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Making Mischief: Thinking Through Women's Solidarity and Sexuate Difference with Luce Irigaray and Gayatri Spivak

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9.1 Introduction

Luce Irigaray's thinking through of intersubjectivity in terms of the relations between two sexuate subjects raises the question, as Gail Schwab suggests, of thinking through sexuate difference as a global model for ethics.¹ In this chapter, I turn to Gayatri Spivak's work in order to meditate further on the possibility of thinking through an Irigarayan-inspired ethics of sexuate difference in our contemporary global contexts. How can we articulate a *universal* ethics of sexuate difference? What issues does this raise for structuring relations between and among women? How do we communicate cross-culturally between traditions in a way that, as I argue elsewhere, Luce Irigaray attempts to

¹ Schwab, 'Sexual Difference as a Model'. For a thorough explanation of Irigaray's notion of sexuate difference, see Jones, 'Irigaray', p. 4.

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do in *Between East and West*?² With these questions in mind, this chapter examines how Spivak mobilises Irigaray's work on sexuete difference to address women's solidarity and what this suggests about the possibility of cross-cultural communication between and among women.³ In particular, this chapter considers the way Spivak engages with—and goes beyond—Irigaray's thinking of sexuete difference in two articles: 'French feminism in an international frame' (1981) and 'French feminism revisited' (1993).

In Spivak's 1981 article 'French feminism in an international frame', she uncovers the way mainstream US feminist discourse (in the late 1970s) failed to recognise the problematic way in which it structured relations between women, including (and especially) women in what Spivak loosely terms the Third World.⁴ Spivak recognises the value of Irigaray's 'productively conflictual' symptomatic reading and suggests that Irigaray's writing simultaneously works 'against sexism and for feminism, with the lines forever shifting'.⁵ Spivak demonstrates how Irigaray's call for positive and autonomous representations of femininity is intimately connected to Irigaray's refiguration of feminine desire. Interestingly, Spivak argues that 'paradoxically enough' she finds in this 'seemingly esoteric area of concern' (of female desire in Irigaray's reimagining of feminine subjectivity) 'a way of reaffirming the historically discontinuous yet common "object-ification" of the sexed subject as woman'.⁶ In other words, on my reading, Spivak finds in Irigaray's positive articulation of feminine desire as double—that refuses phallogocentric logic and the categorising of woman as sex or reproductive object—ways in which we can connect women across the globe. I turn to Spivak's work because she argues that some of the most valuable lessons we

² Roberts, *Cultivating Difference*, pp. 58–76.

³ I use Ofelia Schutte's phrase 'cross-cultural communication' to indicate non-hierarchical continuously negotiated relations of cultural difference. Schutte, 'Cultural Alterity', p. 53.

⁴ Spivak goes on in later work to critique and problematise the use of this phrase. For more on this point, see Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 55.

⁵ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 80.

⁶ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 180.

can learn from Irigaray's philosophy are how to negotiate the structures of violence that effect women's situations on both sides of imperialism.

Spivak's work in these papers explores non-appropriative structures for imagining relations between and among women in a global context that demonstrate an alternative to the Western liberal notion of 'multiculturalism' that I will argue is founded upon phallogocentric logic. She suggests that the first step towards organising women's solidarity consists in acknowledging the contradictions and paradoxes that structure relations between and among women. In doing so, Spivak's work undermines the phallogocentric logic that is founded upon the principles of non-contradiction. In Spivak's 1981 paper, she founds the non-appropriative structures of women's global solidarity on a refiguring of female desire. Intimately linked to this line of thought, she goes on to suggest in her 1993 paper 'French feminism revisited' that we can structure relations between postcolonial and metropolitan feminists using the model of a radically uncertain relation. I suggest that both these aspects of Spivak's work, the focus on refiguring female pleasure and notions of radical uncertainty, resonate with Irigaray's understanding of feminine subjectivity, women-to-women sociality and mother-daughter relationships. As I go on to illustrate, we can see the way in which Spivak's reworking of female pleasure is inspired by Irigaray's work, and at the same time, how it takes Irigaray's work forward in different directions. Spivak's notion of radical uncertainty links to Irigaray's writings on knowledge and the questions of what it means 'to know' that Irigaray explores in her reading of Diotima and throughout *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Interestingly, these notions also link to more recent writings of Irigaray's on listening and teacher-student relationships.⁷ For Irigaray, 'to know' an other is to silence and appropriate the other. It is through the work of the negative in the relation of sexual difference that sexual subjectivity comes to recognise the limits to subjectivity. As a result, for Irigaray, sexual subjects come into Being-Two through the realisation that they can never completely know the

⁷ Irigaray, *Teaching*, p. 231.

other; the sexuate other is the limit to subjectivity. Consequently, in this relation of sexuate difference and the founding of sexuate subjectivity, there will always be an excess; whether we call this excess desire or love, this third space is the uncontainable place that allows the two sexuate subjectivities to be in relation with neither appropriating the other.⁸

Spivak's writings highlight how in Irigaray's work the two sexuate subjectivities of sexuate difference not only focus on maintaining the limit, and space, between each other; they also refigure the relations *within feminine subjectivity* and within masculine subjectivity. In other words, we must imagine the two sexuate subjectivities of sexuate difference as providing two spaces, a framework or matrix, within which singular subjects can learn to differentiate from one another using their relation to the double sexuate universal. In doing so, we can learn to become human in a radically different way. Each sexuate subject will realise subjectivity through a relation with a double sexuate universal that is both at once similar and different, self and other, to themselves. We must also remember that the relations between the double sexuate universal are fluid, the relations within the framework and matrix continually move and are ultimately unstable. This fluidity or rhythmic becoming located at the foundation of subjectivity and ontology completely undermines phallogocentric logic. If we read Spivak's articulation of the radically uncertain relationship that she argues can refigure women's solidarity alongside Irigaray's work, it enables us to appreciate how Irigaray's project refounds ontology using the universal non-appropriative relation between two sexuate irreducible subjectivities.⁹ Spivak's work brings to light the way in which, within this refigured sexuate ontology, our lived differences are not measured hierarchically against a single universal that will always inevitably define any difference as an

⁸ See Malabou and Ziarek, 'Negativity', and Roberts, 'A Revolution of Love', for more on how Irigaray's reworking of the Hegelian dialectic enables a refiguring of sexuate subjectivity as necessarily limited and always in relation with the sexuate other.

