Accessing Women through Masculine Discourse:
Luce Irigaray’s Embodied Syntax

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Abstract:

Men and women’s relationship to their bodies is mediated by the linguistic structures surrounding them. The human body plays an important role in understanding the border between language and the body. Contemporary Feminists, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, understand this relationship as intrinsically linked. This thesis articulates a possible development of the body that sees the female body as becoming a linguistically necessary reference for the male-dominated discourse. By existing in a society that values the phallus as the master signifier, women become displaced from their own bodies. This displacement is represented in how women relate to language. Without a connection to their own bodies, women lose their position as a subject. Additionally, the rejection of her own body leaves the woman in a state of sexual and psychological repression. According to Irigaray, their lost female identity can only be reclaimed through a new understanding of language. This new language would incorporate the materiality of the body in an attempt to reclaim a space for the female subject in discourse. These claims are based on a reinterpretation by Luce Irigaray, of Sigmund Freud’s theoretical and psychoanalytic work on sexual development.
Luce Irigaray’s work has created a variety of responses in feminist discourse. Readings have varied from those who argue she created a way of liberating the female experience, to those who solidly affirm an essential distinction between men and women. I want to compare these responses to show how they both have misused Irigaray’s work. The first of these critiques come from Judith Butler. Butler argues that, while Irigaray has effectively changed the way women’s bodies are viewed; a more metaphorical understanding of Irigaray underscores the importance of language on actually lived women. Looking at Irigaray in a completely removed manner from the female body diminishes the foundations for her claims, while assuming a complete understanding of what can be valued, lacks a space for conceptualizing of a new feminine/female nature. Both Irigaray and Butler focus on the relationship between matter, body, and language. Irigaray argues that language, as it functions now, is the exact reason women struggle to find value in patriarchy systems.

The majority of Irigaray’s later work, along with the arguments she makes in, *This Sex Which Is Not One (TSW)*, center around liberating women from the repressive masculine discourse. Notions of embodied syntax and pre-contextualized femininity that is ingrained in the make-up of a woman’s body can bring to the front the full extent of Irigaray’s claims. An idea of the feminine that is pre-cultural context and creation is a seemingly necessary explanation for Irigaray’s later claims. The distinction that contemporary western feminists make between gender and sex, does not exist for Irigaray. As she states, “[e]quality between men and women cannot be achieved without a theory of gender as sexed and a rewriting of the rights of obligation of each sex, *qua different*, in social rights and obligation” (Irigaray, 1995, 13). By revaluing the feminine body, and allowing it to become a potential site of liberation, Irigaray reconceives of the relationship between body, matter and language.
By putting Irigaray in conversation with Judith Butler this thesis examines the limits of matter and the body. What I want to defend is the ability that the female body can participate in demonstrations and meaning that exceed the current linguistic structure. The female body exists as a necessary reference point in masculine discourse. Because of a perpetual detachment from her own body, woman is never fully positioned as the subject. In order to gain a position of speaker Irigaray argues that the reason for woman’s exclusion needs to be reconceived. This exclusion is perpetuated by the bodily matter that constructs the female body. This matter demands recognition in material space because it excludes other bodies from occupying a certain location and a certain time. This function of material exists for both men and women, but an access to linguistic space is limited to the masculine body.

It is important to understand the foundation that Irigaray presents as a combination of the material and the conceptual. By privileging both aspects of human experience Irigaray tries to disconnect the material from its linguistic moorings. Judith Butler pushes back against this use of language as illogical and incoherent. In attempting to inscribe the body into a material and linguistic space Irigaray is able to problematize Butler’s relationship between matter and language.

1. Freud and Irigaray:

The foundation of Irigaray’s work is primarily psychoanalytic. She draws extensively from Sigmund Freud’s work on development of human sexuality and Jacques Lacan’s symbolic language. Irigaray’s foundational theories are presented in her work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, published in 1985. The work lays out the psychoanalytic and physiological theories that
persist throughout Irigaray’s work. She is examining the ways in which, developmentally, the sexes have diverged and dominated different realms of human experience.

Normal feminine development, in Freud, starts to occur as the two sexes separate into boys and girls. This moment is crucial for Irigaray because it creates a precise point where the two sexes branch away from each other. This distinction creates a rift in the linguistic and psychological functioning of the little girl. What Irigaray concludes, is that the little girl is prevented from accessing her own body, because as she develops within a phallocentric linguistic structure, her body is conceived only as the negation of maleness. The dichotomy that Freud establishes between masculine and feminine development is described in terms of the little boy’s development, and how the little girl in turn responds. It does not account for any independent development of the little girl. The female and feminine are left undefined and simply a reference point for the masculine symbolic. Irigaray strongly questions Freud’s claims about gender/sex because they ignore an independent female development, but it is still necessary to look closely at the Freudian structure of development, to see where Irigaray and Freud’s conclusions differ.

