996: 7). Margaret Whitford suggests that Irigaray has frequently been “dismissed without much understanding” (1991: 3). Judith Butler acknowledges that “the largeness and speculative character of Luce Irigaray’s claims have always put me a bit on edge” (1994, 149). Deutscher writes of the pleasure in getting immersed in Irigaray’s concepts, but finds “that Irigaray’s tone and style leave the reader on edge, left with a kind of ‘Irigaray anxiety’” (1996: 6-7). In ‘Transforming Sacrifice’, Anne Caldwell writes:

Irigaray's proposals will never appeal to those who wish to move beyond gender. She does, however, supply strategies and starting points for those who do wish to retain some conception of a feminine identity, a desire that often persists in the everyday lives of women … Irigaray's work addresses women who do not wish to overcome gender, but to enjoy their identity as women without being oppressed because of it (2002: 30).

Penelope Ingram argues that it is clear that Irigaray is writing exclusively of “the heterosexual couple” (2000, 56). Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell similarly believe that Irigaray privileges heterosexuality, reducing difference to the model of the heterosexual couple (in an interview with Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, 1998b, 19). Abigail Bray reads Irigaray’s construction of sexual difference as prescriptive and normative, arguing that Irigaray reduces humanity to two sexes who are “stereotypical heterosexuals” (2001, 315). To close down alternate readings, Bray writes: “While her influence has waned somewhat, one still runs the risk of appearing dull, of not appreciating the rhetorical complexity of her dense metaphysical allusions, if one asks basic questions of her work (2001: 317).”

Mary Beth Mader concurs with the view that the sexual act in Irigaray’s writing is most commonly heterosexual, but responds more thoughtfully with a close reading of Sexes and Genealogies. She notes that there is some ambiguity in the way in Irigaray’s work which, at times, demonstrates “nuanced, complex and illuminating thought on the topic of sexuality” (2003: 371). Mader breaks down what it means to “have a sex” within Irigaray’s model of sexual difference into three parts: gender differences in modes of making love, birthing and feeding. To illustrate this summary, Mader offers two brief examples. In an interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, Irigaray describes sexual difference in the mother/child relation:
He’s a little boy. He has come out of a woman who is different from him. He himself will never be able to engender, to give birth. He is therefore in a space of unfathomable mystery … For the little girl it's entirely different. She's a little woman born of another woman. She is able to engender like her mother; thus, she has a sort of jubilation in being herself and in playing with herself (1996).

And in Sexes and Genealogies: “The woman … does not have to distance herself from her mother as [the man] does: through a yes and especially a no, a near or far, an inside as opposed to an outside, in order to discover her sex” (1993b: 18). Mader’s response to the dualism of inside, pertaining to the feminine, or outside, pertaining to the masculine is incredulity: “It is astonishing to have to point out that routinely men and women enter each other in making love; one would have to exclude from lovemaking the human kiss, among other common favourites, in order to think otherwise” (2003: 371). Mader’s point is worth making, but in my reading of Irigaray here, the sexual difference that is emphasised is not that between the man and the woman so much as that between the women and her mother. Irigaray continues (and Mader offers her own translation of Irigaray’s text here in order to include sentences omitted from the English version): “[The woman] finds herself faced with a wholly other problem. She must be able to identify with her mother as a woman in order to accede to her sexuality. She must be or become a woman like her mother and, at the same time, be capable of differentiating herself from her mother” (Irigaray in Mader 2003: 369). Indeed, elsewhere in her work, Irigaray challenges the identification of the feminine with the internal. In This Sex, to offer just one example, she writes: “We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment by our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment” (1985: 209-10).

In ‘The Use and Abuse of ‘Violence’ in Feminist Theory’, Ann V. Murphy argues that Irigaray enacts “violence against differently gendered or sexed subjects in the precedence she affords sexual difference” (2005: 1). Murphy characterises Irigaray’s position on discourses of gender identification, performativity, androgyny and the neuter as spiteful, pernicious, alarmist, weird and worrisome. Although framed in hyperbole – to which Butler might respond that “sometimes a hyperbolic rejoinder is necessary when a given injury has remained unspoken for too long” (1993: 37) - Murphy raises an important question: has Irigaray shifted her philosophy of sexual difference from subversive mimesis to prescriptive politicking? Murphy acknowledges Irigaray’s explicit statement that she is “not advocating a return to a more repressive, moralising conception of sexuality. On the contrary, what we need is to work out an art of the sexual, a sexed culture” (1993b: 3), but wonders whether this mood infects her work nevertheless. It is my contention, however, that Irigaray’s work is speculative rather than prescriptive: she is attempting to imagine how a new poetics (or a sexed culture) might operate.