⁹ While Irigaray's work has been criticised for privileging sexuate over other differences, this chapter highlights how Spivak's reading that links women together via a complex matrix of radical uncertainty demonstrates how an Irigarayan conception of sexuate difference can be mobilised in ways that do not hierarchise differences of skin colour, class, religion, age, disability, sexuality.

'imperfect copy'. Instead, within the non-hierarchical and relational logic of sexuate difference, these differences are positively realised in the universal relation of sexuate difference.

9.2 French Feminism in an International Frame (1981)

Spivak begins the 1981 paper with reference to a Sudanese colleague who has written 'a structural functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan' and frames her reaction using a playful mimicry that evokes the ambiguity of Spivak's own position as a postcolonial Indian academic feminist recently situated in the USA.¹⁰ Throughout this paper, Spivak performs an astute awareness of the ambiguity of her own subjectivity. This performance is crucial to Spivak's argument in the essay. The mimicry (and ambiguity) is subtle; Spivak moves seamlessly between the silent voice(s) of an 'other' (postcolonial? Indian? Third World?) woman that underlies mainstream US feminist discourse (of the late 1970s), and, in the same breath, inhabits her speaking subject position as a critical academic feminist in the US academic system.¹¹ Spivak writes:

I was ready to forgive the sexist term 'female circumcision'. We have learned to say 'clitoridectomy' because others more acute than we have pointed out our mistake. But Structural Functionalism? Where 'integration' is 'social control [which] defines and enforces... a degree of *solidarity*'?¹²

Using mimicry, Spivak elucidates the ambiguity (and awareness of the conflict) of her own position(s) and immediately unsettles the belief that there can be a single 'all-encompassing' feminist voice. While Spivak is

¹⁰ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

initially troubled at her colleague's use of Structural Functionalism, she notes that in her colleague's research she finds an allegory of what she calls her 'own ideological victimage'.¹³ This notion of ideological victimage evokes, I think, an awareness that the ability to articulate the relation between her own fractured subjectivity and her own research has been necessarily silenced by the mainstream US feminist discourse with which Spivak attempts to engage. Writing in 1981, Spivak notes that as her career in the USA progressed she discovered an area of feminist scholarship called 'International Feminism: the arena usually defined as feminism in England, France, West Germany, Italy, and that part of the Third World most easily accessible to American interests: Latin America'.¹⁴ However, when Spivak attempts to engage with this field and tries to think of 'so-called Third World women in a broader scope' she finds that she too is 'caught and held by Structural Functionalism, in a web of information retrieval inspired' by the following statement: 'what can I do *for* them?'.¹⁵ Realising that the very framing of this question 'what can I do *for* them?' is 'part of the problem', Spivak sets about to refigure this problematic.¹⁶ She notes:

I sensed obscurely that this articulation [what can I do *for* them?] was part of the problem. I re-articulated the question: What is the constituency of an international feminism? The following fragmentary and anecdotal pages approach the question.¹⁷

In doing so, Spivak brings to light the silencing of her own fractured subjectivity, an embodied subjectivity that inhabits a space somewhere between the binary categories of 'East' and 'West', alongside 'First' and 'Third' World(s). Spivak finds her destabilising subjectivity has no place in the dominant discourse; it is unacknowledged, silenced and ultimately

¹³ Spivak explains that her concern with structural functionalism is that it 'takes a "disinterested" stance on society as functioning structure. Its implicit interest is to applaud a system—in this case sexual—because it functions' (Spivak, 'French Feminism', pp. 154–155).

¹⁴ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

objectified. Is Spivak (and 'others' that do not fit the stereotypes) the symbolic 'scapegoat' that takes on the unwanted ideological projections of mainstream US feminist discourse (of the late 1970s)? In other words, in seeking to create an alternative discourse to the one she encounters, Spivak recognises that her fractured subject position, her 'inbetweenness', has been silenced and objectified in the unwanted projections from a well-meaning feminist discourse. It is these dangers of well-meaning feminist discourse(s) that Spivak wishes to highlight in this paper. In doing so, she uses Irigaray's work to deconstruct the meaning of the (narcissistic and masculine) subject that governs Western discourse(s), as well as this notion of a generalised 'other' that covers over the unacknowledged heterogeneity of women's perspectives around the globe.

Near the start of the chapter, Spivak recalls a childhood memory of walking alone on her grandfather's estate in India and overhearing the conversation of two washerwomen talking on the banks of a river. She does this, I think, in order to demonstrate the multiple locations of subjectivity that are involved in thinking through our negotiations with the binary categories of self/other. Spivak acknowledges the divide between her situation and that of the washerwomen—which would not have been seen from the perspective of the mainstream US discourse.¹⁸ Inspired by this memory, and not forgetting her (somewhat privileged) location within it, Spivak asks:

How, then, can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban Indian women who live 'in the pores of capitalism, inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common enemies.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Understood within phallogocentric logic, these three Indian women would have been constructed as an all-encompassing single 'other' when in fact there are multiple sites of difference between them, including, for example, class, religion and caste.

¹⁹ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 156. In terms of these 'shared channels of communication', we might argue that much has changed since 1981 in terms of Internet access across the globe. Indeed, the fourth wave of feminism is commonly linked to global Internet activism and consciousness-raising. However, for those in the 'pores of capitalism' how much has actually changed? People living in the 'pores' do not have access to clean drinking water and food, never mind the Internet.

Aware of how this claim is often taken up by patriarchal nationalists in recently decolonised countries, Spivak explains how her point differs. She continues:

This is not the tired nationalist claim that only a native can know the scene. The point I am trying to make is that, in order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World Feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*.²⁰

The 'First World Feminist' must recognise the almost unlimited varying perspectives of women who have no access to 'speak' within the 'channels of communication' that a global capitalism allows. In order to recognise these silent others, the 'First World Feminist' must stop asking what she can do *for* the other as this question remains in the hierarchal binary self/other logic. This is why Spivak says the 'First World Feminist' must stop feeling privileged *as a woman*. This is an important claim and I believe it is linked to a more sophisticated critique of the underlying patriarchal phallogocentric logic at work in the discourse Spivak is criticising. In asking what she 'can do *for* the other', there is no possibility of a non-hierarchal recognition between and among the women, and thus no possibility of any ethical dialogue between them.