The phallic stage for boys and girls is different, I will be looking solely at the female relationship to the phallic. At this stage the little girl distances herself from her own body because the female body is rejected and left empty. It is later filled later with the masculine excess which leads the little girls detachment to her body and subjectivity. Penis envy is the third developmental stage wherein the little girl realizes that she lacks what is, sub-consciously, the master signifier (the phallus) and therefore rejects her own, “castrated,” body (Irigaray, 1985, 68). This is the little girl’s first introduction to the imaginary. The imaginary is the field of concepts that presents visually to the subject, and which, through their visually privileged
existence, prescribe normative conceptions. The phallus is, literally, seen as the master signifier, through the treatment of the nuclear family and the language surrounding its power. In the imaginary structure, the little girl becomes aware that her body lacks this signifier. Irigaray puts it, “woman’s castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her having nothing. In her having nothing penile, in seeing that she has No Thing. Nothing Like man. That is to say, no sex/organ that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth,” (Speculum, 1985, 48). The biological nature of the male sex organ allows it to present externally, and therefore is clearing missing in the little girl. Where prior to the development of an awareness of difference, the little girl was able to value and covet her own body. But what, “she thought she had, in her clitoris, [as] a significant phallic organ” is exposed as a missing part (TSW, 1985, 39).

The loss that the little girl feels is not a physical loss, but a psychological one. While the little girl’s body does not change, she becomes psychologically unmoored and seeks something to ground her. Unfortunately, the repression that the little girl experiences is caused by her own body, and therefore she cannot find a solution for it within herself. This serves as the primary reason for the rejection of her own body; her body is not a space for her own understanding of her identity. This opens her up to receiving something falsely stable from the external world, which is a phallocentric world. This search for a power that can be comparable to the phallus leads the little girl to reject her own body and enter into a state of hysteria. Irigaray argues that hysteria is caused by her, ‘loss,’ but [this loss] radically escapes any representation, hence the impossibility of ‘morning’ it,” her own deficiencies (Speculum, 1985, 68). To accept her own body as necessarily deficient would mean that all of her original sexual drive would be lost. Instead, she looks to replace this drive by internalizing external symbols of power. Hysteria is
the little girl’s attempt to maintain her own sexuality, against strong repressive forces by looking outside of her body, but she cannot succeed because, “it is precisely for which she is not – the phallus – that she asks to be desired and simultaneously to be loved,” (*TSW*, 1985, 62). She does not possess, and cannot gain sufficient access to the phallus.

What the little girl does “find” outside of herself is an unyielding discourse surrounded and propelled by the phallus. Once the little girl is left without access to her body or libido she has no origin for her desires. This gaping ‘hole’ needs something to replace what was removed during the ‘castration,’ of the little girl. Irigaray posits that this is the point where women are filled with the excess of the male representation. Because the little girl is in need of an origin for her desire, she finds it in the dominating discourse of the masculine. A masculine center piece does not simple supply her sexuality, but supplies an entire framework from which the female/feminine is defined. Crucially, Irigaray proclaims that this developmental stage is centered around the “fact” that the little girl has been castrated, and now she is without, so that,

The nonsymbolization of her desire for origin, of her relationship to her mother, and of her libido acts as a constant appeal to polymorphic repressions (be they melancholic, maniacal, schizophrenic, paranoiac...). She functions as a hole – that is where we would place it at its point of greatest efficiency, even in its implications of phobia for man too – in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes. But this fault, this deficiency, this ‘hole,’ inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself...she borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them. (*Speculum*, 1985, 71)

The little girl’s realization of the master signifier as phallus, and her inability to obtain the power of the signified, excludes her from generating any genuine relationship to representations.
The connection between sexuality and the larger representation field is central to both Freud and Irigaray. One way in which they defend the connection between language and early sexuality is the similarities in construction. The distinctions Freud creates between active/passive, penis/clitoris, “are interpretive modalities of the female function rigorously postulated by the pursuit of a certain game for which she will always find herself signed up without having begun to play,” (Speculum, 1985, 22). The little girl is required to formulate her entire external and internal consciousness through a framework she has not created. Freud does not acknowledge his implicit negation of the feminine within his own theories, but he does stress the importance of repression in female sexuality in allowing for the masculine creation.