In ‘Sexual Difference as a Model’, Gail Schwab argues against accusation of heterosexism in Irigaray’s philosophy. In her reading, sexual difference constructs the subject in the negative; to acknowledge a sexed identity is to recognise that one is ‘not all’. In other words, sexual difference affirms alterity and understands subjectivity as at least two. For Schwab, sexual difference “is not about predetermined, stereotypical … identities for heterosexual couples;” it offers, rather, a
model for ethical relations in general, “between men and men, between women and women and between women and men … [a] true intersubjectivity” (1998, 82). Cheah and Grosz make a similar point when they argue that sexual difference is not a prescriptive statement on individual sexual preference or lifestyle, but instead an argument pertaining to the condition of human life (1998a, 12).

The interpretation of Irigaray’s work as unambiguously critical of performative gender identities is paradoxical, given her early work on disrupting the ‘natural’ sexual identity of women as passive and obliging props for male sexuality (1985, 25). In *This Sex Which is Not One*, for example, she writes: “Female sexuality has always been conceptualised on the basis of masculine parameters … Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies” (1985, 23-5). Irigaray challenges this construction by articulating women’s polymorphous perversity through the auto-erotic touching of her vaginal lips. She writes: “Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two pairs of lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two — but not divisible into one(s) — that caress each other” (1985, 24).

This multiple model of female sexuality offers a counter to Alison Stone’s reading of Irigaray’s sexual difference as dualist and heterosexist. Curiously, she criticises Irigaray for “overlooking … the natural multiplicity of forces and capacities [within each of our bodies] such that we are never simply sexually specific” (2006: 1). Her solution is to synthesis Irigaray’s sexual difference with Butler’s model of performativity and corporeal multiplicity, which I would suggest is a misdirected argument, given that Irigaray has vehemently argued for the multiplicity of feminine sexuality. There are complex arguments to be made in relation to sexual difference by reading Irigaray and Butler together — indeed, many are signposted by Butler herself in *Bodies That Matter* — including finding ways to use the term sexual difference, like ‘women’ and ‘feminine,’ “tactically even as one is … used and positioned by it” and critically “to engage – take stock of, and become transformed by – the exclusions that put it into play” (1993: 29). Carnal difference, I will argue, provides an opportunity to counter both the contradictory exclusions of sexual difference within Irigaray’s own work, and readings of it that reduce its possibilities to a limiting specificity.

In *Transformations*, Drucilla Cornell explains her use of the phrase sexual difference, which corresponds with a more enabling interpretation:

> I use the phrase ‘sexual difference’ because gender, even if it operates as a system, divides us into male and female and, thus, is too limited a conception of our lives as sexuate beings … I use the phrase because it returns us to the issue of ‘sex’ not as biological body parts, but as sexuality, as sexuality is central to conceptions of how radical social change can truly take place” (1993, 5).

Debra Bergoffen neatly articulates Irigaray’s position on sexual difference as “the question of the couple” (2007, 152). But who is the couple in Irigaray’s writing? Consider this passage from the end of *This Sex Which Is Not One*:
We are luminous. Neither one nor two … In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn’t that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one … I love you: our lips cannot separate to let just one word pass. A single word that would say “you,” or “me.” Or “equals”; she who loves, she who is loved … I love you who are neither mother (forgive me, mother, I prefer a woman) nor sister. Neither daughter nor son … What need have I for husband or wife, for family, persona, role, function? … I love you, your body, here and now. I/ you touch you/ me, that’s quite enough for us to feel alive” (1985: 207-209).

In this extract, ‘I’ and ‘you’ are not fixed or distinct bodies, genders, or identities. The couples that Irigaray evokes here include a multiple self, lovers (gender unspecified), or a placental relation between mother and unborn child. Unlike the statements on sexual difference quoted at the beginning of this paper, this passage is marked by ambiguity and undecidability.

Bergoffen writes that “to take up Irigaray’s question of the sexual difference is to take up the challenge of following the forked roads of her thought” (2007: 172). Irigaray’s writing is difficult. Sentences are frequently left incomplete as if half-heard; grammar and syntax do not follow the rigid guidelines one has come to expect; ideas are fragmentary, elliptical, playful; her styles are various, multiple, and changeable, seemingly mid-sentence; her prose is called ‘poetry’; her allusions en passant. To illustrate in This Sex Which is Not One, she writes:

Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand … One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them (1985: 29).

As Grosz says, “the moment one feels relatively confident about what [Irigaray] means in one context, one loses grasp of other related passages which seemed comprehensible when they were read” (1989: 101). She invites contradictory readings; Grosz continues: “no two readings, even by the same reader, are identical” (Grosz, 1989, 102).