In light of her critical analysis, Spivak argues that Luce Irigaray's and Sarah Kofman's work gives us 'politicized and critical examples of "Symptomatic reading"' that does not always follow 'the reversal-displacement technique of a deconstructive reading'.²¹ 'Symptomatic reading', according to Spivak, thus becomes 'productively conflictual when used to expose the ruling discourse'.²² For Spivak, Irigaray's and Kofman's work, rather than simply deconstructing, produces something new and is thus useful when trying to refigure fragmented

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²² *Ibid.*

postcolonial subjectivity from a feminist perspective. It is this, I think, that Spivak learns from Irigaray.²³

While Spivak acknowledges the positive and productive aspects of Irigaray's and Kofman's work, she is, nevertheless, acutely aware of the dangers of this type of 'academic feminism'.²⁴ Because of this, Spivak suggests that we must always recognise the discontinuity between women living in different situations around the world. We can work at this discontinuity using the structures that she finds in the productively conflictual readings of Irigaray and Kofman. In doing so, we begin to refigure the relations between women across the globe. Spivak writes:

However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss? Indeed, it is the absence of such unfeasible but crucial questions that makes the 'colonized woman' as 'subject' see the investigators as sweet and sympathetic creatures from another planet who are free to come and go [. . .] My point has been that there is something . . . wrong in our most sophisticated research, our most benevolent impulses.²⁵

²³ Spivak goes on, in future work, to argue that it is not enough (or that simple) to reverse power relations between colonial/postcolonial. Rather, we must recognise these binary relations cannot 'simply' be reversed because there are not two separate 'pure' 'cultures' or 'subjects'. Spivak argues we must destabilise these problematic relationships of colonial power in order to demonstrate how imperialism constructs the idea of a 'pure native' or 'native hegemony' and vice versa, how this (false) idea of 'native hegemony' constructs the 'colonial subject'. I believe Spivak takes this central point in her philosophy from her early engagements with Irigaray (and Kofman) in these works that I explore here. For more on Irigaray's use of mimesis as a reading strategy, see Grosz (1989), Whitford (1991) and Jones (2011). See Gedalof (1999) for an interesting perspective on constructions of purity, colonial subjectivity and 'French Feminist' thought.

²⁴ Spivak writes:

As soon as one steps out of the classroom, if indeed a 'teacher' ever fully can, the dangers rather than the benefits of academic feminism, French or otherwise, become more insistent. Institutional changes against sexism here or in France may mean nothing or indirectly, further harm for women in the Third World. *This discontinuity ought to be recognized and worked at. Otherwise, the focus remains defined by the investigator as subject.* (Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 179, my emphasis)

²⁵ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 179.

I think we can heed Spivak's lesson here. It is crucial to remind ourselves that if we are thinking through sexual difference as a universal feminist ethics, and even if we refigure intersubjectivity in terms of two sexuate subjects, we must also always recognise the destabilising relations at work between and among women (within feminine subjectivity). We must always ask the questions Spivak asks. To do so, she situates the 'First World Feminist' in relation to *other* women's perspectives. Asking these questions fundamentally destabilises the self/other relation of phallogocentric logic that always situates self as the single universal. In drawing our attention, yet again, to this constant need for a 'simultaneous other focus' Spivak suggests that she finds that the focus on women's pleasure in the French feminists texts might provide some sort of way to theorise the common yet history-specific solidarity between women across the globe.²⁶

It is here, in the descriptions of women's pleasure, that Spivak identifies what she calls the best of French feminism. She says, 'the best of French feminism encourages us to think of a double effect (against *sexism* and for *feminism*, with the lines forever shifting . . .'.²⁷ She suggests this common thread might be found in recognising the excess of women's pleasure. Spivak notes that in the objectification of woman, it is the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced. All historical and theoretical investigation into the definition of woman as legal object—in or out of marriage; or as politico-economic passageway for property and legitimacy would fall within the investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris.²⁸

Most helpful, however, is the double vision Spivak finds in Irigaray's work. Working *against* sexism (e.g. identifying the silencing of the feminine within the Western culture of narcissism) and *for* feminism

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁷ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 180.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181. Spivak quotes Irigaray here:

In order for woman to arrive at the point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems of oppression which affect her is certainly necessary. By claiming to resort to pleasure alone as the solution to her problem, she runs the risk of missing the reconsideration of a social practice upon which *her* pleasure depends. (Irigaray cited in Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 105)

(creatively imagining a potentially autonomous feminine subjectivity), while at the same time continuously blurring the lines between these important themes. And, it is here, in Spivak's work (following Irigaray), that we find the beginnings of an alternative discourse.²⁹ Spivak suggests that we must recognise the irreducible relationship between the excess of women's pleasure (via the clitoris) and what she refers to as the 'reproductive definition'.³⁰ Thinking through this irreducible relationship becomes an alternative way in which to positively symbolise autonomous feminine subjectivity. It is this connection between refiguring women's pleasure and autonomous feminine subjectivity that I think Spivak finds in Irigaray's work.³¹ Irigaray points out how the silencing of sexual difference, and consequently the silencing of an autonomous feminine imaginary, works to repress the positive symbolisations of the plurality of women's pleasure. For Irigaray, to rethink women's pleasure as autonomous and plural also works to undermine this phallogocentric logic that only ever defines women's pleasure (and subjectivity) as dependent on the man's penis (Phallus). I think these aspects of Irigaray's work on feminine desire inspire Spivak's argument and provide important context to the links that Spivak makes between the

²⁹ Spivak notes that in Irigaray's *Speculum* we find: '...the analysis brilliantly deploys the deconstructive themes of indeterminacy, critique of identity, and the absence of a totalizable analytic foothold, from a feminist point of view' (*ibid.*, p. 177).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³¹ See, for example, Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*, where she writes:

Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*. Is this the way culture is seeking to characterize itself now? Is this the way texts write themselves/are written now? Without quite knowing what censorship they are evading? Indeed, women's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to women's pleasure. Among other caresses . . . Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures. Pleasures which are somewhat misunderstood in sexual difference as it is imagined—or not imagined, the other sex being only the indispensable complement to the only sex. (Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 28)

objectification of women around the globe and the effacement of the 'clitoris as signifier of the sexed subject'.³² Spivak writes:

The double vision is not merely to work against sexism and for feminism. It is also to recognize that, even as we reclaim the excess of the clitoris, we cannot fully escape the symmetry of the reproductive definition. One cannot write off what may be called a uterine social organization (the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is the chief agent and means of production) in *favour* of a clitoral. The uterine social organization should, rather, be 'situated' through the understanding that it has so far been established by excluding a clitoral social organization.³³