Not only has sexuality been defaulted to the masculine, but masculinity has positioned itself as the master subject. By residing as the main subject, man is able to choose a point of reference from which he can always refer to as Other. The reference point is necessary for the structure of language and conceptualization. This is because the dichotomy of subject/object allows for language to refer to matter and experience relationally. Without a relational distinction, concepts and ideas would blur together. By positioning himself as the Subject, man is able to prioritize himself as the only consistent perspectival position. That then leaves all other things in a position of reference. As the little girl grows into a woman, she is constantly faced with ideals and language that only refer to the masculine experience, which means that the female experience is limited to a category of otherness. The hole left by not having an originating point of her sexuality “greets the little girl as she enters as a subject into representative systems. This is the indispensable assumption governing her appearance upon the scene of ‘presence’ where neither her libido nor her sex/organs have any right to any ‘truth’ except the truth that casts her as ‘less than, other side, backside, of the representation thereby
perpetuated,” *(Speculum, 1985, 83).* Thus the little girl has become not just a repressed individual but the always othered subject. The masculine discourse also positions any concept of the other as, “his other,” *(Speculum, 1985, 135).* This implies for the little girl that her position as other is maintained at all times. Even when women try to mark and object as being outside of themselves, or other, that object has already been marked as other to the masculine first. And this conception of the masculine other is perpetuated by the existence of the woman as a linguistic reference point. This structure leaves no room for the little girl or woman to position themselves as an independent subject. Prominent in this discussion is the way the subject functions in language.

Irigaray attempts to position the male subject in a historical and psychoanalytical contexts. She starts by examining how the Copernicus revolution had a profound effect on the male psyche. Man and the Earth were no longer at the center of the universe and this displacement removed the central nature of the male subject, and placed him as a potential other. Before, the other was conceived as the bodies (planets) circulating and defining themselves against the focal man (Earth). The other becomes entombed with the male psyche in a way disrupts his primacy as subject. But, “when the Other falls out of the starry sky into the chasms of the psyche, the ‘subject’ is obviously obliged to stake out new boundaries for his field of implantation and to re-ensure -- otherwise, elsewhere -- his dominance. Where once he was on the heights he is now entreated to go down into the depths,” *(Speculum, 1985, 136).* Prior to the Copernicus revolution the male had a *Gestalt* like connection to the heavenly bodies, and was psychologically secure in their empirical validity, but once that external grounding was debunked, he had to search for a new Other that was affixed outside of himself. Then, “by wishing to reverse the anguish of being imprisoned within the other, of being placed inside the
other, by making the very place and space of being his own, he becomes a prisoner of effects of symmetry that know no limits,” (Speculum, 1985, 137). Reaffirmation of the male subject takes place in the larger discourse of otherness. The other is created, situated, and imagined to benefit the security of the internal male subject. The role of the woman in this development is muted. She is positioned as the boundless Other that’s role is to absorb the excess of the male subject. This absorption acts more like an entire replacement of the woman’s subjective experience. One of the main faculties that is inserted into the woman is masculine discourse. Irigaray argues strongly that female speech is destroyed and replaced in the development of the female as the Other. In the limited space of discourse, access to “‘reasonable’ words....are powerless to translate all that pulses, clamors, and hangs hazily in the cryptic passages of hysterical suffering-latency,” that is the unmoored feminine (Speculum, 1985, 142). The tools of reason are linguistic, and therefore are a function of the masculine discourse. Not only is the woman lost without her own voice, but Irigaray sees the only option of freeing and creating the female subject with the not so simple task of reimagining language usage.

As the little girl tries to become her own subject, she fails. For Irigaray this is because, “any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine.’ When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being ‘female,’” (Speculum, 1985, 133). This notion of the imaginary is, a visual engagement with the world, which simultaneously facilitates understanding and external norms. The imaginary is also dominated by the masculine psyche, with the visual privileging of the phallus. This notion of an imagery dominating the psychology and development of language allows Irigaray access to the power invested in the visual field.
II. The Symbolic Woman

Female sexualization is thus the effect of a logical requirement, of the existence of a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies, which would necessitate, in order- nevertheless - to become incarnate ‘so to speak,’ taking women one by one. Take that to mean that woman does not exist, but that language exists. That woman does not exist owing to the fact that language -- a language -- rules as master, and that she threatens -- as a sort of ‘prediscursive reality’? -- to disrupts its order.

(TSW, 1985, 87)

The master symbol is the symbol of the phallic. It maintains control, through excluding the feminine from any access, to the creation or control of new symbols. In this context symbols mediate the being’s relation to a socially dominated world. This can take the shape of language, images or values that represent larger contextual dominations. Thus, in response, the little girl must imitate or mimic the masculine and this “hysterical mìming will be the little girl’s or the woman’s effort to save her sexuality from total repression and destruction,” so that she becomes a specularization or mirroring of the masculine (Speculum, 1985, 72). She is not a copy in that she replicate the male but her acts of miming are an attempt to his power, a copy would imply that she could embody all things masculine and become her own subject.

