

Always-Already Feminine – Thinking Alternative Creations of Feminine Subjectivities with Luce Irigaray

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In this text I elaborate the possibility of creating feminine subjectivities parting from one of Luce Irigaray's least known books: Passions élémentaires. I start by talking about style which in this book is inextricably linked to content. I then discuss different themes from Passions élémentaires and how they contribute to the creation of alternative femininities. In the last part of this text I assess relevant critiques of Irigaray's work.

Pourquoi m'extasier dans ton monde alors que, déjà, je vis ailleurs. (Irigaray 1982, 41)

Why seek ecstasy in your world when I already live elsewhere. (Irigaray 1992, 34)

Luce Irigaray lets us experience another world. A world that is not other, but ours. A world that is lost, forgotten, erased. She presents a universe that is not outer but already inside of us. A world that we have always carried at the inner depths of our being. In *Passions élémentaires*, Irigaray talks about the rediscovery of this world, where a woman, *I-woman*,¹ is walking alongside the memories of her own past, rediscovering a universe that has fallen into the untouchable oblivion of masculine thought. Irigaray tells us the story of a woman in search of her-self, an impossible being. For Irigaray, woman does not exist, but at the same time, she finds herself everywhere, in us. The/A woman exists in the same way as the roots of a flower exist: they are there but we cannot see them. *I-woman* in *Passions élémentaires* is singular in the same way as a root is singular, always-already attached to others, always-already rhizomatic.² In this text, we will follow *I-woman* in search of her-self through a number of images that reoccur in *Passions élémentaires*. I have used these images to discuss the possibility of creating alternative femininities, in order to elaborate a feminine transcendancy³ that is always-already located in between nature, body, and sky. I will start by discussing ways to approach *Passions élémentaires* in order to open up a discussion on the importance of style for feminist writing, a central theme throughout this text. I will then discuss how images of *nature* and *corporeality* allow us to elaborate a feminine subjectivity. In the last part of this essay, I will discuss how Irigaray's specific style of writing makes us think differently about the development of alternative feminine subjectivities. I argue that the alternative form elaborated in Irigaray's texts offers openness in regards to content; her writing deconstructs the boundaries between form and content, thus offering not only new ways of reading and writing, but also of being and of being-in-relation.

I. Ways of reading

I am reading *Passions élémentaires* again and again. Hélène Cixous said in her seminar at the Maison Heinrich Heine in the spring of 2013 that when you read, you do not think, you do not analyze. If you analyze, if you think, you are not reading. I am not thinking, I assure you. I am perceiving, feeling, reading.

When one writes, one does not think? “Are you writing, Anaïs?” I always say no. I call this breathing. I forget I write every day” (Nin 1996, 122). Hélène Cixous said in another session of the same seminar that she was always equally surprised when she heard Derrida talk about his own writing. He said that what he managed to put on paper was always only a small part of what he carried in his head. Cixous’s experiences were the opposite; her head is, she explained, always completely empty when she starts to write, her writing emerges while writing. It is thus the hand rather than the head that writes. It is our milk—the white ink of mother-milk, our tears, the moon, our bodies, the night—the black ink of the writing of Clarice Lispector—that constitutes our writing, rather than ideas, thoughts, our analysis.⁴

At first, impossible to write. I know only reading, perceiving, feeling. Cixous says in writing on Lispector: “*Maintenant je vais changer de ton, pour parler un peu plus froidement de cette étincelle divine*” (Cixous 1989, 128). “Now I’m going to change my tone, in order to talk in a more distant manner about this divine flash” (My translation). So will I. I sit down, I conform, I start to think. I think and I write, I thematize. I begin and I’ll begin again, still reading, always feeling.

1. Poetic-readings

Entends-moi, entends le silence. Ce dont je te parle n’est jamais ce dont je te parle mais autre chose. Capte cette chose qui m’échappe et dont pourtant je vis et je suis à la surface d’une obscurité brillante. (Lispector 1973, 25)

Listen to me, listen to the silence. What I’m saying to you is never what I’m saying to you, but something else. Understand that which escapes me, and of which I live, at the surface of a shining darkness. (My translation)

How does one read a text that resists classification? How does one resist classifying it? How does one stay faithful to a text while reading it? How does one stay close? The question of how to read is easily asked while reading a text that finds itself between disciplines. Reading Luce Irigaray’s book from 1982, *Passions élémentaires*, I ask myself this question continuously. *Passions élémentaires* is a poetic text: not to ruin its flow, I have read it poetically. I have thus not (only) read it as a theoretical text, but I have rather tried to follow its own rhythm while reading. I have engaged with this text as in conversation rather than having treated it as a passive object to be interpreted. Instead of imposing a traditional structure on this text, I have followed

the paths that this other universe offers; as write Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen, the authors of *Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray's Elemental Passions*:

The reader cannot simply 'consume' her books but is made to participate in them by engaging with the allusions and free associations. (...) As such, it is a performative text, not merely a descriptive one; and although this makes any interpretation necessarily unstable and incomplete, it also enables creative engagement. (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 54-55)

Writing poetically makes it possible for Irigaray to discuss a subject without burdening it with words that are too invested in phallogocentric language. Irigaray often breaks syntax and grammar to create new words, to make us perceive the images that she produces to accompany that which she wants to make visible. In the words of Margaret Whitford:

The elements allow Irigaray to speak of the female body, of its morphology, and of the erotic, while avoiding the dominant sexual metaphoricity which is scopic and organized around the male gaze; she can speak of it instead in terms of space and thresholds and fluids, fire and water, air and earth, without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it. (Whitford 1991, 62)

In this quotation, Whitford is speaking of Irigaray's style. Since the writing of Irigaray is *performative* and not only *descriptive*, Irigaray inhabits the qualities of the subject that she is addressing. Talking about the female body, which for her is fluid and multiple, her writing becomes fluid and multiple. *Passions élémentaires* is one example where this performative writing emerges. The poetical writing of Irigaray is also a writing that accepts that feminine experience is located beyond comprehension; that it is not possible to describe. Her writing talks about femininity exactly as Whitford describes, "without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it." Feminine experience thus finds itself *between* silence and speech, between the said and the non-said:

I compose my books as if I were able to speak silently; that is, I always create a counterpoint between speech [*la parole*] and silence. (Hirsh and Olson 1995, 101)

Reading Irigaray poetically is thus a reading that locates itself between silence and speech, beyond the compulsion of complete comprehension. It is also a reading that resists interpretation, in the words of Susan Sontag: "to put silence into poems and to reinstate the magic of the word, has escaped from the rough grip of interpretation" (Sontag 1964, 10).