In other words, we must not remain within the binary phallogocentric logic of Western metaphysics that makes us choose between pleasure and reproduction. I think Spivak is clearly inspired by Irigaray's work when Irigaray acknowledges that, for Freud, 'female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters'.³⁴ Within phallogocentric logic, the plurality of women's pleasure is silenced by reducing women's bodies to the reproductive function. The only way a little girl can emerge as a subject in phallogocentric culture is as mother. In response to this problem, Irigaray (and Spivak) point out that there is an irreducible relation that occurs within feminine pleasure and desire that cannot be reduced to the single reproductive function. Rather, we can imagine women's pleasure as double, as plural, as multiple, as fluid; based on the labial logic that disturbs the phallogocentric logic of sameness which requires any difference to be subsumed and appropriated into the whole, the phallogocentric 'One'. Again, on this point, I turn to Irigaray to contextualise. She writes:

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's: woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the times of the Greeks.³⁵

³² Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 181.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁴ Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Irigaray notes that this masculine logic privileges the visual and as a result woman's sexuality and pleasure is represented as a lack, literally 'as a hole'. She notes:

This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own. And if woman takes pleasure precisely from this incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over and over again, indefinitely, by itself, that pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallogormorphism. The value granted to the only definable form excludes the one that is in play in female autoeroticism. The *one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching and what is touched.

Whence the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units, to inventory everything as individualities. *She is neither one nor two* [. . .] She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no 'proper' name. And her sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as *none*. The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphological designatable organ (even if the passage from erection to detumescence does pose some problems): the penis.³⁶

Within this refiguration of women's pleasure as founded upon an irreducible relation between the reproductive function and the clitoral social organisation, Spivak suggests that this reimagining of women's pleasure as double enables the links between women to emerge. We can think of this in relation to Irigaray's notions of feminine subjectivity and the image of the 'two lips', women-to-woman sociality and the positive representations of mother–daughter relations in which neither feminine subject is reduced to a reproductive function. Spivak suggests that within this doubly dynamic discontinuous discourse that moves between pleasure and reproductive function we can find a common

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

thread at work that links young girls facing the real threat of clitoridectomy, wealthy women in advanced capitalist countries and those women living 'in the pores' of the global capitalist system.³⁷ Spivak notes that we find here the link between women's objectivity (whether as sex or as reproductive object) and the repression of women's pleasure. She writes:

At the moment, the fact that the entire complex network of advanced capitalist economy hinges on home-buying, and the philosophy of home-ownership is intimately linked to the sanctity of the nuclear family, shows how encompassingly the uterine norm of womanhood supports the phallic norm of capitalism. At the other end of the spectrum, it is this ideological-material repression of the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that operates the specific oppression of women, as the lowest level of the cheap labor that the multi-national corporations employ by remote control in the extraction of absolute surplus-value in the less developed countries. [...] whether the family is a place of the production of socialization or the constitution of the subject of ideology; what such a heterogeneous sex-analysis would disclose is that the repression of the clitoris in the general or the narrow sense (the difference cannot be absolute) is presupposed by both patriarchy and family.³⁸

It seems clear to me that Spivak's analysis intends to recognise and explore the connections between women that in no way covers over the differences between them. Rather, in constantly calling attention to her own politics of location and her own place of enunciation, Spivak makes clear she is not speaking for all women.³⁹ In so doing, she constantly works to create dialogue, while simultaneously recognising that this is not always possible. Spivak shows us that despite the problems we must nonetheless try, and I think this is the crucial lesson. In

³⁷ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–184.

³⁹ See Adrienne Rich's *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1987) and Rosi Braidotti's development of Rich's phrase 'politics of location' in her work *Nomadic Subjects* (2011) and 'Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject' (1993).

our efforts to communicate, we can work towards alternative ways that do not silence the other. Spivak writes:

I emphasize discontinuity, heterogeneity, and typology as I speak of such a sex-analysis, because this work cannot by itself obliterate the problems of race and class. It will not necessarily escape the inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third. *It might, one hopes, promote a sense of our common yet history-specific lot.* It ties together the terrified child held down by her grandmother as the blood runs down her groin and the 'liberated' heterosexual woman who, in spite of Mary Jane Sherfey and the famous page 53 of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, in bed with a casual lover—engaged, in other words, in the 'freest' of 'free' activities—confronts, at worst, the 'shame' of admitting to the 'abnormality' of her orgasm; at best, the acceptance of such a 'special' need; and the radical feminist who, setting herself apart from the circle of reproduction, systematically discloses the beauty of the lesbian body; the dowried bride—a body for burning—and the female wage-slave—a body for maximum exploitation. There can be other lists; and each one will straddle and undo the ideological-material opposition. For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at. . . .⁴⁰

Spivak's constant attention to the discontinuity between the situation(s) of women via the self-reflective attention she draws from her own lived experiences enables her to perform a critical analysis of the phallogocentric logic that silences any recognition of sexual difference, and consequently any non-hierarchical non-sacrificial relations between and among women. Using Irigaray's work along with her own astute analysis, Spivak not only displaces the phallogocentric logic that underlies the ideological-material opposition she seeks to disrupt but begins to make space for alternative imaginings of autonomous feminine subjectivity. Spivak has successfully demonstrated the ambiguity of a potential universal (and yet heterogeneous) feminine subjectivity that both straddles and displaces the phallogocentric split between female pleasure and the uterine female reproductive function, as well as the phallogocentric split between the situations of oppression of women in rural Third World situations and their counterparts in the 'First World'.

⁴⁰ Spivak, 'French Feminism', p. 184 my emphasis.

9.3 French Feminism Revisited (1993)

In 1993, Spivak published 'French feminism revisited' in which she returns to the themes I have explored earlier. In particular, she notes that this new essay feels like 'a second take on "International Frame"'.⁴¹ Spivak reflects on the development of her work and teases out some insightful perspectives on relations between 'French feminist' thought and so called postcolonial 'Other(s)'. In this essay, Spivak positions texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray alongside a text by the Algerian writer Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas. She writes:

My question has sharpened: How does the postcolonial feminist negotiate with the metropolitan feminist? I have placed three classic texts of French feminism before an activist text of Algerian feminism that speaks of negotiation. I imagine a sympathy with Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas's subject-position because hers too is perhaps fractured and I help to crack it further, for use. She too is revising an earlier position. As she does so, she speaks *of* solidarity with Islamic women around the world. She speaks *to* a British interviewer. And I, a non-Islamic Indian postcolonial, use her to revise my reading of French feminism.⁴²

Spivak reflects on the development of her research since writing the 1981 article 'French feminism in an international frame'. She notes:

...my original argument, that the face of 'global' feminism is turned outward and must be welcomed and respected as such, rather than

⁴¹ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 144.

