

je, tu, nous

Toward a Culture of Difference

*Luce
Irigaray*

*Translated from the French by
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opened up for many women, and men. . . . She certainly found part of her inspiration for these during her long and often solitary walks in the countryside, in nature. It seems to me that her concern for and writings on this subject are a message not to be forgotten.

*The Neglect of
Female Genealogies*

The question of sexed identity is one of the most important of our time. In my opinion, it's the most important, and for various reasons:

1. *Sexual difference is necessary for the continuation of our species*, not only because it constitutes the locus of procreation, but also because it's here that life is regenerated. The sexes regenerate one another aside from any question of reproduction. The latter might even weaken the life of the species by reducing sexual difference as such to genealogy. Some cultures have realized and acted upon this truth. More often than not we have overlooked it. Which has impoverished our sexuality, made it mechanistic, at times more regressive and depraved than animal sexuality, in spite of all our moral arguments.
2. *The status of sexual difference is obviously related to that of our culture and its languages*. Our centuries-old sexual economy is so often cut off from all aesthetic, speculative, and truly ethical elaboration that the idea of a sexed culture is astonishing to most people. Sex is said to be a matter separate from civilization. A degree of thought

and enquiry will show that it's nothing of the sort; that sexuality, though said to be private, cannot possibly escape from social norms. And the fact that we have no or few specific sexual rules, rites, or ceremonies appropriate to our time simply reinforces this. During the development of our civilization the sexual order has been neglected. It's a sad irony that cultures as sophisticated as ours in many respects should be so lacking or impoverished in others and should now seek sexual rules or secrets from animals, plants, and distant civilizations. What we need for our future civilization, for human maturity, is a sexed culture.

3. *The decline of sexual culture goes hand in hand with the establishment of different values which are supposedly universal but turn out to entail one part of humanity having a hold over the other, here the world of men over that of women. This social and cultural injustice, which nowadays goes unrecognized, must be interpreted and modified so as to liberate our subjective potential in systems of exchange, in the means of communication and creation. In particular, it must be made apparent that we live in accordance with exclusively male genealogical systems. Our societies, made up half by men, half by women, stem from two genealogies and not one: mothers → daughters and fathers → sons (not to mention crossed genealogies: mothers → sons, fathers → daughters). Patriarchal power is organized by submitting one genealogy to the other. Thus, what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolize the woman's relation to her mother. Mother-daughter relationships in patrilinear societies are subordinated to relations between men.*

From Goddesses to Gods

Societies other than patriarchal ones correlate to traditions in which there is a female cultural order, transmitted from mothers to daughters. Johann Jacob Bachofen, for example, outlines the basic characteristics of this female civilization in *Du règne de la mère au patriarcat*.¹ I myself have analyzed certain events marking the transfer of the transmission of maternal-female power from the daughter to the son in *Amante marine*² (particularly in the chapters '*Quand naissent les dieux*' and '*Lèvres voilées*').

It should be pointed out that, with this transformation of spiritual genealogy, both the style and quality of the economy of discourse changed. Thus, in seizing hold of the oracle, of truth, the gods-men severed them from their earthly and corporeal roots. The change was accompanied by modifications in law, justice, and rhetoric. A new logical order was established, censoring women's speech and gradually making it inaudible.

Through incredible neglect and disregard, patriarchal traditions have wiped out traces of mother-daughter genealogies. Nowadays the majority of scientists claim, usually in good faith, that these have never existed except as a figment of the female or feminist imagination. Obviously, these scholars (men and women) haven't studied this question at length; they don't really know anything about it, yet they take the liberty of passing judgment according to the focus of their own research, without having sufficiently examined our cul-

¹Adrien Turel, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).

²*Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), originally published as *Amante Marine* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

tural history. This neglect is symptomatic of patriarchal culture. It explains the dereliction and errancy of modern man, who knows nothing of the origins of his relations with the world.

How Can We Dwell on Earth Without Goddesses?

In reference to this question, the French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux, analyzes in a paper entitled "*L'oubli de Hestia*"³ the nostalgic path Heidegger pursued in the quest for a possibility of dwelling on earth as mortals without renouncing the dimension of the divine as fulfillment and celebration. He explains that the term *Being* is often identified with the term *dwelling* in Heidegger's philosophy and that the coincidence of the two grows more marked as his thought progresses. To show this, Jean-Joseph Goux uses the Indo-European roots of these words. Now, these very same roots—signifying *Being* and *dwelling*—are related to the name of Hestia, the female divinity who guarded the flame of the domestic hearth. The divine is therefore watched over by the woman at home. It is transmitted from mother to daughter. When a daughter marries, the mother lights a torch at the altar of her own hearth, and, preceding the young couple, she carries it to their new residence. She thus lights the first fire of her daughter's domestic altar. The fire stands for the fact that the woman is the guardian of purity. Purity here does not signify defensive or prudish virginity, as some of our profane contemporaries