In her text *Poetic Nuptials*, Judith Still establishes that the writing of Irigaray demands new ways of reading: one has to invest oneself corporeally in order to read her. *Passions élémentaires* demands more than our capacity to critique; it demands

our bodies. It is therefore not possible to read *Passions élémentaires* as one reads a theoretical text. If one distances oneself from the text, no exchange will be made between the reader and the author. Judith Still calls her own way of reading Irigaray *poetic nuptials*:

Poetic nuptials are an alternative to ways of reading such as critique which demand a particular distance between what become subject and object. Poetic nuptials would take place *as if* between (at least) two subjects, and lead us on to consider intersubjective relations in general outside any text in the narrow sense of the term. (Still 2002, 1)

Concerning the style of Irigaray, Whitford says: “One can see Irigaray’s own ‘poetic’ writing as attempts to mobilize a possible other (female) imaginary” (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 52). Reading Irigaray is thus always an exercise in not reproducing the gap between what is considered form and what is considered content; in *Passions élémentaires*, form is always-already content.

I stay close to be able to touch the text and I create space to be able to move with the text. Reading as conversation is also reading with equal respect for silence and for words; it is following the natural rhythm of breath, thus recognizing the circular movements of our bodies in relation to the text.

II. Still natural-corporeal

She finds herself everywhere all the time, in all times, in all directions. She must thus be represented at the same time, in all the times simultaneously, to stay true to her being. She is not yet; still being born, still giving birth. She is here and not here, simultaneously place and non-place. She moves while staying at the same place, this place without contours; she is these contours without place, this circumference without centre. She is the origin of the world, the original source of life, although she is not, yet. At the same time the most ancient and the least stable, at the same time eternal and temporal: she is woman, *I-woman*.

2. Opening

‘Elemental Passions offers some fragments from a woman’s voyage as she goes in the quest of her identity in love. It is no longer a man in quest of his Grail, his God, his path, his identity through the vicissitudes of his life’s journey, it is a woman. Between nature and culture, between night and day, between sun and the stars, between vegetable and mineral, amongst men, amongst women, amongst gods, she seeks her humanity and her transcendency. Such a journey is not without its trials.’ (Canters and Jantzen Forever, 52)

Luce Irigaray

In this quotation, Irigaray gives us an idea of her thoughts on *Passions élémentaires*.⁵ *Passions élémentaires* is one of Irigaray's least-known texts. The only book I have found that discusses it at length is Canters and Jantzen's *Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray's Elemental Passions*. *Passions élémentaires* is thus surrounded by very few texts that offer help in interpreting Irigaray's allusive, elusive language. It is also possibly because of this language that the book has received little attention. It is written in a highly feminine style, and unlike her two other element books, *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche and L'Oubli de l'air - chez Martin Heidegger*, which are also poetical works, *Passions élémentaires* is not directly related to a canonized male philosopher.⁶ Considering the reception of the oeuvre of Irigaray, one can argue that the books that have received the most attention are her critical books: early works such as *Speculum de l'autre femme* and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. *Passions élémentaires* has possibly received less attention by Irigaray scholars because it is highly feminine, because it does not conform to a masculine conception of what theory looks like, and because it is a creative rather than critical work, leading us to consider whether "'femino-phobia' is alive and well, even among feminists," as argues Rosi Braidotti. (Braidotti 2002, 29). Irigaray teaches us to reject false divisions based upon false dualisms. One such division, often considered insurmountable, is the one installed between Irigaray and queer theory. Lynne Huffer discusses this (non) relation in her text "Weird Greek Sex: Rethinking Ethics in Irigaray" (Tzelepis and Athanasiou 2010, 119-134). For Huffer, several paradoxes constitute the reception of the work of Michel Foucault in a queer context, in relation to the reception of the work of Irigaray in the same context. Huffer explains these paradoxes in the following way:

[T]he queer disinterest in Irigaray's work is not, in fact, symmetrically mirrored by any feminist dismissal of Foucault. To be sure, many feminists have criticized the gender bias and the gender blindness of Foucault's oeuvre, but some thinkers continue to find in Foucault a useful framework for understanding gender inequality as a particular kind of subjugating discursive formation. In other words, Foucault is very much on the feminist radar screen, while the inverse for Irigaray and queer theory is not the case. Obviously enough, like the queer-feminist divide, the division between Foucault and Irigaray is asymmetrical, repeating the falsely symmetrical, specular structure identified by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* as the exclusionary logic undergirding Western thought. In this sense, Irigaray herself becomes, in relation to queer theory, another version of the maternal feminine: queer theory's excluded other, its silent and invisible ground. (Huffer 2010, 120)

Irigaray's thinking has always been present within queer theory and she has nourished its development in the work of theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler. However, Irigaray is rarely recognized as a source of inspiration for queer theory as Foucault is. She thus becomes, as states Huffer, inert ground, the eternal destiny for women.

Passions élémentaires is a small book divided into fifteen chapters, in which we encounter the voice of a woman, *I-woman*, who tries to keep a dialogue with her interlocutor, *you-man*. It is not a chronologically structured text, nor does it follow a strict narrative; it is rather a highly allusive poetic work that presents images

from a woman's journey. I have organized my reading of *Passions élémentaires* around two themes: *nature* and *body*. These images are not easily distinguished from one another. Because Irigaray's writing is highly fluid, they "flow over into one another," (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 5) to cite Jantzen and Canters. I have chosen these images to introduce aspects of Irigaray's work that are under-theorized among Irigaray scholars and overlooked in feminist theory in a larger sense. Irigaray offers alternative ways to reconsider concepts such as *nature* that hold particularly convoluted positions within feminist theory. I wish that these images will show the width of the political project of Irigaray, as well as to offer new ways to attack concepts that I think of as central for contemporary feminist thought.