⁴² Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 145. While I have no desire to reduce either 'feminist' to a definition, for the purposes of the problematic Spivak is attempting to unravel, I point to very general meanings of these terms; postcolonial as 'occurring or existing after the end of colonial rule' and metropolitan as 'belonging to, forming or forming part of, a mother country as distinct from its colonies etc. (*metropolitan France*)' (The Australian Oxford Dictionary, 4th ed). This suggests to me that Spivak is specifically acknowledging that this particular essay is working within this French postcolonial setting. Moreover, this paragraph illustrates that relation(s) between a metropolitan and postcolonial feminist are not reducible to the (patriarchal) coloniser/colonised relationship that the canonical texts of postcolonial theory have attempted to unravel.

fetishized as the figure of the Other, gains confirmation from my first research visit to [postcolonial] Algeria.⁴³

Spivak continues:

Further research will, I hope, flesh out the domestic space in such a way that this postcolonial feminist will no longer need to revisit French feminism *as a way in* [...] The way in through French feminism defines the third world as Other. Not to need that way in is, paradoxically, to recognize that indigenous global feminism must still reckon with the bitter legacy of imperialism transformed in decolonization.⁴⁴

What I think Spivak is demonstrating here, as she did in 1981, is the recognition that we cannot simply split the West from all that is 'not-the-west'. She suggests that, on the one hand, if you use French feminism as a frame (as a way in) you inevitably 'define the Third World as Other', while, on the other hand, to not need this frame renders indigenous global feminism unintelligible (to academic discourse). To unpack this worrying paradox, we must, according to Spivak, recognise that feminist thinkers on both sides of imperialism need to grapple with its bitter legacy.⁴⁵ In response to this problem, Spivak refers to Chafika Marouf's suggestion that contemporary feminist research in Algeria and the Maghreb ought to be evaluated with a 'retrospective view' that recognises the 'paradigms of academic intelligibility of feminism in Algeria and in the Maghreb have been, for the large part, modulated in the intellectual configurations of Western thought'.⁴⁶ In doing so, Spivak provides an alternative lens with

⁴³ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 141.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ In order to make her point, Spivak quotes a passage from Chafika Marouf (1988) and I cite this here in order to provide context for Spivak's further comments:

Current research on the family in Algeria and in the Maghreb cannot be evaluated without a retrospective view, however brief, of the movement of ideas that have emerged in Europe, and in Anglo-Saxon and transatlantic countries ... The paradigms of academic intelligibility of feminism in Algeria and the Maghreb have been, for the large part, modulated in the

which to view the problem of framing that she reveals to us in her 1993 work. With reference to Marouf's point, Spivak writes: 'this intelligent passage defines my charge: to see that the view is retrospective, and that the requirements are of academic intelligibility'.⁴⁷ For Spivak, there is always going to be a 'framing' of the postcolonial situation, and if we do not acknowledge that this 'frame' is itself contested and constructed by the colonial and postcolonial situation(s), then we have not escaped the patriarchal phallogocentric logic that underlies imperialism. This situation can be likened to the manner in which Spivak articulates the 'what can I do *for* you?' logic in her earlier work. If there is no attempt to locate the need for both a retrospective view and the frame of 'French feminism', then the latter will become the central (unacknowledged) signifier against which 'others' are judged (always as 'imperfect copies') with no acknowledgement of its own location in the hierarchies of power. This silencing covers over any potential space for possible non-hierarchical dialogue between differing perspectives and welcoming of the multiple 'faces' of global feminisms. For Spivak, this sets up a contradiction; it is paradoxical because to fail to acknowledge Spivak's necessary way in (using *her* own engagement with French feminism) would be to submit herself to the binary categorical logic that underlies cultural imperialism. However, because Spivak acknowledges 'her way in' through French feminism, this does not silence the 'other'; instead, we might say that Spivak uses this 1993 chapter 'French feminism revisited' as a way to retrospectively reflect on her earlier writings. In this sense then, I suggest that Spivak's 'way in' works and performs, it destabilises, it reverses and reinforces the asymmetrical bridges between *her* own fluid, fractured, sexuate, postcolonial subjectivity and her European philosophical genealogy.

Spivak's writing performs contradiction(s); it is neither one thing nor the other. We are not submitted to the phallogocentric logic of imperialism here. This is why we must always acknowledge this relationship between postcolonial and metropolitan thought when engaging with what we

intellectual configurations of Western thought: They have offered the frame and the genesis. . . .' (Marouf cited in Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 142)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

might call 'global' feminism(s), no matter how problematic this may be. To fail to acknowledge this relationship would be to assume that it does not exist and this would allow phallogocentric logic to continue to repress the other(s). Recall that within phallogocentric logic there is one universal, there is one singular narcissistic (masculine) subject, against which all others are compared. Thus, if we attempt to speak of differences between women without destabilising this underlying logical structure, it will continue to repress any possibility of non-appropriative or non-hierarchical communication between two. This silencing of the other through the structure of the underlying phallogocentric logic is what I think Spivak means when she refers to the 'structures of violence' that Irigaray's work helps us to negotiate. Acknowledging the paradoxical relationship between postcolonial and metropolitan feminist thought is crucial because if it is not acknowledged and continually negotiated by both perspectives then there will be no possibility for a non-hierarchical dialogue between them. To acknowledge this relationship makes it available to problematise, destabilise and refigure.