One form of miming occurs when women use language. The language they use is not their own, and more than being outside of themselves, the language is based on excluding them. The language woman uses is simply a play, or an attempt “to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse,” (TSW, 1986, 76). Mimicry, in Irigaray, is double-sided. On the one hand, it is highly restrictive and limiting to women because it is an always imperfect expression of her desires, but on the other front, it is the only tool, in discourse, women consciously have and therefore must be used to liberate them. ́Mimicry and language are closely related for
women. Not all acts of mimicry are acts of language, but all female use of language is an act of mimicry. The use of mimicry in language means that the concepts and words used do not rightfully represent the normative understanding of words. The full meaning always exclude women and therefore her use of such language is a denial of her own existence and a reposition of the object in relation to the subject. By being the source of the reference, and referencing the source, women have a doubly layered experience with language. Irigaray puts it, “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. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself,” (TSW, 1985, 29). She goes on to say that, “for ‘she’ says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous,” (TSW, 1985, 29). What happens is that language, as it is used in the everyday sphere, cannot be used properly by women. Irigaray new approach to language opens up the opportunity for women to speak as women.

The language, which Irigaray calls a “feminine syntax,” rests on a critical reading of Freud. The main point of contention is Freud’s defining of “sexual difference by giving a priori value to Sameness, shoring up his demonstration by falling back upon time-honored devices such as analogy, comparison, symmetry, dichotomous opposition and so on,” (TSW, 1985, 72). This is pointing an issue of valuation that is translated into Freud’s own understanding and calculation about identity formation. The two sexes begin with some a priori sameness that allows for Freud’s comparisons about development. It also necessitates a constant creation of dichotomies because the notion of sameness implies overlap as well as exclusion. Prior to the phallic stage Freud refers to the similarities between the two sexes. He says, “the little girl, in the sadistic-
anal phase, shows *no less aggressiveness than* the little boy... the aggressive impulses of the little girls are *no less abundant and violent* [than those of the little boys]... from the onset of the phallic phase, the *differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by the agreements...*

**THE LITTLE GIRL IS THEREFORE A LITTLE MAN,”* (Speculum, 1985, 25).ii** Quiet explicitly, Freud is arguing that the little girl and the little boy are identical prior to sexual development. More specifically they are both a little man, and even in this stage not identical in a neutral space. The Freudian theories about development offer a bodied explanation for how two identical beings shift into their sexualized roles once a more complex understanding of their body is apparent. Freud’s attempt to create an equal starting point is once again a trap door. The theories on sameness can be seen in other philosophical works, and “this domination of the philosophical logos stems in large part from its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same* … in systems that are self-representative of a ‘masculine subject,’”* (TSW, 1985, 74). Any representation of an *a priori* body will be controlled and dominated by a masculine image even though the little girl’s body is distinctly *different* from the little boy’s.

Irigaray undercuts the Freudian desire for universality precisely because it is a masculine universal. She highlights the key aspects of the female body that have been overlooked in prior discussions but are critical in understanding what a feminine syntax would look like. The female sex organ does not have just one part, area, or function. It is a compilation of the visual and multiple material parts. It is has a distinct multiplicity that differs from the notion duality. The sexual aspects of the genitals, in particular, the labia, are constructed of folds that overlap, touch and move. Looking at the body as the foci of an external, formative gaze shows how important such an indistinct and fluid body part is to women. The multiplicity of the female genitals has a
direct link to their allowance for external, multiple identities. This can be seen as impacting
many parts of women’s lives, but in particular it changes their relationship to language.

The multiplicity of the female body is replaced with the hysteric miming once the little
girl enters the phallic stage. Irigaray is looking to reach back into the female experience, prior to
her exclusion, and see if a re-articulation is possible from that viewpoint. The problem of
Freudian sameness is that it excludes an equally valid and co-existing difference. Another critic
of Irigaray, Alison Stone, argues that if one simply looks at the body or at the formation of the
identity through a socialization, falls right back into the problem that it is trying to avoid: valuing
contingent aspects of humanity (Stone, 2006, 20). While there is a common and stereotypical
understanding of the feminine as nature and the masculine as the culture, Irigaray is not worried
about this type of conversation. The framework that that conversation has always existed in,
cannot have considered any sort of pure understanding because it has been subliminally
controlled and orchestrated by the masculine domination.

In trying to look at the body and its own language, Irigaray is hoping to break into the
world prior to the masculine control. It is at this point in her argument that it becomes harder to
separate Irigaray’s theories about the body and notions of essential bodily characteristic. Before
addressing that issue, and turning to Judith Butler I am going to explore how the feminine syntax
works.