In light of Irigaray’s contradictions, sexual difference need not be conceived as an exclusively heterosexual relation nor a singularly gendered identity; rather, it is a philosophy that is posited on the more than one, the notion of the in between, and a movement beyond the structures that currently operate. Irigaray’s model of difference offers a conception of subjectivity as at least two. In Democracy Begins Between Two, she writes: “We have to rethink the model of subjectivity which has served for centuries … so that we can abandon a model of a single and singular subject altogether. This does not mean that the one of the subject can become many … but that the subject is at least two, man and woman” (2000: 4). The ‘at least’ two of the subject echoes the multiplicity of feminine subjectivity — already two, and not divisible into ones — that is articulated in This Sex Which Is Not One. The frameworks within which Irigaray imagines being two — carnal acts of love, bodily thresholds, textual blurrings of identity — emphasise the potential plurality and
multiplicity of this model.

Reading Irigaray’s *Elemental Passions*, Cecilia Sjöholm argues that sexual difference becomes “a form of plurality which announces itself as overflow and threat of boundaries” (2000: 93). In *Elemental Passions*, a book which offers (to quote Irigaray) “some fragments from a woman’s voyage as she goes in search of her identity in love”, she writes:

> Your skin and mine, yes. But mine goes on touching itself indefinitely, from the inside. Secreting a flow which brings the sides together. From which side does that liquid come? One or the other? Both? So which is one and which is the other in that production? Neither? Yet it exists. Where does it come from? From both. It flows between. Not held or held back by a source. The source already rises from the two caressing (1992: 15).

This builds on Irigaray’s conception of women’s two sets of lips, and extends it to the couple. In the above passage from *Elemental Passions*, the ‘both’ and the ‘two caressing’ refer to the two sides of the passage of the vagina, extending from the lips. But in an alternate reading, the flow between the two suggests a loving union where the “solidity of the erection” — to use the phrase Irigaray continues with — and the paternal possibilities of sperm are no more valuable than the hospitality offered by the woman and the mingling of a flow between two (1992: 16). This echoes the transition in *This Sex Which is Not One*, from the violation of a woman’s lips to a coming together in body and language. In the beginning, a woman’s autoeroticism “is disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis.” By the end, these lips are speaking together — the morphology of woman has rubbed off on the man — “Between us, ‘hardness’ isn’t necessary. We know the contours of our bodies well enough to love fluidity” (1985: 215). This demonstrates a model of being two, with its origins in carnality, that recognises the difference between two subjects — nominally male and female, but modelled on the plurality of female sexuality. Such an approach emphasises what Rosi Braidotti refers to as the “trace” of the journey of sexual difference, rather than its arrival point, wherein lies the challenge of feminism to express “the in-between spaces, the transit-areas, the transitions and shifts which make up the nomadic itinerary” (2004: 162).

Focussing on the trace of sexual difference, and its multiple carnal inscriptions, I would like to propose carnal difference as a means for moving beyond prescriptive genders and sexualities. Carnality suggests a focus on the body and its pleasures, the material world, flesh, excess, and corporeality. It evokes the abjection of bodily fluids and eliminations, and the temporal physicality of sex and desire. Difference is formulated in erotic terms by referring to the irreducibility of bodies, the distinction between them, and the inability of one to entirely consume or incorporate the other in a carnal encounter or exchange. It emerges in embodied exchanges as various as reading and writing; a caress; pregnancy, labour, birth, and breastfeeding; and sexual and sensual pleasure.

Irigaray’s writings on sexual difference become a series of statements on the specific subjectivity of desire, in which the individual momentarily loses bodily integrity and
selfhood. Irigaray describes this erotic exchange in ‘Questions to Emmanuel Levinas’:

[Love is the] shared outpouring ... the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body’s solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons (de la dualité) becomes indistinct (1991: 180).

Carnal difference provides a terminology for the “new poetics” that Irigaray suggests emerges from thinking through sexual difference (1993a: 5). A poetics moves beyond logic and rhetoric to explore the intimacies and intricacies of language, affect, and the reading and writing exchange in an exploratory and experimental philosophy that invites speculation about subjectivity, corporeality, and difference. In a poetics of carnal difference, subjectivity is constituted through corporeal exchanges, and hovers on the threshold of bodily and intellectual being, where the binary oppositions of absence/presence, self/other, mind/body, active/passive tremble.

To recap Irigaray’s words:

The other who is forever unknowable to me is the one who differs from me sexually (1993a: 13).

Women’s exploitation is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference (1993c: 12).

She has a sort of jubilation in being herself and in playing with herself (1996).

I love you, your body, here and now. I/ you touch you/ me, that’s quite enough for us to feel alive (1985: 209).

Thinking through carnal difference enables an engagement with the politics of sexual difference, and challenges the limitations of Irigaray’s constructions of the other, by speculating on corporeality and difference without the imposition of a proper, real or natural gender or sexual identity.

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