Spivak's emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the dynamic and contradictory relationship between postcolonial and metropolitan feminist thought can be understood in relation to questions of knowledge. What is it to know? What does it mean to know the other? Can we ever know the other? Spivak illustrates the links between her thoughts on the relations between women and her ideas on the relationships that occur between teacher and student. She imagines these ideally non-appropriative relationships to be structured in similar ways. Spivak suggests we can understand the relationships between teacher and student as a kind of *radically uncertain* relation that she proposes we may imagine to be underlying women's solidarity. This relationship of radical uncertainty, which Spivak suggests occurs in a teaching environment, is reimagined as a mischievous relationship between women, which occurs on both sides of imperialism. Evoking mischief to describe the relations between and among women on both sides of imperialism refers back to Spivak's earlier work on women's solidarity. Acknowledging that relations between/among women are radical and uncertain emphasises two main points in Spivak's analysis. The term 'mischief' highlights the way in which these relations are heterogeneous and discontinuous and, secondly, it calls attention to the importance that Spivak places on these

relations to trouble and disturb the violent logic of imperialism. In suggesting that relations between women are mischievous, Spivak gestures towards a unique way of challenging and displacing the violence of imperialism rather than attempting to 'simply' reverse it. Spivak explains that in the position of teacher one never actually 'knows' what occurs in the attempt at the transmission of 'knowledge' to the student(s), and because of this she suggests this relationship between teacher and student is dynamic, unstable and risky. This risky relationship is founded upon the recognition of the limits to what we can know about an other and it demonstrates the ways in which Spivak begins to imagine how we might structure relations between women. She writes:

This, then, might be the moment to remember that, even when—in class, in a lecture room—the other seems a collection of selves and nothing seems displaced or cracked, what 'really happens' *remains radically uncertain*, the risky detail of our craft⁴⁸ [. . .] *Can it be imagined how this mischief conducts traffic between women's solidarity across two sides of imperialism?*⁴⁹

This idea links to the refigured relation between what we might call a metropolitan feminist and a postcolonial feminist. They are both, in different ways, situated as silenced 'other' to the masculine subject of either colonial or postcolonial discourse. I think that Spivak's remarks point to a creative imagining of conversations that can take place when we acknowledge these space(s) of radical uncertainty. The 'other' is always inaccessible to us and yet in the double moment of recognising our embodied (fractured) self and an (embodied) other in this relationship of radical uncertainty, the moment we let go of 'knowing' or 'appropriating' the 'other', it is there that we may find a potential common ground, *a common mischief*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ This refers back to a point Spivak made earlier where she notes: 'Assuming that classes and audiences are collections of selves ignores the details of their intimate and inaccessible alterity' ('French Feminism Revisited', p. 142).

⁴⁹ Spivak 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 146 my emphasis.

⁵⁰ Recall, again, how the labial logic of the two lips is 'always touching, always open', confusing the binary of self/other logic? This notion of mischief can also be thought of in relation to what

Keeping in mind Spivak's overarching question of how to structure relations between women, I turn to the end of Spivak's paper where she focuses on Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Spivak points out that what Irigaray means by an ethics of sexual difference is not an argument reducible to biology (or traditional western ontology). Spivak also recognises that what Irigaray has to say cannot be reduced to a claim concerning a normative heterosexuality. It is clear from the following passage that Spivak appreciates Irigaray's metaphysical challenge to the single universal of phallogocentric logic, the risk that she takes in positing two universals, and, consequently, the potential restructuring of subjectivity as sexuate. Spivak writes:

This is no separatist politics, but a full-blown plan for an ethics where sexual difference, far from being located in a decisive biological fact, is posited as the undecidable in the face of which the now displaced 'normal' must risk ethico-political decisions. An ethical position must entail universalization of the singular. One can wish not to be excluded from the universal. But if there is one universal, it cannot be inclusive of difference. We must therefore take the risk of positing two universals, one radically other to the other in one crucial respect and keep the 'real universal' on the other side of *différance*. If Derrida had dared to think of minimal idealization, Irigaray dares minimal

Michelle Boulous Walker calls labial logic. Boulous Walker (1998) links Irigarayan labial logic with Derrida's play of difference, noting that:

It is deconstructive because it shifts 'language' away from an oppositional logic of reference versus metaphor toward something much closer to the play of *différance*. . . The singularity of the labia is always *double*, never one. This labial logic confounds oppositional thinking. It displaces oppositions such as inside and outside, self and other, reference and metaphor. (Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*, p. 157)

Consequently, we might think of this 'common mischief' in terms of Derrida's notion of difference and play as disruptive to binary logic that he explores in his 1968 lecture 'Difference' ('Difference', p. 282). Furthermore, Irigaray's early remarks on women laughing in *This Sex Which Is Not One* evoke this notion of playful mischievousness to challenge the notion that sexual difference is a simple reversal of binary positions. Irigaray writes:

Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? *Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning?* Perhaps women, and the sexual relation, transcend it 'first' in laughter? Besides, women among themselves begin by laughing. To escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh. (Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 163)

alterity. Each is a same-sexed ethical universal, operating in a social cooperation that must conventionally assume others to be collectives of othered selves. This is to provide the (im)possible ethical base for rewriting gendering in the social sphere.⁵¹

Reading Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference alongside Derrida's notion of *différance*, Spivak opens up an interesting moment between these two philosophers.⁵² If we think of the play of Derrida's *différance* as resonating with an Irigarayan labial logic, we can see why Spivak might bring *différance* into dialogue with Irigaray's project of sexual difference. Both Irigaray and Derrida seek to challenge the traditional either-or logic of Western metaphysics, and the writings of both these two philosophers ought to be appreciated with this challenge in mind. Consequently, when Spivak writes that we must risk positing two universals and we ought to keep the "real universal" on the other side of *différance*' she is suggesting that Irigaray's double sexuete universal ought to be appreciated within the labial logic and play of *différance* that cannot be reduced to the binary either-or logic of Western metaphysics. In suggesting the double sexuete universals' move to the side of *différance*, Spivak is reminding us of the excess between the two, the interval that Irigaray suggests we need in order for the two universals to exist (and meet in difference). We can think of

⁵¹ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 165.