³*Langages*, special issue: *Le sexe linguistique*, no. 85 (March 1987). This chapter is a revised version of the introduction I wrote for this collection of papers by Marie Mauxion, Patrizia Violi, Luisa Muraro, Marina Mizzau, Jean-Joseph Goux, Eliane Koskas, H el ene Rouch, and Luce Irigaray.

might take it to mean, nor does it signify an allegiance to patriarchal culture and its definition of virginity as an exchange value between men; it signifies the woman's fidelity to her identity and female genealogy.⁴ Respect for these female filiations and qualities attests to the sacred character of the home. The loss of the dimension of earthly inhabitation goes hand in hand with the neglect of Hestia in favor of the male gods, defined as celestial by philosophy from Plato onwards. These extraterrestrial gods would seem to have made us strangers to life on earth, which from then on has been thought of as an exile.

Such an interpretation of life on earth, the break with female genealogy, the disregard for its gods, its qualities, do nothing to bring about fulfillment in marriage, understood in the more general sense as the carnal and spiritual alliance between a man and a woman. However well a couple may get along, without a transformation of language and culture there can be no space for their intersubjective relations as a couple. The ensuing tragedies are often more evident in art and literature than in other forms of representation that are to a greater extent subject to the regulations of logical truth or the social order, in which the artificial scission between private life and public life maintains a collusive silence on the disasters of loving relationships.

How She Became Not-He

The way culture has become patriarchal manifests itself, therefore, in the evolution of relations between the sexes. It is also

⁴At least this is the way I wished to interpret it. However, the privileging of fire and the later characteristic of this divinity are problematic. Unless what can be understood by it is a sort of memory of aboriginal traditions?

marked in the deep economy of language. Grammatical gender is neither motiveless nor arbitrary. One need only do a synchronic and diachronic study of several languages in order to show that the distribution of grammatical gender is based on semantics, that it has a meaning related to our corporeal and sensory experience, that it varies according to time and place. So the same experience—if it's still permissible to talk like this, though to some extent sexual difference permits it—might be expressed by different grammatical genders depending on whether the culture, the moment in History, valorizes a sex or not. Sexual difference cannot therefore be reduced to a simple, extralinguistic fact of nature. It conditions language and is conditioned by it. It not only determines the system of pronouns, possessive adjectives, but also the gender of words and their division into grammatical classes: animate/inanimate, concrete/abstract, masculine/feminine, for example. It's situated at the junction of nature and culture. But patriarchal cultures have reduced the value of the feminine to such a degree that their reality and their description of the world are incorrect. Thus, instead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality. Just as an actual woman is often confined to the sexual domain in the strict sense of the term, so the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject. This accounts for the fact that women find it so difficult to speak and to be heard as women. They are excluded and denied by the patriarchal linguistic order. They cannot be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner.

The Neutral As Loss of Identity

It is this untenable position in relation to discourse that causes most women who wish to have a say in culture to fall back on what they believe to be a neutral position. Yet this position is impossible in our languages. A woman denies her sex and gender in doing this. It's true that culture conditions her to do it. To behave in any other way, she must go through a complex and painful process, a real conversion to the female gender. This would seem to be the only way out of the loss of sexed subjective identity. Most women's experience tells them, on a cultural level, that they are first and foremost asexual or neuter, apart from when they are subjected to the norms of the sexual arena in the strict sense and to family stereotypes. The difficulties they face in order to enter the between-men cultural world lead almost all of them, including those who call themselves feminists, to renounce their female identity and relationships with other women, bringing them to an individual and collective impasse when it comes to communication. Culture, too, is considerably impoverished, reduced to a single pole of sexed identity.

The point of such thoughts, as well as those developed throughout this book, is certainly not just to denounce or criticize. They attempt to interpret the social structure with regard to its sexual order, or disorder. They also suggest specific tools for the analysis of this dimension and show, through examples taken from several important areas of current knowledge, that social justice cannot be achieved without a cultural transformation, the nature of which we can barely conceive.