3. Natural

Et tu veux me faire fleur ? J'ai aussi des racines à partir desquelles je puis fleurir. La terre, l'eau, l'air, le feu, sont aussi mon partage. Pourquoi les quitter pour que tu me les redonnes, appropriées par toi. Pourquoi m'extasier dans ton monde alors que, déjà, je vis ailleurs. (...) Avant de te connaître, déjà j'étais fleur. Faut-il que je l'oublie pour devenir ta fleur ? (Irigaray 1982, 41)

You want to make me into a flower? I also have roots and from them I could flower. Earth, water, air and fire are my birthright too. Why abandon them to let you appropriate them and give them back to me. Why seek ecstasy in your world when I already live elsewhere. (...) Before I knew you, already I was a flower. Must I forget that, to become your flower?" (Irigaray 1992, 34)

Nature is germinating in *Passions élémentaires*. We find flowers, water, sap, plants and roots. We find a becoming-plant, we listen to flower-thoughts and we experience vegetal-love. We rediscover the *sensible-transcendental* in the non-schism of the sap, or mucous, running along the tree, or *I-woman*, who is about to reconstruct the history of her own past. She is always-already nature, as is *you-man*, but he continuously fails to recognize it. We will begin by turning toward Irigaray's images of nature, characterized by an ambiguity between woman and flower, to be able to examine more closely its, or her, petals and roots.⁷

Petals

The authors of *Forever Fluid* establish that the petals in *Passions élémentaires* are, like the lips in Irigaray's writing, an image for the female body. The petals of the flower are always simultaneously attached and separated, they are at once many and one, and they are touching, perpetually. The petals, like lips in Irigaray, are constituted by their own movement. As Canters and Jantzen explain: "[...] if lips were held constantly open, talking would be impossible: we are only able to speak because our lips move together, opening and closing. (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 108). Flowers close and open in cyclical movements that contest the linearity of masculine

thought. *You-man* watches the flower and reads it departing from himself, from his own logic, while *I-woman-flower* is confronted with his gaze, his expectations, and she senses the conflict:

Veux-tu la fleur une seule fois ouverte ? (...) Le refermement de la fleur dans la nuit, son mouvement de repli en elle-même, n'y aurait pas lieu. (...) Son devenir serait arrêté dans sa révélation diurne par toi. Croissance extasiée dans cette floraison idéale pour toi. (Irigaray 1982, 38)

Do you want the flower to open only once? The flower closing again in the night, her movement of folding herself in does not take place. Her becoming would be arrested in her daily revelation by you. Growth suspended in ecstasy, the ideal flowering for you." (Translation modified, from Irigaray 1992, 38)

He wants the flower to bloom; he wants his idea of the flower to correspond perfectly with the flower itself. She has to change her rhythm and stay forever open for him, for his gaze, and thus limit her movements, her closings and openings. According to Dorothea Olkowski, these two positions, being looked at and looking, corresponds to the visible and the invisible sphere. We will now turn to our ancestors, Demeter and Persephone, in examining more closely these two spheres.

Olkowski tells us the story of Kore/Persephone in her text "Kore—Philosophy, Sensibility, and the Diffraction of Light," (Tzelepis and Athanasiou 2010, Chapter 3) while traversing the visible and invisible spheres. Olkowski begins her text at the field of flowers which Kore is crossing the day of her abduction by Hades. Kore is walking and starts looking at a flower: "...it was a narcissus, so overwhelming, so seductive, [...] a flower begging to be picked" (Olkowski 2010, 33). Kore is watching the narcissus, a flower known for its connection to the gaze, and she is thus, for Olkowski, about to look at the one who is looking: "For if to look at and to pick a narcissus is to look at and to pick the act of looking, it is to see it and through seeing, to understand" (Olkowski 2010, 34). Kore is thus walking on a field of flowers, stopping to pick a narcissus that enchants her, when the ground opens under her feet and she is swallowed by the underworld. Olkowski uses this story to talk about the prohibition that keeps girls from acquiring knowledge, a prohibition that prevents them from possessing the gaze and thus allows them only to be looked at:

[F]or Persephone-Kore, for this girl, understanding was, at the beginning, denied. Wandering alone on a sunny morning amid clusters of blossoms; Kore stops to look. Precisely at the moment when she reaches out to pluck the flower, precisely at the edge of her own look at the act of looking, at the edge of understanding through seeing, the earth opens and she is taken away by an unseen power to a dark, invisible place. Is this not the fate of many young girls? In the full light of the sun, at the very instant when they begin to look at the act of looking, on the verge of seeing and of coming to understand through sight, are they not also swept away by some unseeable power, a power that sees itself in them but which they cannot see? And unlike Persephone-Kore, most do not return. (Olkowski 2010, 34)

According to Irigaray, this event constitutes the way that masculine culture destroys the language of the girl: “I think the most destructive thing in our culture (mythology says the same thing, in Kora’s [Proserpina’s] abduction by the god of the underworld) is the loss of the little girl’s questions, her discourse. Even more than that of the mother, the little girl’s discourse is destroyed” (Hirsh and Olson 1995, 109). Men-Hades occupies the invisible sphere, a position from which they can control the gaze. Girl-flowers on the other hand do not possess the gaze, and are therefore left to dwell in the visible sphere. If, as Olkowski argues, knowledge is what is acquired through looking, then girls are systematically bereaved from acquiring knowledge since they are not allowed access to the invisible sphere from which looking is made accessible.