**III. The Feminine Syntax:**

A space is available to women to talk “(as) women” when the reference point becomes
their own bodies. Irigaray is clear in her later work that the oppression of women is enacted on
the sexed bodies of women. Any ideological movement towards the liberation of women must
come from an idea that liberates women’s body and not just the feminine gender. She goes as far as to say, “equality between men and women cannot be achieved without a theory of gender as sexed and a rewriting of rights and obligations of each sex,” (JTN, 1993, 13). The body has always been the initial site of exclusion and signification. The expressions of sex, seen normally as gender, manifest in a variety of ways, but the body is maintained throughout these multiplicities. The example of transsexuals which, here mostly serve as a possible and not fully concrete example, of the bodies relation to the identity. In the text *Thinking With Irigaray*, published in 2011, Danielle Pope writes, “[Irigaray’s] theory can be used to provide a theoretical groundwork for interpreting the narratives of transsexual people who describe their experience of crossing genders as visibly becoming the people that they always knew themselves to be,” (Pope, 2011, 122). While this narrative cannot be generalized to all trans-experiences, and does seem limited when looking at people who choose not to make modifications of their bodies or are born intersex, it raises an interesting observation about the power of the body. Potentially, this example is suggesting that the body maintains key features and signifiers outside of its preliminary acculturation. So while the expression and the impression that are imposed on a body, the body is able to subvert norms implying that there are aspects of the body that are non-contingent and exist outside any externally imposed ideas. This creates a space for bodies to “talk” or at least be heard in a language outside of the masculine dialects.

This embodied communication is able to break through the wall of the masculine language and access, not just the female body, but the potentially female Experience. By tapping into corporeal distinctions Irigaray presents a reassessment of the entire linguistic structuring. Not only does language allow access to human experiences, it can be used to repress and shape our conscious interpretation of these experiences and the objects in the world. Irigaray draws
attention to the contingency of linguistic epistemology. Not only the words we use, and the meanings that they allow us conceptually, but their ability to create meaning in ways that are abstracted from an exclusively masculine experience. In explaining the extensive ramifications of masculine language Irigaray says of female sexuality that, “female sexualization is thus the effect of a logical requirement, of the existence of a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies, which would necessitate, in order -- nevertheless-- to be come incarnate, ‘so to speak’ taking women one by one. Take this to mean that woman does not exist, but that language exists,” (TSW, 1985, 89). Creating this dichotomy implies that the female is a lesser body, imperfect, and different. Yet this difference is precisely the unique referent that the female syntax requires. One of the few accessible differences that women are still allowed is their bodies. By being allocated to the negation of men, it is not a true difference that they represent, but only a difference in relation to the qualities that men possess. None of their differences are real anymore, except for their bodies.

There are a few specific ways that Irigaray argues for an embodied language. This is not an exhaustive list of ways, but the few that Irigaray explicitly supplies. Body language and bodily gestures are the first space. Irigaray says “the place where [the feminine syntax] could best be deciphered is in the gestural code of women’s bodies. But, since their gestures are often paralyzed, or part of the masquerade, in effect, they are often difficult to ‘read,’” (TSW, 1986, 134). When there is a break in women’s masquerade-like relation to her body she can create a space for her unmediated body to express itself. The second space is in women’s suffering, “but also in women’s laughter,” (TSW, 1985, 134). Here the body is expressing extreme and uncontrollable emotion. Laughter and cries of pain can be seen as pre-linguistic expression of the body. I am presuming that because the little girl could also cry when she was hurt, or laugh as
most happy babies do, this expression is possible prior to the masculine discourse. If women are able to return to these types of bodily expressions they may also be able to return to a body prior to linguistic signification.

IV. Judith Butler and Bodies That Matter:

Judith Butler argues that any conception of matter outside of linguistic structures is logically incoherent. Butler argues that any recognition of matter is produced through language. This is based on an understanding of how matter is able to perform the concepts and structures in which it resides. The following quote from Butler explains the relationship between the body and its signification:

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even are performative, in as much as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification. (Butler, 1993, 30)

Butler is arguing that if we attempt to separate the body from its linguistic significations we immediately fall back into an understanding of the body as it is signified. The body has no meaning or coherence prior to language because as matter it is a, “site of inscription [and] cannot be explicitly thematized,” (Butler, 1993, 38). This view of matter conceives of the body as subsequent to any development of language or concepts. If the body were able to sway or shift the linguistic focus it would be functioning outside of its ontological dispositions. The
intelligibility of matter arises within the linguistic framework, so any attempt to access matter detached from language would contradict the faculties that have allowed matter to exist.

Butler does not intend to devalue the need for bodies in maintaining linguistic formation; on the contrary, she argues for an understanding of how the body’s interaction with linguistic space is needed for its (re)production. Butler understands how deeply entrenched body and language, “is not to say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such a distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself. Such an account also fails to understand materiality as that which is bound up with signification from the start,” (Butler, 1993, 30). To try and reduce the body to un-conceptualized matter would be impossible, but to try and negate its own potential for receptivity would also be contradictory. According to Butler, the body is not pre-determined into a specific fashion, nor is it unable to enact linguistic signification. The two components of matter are its construction through and by linguistic understanding and its ability to perform and enact language. When using language to try and address a materiality outside of language, such as in describing a new perceptual experience or attempting to access objects prior to any conceptual understanding. The struggle is that materiality is position in tandem with language and, “the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition,” (Butler, 1993, 30). In this case, matter is constituted by language so that any attempts to refer to matter as not residing within linguistic signification would not only be incoherent but necessarily re-ascribe linguistic understandings to matter.