Social injustice is due not only to economic inequalities in the strict sense. Our needs are not restricted to housing, clothing, and feeding ourselves. And what's more, I think it's a cul-

tural distortion that leads to some people having a considerable amount of money whereas others do not. To invent currency was perhaps to create social disorder. In any case, our need first and foremost is for a right to human dignity for everyone. That means we need laws that valorize difference. Not all subjects are the same, nor equal, and it wouldn't be right for them to be so. That's particularly true for the sexes. Therefore, it's important to understand and modify the instruments of society and culture that regulate subjective and objective rights. Social justice, and especially sexual justice, cannot be achieved without changing the laws of language and the conceptions of truths and values structuring the social order. Changing the instruments of culture is just as important in the medium to long term as a redistribution of goods in the strict sense. You can't have one without the other.

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*Religious and
Civil Myths*

Many of us are under the impression that all we have to do is not enter a church, refuse to practice the sacraments, and never read the sacred texts in order to be free from the influence of religion on our lives. In our countries, we have—at least in theory—a system that separates church from state, enabling us to maintain this illusion. Indeed, these measures taken to dissociate powers do testify to a relative degree of tolerance for the exercise of civil and religious passions. Nonetheless, this does not solve the problem of how significant is the influence of religion upon culture. Thus we are all imbued with the many Greek, Latin, Oriental, Jewish, and Christian traditions, at least, particularly through the art, philosophy, and myths we live by, exchange, and perpetuate, often without our realizing. The passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what already exists. The theories of Marx and Freud are not adequate, because they remain bound to a patriarchal mythology which hardly ever questions itself as such. Patriarchy, like the phallocracy that goes with it, are in part myths which, because they don't stand back to question themselves, take themselves to be the only order possible. That's why we tend to think of myths as representing secondary re-

the mother's body. If she isn't the owner of it as such, she could be asked to whom or for what she would like to make a gift of it. That would be a mark, symbolically at least, of the gift she has given to the child and the debt, inestimable in our patriarchal commercial system, of the child in return.

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The Culture of Difference

One of the distinctive features of the female body is its toleration of the other's growth within itself without incurring illness or death for either one of the living organisms. Unfortunately, culture has practically inverted the meaning of this economy of respect for the other. It has blindly venerated the mother-son relationship to the point of religious fetishism, but has given no interpretation to the model of tolerance of the other within and with a self that this relationship manifests. A woman's body in fact gives equal opportunities of life to the boys and to the girls conceived in it through the coming together of male and female chromosomes.

The between-men culture works in the opposite sense. The way it is structured excludes what the other sex brings to its society. Whereas the female body engenders with respect for difference, the patriarchal social body constructs itself hierarchically, excluding difference. Woman-as-other has to remain the natural substratum in this social construction, a substratum whose importance remains unclear in its relational signification. Clearly, the cult of the mother-son relationship demonstrates female tolerance. Yet, to date, girls are also engendered by male semen. They are not produced partheno-

genetically by their mother, even if the outcome of the chromosomal encounter is the birth of a child who resembles her.

Our civilizations, therefore, are lacking in two respects; they present us with two repressions, two injustices or anomalies:

1. women, who have given life and growth to the other within themselves, are excluded from the order of the same which men alone set up
2. the girl child, although conceived by a man and a woman, doesn't enter society as the father's child with the same status as that accorded the son. She remains outside culture, kept as a natural body good only for procreation.

The difficulties women have in gaining recognition for their social and political rights are rooted in this insufficiently thought out relation between biology and culture. At present, to deny all explanations of a biological kind—because biology has paradoxically been used to exploit women—is to deny the key to interpreting this exploitation. It also comes down to remaining within the cultural naïveté that dates back to when the men-gods established their reign: only that which manifests itself in the form of a man is the divine child of the father, only that showing an immediate resemblance to the father may be legitimized as a valued son. The deformed or the atypical are to be hidden in shame. And as for women, they have to reside in darkness, behind veils, indoors; they are stripped of their identity insofar as they are a non-manifestation of forms corresponding to male-sexed chromosomes.

In order to obtain a subjective status equivalent to that of men, women must therefore gain recognition for their difference. They must affirm themselves as valid subjects, daughters of a mother and a father, respecting the other within themselves and demanding that same respect from society.

Yet the whole framework of their identity has to be constructed, or reconstructed. I'd like to suggest a few simple examples of the way identity relations between mothers and daughters might be improved, as this is the least cultured space of our societies. Indeed, such relations are subject to a double exclusion from patriarchal cultures because the woman is rejected from them as woman subject, and the daughter is not given equal recognition as girl subject. The values dominating our civilizations are those that show clearly they belong to the male gender.

How can we get out of this vicious circle of the patriarchal phallographic order? How are we to give girls the possibility of spirit or soul? We can do it through subjective relations between mothers and daughters. The following, then, are a few practical suggestions for the development of mother-daughter relationships.