Kore is violently separated from her field of flowers, from the visible world, and at the same time or in another time, *I-woman* is beginning to discover her own history. She is realizing that the only possible way out of the world of *you-man* is retracing paths already taken. She thus turns back and into herself, following her own roots, to dwell in her own underworld. *I-woman-flower* seeks to escape *you-man*’s gaze by closing herself, by drawing herself back. She is escaping the homogenizing light of day by turning to her own sparkling night, she rediscovers herself in her own darkness, next to her own roots, far from Hades’ hell: “Si elle n’en meurt pas tout à fait, c’est qu’elle reste encore sous terre. Que, dans l’obscurité, elle subsiste” (Irigaray 1982, 39). “If she does not completely perish, it is because she still rests underground. That in obscurity, she remains” (My translation). It is thus to this, to her, underworld that we turn next.

Roots

I-woman is about to rediscover herself through her own history, following her own roots. Realizing that the dichotomies and the categories imposed by *you-man* don’t correspond to her being, she exclaims: “Pour qui l’amour et la pensée se vivent-ils comme avènements différents ?” (Irigaray 1982, 41). “For who are love and thought experienced as different creations?” (My translation). She is thinking, but unlike *you-man*, her thinking is not linear; rather, she is growing toward different directions simultaneously, she is cyclic rather than logic. While realizing that she is blooming only for him, she withers, and to regain her strength, her own gaze, she escapes the blinding light of his day. In the underground she reunites with her own roots, and she relies upon her night vision, touch: “Pourquoi ce qui nous éclaire ne serait-il la nuit de notre jouissance ? [...] Le visuel n’étant plus notre seul guide” (Irigaray 1982, 46). “Why should we not be illuminated by the night of our jouissance?... For sight is no longer our only guide” (Irigaray 1992, 37).

In the third chapter of her book *Le grand théâtre du genre*, Anne Emmanuelle Berger analyzes visibility and invisibility while discussing the question of sexual difference in the United States and in France (Berger 2013). She shows how sexual difference in the hands of Jacques Derrida becomes invisible as *text*. The *imperceptible* is also extremely present in thinking the development of feminine subjectivities in Irigaray’s writing. We listen thus to the voice of *I-woman*:

Imperceptiblement, je te ramène, te laissant croire que, seul, tu connais le chemin. En silence, je te parle pour que tu t'ouvres à ma voix. Et je te sauve, parfois, d'arrachements inutiles, te précédant dans ta démarche. Mimant, sans mot dire, ton prochain pas. T'évitant le pire? (Irigaray 1982, 13)

Imperceptibly, I wind you in, letting you believe that you know the way on your own. I speak to you in silence so that you open up to my voice. And, sometimes, I save you from useless torment, going before you on your way. Miming, without speaking a word, your next step. Protecting you from the worst? (Irigaray 1992, 12)

I-woman is beginning to understand, appropriating for herself a knowledge that women have always been denied. She understands that she is different from *you-man*, that she has a history and that *you-man* has forgotten his own. She is making accessible her own history through her body; *you-man* on the other hand is incapable of acknowledging his history because he does not recognize his own corporeality. *I-woman* begins to critique *you-man* for not recognizing her, for not realizing that she is his genesis:

Sais-tu que tu répètes ainsi, aussi en moi, la fleur que je t'ai déjà donnée. Qui t'es déjà apparue, mais sans jamais devenir visible. Enfouie dans le fond de ta mémoire, tu tentes indéfiniment de la ressaisir. De la redessiner. Mais cette remémoration de moi, qui n'est que tienne, tu la réimplantes entre ma terre et sa fleur. (Irigaray 1982, 42)

Do you know that you are thus repeating, also in me, the flower that I have already given you. That has already appeared without ever becoming visible. Buried at the back of your memory, you attempt boundlessly to recapture it. To redesign it. But this memorization of me, that is only yours, you are reimplanting it between my ground and its flower. (My translation)

He is appropriating *I-woman's* body, treating it as *matière inerte*, or inert matter (Irigaray 1982, 43). He takes that which she has already created with her invisible threads, reinstating it in a form that is his, ruining at the same time the imperceptible connection between *her* ground and *her* flower. In the story of *you-man* and *I-woman* we are experiencing the systematic appropriation of women's work by men. For *you-man*, *I-woman* is a part of his body, and never has she been anything else. Her history also belongs to him, he is imposing, planting his homogenous structure—the hyper-visible logic of the One—on top of the imperceptible difference that she is trying to create; he suffocates all intervals that she is seeking to maintain. He is all, and she is this sex which is not one; a sex which is not at all: “Et tu t'ériges : je suis. Tel, l'être. Et qui ne dispose de quoi contenir la force, n'est pas. Hors de toi, le néant” (Irigaray 1982, 16). “And you rise: I am. Such is the being. And they who do not use that which contains strength, do not exist. Outside of you, nothingness” (My translation). *I-woman* has thus started to resist the being that he is, that she has also had to share, to discover how to be otherwise, other, elsewhere.

4. Corporeal

Covering up the original cover amounts to covering the original and actual process of all production, including the production of ideas. (Berger 2010, 65)

We have seen how man creates his world upon oblivion, on a forgotten past; that he has erected his story of parricide to cover up the precedent and even more ancient matricide.⁸ We will now turn to another masculine oblivion, the one that constitutes his relationship to his own body. We will examine this obliteration of origin through images of skin and envelopes. We will then follow *I-woman* in her rediscovering of her body through her cavities, holes, and placenta.