⁵² Derrida writes:

Différance is not simply active (any more than it is a subjective accomplishment); it rather indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity. With its *a*, différance more properly refers to what in classical language would be called the origin or production of difference and the differences between differences, the *play [jue]* of differences. *Différance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept*. In it, however, we shall see the juncture—rather than the summation—of what has been most decisively inscribed in the thought of what is conveniently called our 'epoch': the difference of forces in Nietzsche, Saussure's principle of semiological difference, differing as the possibility of [neurone] facilitation, impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as the irreducibility of the trace of the other in Levinas, and the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger. (Derrida, 'Différance', 279)

I think we can add Luce Irigaray's ontology of sexuete difference to the 'juncture' of our 'epoch' that Derrida describes earlier.

this as the refigured dialectical relation of desire or love between two. It is the excess, it is the sensible transcendental, and it is in this way that we can understand sexuate difference as universal.⁵³

I believe that Spivak's understanding of sexual difference as a double universal allows her to productively read Irigaray's work as she goes on to focus on the last chapter of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, the "The fecundity of the caress: a reading of Levinas, totality and infinity, "Phenomenology of Eros"". In what follows, I turn to Spivak's engagement with Irigaray's reading of Levinas in depth in order to consider this double sexuate universal, radical alterity and the caress, and bring these notions into dialogue with Spivak's motif of radical uncertainty. As we will see, Spivak writes that the double sexuate universal provides 'the impossible differed/deferred grounding of the ethics of sexual difference in the fecund caress...'.⁵⁴ I thus suggest that Spivak's reading of Irigaray's appropriation of the (fecund) caress and the notion of a double sexuate universal enables Spivak to explore notions of radical alterity between and among women in novel ways.

Spivak notes that the 'empirical scene of sexual congress behind Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" is almost comically patriarchal, so generally so that the bourgeois male colonial subject from various parts of the world can be fitted into the slot of "the lover"'.⁵⁵ Spivak suggests that she finds 'it difficult to take this prurient heterosexist, male-identified ethics seriously', but Irigaray, on the other hand, 'is more generous'.⁵⁶ Tina Chanter writes that 'no matter how problematic Levinas' depiction of the feminine is in other respects, it challenges the logic of metaphysics with a radicality hitherto unprecedented'.⁵⁷ Levinas describes the face-to-face relation as one in which beings face one another and yet are

⁵³ Importantly, Irigaray sets out this labial logic in her earliest works and so we can recognise that Irigaray's call for a double sexuate universal must be understood as part of her overall ontological challenge to the very notion of traditional conceptions of ontology and metaphysics in Western philosophy.

⁵⁴ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', pp. 170–171.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁷ Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, p. 209.

asymmetrical with regard to one another. He notes, '[T]he being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy'.⁵⁸ Instead of positing the subject as a rational and individual subject, Levinas thinks of the subject as always in this face-to-face relation. The subject in the face-to-face differs from the rational and individual subject because it is always in relation to another subject; it is never, even primordially, an isolated individual.

Spivak (1993) suggests that because Irigaray genders the 'active-passive' division and identifies both the 'lover' and 'beloved' as both feminine and masculine this is not a reduction to some heteronormative sexual ethics. She writes, 'The most noticeable thing about Irigaray's "Fecundity of the Caress" is the practical crispness of its tone. It is obviously a text that assumes that both partners do things, and are not inevitably heterosexual'.⁵⁹ As Spivak suggests, this is a 'full-blown plan for ethics' with the refiguring of a double sexuate universal.⁶⁰ Importantly, it is within this gendering of the active-passive division that we can begin to see the emergence of two autonomous sexuate subjectivities that are always in relation, and not necessarily heterosexual. This is what I think Irigaray means when she writes that in the fecundity of the caress 'the abyss is circumscribed by the unavoidable alterity of the other. Its absolute singularity'.⁶¹ Recall that recognising the limit to sexuate subjectivity is crucial for bringing about the recognition of a non-hierarchical and non-binary ontology of sexuate difference because it means that the narcissistic masculine subject cannot silence the maternal body (and the sexuate other) via projections of illusionary omnipotence.⁶² This is arguably a staging of the

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 215.

⁵⁹ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 167.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics*, p. 204.

⁶² To bring both the maternal and erotic into relation is to go beyond Levinas. As Tina Chanter writes:

Plenty could be said about the stereotypical restrictions on sex roles in play in Levinas' texts. Levinas limits the appearance of the feminine figure either to the realm of the erotic (where, in one respect, it turns out to be a poor imitation of the ethical), or to the elevated heights of

sensible transcendental in the sense that the scene of sexuality brings together in a fecund caress a spiritual excess that is beyond the reproductive function or outcome in a child, and at the same time is situated in the present of the touching and caressing of lived-in-bodies.⁶³ Spivak points out that for Irigaray it is through the loving and fecund caress that a refigured feminine subjectivity emerges.

Irigaray writes:

Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other's hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life is held in reserve. Searching for what has not yet come into being for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become. To realize a birth that is still in the future. Plunging me back into the maternal womb and beyond that conception, awakening me to another birth—as a loving woman.⁶⁴

Irigaray continues here, suggesting that this birth as a loving, desiring woman (as a refigured autonomous feminine subjectivity) has not yet occurred. She argues that we will never move out of the current epoch if we fail to recognise sexuate difference as well as the work of the negative in the emergence of the two sexuate subjects. We need new ontological structures in order for sexuate difference to come about; we have to

maternity. It is not, perhaps, too extreme to accuse Levinas of expressing the traditional denigration and deification of the feminine in the restricted possibilities he extends to the feminine [. . .] However far it might be from his intentions, it is hard not to find in Levinas' work the opposition between good wife and mother and wayward sex symbol. (Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, p. 199)

⁶³ This is why the two subjects are not necessarily heterosexual. The difference is created within the relation to the maternal and to the other. There is no normative sexual function whereby the couple reproduce a child, the relation is in excess of this. It is within this difference that we become sexuate subjects, that we are born as a 'loving woman' that is beyond the reproductive function.

⁶⁴ Spivak then quotes Irigaray from a 1986 translation of the text. I quote the 1993 *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* translation as I think it evokes the point being made here more clearly than the earlier translation (Irigaray, *An Ethics*, p. 187).

construct and refigure love (and space and time and desire). Irigaray's thinking through of the fecund caress, radical alterity and the emergence of autonomous feminine subjectivity links, I suggest, to Spivak's explorations of radical uncertainty and women's solidarity. Irigaray continues:

A birth that has never taken place, unless one remains at the stage of substitution for the father and the mother, which gestures toward an act that is radically unethical. Lacking respect for the one who gave me my body and enthusiasm for the one who gives it back to me in his amorous awakening.

When the lovers, male or female, substitute for, occupy, or possess the site of those who conceived them, they founder in the unethical, in profanation. They neither construct nor inhabit their love. Remaining in the no longer or the not yet. Sacrilegious sleepers, murderous dreamers—of the one and of the other in an unconscious state that might be the site of sensual pleasure? Sterile, if it were not for the child.⁶⁵

The impossible threshold of ethics is thus evoked in the refigured fecundity of the caress of the two sexuate subjects (intimately linked to the two universals of sexuate difference) as an impossible memory that shapes each one of us, as mother's sons and as mother's daughters, in relation to the intimate relation to the maternal body.