1. Learn once again to respect life and nourishment. Which means regaining respect for the mother and nature. We often forget that not all debts can be paid by money alone and that not all nourishment can be bought. This is a point that obviously concerns boy children, too, but it's vital for the rediscovery of a female identity.
2. In all homes and all public places, attractive images (not involving advertising) of the mother-daughter couple should be displayed. It's very damaging for girls always to be faced with representations of mother and son, especially in the religious dimension. I'd suggest to all Christian women, for example, that they place an image depicting Mary and her mother Anne in their living room, in their daughters' rooms, and in their own room. There are sculptures and easily reproducible paintings of them available. I'd also advise them to display photographs of themselves with their daughter(s), or maybe with their mother. They could also have photographs of

the triangle: mother, father, daughter. The point of these representations is to give girls a valid representation of their genealogy, an essential condition for the constitution of their identity.

3. I suggest mothers create opportunities to use the feminine plural with their daughter(s). They could also invent words and expressions to designate realities they feel and share but for which they lack language.
4. It's also important for mothers and daughters to find or make objects they can exchange between themselves so that they can be defined as female I↔you (*je↔tu*). I say "exchangeable" since objects that may be shared, divided, and consumed together can maintain unity. Normally, women only exchange remarks to do with children, food, or perhaps their appearance and sexual exploits. These are not exchangeable objects. Yet to speak well of oneself and others, it helps to be able to communicate about the realities of the world, to be able to exchange something.
5. It would be helpful if, from an early age, mothers taught daughters respect for the non-hierarchical difference of the sexes: *he* means *he*, *she* means *she*. *He* and *she* cannot be reduced to complementary functions but correspond to different identities. Women and men, mothers and fathers, girls and boys have different forms and qualities. They can't be identified solely through actions or roles alone.
6. To establish and maintain relations with oneself and with the other, space is essential. Often women are confined to the inner spaces of their womb or their sex insofar as they serve procreation and male desire. It's important for them to have their own outer space, enabling them to go from the inside to the outside of themselves, to experience themselves as autonomous and free subjects. How

can the creation of this space between mothers and daughters be given a chance? The following are a few suggestions:

- a) As often as possible, substitute human value for artificial value.
- b) Avoid being exiled from natural and cosmic space.
- c) Play with mirror phenomena, with symmetrical and asymmetrical phenomena (particularly right-left) to minimize the chances of being projected into or devoured by the other, and of indifferenciation with the other: whether the mother, the father, future lover, etc.
- d) Learn not always to follow the same path, which doesn't mean to dissipate your energies, but rather to know how to circulate from outside to inside, from inside to outside yourself.
- e) Between mother and daughter, interpose small handmade objects to make up for the losses of spatial identity, for intrusions into personal space.
- f) Don't restrict yourself to describing, reproducing, and repeating what exists, but know how to invent or imagine what hasn't yet taken place.
- g) In verbal exchanges, create sentences in which I-woman (*je-femme*) talks to you-woman (*tu-femme*), particularly of yourself or of a third woman. The fact that this sort of language barely exists greatly restricts women's space for subjective freedom. It's possible to start to create it with everyday language. Mothers and daughters could do it

in affective and educational games. In concrete terms, that means that the mother-woman should speak to the daughter-woman, use feminine grammatical forms, talk about things that concern the two of them, talk about herself and ask her daughter to do the same, bring up her genealogy, especially the relation to her own mother, tell her daughter about women currently involved in public life, or Historical or mythological women, ask her daughter to tell her about her girlfriends, and so on. When girls start school, the discourse they learn is that of he/they (*il(s)*), or the between-men culture (*Ventre-il(s)*). Even if coeducational schools do have some advantages, in this respect they are not particularly favorable to the development of girls' identity as long as linguistic rules (grammatical, semantic, lexicological) don't progress.

Today, only a mother can see to it that her daughter, her daughters, form(s) a girl's identity. Daughters that we are, more aware of the issues concerning our liberation, we can also educate our mothers and educate each other among ourselves. I think this is essential for the social and cultural changes we need.

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Writing As a Woman

Alice Jardine: What does it mean to you to write at the end of the twentieth century?¹

Luce Irigaray: It means several things; I'll list those I can think of right now:

1. I live at the end of the twentieth century and I am of an age to write.
2. I earn my living by writing. I am not a woman supported by a man or men; I have to meet my own material needs. I do scientific research and my job is to work on particular issues and to pass on the results of my work.
3. One means of communicating thought, in the late twentieth century, is by alphabetical writing. Thus, I use it to communicate even if I think this method is limiting to what I have to say, especially as a woman.
4. Writing enables me to transmit my thought to many people whom I don't know, who don't speak the same

¹This interview was carried out by Alice Jardine and Anne Menke of Harvard University. It is part of a study of women's writing.