Skin, envelopes

Propriétaire, ta peau est dure. Un corps est une prison dès qu'il se replie en un tout. (Irigaray 1982, 20)

Proprietor, your skin is hard. A body is a prison as soon as it takes the shape of a whole. (My translation)

Ton corps est ma prison. (Irigaray 1982, 17)

Your body is my prison. (My translation)

Cette enveloppe, sa première maison vivante, n'a pas encore la consistance tranchée d'une peau. Elle s'habite de l'intérieur d'une peau. Cette première demeure de chair sera à jamais perdue. Il restera à jamais enfermé dans sa peau. (Irigaray 1982, 17)

This envelope, her first living house, does not yet have the fractured consistency of skin. She is living inside of a skin. This first dwelling of flesh will never be lost. He will always stay closed in her skin. (My translation)

In *Passions élémentaires*, skin and envelopes are both shell-like figures, but their respective essence differs. We will begin this section where we left off in talking about flowers, in the totalitarian universe of the One. For *you-man*, skin functions as a limit, and he needs this limit to be able to define his being. Since he has proclaimed himself the One, the being, nothing can exist outside of him. *I-woman* is swallowed, he has included her in his being, in her words: “Je participe de ton sujet. Et de toutes ses déterminations” (Irigaray 1982, 56). “I contribute to your subject. And to all of its determinations” (My translation). Here, we are experiencing the enduring distinction between form and content where *you-man* is form, drawing the limits, deciding what to include in, and what to exclude from, his being. The only way that *I-woman* can exist is to exist for him, as Rebecca Hill argues: “Woman is only insofar as she functions as the immobile limit for man-embryo” (Hill 2012, 60). He is neglecting the idea that once he has been enveloped by another, in a house where he was not the master. As witnesses *I-woman*:

J'étais ta maison. Et, quand tu pars et plus n'habites ce lieu, je ne sais que faire de mes murs. Ai-je jamais eu autre corps que celui que tu m'as construit à ton idée? Ai-je jamais éprouvé autre peau que celle que tu me voulais pour demeure? (Irigaray 1982, 60)

I was your house. And when you leave, when you no longer live here, I do not know what to do with my walls. Have I ever had another body than the one that you have constructed for me in your thought? Have I ever experienced another skin then the one you wished for me as your dwelling? (My translation)

In the same way as the petals of the flower are constructed by his gaze, the body of *I-woman* is created by his thought. Man is form, which means that woman is content: "Tu avais la forme, je te servais de matière" (Irigaray 1982, 73). "You had form, I was matter for you" (Irigaray 1992, 60). She equips him with skin, houses, walls, envelopes, everything that he needs to exist:

Tu m'encercler en maison, famille. Murs décisifs, définitifs. Déplaçant, déportant ainsi ce que tu n'as pas eu ? L'enveloppe souple d'un corps. La peau d'un vivant. Ce que tu n'auras pas eu... (Irigaray 1982, 30)

You encircle me in a family home. Decisive and definite walls. Transporting, deporting thus that which you have never had? The supple envelope of a body. The skin of a living. That which you have not had... (My translation)

I-woman is realizing that *you-man* has forgotten where he came from: "Déjà tu recommences à oublier. Tu continues d'oublier" (Irigaray 1982, 16). "Already you continue to forget. You are made of oblivion" (My translation). She feels the constraining rigidity of his skin and begins to move. As the flower, *I-woman* can't resist mobility; she cannot be kept from moving. Her being is movement:

Seule, je retrouve ma mouvance. Le mouvement est mon habiter. Je n'ai de repos que dans la mobilité. Qui m'impose un toit, m'épuise. Laisse-moi aller où je ne suis pas encore. (Irigaray 1982, 30)

Alone, I rediscover my movement. It is in movement that I dwell. I cannot rest but in mobility. The one that imposes on me a roof drains me out. Let me go where I have not yet arrived. (My translation)

Unlike those of her interlocutor, *I-woman's* limits are fluid. *You-man* needs rigidity since fluidity frightens him: "Man's violations and appropriations of woman-place emanate from his unconscious fear of the flowing interval, which betrays the man-embryo's dependence on the maternal-feminine" (Hill 2012, 62). He is denying his origin to escape taking it into account in his becoming-subject. Therefore, everything that reminds him of this fluid genesis, such as hollowness or mucus, has to be erased.

The point of departure for *I-woman* is different from that of *you-man*, and so is that of her becoming-subject. *I-woman* might be form, but if she is form then the form that she is does not resemble the form that *you-man* has given her. Form for her is not hard, fixed or stable: "...woman is both place and the very unravelling of place," (Hill

2012, 58) states Hill, concluding, “[w]oman is place for herself” (Hill 2012, 59). I am here talking about form as place where the dualism of content/form collapses, where, as in the interval, the sensible-transcendental manifests itself.

I-woman might have limits, but those limits are not characterized by the rigidity that defines *you-man’s* skin. She does not define herself using his concepts, but she does not neglect the importance of definitions, either. *I-woman* has a shell, but it resembles more an envelope than skin. She is enveloped by a suppleness that adapts after her movements and that change with her. Following Hill, we will now discover how woman *is* for herself, asking: what is her form?

Holes, cavities, placenta

Leur plaisir et leur crainte—les trous. En dessous, au-dessus, entre. Ils construisent ou déconstruisent sur, sous, autour, le long de, à travers, entre... des trous. (Irigaray 1982, 82)

Their pleasure and their fear—holes. Below, above, in-between. They construct or deconstruct on, under, around, along, across, between... holes. (Irigaray 1992, 67)

Tu me remplissais de tes vides. Tu me comblais par tes manques. Forte d’y apporter remède, je t’apportais ce que j’ai de plus précieux : mes creux. C’est toi qui devenais béant, moi pleine. (Irigaray 1982, 74)

You filled me with your vacancies. You replenished me with your lacks. To skillfully bring you remedy, I brought you that which was most precious to me: my cavities. It is you that became wide open, I complete. (My translation)

I-woman finds herself next to herself. She realizes that she has qualities of her own, and sometimes she even feels the possibility of being differently with *you-man*. *I-woman* is content since she has never erected walls between her self and her origin; she is also form, as the interior and exterior do not differ for her. She is not obligated to construct a world outside of herself, as is *you-man*. The world constructed by *you-man* is created through using his body as material, and in denying his maternal origin he becomes empty, he is thus in need of an external world to give him meaning. He detaches himself “pour constituer l’identité d’un sujet toujours méta-physique” (Irigaray 1982, 107). “to constitute the identity of a subject that is always meta-physic” (My translation). She, *I-woman*, brings him her cavities to cure his amnesia of origin.