So what is it, Spivak asks, that is 'born in the sexual embrace?' She responds: 'The possibility of two spaces, un-universalizable with each other'.⁶⁶ As Spivak suggests, the two universals are not reducible to one another and neither can appropriate the other. Rather, it is the universal relation of the two sexuate subjectivities (and the fecund relation of the two involved in the caress) themselves that becomes the universal. In this sense, again, can we imagine an ontology of sexuate difference?⁶⁷ Thinking through this ethical universal relation of sexual difference, Spivak writes:

⁶⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics*, p. 187.

⁶⁶ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 168.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

The ethics of sexual difference are persistent and to come. *In all patriarchal cultures, all classes, it is an immense move for the wife to become the fecund agent of the caress* [. . .] How much more immense to inscribe the agency of the fecund caress in 'woman' collectively, rather than in site and situation-specific exceptions. In fact, it is not excessive to say that this ethical charge illuminates every immediate practical undertaking for women's liberation . . . ⁶⁸

Spivak is suggesting here that perhaps the lesson we must learn from 'learning the agency of the caress' is that to be human is to recognise the unknowable sexuate other. That the recognition of the two universals of an ontology of sexuate difference will allow us to appreciate the space(s) required for the openness, fluidity and radical uncertainty that is our humanity; 'the unavoidable alterity of the other'.⁶⁹ Spivak acknowledges that this is the most important lesson we learn from Irigaray when trying to think through difference in our postcolonial/neocolonial globalised environment. She writes:

The discourse of the clitoris in the mucous of the lips still remains important in Irigaray's work. Trying to think the international from within a metropolized ethnic minority, I had given this discourse a general structural value a decade ago. Much talk, flying, and falling, from known and unknown women, has shown me that that evaluation runs no more than the usual risks of intelligibility. It is just that the generalization of a *bicameral*, or even two universals, to provide the impossible differed/deferred grounding of the ethics of sexual difference in the fecund caress seems to respond to the call of the larger critique of humanism with which postcoloniality must negotiate, even as it negotiates daily with the political and cultural legacy of the European Enlightenment.⁷⁰

What is Spivak suggesting here? She notes that the themes of the clitoris, lips and mucous that she explored in 1981 remain important in Irigaray's

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 169–170, my emphasis.

⁶⁹ Irigaray, *An Ethics*, p. 204.

⁷⁰ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', pp. 170–171.

work, for all the criticisms it may have endured. Accordingly, Spivak admits that her own evaluation is not without its risks and, as I have demonstrated, she recognises this may be true of all of her work. However, it is in the moments of (productively conflictual) radical uncertainty that Spivak evokes in her writing that we can begin to think through a global women's solidarity that is universal and historically specific. Recall, it is in this risk of radical uncertainty that we begin to learn, that we glimpse another way of being. It is here, in recognising the radical uncertainty of the two universals of an ethics of sexual difference, that we can imagine *'how this mischief conducts traffic between women's solidarity across two sides of imperialism?'*⁷¹ Spivak's analysis demonstrates, and goes beyond, the valuable lessons that Irigaray's work teaches us. Not only must we, as women, challenge Western metaphysics, but also the phallogocentric logic underlying the masters of the crises of metaphysics; for example, Heidegger, Levinas and Fanon. Continually moving between these two patriarchal structures, Spivak and Irigaray bring about a heterogeneous sex analysis that is radically confronting. Spivak continues and returns to her original question. She asks again, 'How does the postcolonial feminist negotiate with the metropolitan feminist?'.⁷² Must we assume that the postcolonial feminist has no use for the metropolitan feminist? The answer is not straightforward. Spivak writes:

What of the Irigaray who rereads Plato and Levinas? Can H elie-Lucas have no use for her?

On the contrary. Here again we revert to the task of decolonizing the mind through negotiating with the structures of violence.⁷³

Spivak continues and suggests that Irigaray's work may have relevance to a feminist citizen of a recently decolonised nation. She notes:

... there will be someone who is in that particular subject position—a feminist citizen of a recently decolonized nation concerned with its

⁷¹ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 146, my emphasis.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 170–171.

domestic/international political claims, not merely its ethnocultural agenda. To such a person I would say—whenever the teleological talk turns into unacknowledged, often travestied, articulations of the Plato of the *Republic* or *Laws*; or, indeed to the rights of the self-consolidating other, Irigaray's readings must be recalled in detail. If such a person—I must assume her without alterity—holds a reproduction of this page, she will know, alas that such occasions will not be infrequent. But how can I be certain? And what is it to know, or be sure that a knowing has been learned? To theorize the political, to politicize the theoretical, are such vast aggregative asymmetrical undertakings; the hardest lesson is the *impossible intimacy of the ethical*.⁷⁴

Again, Spivak refers to the radical uncertainty, what is it to know? To know the other, as Spivak and as Irigaray teach us, is to silence, to appropriate. However, to speak 'for' the other is also to silence the other. The only way out is to refigure the relationship between binary oppositions of ignorance and knowledge, as Irigaray does in Diotima's dialectic, that is, to refigure love. To acknowledge that there is always a 'contested' frame, and that there is always an 'other' voice, a different narrative. This happens in Irigaray's refiguring of the two sexuate subjects. Here, Spivak writes, lies the 'impossible intimacy of the ethical'. The hardest lesson is to recognise the limit of the other, the recognition that there is a limit to our knowledge of the other. We cannot appropriate the other by knowing her or him, and within the intimacy of the fecund caress that brings together the carnal and spiritual—in that realm of refigured desire—is the universal ethics of sexual difference. What I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter is that in thinking through a universal ethics of sexual difference we must take seriously Spivak's notions of women's solidarity using the motifs of radical uncertainty, the double sexuate universal and the fecund caress, and recall how this enables us, as women, to joyfully participate in the making of mischief on both sides of imperialism. Women's solidarity, conceived in this way, as an Irigarayan-inspired Spivakian heterogeneous sex analysis, offers feminist citizens around the globe

⁷⁴ Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited', p. 171, my emphasis.

alternative ways to fight, together, the increasingly insidious structures of violence that neocolonialism brings.

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