Also available in English
by the same author:
An Ethics of Sexual Difference
Speculum of the Other Woman

Luce Irigaray

THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE

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may change; they may or may not coincide with those of some other, man or woman. Today, not tomorrow. Don't force yourselves to repeat, don't congeal your dreams or desires in unique and definitive representations. You have so many continents to explore that if you set up borders for yourselves you won't be able to "enjoy" all of your own "nature."

When Our Lips Speak Together

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? Listen: all round us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same . . . Same . . . Always the same.

If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They'll vanish, and we'll be lost. Far off, up high. Absent from ourselves: we'll be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don't have any. We change names as men exchange us, as they use us, use us up. It would be frivolous of us, exchanged by them, to be so changeable.

How can I touch you if you're not there? Your blood has become their meaning. They can speak to each other, and about us. But what about us? Come out of their language. Try to go back through the names they've given you. I'll wait for you,

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I'm waiting for myself. Come back. It's not so hard. You stay here, and you won't be absorbed into familiar scenes, worn-out phrases, routine gestures. Into bodies already encoded within a system. Try to pay attention to yourself. To me. Without letting convention, or habit, distract you.

For example: "I love you" is addressed by convention or habit to an enigma—an other. An other body, an other sex. I love you: I don't quite know who, or what. "I love" flows away, is buried, drowned, burned, lost in a void. We'll have to wait for the return of "I love." Perhaps a long time, perhaps forever. Where has "I love" gone? What has become of me? "I love" lies in wait for the other. Has he swallowed me up? Spat me out? Taken me? Left me? Locked me up? Thrown me out? What's he like now? No longer (like) me? When he tells me "I love you," is he giving me back? Or is he giving himself in that form? His? Mine? The same? Another? But then where am I, what have I become?

When you say I love you—staying right here, close to you, close to me—you're saying I love myself. You don't need to wait for it to be given back; neither do I. We don't owe each other anything. That "I love you" is neither gift nor debt. You "give" me nothing when you touch yourself, touch me, when you touch yourself again through me. You don't give yourself. What would I do with you, with myself, wrapped up like a gift? You keep our selves to the extent that you share us. You find our selves to the extent that you trust us. Alternatives, oppositions, choices, bargains like these have no business between us. Unless we restage their commerce, and remain within their order. Where "we" has no place.

I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed. There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us,

from us. Blood is familiar, close. You are all red. And so very white. Both at once. You don't become red by losing your candid whiteness. You are white because you have remained close to blood. White and red at once, we give birth to all the colors: pinks, browns, blonds, greens, blues . . . For this whiteness is no sham. It is not dead blood, black blood. Sham is black. It absorbs everything, closed in on itself, trying to come back to life. Trying in vain . . . Whereas red's whiteness takes nothing away. Luminous, without autarchy, it gives back as much as it receives.

We are luminous. Neither one nor two. I've never known how to count. Up to you. In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one. Let's leave *one* to them: their oneness, with its prerogatives, its domination, its solipsism: like the sun's. And the strange way they divide up their couples, with the other as the image of the one. Only an image. So any move toward the other means turning back to the attraction of one's own mirage. A (scarcely) living mirror, she/it is frozen, mute. More lifelike. The ebb and flow of our lives spent in the exhausting labor of copying, miming. Dedicated to reproducing—that sameness in which we have remained for centuries, as the other.

But how can I put "I love you" differently? I love you, my indifferent one? That still means yielding to their language. They've left us only lacks, deficiencies, to designate ourselves. They've left us their negative(s). We ought to be—that's already going too far—indifferent.

Indifferent one, keep still. When you stir, you disturb their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire. Their world. Indifferent one, you mustn't move, or be moved, unless they call you. If they say "come," then you may

go ahead. Barely. Adapting yourself to whatever need they have, or don't have, for the presence of their own image. One step, or two. No more. No exuberance. No turbulence. Otherwise you'll smash everything. The ice, the mirror. Their earth, their mother. And what about your life? You must pretend to receive it from them. You're an indifferent, insignificant little receptacle, subject to their demands alone.

So they think we're indifferent. Doesn't that make you laugh? At least for a moment, here and now? *We are indifferent?* (If you keep on laughing that way, we'll never be able to talk to each other. We'll remain absorbed in their words, violated by them. So let's try to take back some part of our mouth to speak with.) Not different; that's right. Still . . . No, that would be too easy. And that "not" still keeps us separate so we can be compared. Disconnected that way, no more "us"? Are we alike? If you like. It's a little abstract. I don't quite understand "alike." Do you? Alike in whose eyes? in what terms? by what standard? with reference to what third? I'm touching you, that's quite enough to let me know that you are my body.