We have seen that *you-man* is the One, everything, and we have heard *I-woman* talk about herself as full, as whole, but what constitutes the difference between these two *wholes*? *I-woman* accuses *you-man* of being empty and wide-open. For her, he is constituted by loss, but what is the difference between their respective holes?

Mais, quand je pars, dans ton horizon il y a un manque. Dans ta peau, un trou. Si je me soustraïs à ta consommation, tu découvres un ouvert que tu ne connaissais pas. Une bouche que tu ne soupçonnais pas. Un appel sans voix. Un besoin sans intention, sans direction vers. Ton tout s'écroule, s'écoule, dans un rien de désignable. Ce n'est même pas la nuit. Ta nuit. Ce là d'où tu me prends - l'ombilic de ton corps. De ton monde. Ce là que tu ne vois ni ne perçois. D'où tu ne me vois, ne me perçois plus. (Irigaray 1982, 19-20)

But, when I leave, in your horizon there is a lack. In your skin, a hole. If I subtract myself from your accomplishment, you will discover an opening that you did not know of. A mouth that you had not expected. A calling without voice. A need without intention, without direction toward. Your everything collapses, flows away into something unrecognizable. It is not even the night. Your night. This place from where you take me—the navel of your body. Of your world. This place that you do not see nor perceive. From where you no longer see nor perceive me. (My translation)

Even though his origin is inscribed on his body, *you-man* does not see it; he does not recognize his own navel. He, like her, also has holes, one in the middle of his body given to him by *I-woman* when she left him. To continue to forget his origin, *you-man* substitutes language for his body, a paternal language preoccupied with naming the world. He names to create distance between himself and that which he designates, he names to dominate: “Le nom propre, et même déjà le prénom, sont toujours en décalage par rapport à cette trace d'identité la plus irréductible : la cicatrice de la coupure du cordon” (Irigaray 1987, 26). “The proper name, and already the first name, is always in deviation with this the most irreducible trace of identity: the scar from the cutting of the umbilical cord” (My translation). Irigaray states that: “La femme parle toujours *avec* la mère, l'homme parle en son absence” (Irigaray 1982, 113). “Woman always talks *with* the mother, man talks in her absence” (My translation). The fundamental difference between their *beings* is thus that everything that she does is in accordance with her self, with her history and body. Everything that he does is artificial, in neglect of his body and history. She creates herself through relations, whereas he creates himself through divisions. He cuts the umbilical cord to forget the body at the other end: “Le père interdit le corps-à-corps avec la mère” (Irigaray 1982, 26). “The father is forbidding the bodily encounter with the mother” (My translation). She is trying, on the other hand, to reconstruct this hollow thread connected to her mother. In other words, their (w)holes differ concerning their different relations to memory and amnesia.

Irigaray describes in *Passions élémentaires* how *I-woman* holds a privileged position related to the creation of a world where difference is constituted on a non-hierarchical relation. The woman in this book always finds herself at the margins, she can exist, but only in the form that *you-man* decides. This decentralized position, at the margins of the phallogocentric order, makes it possible for her to perceive its structure. *You-man* as centre becomes blind of the borders that are surrounding him. As says

Irigaray concerning her method in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*: “J’essayerais peut-être de le renverser, mais j’y resterais incluse. Je vais plutôt m’efforcer—car on ne peut simplement sauter hors de ce discours—de me situer à ses frontières et de passer, sans arrêt, du dedans au dehors” (Irigaray 1977, 121). “Maybe I was trying to subvert it, but I remain within it. I will rather exert myself—since one cannot simply jump out of this discourse—to situate myself at its borders and to pass, without stop, from within to the outside” (My translation).

As the flower, Irigaray also moves perpetually back and forth over the borders raised by a logic that is not hers. Woman has no specific place in the phallogocentric order to develop her own femininity, she is omnipresent, she carries, like a snail, her house with(in) her:

Autour d’eux, des placentas qu’ils ne veulent jamais quitter. Entre nous, l’une pour l’autre, nous sommes placentaires. Cette unité de la première demeure, nous la partageons sans pour autant la déchirer, découper, répartir en morceaux. L’un pour l’autre habitables, sans enfermement. Nous vivons dehors. Ce qui ne revient pas au vide de l’absence. Où que nous soyons, le lieu a lieu. Avant tout autre architecture que celle de nos corps vivants. (Irigaray 1982, 82)

Around them, placentas that they don’t want to leave. Between us, one for the other, we are placental. This uniformity with the first dwelling, we are sharing it without ever shredding, cutting or scattering it in parts. We live one for the other, without confines. We are living outside. That which does not return to the emptiness of absence. Where we are, place is taking place. Before every other architecture than the one of our living bodies. (My translation)

It is in her own body that she finds her place, in her living skin, in her supple envelope, in her cavities and holes, in her body that is touching, continually. Her corporeal landscape is thus always-already decentralized.

For Irigaray, the most important and most archaic element is the earth, which is related to touch, the sense that precedes all other senses. We have already seen how woman digs through the soil where her roots are in order to find herself, a place where touch/the tactile replaces the gaze: “Du plus intime du muqueux au plus lointain du céleste et du transcendant, du plus charnel au plus divin, tout a lieu grâce au tact” (Irigaray 1982, back cover). “From the most intimate of mucus to the most distant and celestial and transcendent, and from the most carnal to the utterly divine, everything takes place through tact/the tactile”⁹ (My translation). Touch is fundamental for understanding her being, always-already present in her petals, lips, placenta. Woman, understood as plural, not-one, always touches herself; she remains placental, as she is incapable of distinguishing her origin from her present. Thus, she is always touching upon the womb, the original matrix. But, as Rebecca Hill shows, woman also carries in herself the interval; she is no longer glued to matter:

Irigaray invokes the placenta as a threshold between the mother and the embryo. While this place is intimately related to the uterine mucosa of the mother's body, the placenta remains separate from it. Woman is no longer collapsible into place. (Hill 2012, 69)