Butler’s project is to question a feminist appeal to matter and the body as an avenue towards liberation. She warns against any attempt to use matter as an avenue towards uniting the female experience. What could be gained through such a claim would be an irreducible and
ontological unity between women that escapes any linguistic contingency. Many feminists, including Irigaray, want to unite behind the body as a focus of power that could liberate women from oppressive male bodies. While Butler addresses the link between femininity and materiality, she does not distinguish between how female and male bodies interact with language. It would be contradictory for her to recognize either sexed body as functioning differently prior to linguistic distinctions of sex. This does not mean that the male and female bodies are the same for Butler, but that when they come into being, they are equally constituted and constricted by language. The oppression of women is imposed on the body through the use of language, but this act of oppression happens at a distance from the materiality of the female body. If a language does not supply ample opportunity for feminine expression it is a functioning of the culture and not linguistic coherency.

Butler’s descriptions illustrate the body as a receptacle not ‘filled’ by concepts but embodying those concepts. If the body were understood as matter waiting to be filled it would exist prior to conceptualization allowing it its own ontological grounding. But Butler is clear that “the receptacle can have no ontological status, for ontology is constituted by forms, and the receptacle cannot be a form on its own (Butler, 1993, 44). Neither the form nor the matter of the body can exist intelligibly prior to linguistic articulation. The nuanced point that Butler makes is that if we try to understand the matter of the body with language, we are restricted to only understanding it within its linguistic context. We cannot look at a glass of water with tinted lenses and ignore the hue the matter takes on. The body receives that linguistic signification. This process happens because the body is exists in the material realm that is organized through the symbolic and imaginary structures. Any attempt, “to have a concept of matter is to lose the
exteriority that concept is supposed to secure,” which means that our understanding of matter is self-contained in our concept of matter (Butler, 1993, 31).

I will argue that this understanding of the body restricts any consideration of the body’s potential to subvert language. While Butler believes in the potential to subvert social constructions within language, this does not take into account the many dimensions in which language can manipulate the subject. I see subverting language to mean a restructuring of values and concepts so that language can create an equal platform for men and women to flourish. The system of language that is currently used limits understanding of the feminine experience. The language system is produced and reproduced socially so that it represents the social values and structures of its surroundings. In order to subvert the inequalities of society, there needs to be an attack on the language that maintains its hierarchies. A basic and somewhat superficial example of this comes from the Queer community. As the language surrounding queer sexuality broadens and becomes more mainstream, individuals are able to label their sexuality more accurately and enter into public discourse speaking from a linguistically recognized position. Politically, this would mean that a feminist claim should not try to ignore the importance of language in the intelligibility of women’s bodies. Butler’s theories allow for a language that can be creative and liberating. What Butler is not recognizing is the ways in which the creative/liberating language is limited in its creativity. For Irigaray, any continuation of the current language system cannot lead to liberation of women’s bodies and therefore their social equality.

Irigaray doubts the possibility that language can deconstruct a phallocentric society. This difference between Butler and Irigaray reflects their divergent understanding of how language and the body interact. Where Butler is clear that they necessitate each other, and therefore cannot be intelligible in any other manner than is presented through language, Irigaray radicalizes the
body/language relationship by opening up a space for the female body’s articulation outside of language. In Irigaray’s system women and men interact differently from language because of their bodies. She is clear that this is a manifestation of the linguistic order that they enter into at a young age, but the language ignores aspects of the female body that are important for its own individual development. For Irigaray, the female body as matter is made intelligible through language, as Butler would suggest, but because of the female’s position as other, her own subjectivity and relation to her body through language is negated. But when the female body is forced to enact the form that her body has been placed in, she is obliged to use masculine discourse requiring that she dissociate from her body. Irigaray also separates herself from Butler in that she acknowledges that societies have existed where the feminine is allowed to express itself. What this implies is that the matter of the woman’s body was once constituted by language in a way that allowed for a co-arising of matter and form but the acculturated feminine has since been restricted by language. The matter that constitutes the female body has also been changed and affected by entrance of the phallocentric discourse. What has changed is the controlling systems have alter the woman’s relationship to language. At a young age, “everything, or almost everything, is settled as to woman’s allotted sexual role, and especially as to representations of that role that suggested, or attributed, to her, even before the specific, socially sanctioned form of her intervention in the sexual economy is feasible, and before she has access to a unique, ‘properly feminine,’” (TSW, 1985, 62) relation to her body. This implies that language mistreats the little girl’s access to her own body. The little girl as “subject” needs a referencing point of her subject-ness. The little boy is able to find his grounding in the woman, as the universal “Other,” but this option is not available to the little girl. Irigaray says, “this desire for re-presentation, for re-presentation oneself, and for representing oneself in desire is in
some ways *taken away from woman at the outset* as a result of the radical,” rejection of her body (*Speculum, 1985, 83*). In reading Butler with Irigaray I raise the issue how the little girl’s body can be both repressed and formulated linguistically. If the matter of body is entirely contained through the linguistic conceptions that are enacted in it, as Butler suggests, then how could a language misrepresent the body? It would be constituted entirely through language. In the example of queer sexualities, society does not recognize the need or importance for an linguistic space that describes their experience, but this does not deter individuals from identifying or developing their bodies outside of societal norms. Along the same lines, transsexuals are rejecting their formed bodies as incomplete or inaccurate. Butler would understand this as a transgression of language’s ability to properly mark the form of the queer person correctly, but Irigaray could see it as the body pushing back against linguistic constraints.