I love you: our two lips cannot separate to let just *one* word pass. A single word that would say "you," or "me." Or "equals"; she who loves, she who is loved. Closed and open, neither ever excluding the other, they say they both love each other. Together. To produce a single precise word, they would have to stay apart. Definitely parted. Kept at a distance, separated by *one word*.

But where would that word come from? Perfectly correct, closed up tight, wrapped around its meaning. Without any opening, any fault. "You." "Me." You may laugh . . . Closed and faultless, it is no longer you or me. Without lips, there is no more "us." The unity, the truth, the propriety of words comes from their lack of lips, their forgetting of lips. Words are mute, when they are uttered once and for all. Neatly wrapped up so

that their meaning—their blood—won't escape. Like the children of men? Not ours. And besides, do we need, or want, children? What for? Here and now, we are close. Men and women have children to embody their closeness, their distance. But we?

I love you, childhood. I love you who are neither mother (forgive me, mother, I prefer a woman) nor sister. Neither daughter nor son. I love you—and where I love you, what do I care about the lineage of our fathers, or their desire for reproductions of men? Or their genealogical institutions? What need have I for husband or wife, for family, persona, role, function? Let's leave all those to men's reproductive laws. I love you, your body, here and now. I/you touch you/me, that's quite enough for us to feel alive.

Open your lips; don't open them simply. I don't open them simply. We—you/I—are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: *a single word* cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct. You don't understand a thing? No more than they understand you.

Speak, all the same. It's our good fortune that your language isn't formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once. You touch me all over at the same time. In all senses. Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time? To seduce, to satisfy, to fill one of my "holes"? With you, I don't have any. We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the other. By our lips

we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment.

Kiss me. Two lips kissing two lips: openness is ours again. Our "world." And the passage from the inside out, from the outside in, the passage between us, is limitless. Without end. No knot or loop, no mouth ever stops our exchanges. Between us the house has no wall, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion: openness is never spent nor sated.

We haven't been taught, nor allowed, to express multiplicity. To do that is to speak improperly. Of course, we might—we were supposed to?—exhibit one "truth" while sensing, withholding, muffling another. Truth's other side—its complement? its remainder?—stayed hidden. Secret. Inside and outside, we were not supposed to be the same. That doesn't suit their desires. Veiling and unveiling: isn't that what interests them? What keeps them busy? Always repeating the same operation, every time. On every woman.

You/I become two, then, for their pleasure. But thus divided in two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me. Outside, you try to conform to an alien order. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. You imitate whatever comes close. You become whatever touches you. In your eagerness to find yourself again, you move indefinitely far from yourself. From me. Taking one model after another, passing from master to master, changing face, form, and language with each new power that dominates you. You/we are sundered; as you allow yourself to be abused, you become an impassive travesty. You no longer return indifferent; you return closed, impenetrable.

Speak to me. You can't? You no longer want to? You want to hold back? Remain silent? White? Virginal? Keep the inside self to yourself? But it doesn't exist without the other. Don't tear yourself apart like that with choices imposed on you. *Between us*, there's no rupture between virginal and nonvirginal. No event that makes us women. Long before your birth, you touched yourself, innocently. Your/my body doesn't acquire its sex through an operation. Through the action of some power, function, or organ. Without any intervention or special manipulation, you are a woman already. There is no need for an outside; the other already affects you. It is inseparable from you. You are altered forever, through and through. That is your crime, which you didn't commit: you disturb their love of property.

How can I tell you that there is no possible evil in your sexual pleasure—you who are a stranger to good(s). That the fault only comes about when they strip you of your openness and close you up, marking you with signs of possession; then they can break in, commit infractions and transgressions and play other games with the law. Games in which they—and you?—speculate on your whiteness. If we play along, we let ourselves be abused, destroyed. We remain indefinitely distant from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends. That would be our flaw. If we submit to their reasoning, we are guilty. Their strategy, intentional or not, is calculated to make us guilty.

You come back, divided: "we" are no more. You are split into red and white, black and white: how can we find each other again? How can we touch each other once more? Cut up, dispatched, finished: our pleasure is trapped in their system, where a virgin is one as yet unmarked by them, for them. One who is not yet made woman by and for them. Not yet imprinted with their sex, their language. Not yet penetrated, possessed by them. Remaining in that candor that waits for them, that is nothing without them, a void without them. A virgin is the

future of their exchanges, transactions, transports. A kind of reserve for their explorations, consummations, exploitations. The advent of their desire, Not of ours.