The placenta thus works as a mediator between mother-embryo, and it is not only this, it is also alive. The placenta is an active “negotiator” between mother and embryo:

[T]he placenta ‘negotiates’ a relationship between the embryo, which is in part foreign (half of its genes are paternal), and the maternal body. The mother’s body ‘recognizes’ and accepts the placenta and the growing embryo *as other* within herself. (Hill 2012, 69)

The body of the woman accepts that the embryo and the placenta occupy her; she accepts them as parts of herself. They can therefore harmonize without being reducible to one another. Woman as placentary and as guardian of the memory of this first house feels a proximity with the elements. Because the placenta brings blood, air and water, it is in relation to it that she experiences these elements for the first time. The placentary interval is located between the past and the present, and it is not graspable in the latter, as concludes Hill: “For Irigaray, the placental interval unfolds a living rhythm of times that cannot be mastered” (Hill 2012, 69). In Irigaray’s thought, woman is at least two, a temporality thought from her body is thus necessarily polygonal and dispersed, she is: “[g]outte de temps qui se détache d’une pesante accumulation” (Irigaray 1982, 47). “A drop of time detached from heavy accumulation” (Irigaray 1992, 32). For Whitford, feminine time in Irigaray’s philosophy must be thought as *durée* where we find neither beginning nor end. Time considered by masculine culture is divided, whereas time for woman flows; thought from her body, time becomes as fluid as her mucus, half-open as her lips. An Irigarayan way of thinking time thus escapes from the phallic organization of time-space and is instead thought as *durée* or the interval.

III. Always-already half-open

Writing this text, my thoughts have largely circulated around the question of style. When thinking about the writing of Irigaray as form, openness is a way to describe that form; her writing opens (me) every time that I read her. What I talk about as *openness* in the writing of Irigaray corresponds to what Rebecca Hill calls the *interval*, what Judith Still names *hospitality*, what Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen speaks of as *fluidity*, and what Margaret Whitford names *durée*. Irigaray’s openness makes available a different way of thinking the questions that she is asking; form and content thus collapse yet again. The interval, hospitality, fluidity, and *durée* are located simultaneously on the inside and the outside; they manifest the conflation

of form and content. Irigaray's style in *Passions élémentaires* is open because it is situated between silence and speech, thus dependent on the conversation into which it invites its readers.

Irigaray's non-definitions invite me to read her, to continue to not define with her; however, she also creates definitions. What I here call openness might for some Irigaray readers correspond to *negation*. This negation relates to her non-definitions, such as her critique of the non-representation of women in phallogocentric culture. Irigaray rejects in the first phase of her oeuvre the discourse produced by men about women, and she resists at the same time all definitions of the feminine, considering it to be indefinable.¹⁰ When entering into the second phase of her oeuvre, Irigaray finds negation to be insufficient for the creation of alternate subjectivities: "La philosophie s'intéresse beaucoup à la déconstruction de l'ontologie, à l'anti- au post-, mais peu à la constitution d'une nouvelle identité rationnellement fondée" (Irigaray 1987, 220). "Philosophy is widely interested in the deconstruction of ontology, in the anti- or post-, but less in constructing a new rationally founded identity" (My translation). That construction is thus the focus of her second phase. In passing from a negative to a more positive method when talking about feminine subjectivities, Irigaray is criticized for having defined, and thereby enclosed, the femininity which she is elaborating.

For Eleni Varikas, the female genealogies presented by Irigaray in works such as *Sexes et parentés* are problematic since Irigaray, in defining specific stories of relations between women in Greek mythology, excludes others. Moreover, the stories she excludes are, for Varikas, femininities that do not conform to a way of being feminine that Irigaray wishes to (re)create (Varikas 2010, 231-247). Irigaray becomes problematic for Varikas when her voice changes, when she becomes didactic. Irigaray's voice is also at the centre of Anne Emmanuelle Berger's critique of Irigaray's later works:

I Love to You is a didactic text, as are many of Irigaray's later works, which aims to teach the 'way of love,' to borrow the title of one of her last books. Its style is markedly different from that of *Speculum*, *Marine Lover*, or *An Ethics*. It is simpler, barer, 'depleted,' one might say, stripped of ambiguities. Indeed, she spends a number of pages explaining what the title of her first book *Speculum*. *Of the Other Woman* really meant, denying any playful ambiguity of style and intention, and trying to indicate what a proper translation might be. (Berger 2010, 75)

Feeling my way through theory, reading becomes almost completely intuitive. I find and I seek texts that harmonize with my body, texts that open up space for, and that encourage, feminine feelers such as myself. This space is, I believe, introduced and maintained within the interval opened up by the motion between theory, poetry, literature, philosophy, as well as between different languages, accents, and voices. Luce Irigaray has many voices. In *Passions élémentaires*, her voice is far from

didactic; it is open, and it opens. She manages to bring forth contours of a feminine subjectivity without locking it into a specific place. Yet reading other texts, such as her later works, the creative conversation between the reader and the author has been more difficult to establish. I feel as if she becomes less interested in conversation, and more interested in teaching, as Berger states. Thus, in Irigaray's later works, I find less space for feeling, for being feminine.