To return to the issue of bodies subverting language I want to clearly state the problems generated through reading Butler and Irigaray alongside one another. Butler is arguing for a view of subversion that is circumscribed within the current linguistic structure. When bodies are able to create new spaces for their representation, through communities or labels, they can begin to expose the linguistic, oppressive hierarchies that previously excluded them. This approach works within the current linguistic structure in order to dismantle some of the societally constructed inequalities. In contrast, Irigaray identifies the problems of inequality as being reproduced and created because of the linguistic structures. Any use of language, as it is used currently, would only serve to reinforce the female exclusion from discourse.

According to Irigaray, this type of re-articulation that Butler is arguing for would only be possible for a male subject. This is because for Irigaray, the male is given access to language with his body as the universal subject. The woman instead mimics the masculine language, and
uses language very differently from men. The differences between the sexes are not an issue for Butler. She sees both bodies as initially interacting with language in the same way. A more robust understanding of Irigaray’s feminine syntax will show how her understanding of the body exists outside of language.

Irigaray’s attempts to add a pre-acculturated female body into language that would return the women’s body back to herself. The body can then be a space to reclaim and push forth difference. In Irigaray’s syntax, the true feminine can be articulated in a form that allows for the body’s differences. This language sees masculine discourse as forcing women into an impossible linguistic position. As Irigaray says, “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. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself,” (TSW, 1985, 29). She goes on to make the further claim that, “for as ‘she’ says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous,” (TSW, 1985, 29).

Language here must function as an approximation and not a declarative distinction. If the language that we use now is built on a need to delineate and compare, bodily language would add an fluid delineation that separates the speaker from subject. If the woman is the speaker, her position as the subject is already detached from her body because masculine language strictly prohibits women’s direct access to a language that includes uses her exclusion structure its logic. By inserting the body, Irigaray argues, that she can begin to “play” with the boundaries between subject and object (TSW, 1985, 77). This is the function that mimicry serves. By miming the language used by men, women can begin “to make ‘visible’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible” ie. her body (TSW, 1985, 76). The woman cannot act as
the subject because she is not constituted as one through language, but this play within language opens up room for (re)interpretation of the subject/object distinction and a possible create a feminine voice. I argue this is why Irigaray, as I demonstrated in the previous section of feminine syntax, wants to focus on the simultaneity as well as proximity of feminine syntax.

The spatial and temporal are equally important in bodily expression. Where and when an action occurs, marks its relation to the external world. It is also important that bodies require a space and time to exist. While the formulation of the feminine body as being a distinct form of matter is problematic for Butler, it can be better understood if we consider how bodies interact with the world. The human body, male or female, is not a shell of nerves and tissue, idly bumping into external objects. Butler would agree that it is an interactive and creative entity, that while constrained in some ways through its linguistically formation, maintains agency. Even agreeing with this Butler does not recognize the importance of the physical space bodies consume. As a body moves through the world it, at least partially, takes up a space. If one body is sitting in a chair, no other matter can sit in that chair. So when a body exists in the world, it is simultaneously negating another body’s ability to exist in the exact same location. The unique function of matter to exist, while spatially excluding other matter, does not to just apply to bodily matter but all tangible forms. What the body does exhibit is an ability to also create a linguistic space. As Butler suggests, it is the bodies that enact and make language use possible, and this linguistic space must be occupied both by the matter of the body and body using language.

In a phallocentric society the positioning of the body becomes complicated. The erasure and repression of the female is focused on her body. This reduces her ability to be an embodied subject and means that her ability to occupy linguistic space also becomes complicated. The site of woman’s exclusion from language is centered on the differences between her body and the
male body. Because she is not allowed to access this space linguistically, i.e., refer to her body as a subject or as independent from the male body, there may be a potential for her to occupy a tangible space. Irigaray wants the feminine syntax to focus on notions of simultaneity and proximity. She believes in building a bridge from linguistic concepts to corporeal connections as a space for feminine expression. To quote at length from Irigaray:

This ‘style’ does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things tactile. It comes back in touch with itself in that origin in with ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. Simultaneity is its ‘proper’ aspect – a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize. (TSW, 1985, 79)

At this point, it is important to return to Butler’s work. The quote from Irigaray suggests that language can be used to articulate unintelligible matter. Irigaray tries to avoid describing precisely what this kind of matter or syntax would look like, but instead, supplies theoretical tools to slowly approach repressed femininity.