How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That that has always already happened, without their efforts. And that their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. It's not that we have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips.

How can we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced . . . How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts? Without reserve, without the immaculate whiteness that shores up their systems. You know that we are never completed, but that we only embrace ourselves whole. That one after another, parts—of the body, of space, of time—interrupt the flow of our blood. Paralyze, petrify, immobilize us. Make us paler. Almost frigid.

Wait. My blood is coming back. From their senses. It's warm inside us again. Among us. Their words are emptying out, becoming bloodless, Dead skins. While our lips are growing red again. They're stirring, moving, they want to speak. You mean . . .? What? Nothing. Everything. Yes. Be patient. You'll say it all. Begin with what you feel, right here, right now. Our all will come.

But you can't anticipate it, foresee it, program it. Our all cannot be projected, or mastered. Our whole body is moved.

No surface holds. No figure, line, or point remains. No ground subsists. But no abyss, either. Depth, for us, is not a chasm. Without a solid crust, there is no precipice. Our depth is the thickness of our body, our all touching itself. Where top and bottom, inside and outside, in front and behind, above and below are not separated, remote, out of touch. Our all intermingled. Without breaks or gaps.

If you/I hesitate to speak, isn't it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is "well" or "badly"? With what are we conforming if we speak "well"? What hierarchy, what subordination lurks there, waiting to break our resistance? What claim to raise ourselves up in a worthier discourse? Erection is no business of ours: we are at home on the flatlands. We have so much space to share. Our horizon will never stop expanding; we are always open. Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there is will not be enough. We can never complete the circuit, explore our periphery: we have so many dimensions. If you want to speak "well," you pull yourself in, you become narrower as you rise. Stretching upward, reaching higher, you pull yourself away from the limitless realm of your body. Don't make yourself erect, you'll leave us. The sky isn't up there: it's between us.

And don't worry about the "right" word. There isn't any. No truth between our lips. There is room enough for everything to exist. Everything is worth exchanging, nothing is privileged, nothing is refused. Exchange? Everything is exchanged, yet there are no transactions. Between us, there are no proprietors, no purchasers, no determinable objects, no prices. Our bodies are nourished by our mutual pleasure. Our abundance is inexhaustible: it knows neither want nor plenty. Since we give each other (our) all, with nothing held back, nothing

hoarded, our exchanges are without terms, without end. How can I say it? The language we know is so limited . . .

Why speak? you'll ask me. We feel the same things at the same time. Aren't my hands, my eyes, my mouth, my lips, my body enough for you? Isn't what they are saying to you sufficient? I could answer "yes," but that would be too easy. Too much a matter of reassuring you/us.

If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized. Asleep again, unsatisfied, we shall fall back upon the words of men—who, for their part, have "known" for a long time. But *not our body*. Seduced, attracted, fascinated, ecstatic with our becoming, we shall remain paralyzed. Deprived of *our movements*. Rigid, whereas we are made for endless change. Without leaps or falls, and without repetition.

Keep on going, without getting out of breath. Your body is not the same today as yesterday. Your body remembers. There's no need for *you* to remember. No need to hold fast to yesterday, to store it up as capital in your head. Your memory? Your body expresses yesterday in what it wants today. If you think: yesterday I was, tomorrow I shall be, you are thinking: I have died a little. Be what you are becoming, without clinging to what you might have been, what you might yet be. Never settle. Let's leave definitiveness to the undecided; we don't need it. Our body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it. But their "truth" immobilizes us, turns us into statues, if we can't loose its hold on us. If we can't defuse its power by trying to say, right here and now, how we are moved.

You are moving. You never stay still. You never stay. You never "are." How can I say "you," when you are always other?

How can I speak to you? You remain in flux, never congealing or solidifying. What will make that current flow into words? It is multiple, devoid of causes, meanings, simple qualities. Yet it cannot be decomposed. These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility. This life—which will perhaps be called our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. All this remains very strange to anyone claiming to stand on solid ground.

Speak, all the same. Between us, "hardness" isn't necessary. We know the contours of our bodies well enough to love fluidity. Our density can do without trenchancy or rigidity. We are not drawn to dead bodies.

But how can we stay alive when we are far apart? There's the danger. How can I wait for you to return if when you're far away from me you cannot also be near? If I have nothing palpable to help me recall in the here and now the touch of our bodies. Open to the infinity of our separation, wrapped up in the intangible sensation of absence, how can we continue to live as ourselves? How can we keep ourselves from becoming absorbed once again in their violating language? From being embodied as mourning. We must learn to speak to each other so that we can embrace from afar. When I touch myself, I am surely remembering you. But so much has been said, and said of us, that separates us.