Irigaray stresses that we have to identify with and in history to be able to create ourselves; in order to create such identification, we need a subject in history with which to identify. To quote Luisa Muraro: "I wanted to formulate an initial definition of the concept of female genealogies. It is obviously not a classic kind of definition, but rather a contextual one, or, to be more precise, an indexical one" (Muraro 1994, 319). Muraro explains how one can define and identify feminine genealogies in pointing at them, in recognizing them with the index. One thus escapes the weight of definition and its imprisoning aspect. "Indexical" definitions let us define without having to exclude:

Why haven't I given a classic definition? Because it is impossible. This theme lies on the border between the speakable and the unspeakable, like much—we do not know how much—of women's experience. When, as in this case, we must make an uncoded reality speakable, the semantic field must open, like the Red Sea, to let things (experience) pass through, and the only valid definitions are those based on indexical signs. (Muraro 1994, 319)

We thus return to where we left off in talking about style. Because feminine experience finds itself between speech and silence, we must recognize that it is "an uncoded reality" in order to address it. To make it "speakable," "the semantic field must open, like the Red Sea;" only in this fluidity can we experience valid definitions of ourselves. We need a double movement where we simultaneously recognize a genealogical line in history and also let it grow unbounded, openly, towards the/a future. Irigaray is a thinker who seriously considers the conceptual darkness that surrounds the difference between woman and femininity, between *I-woman* and *a woman*, and who tries to situate this relation in history through her genealogical and mythological work. The relationship between *I-woman* and *a woman* is not coherent or equivalent. I would say instead that the two terms carry between themselves the interval, which I think of as a space from which different ideas of how to create feminine subjectivities can emerge. For Gayle Salamon, difference in Irigaray never manages to transcend the binary man-woman, but she argues that: "Genders that find no easy home within the binary system are still animated by difference" (Salamon 2010, 191-201). We are thus all dependent upon the sensible-transcendental in order to become subjects. Even if Irigaray seeks to establish specifically the relation between woman and femininity, the tools that she elaborates in works such as *Passions élémentaires* are useful for thinking the becoming of all genders. The writing of Irigaray is constituted by the double movement of opening-closing. Following this movement, we can define our histories with our index, to follow Muraro, while

growing and creating space to grow towards the future: “Nous avons beaucoup de choses à faire. Mais mieux vaut avoir l’avenir devant soi que derrière” (Irigaray 1987, 33). “We have many things to do. But better to have the future in front of us than behind” (My translation). Instead of continuing to reproduce teleologically structured methods for writing developed by the masculine philosophical canon, let us be inspired by the hysterically feminine, highly fluid, and open universe that Irigaray invites us into, while rewriting the history of our own past. Her style is as important for understanding her texts as her content; drawing upon this style, Irigaray suggests useful tools and radical ways of creating and engaging with feminist thought today.

IV. Opening

In actual fact, the female function is to explore, discover, invent, solve problems, crack jokes, make music – all with love. In other words, create a magic world. (Solanas 1996, 13)

Irigaray lets us experience another world. She presents a political project for how to reach this other, magical, world. Her thinking opens our own thought, and she makes us think openly about the creation of an alternate universe. We are indebted to all our women-mothers, also toward Luce Irigaray, mothers of all life and all thought, always-already in us. Feminine subjectivity is *vegetal-airborne*, always moving between *ground-sky*. She is mother-earth always located between personal and genealogical memories, memories of oblivion that awaken a sleeping history. She is the stem that reunites the corolla with the roots. She is supple, sinuous, plastic skin; she is envelope, she envelops. Always-hollow, still-honeycombed, already-placentary. She is inside-outside all times, all the time. She is plural, always-already in (re) creation.

I am thus still reading, again and again, movement that never ceases; the only way to cease it is to cease... I cease then, these lines of thought, this time.

Notes

1. *I-woman* is the term that Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen use to talk about the protagonist in *Passions élémentaires*. I have also decided to use this term in my text since *I-woman* manages to maintain the gender of this character. English is not gendered in the same way as French; thus to translate the feminized “je” in this book merely as *I* would mean losing its gender, which is of crucial importance for this text and for the project of Irigaray in a broader sense.

2. The rhizomatic is a term many have borrowed from Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s collaboration *Capitalisme et schizophrénie : L’anti-Oedipe* (1972) to talk about non-hierarchical historical narratives. Although this term is not explicitly present in *Passions élémentaires*, I find the rhizomatic to be a useful way of describing the instable, always changing, intermingling qualities both of the book’s protagonist as well as its formal structure.

3. The transcendental is a central concept in Irigaray's thinking. In discussing the *sensible-transcendental*, Irigaray makes sure not to forget the corporeal reality of our existence, while focusing equally on the importance of the divine. Becoming-subject is dependent upon the movement of the *sensible-transcendental* that departs simultaneously from the body and the sky. In *Sexes et parentés* (1987), Irigaray develops the *sensible-transcendental* traversing relations between-women. Here, the *sensible-transcendental* is manifested in horizontal and vertical relations between-women, thus emphasizing the importance of relating to a female god while creating a female sociality.
4. This darkness, this black ink, alludes to Lispector's writing in texts such as *Où étais-tu pendant la nuit?* where the night is reconsidered as the space from which knowledge is conceived, rather than where it is obscured. The night offers another kind of thought than the lucid, intelligible, clear, rational knowledge produced by/in daylight. During the night one must rely upon one's night vision: touch; writing with black ink is thus writing of and with the body. The question of darkness and (in)visibility is further developed in this text under the section entitled "Roots."
5. The citation comes from the preface of the Japanese edition of the book, published also in the English translation, for the French edition no meta-text is available.
6. However, some scholars discuss whether it can be thought as a dialogue with Empedocles.
7. In French, nature is gendered female, *la nature*, as is flower, *la fleur*. In *Passions élémentaires*, it is often difficult to discern what Irigaray is referring to when she says *she*, or *elle*. In using terms such as nature-woman or flower-girl, I am referring to this ambiguity which always exists in French and which is difficult to reproduce in English.
8. Here, I am referring to Irigaray's critique of Freud considering his oblivion of the matricide of Clytemnestra, which for Irigaray is more ancient than the parricide of Creon that Freud places in the center of his theory of male sexual development.
9. Irigaray uses "le tact" to simultaneously designate the tactile, touch, and tact, rhythm.
10. Concerning the three phases of Irigaray's oeuvre, see Hirsh and Olson, "Je–Luce Irigaray."

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Luce Irigaray (born 3 May 1930) is a Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, linguist, psycholinguist, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist who examined the uses and misuses of language in relation to women. Irigaray's first and most well known book, published in 1974, was *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), which analyzes the texts of Freud, Hegel, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant through the lens of phallogentrism. Irigaray is the author of works analyzing many thinkers, including *This Sex*