In looking at the female syntax as a bodily writing Irigaray also brings up the idea of a reader that can understand feminine expression. The reader supplies the simultaneity, while the written word can provide proximity. Syntactical proximity can be written into sentences so that the dichotomies that structure our objects and subjects break down. Irigaray says, “every dichotomiz[ation] – and at the same time redoubling – break, including the one between enunciation and utterance, has to be disrupted. Nothing is ever to be posited that is not also reversed and caught up again in the supplementation of this reversal,” (TSW, 1985, 80). In this quote, Irigaray tries to turn the woman’s exclusion from discourse as a subject into a tool for liberating them. If the female is really never the true subject of her own linguistic use, then she can potentially act as both the object and subject of speech. Irigaray thinks that this is only
possible through a bodily assertion. This transcends the meaning of the words by supplying the excluded female body to the text, an extra-linguistic expression. The female body has not been allowed to function in both linguistic and material space. An extra-linguistic expression would privilege the excluded body, allowing for woman to occupy both spaces simultaneously. The female bleeding through onto the page mimes and may resemble the masculine language, but alters it slightly due to woman’s exclusion from the representational structures. This concept of writing is difficult to articulate abstractly and much more difficult to show concretely because of the nature of the project. Any words that can be used to describe it would necessarily fall short of a complete picture because the goals of the syntax are outside of language. Irigaray understands her own trouble in explaining the feminine syntax through language and offers her text *Speculum* as a hybrid text of masculine discourse and feminine syntax. I was unable to see this text as anything bodily.

If this syntax is difficult to articulate and enact, how can it easily be received by a reader? Does there need to be a subject that is ready to react and properly “read” the feminine syntax in order for it to express the body? If that is true, how liberating can a completely incoherent language really be? I think that, although Irigaray wants to stress the simultaneity of embodied writing, it does not distinctly require a reader. While the temporal aspect of the work create an eternal link between the reader and the text, it can also imply a connection of a simultaneous demand for the body. Again, the female body represents the unique linguistic space of a dissociated subject. When this “subject” tries to speak about things in the world, she fails to fully express the distance between herself as the speaker and the object. This is because the masculine discourse relies on her functioning as the ever present referent in his language structure. It would follow that any articulation of this kind, if possible, would be incoherent to a
non-female subject. This is an extreme limitation on its potential to deconstruct linguistic paradigms. Irigaray describes embodied language as a way of “jamming the theoretical framework,” and tearing down what was assumed to be equivocally true (TSW, 1986, 78). Although men would be excluded from understanding this language preliminarily, the new embodied writing would hypothetically create a space for an unburdened feminine to emerge, and then a common understanding could be broached.

To return to the problem of materiality and the body, let us clarify the remaining issues. Irigaray posits that only an understanding of the repressed feminine as maintaining a link to unintelligible matter, and functions outside of conventional linguistic structure, can liberate women. Butler does not constitute an extra-linguistic space as having any possibly use in liberation. Primarily, she sees such a task as failed from the start and cannot serve as a uniting, political endeavor. Irigaray relies on accessing inarticulate matter of the female body as the only move in which to eradicate male domination of subjecthood. Contrary to this, Butler contends that the only way we can understand our bodies, and/or matter, is through its linguistic articulations. No matter what type of embodied writing an author did, they would necessarily be referring back to a linguistic framework that, contains all iterations of the body.

V. Concluding Thoughts:

Luce Irigaray reaches outside the walls of language and grasp at the haunting specter of femininity. Something unique about the female body has been lost or devalued into nonexistence. Irigaray’s project to liberate women from the patriarchy relies on rediscovering this loss. Unfortunately, the patriarchal domination penetrates every aspect of linguistic and social understanding. Irigaray accepts this to mean that any liberation the uses language will still
entrapped in masculine hierarchies. To get outside of language Irigaray focuses on the female body. The differences between the male and female body are the reason for women’s oppression. Because of this, Irigaray posits that only through accepting and then turning these differences in on themselves can we liberate women.

The issue remains that any attempt to matter and concepts outside of language seems impossible. Irigaray offers a possible solution, but it still seems limited. The very fact that she is able to conceive of a pre-linguistic femininity is a function of her language use. By this I mean that the entire notion of embodied syntax and destruction of dichotomies can exist within the masculine discourse, as is present with this thesis. Regardless, Irigaray’s work has created a new framework and lens from which to examine the power of patriarchy.

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1 The ways in which mimicry can be liberating will be discussed in the later section, “Feminine Syntax.”
2 Referencing to Freud’s essays on femininity
3 See quotes on pages 13-15.
4 See section on women’s expression on pain and suffering.
5 It is important to note that body is being referred to language twice in this expression. Once, through the language which allows for matter’s intelligibility, and then again, through the body’s own use of language.
References