Let's hurry and invent our own phrases. So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace. We are so subtle that nothing can stand in our way, nothing can stop us from reaching each other, even fleetingly, if we can find means of communication that have *our* density. We shall pass imperceptibly through every barrier, unharmed, to find each other. No one will see a thing. Our strength lies in the very weakness of our

resistance. For a long time now they have appreciated what our suppleness is worth for their own embraces and impressions. Why not enjoy it ourselves? Rather than letting ourselves be subjected to their branding. Rather than being fixed, stabilized, immobilized. Separated.

Don't cry. One day we'll manage to say ourselves. And what we say will be even lovelier than our tears. Wholly fluent.

Already, I carry you with me everywhere. Not like a child, a burden, a weight, however beloved and precious. You are not *in me*. I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, my head. Nor in my memory, my mind, my language. You are there, like my skin. With you I am certain of existing beyond all appearances, all disguises, all designations. I am assured of living because you are duplicating my life. Which doesn't mean that you give me yours, or subordinate it to mine. The fact that you live lets me know I am alive, so long as you are neither my counterpart nor my copy.

How can I say it differently? We exist only as two? We live by twos beyond all mirages, images, and mirrors. Between us, one is not the "real" and the other her imitation; one is not the original and the other her copy. Although we can dissimulate perfectly within their economy, we relate to one another without simulacrum. Our resemblance does without semblances: for in our bodies, we are already the same. Touch yourself, touch me, you'll "see."

No need to fashion a mirror image to be "doubled," to repeat ourselves—a second time. Prior to any representation, we are two. Let those two—made for you by your blood, evoked for you by my body—come together alive. You will always have the touching beauty of a first time, if you aren't congealed in reproductions. You will always be moved for the first time, if you aren't immobilized in any form of repetition.

We can do without models, standards, or examples. Let's never give ourselves orders, commands, or prohibitions. Let our imperatives be only appeals to move, to be moved, together. Let's never lay down the law to each other, or moralize, or make war. Let's not claim to be right, or claim the right to criticize one another. If one of us sits in judgment, our existence comes to an end. And what I love in you, in myself, in us no longer takes place: the birth that is never accomplished, the body never created once and for all, the form never definitively completed, the face always still to be formed. The lips never opened or closed on a truth.

Light, for us, is not violent. Not deadly. For us the sun does not simply rise or set. Day and night are mingled in our gazes. Our gestures. Our bodies. Strictly speaking, we cast no shadow. There is no danger that one or the other may be a darker double. I want to remain nocturnal, and find my night softly luminous, in you. And don't by any means imagine that I love you shining like a beacon, lording it over everything around you. If we divide light from night, we give up the lightness of our mixture, solidify those heterogeneities that make us so consistently whole. We put ourselves into watertight compartments, break ourselves up into parts, cut ourselves in two, and more. Whereas we are always one and the other, at the same time. If we separate ourselves that way, we "all" stop being born. Without limits or borders, except those of our moving bodies.

And only the limiting effect of time can make us stop speaking to each other. Don't worry. I—continue. Under all these artificial constraints of time and space, I embrace you endlessly. Others may make fetishes of us to separate us: that's their business. Let's not immobilize ourselves in these borrowed notions.

And if I have so often insisted on negatives: *not, nor, without* . . . it has been to remind you, to remind us, that we only

touch each other naked. And that, to find ourselves once again in that state, we have a lot to take off. So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other. They have wrapped us for so long in their desires, we have adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin. Removed from our skin, we remain distant. You and I, apart.

You? I? That's still saying too much. Dividing too sharply between us: all.

Publisher's Note and Notes on Selected Terms

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Some modifications of the format of the original edition of this book have been made for the convenience of readers and some in accordance with the conventions of book-making in the English-speaking world.

NOTES ON SELECTED TERMS

- "Alice" underground ("*Alice*" *sous-terre*)
In the original, Irigaray rewrites the name Soutter (the director of the film that is the ostensible subject of "The Looking-Glass, from the Other Side") to point up the subversive or underground nature of her speaker's perspective, that of a female subject who refuses to be circumscribed or named according to the rules of patriarchal logic.
- all (*toute[s]*)
In translation, it is not always possible to convey Irigaray's idiosyncratic transformations of French grammatical structures, as in *toute(s)*, a female subject that is simultaneously singular and plural, as such, an example of her "speaking (as) woman" (*parler-femme*).
- commodities (*marchandises*)
Because English lacks gender, the term is neutralized in translation,