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ARTICLE

Where I End and You Begin: Irigarayan Reflections on Women's "Boundary Issues"

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Abstract

This paper critiques self-help literature for promoting personal boundaries while neglecting the value of boundary ambiguity, which is essential to care relations. Acknowledging the sufferings that undergird the term "boundary issues," it reframes the cause of such experiences through Irigaray's theory of gendered individuation. It argues that sexism produces structural obstacles against women's ability to own their desires, and boundary-setting remains an inadequate solution because it is modeled after a masculine image of individuality. It draws on Irigaray's concept of place-making to offer an alternative solution that does not devalue temporary boundary ambiguities.

1. Introduction

After my grandfather broke his leg, my mother became his primary caregiver because we could not find an affordable and dependable caregiver or facility. Exhausted by her new role, which could last indefinitely, my mom often cried to me over the phone. I urged her to set limits on how much time she devoted to him, but my advice was not welcome: *What he would do without her,* plus, as a housewife, what else was she good for in this world? As I deliberated over whether I should return to my home country to help her, my friends warned me, "You have your own life and your mother has hers; you should set boundaries." I found myself repeating my mom's evasion. I was so worried about her already fragile health that even desiring to set a boundary seemed impossible. Then I began to wonder: what if "boundary issues" is not the right explanation for such situations? What if learning to set boundaries is not the solution to the torment of not knowing how to meet our needs and others' needs at once? This paper explores these questions through the lens of Luce Irigaray's philosophy.

The idea of setting boundaries is specifically troubling for post-phenomenological and post-structuralist French philosophy. Philosophers like Levinas, Derrida, and Deleuze invite us to acknowledge that we are not masters of our own lives, and they challenge the assumed limits of our capacity to welcome others. Nevertheless, this imperative must be revisited by acknowledging women's position in society and their

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experiences, such as care burnout, gaslighting, or identity enmeshment. Irigaray is a uniquely resourceful interlocutor for this revision. In *The ethics of sexual difference,* Irigaray argues that women have traditionally been regarded as the *place* where others are welcomed and nurtured (Irigaray 1993, 41). Sheltering the others, women have been deprived of their own boundaries.

Nevertheless, Irigaray's most innovative—and controversial—contribution to feminist philosophy is her insistence that women should not seek to occupy the subject position reserved for men but instead discover a feminine mode of subjectivity.[1] In her most famous book, *This sex which is not one*, she invites women to notice and embrace their inner heterogeneity. Women should renounce masculine ideals, pushing them to be self-same and sovereign subjects, and make peace with their boundlessness. In this work, she calls women to accept the feminized characteristics of suppleness or fluidity in new, liberating ways: "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." (Irigaray 1985b, 216). Not having fixed identities, objects of desire, or horizons of meaning, women can also cherish the boundary ambiguity between each other: "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" (216). Hence, women's response to the absence of boundaries should not lie in learning to set boundaries.

This paper begins with an overview of the dominant discourses on healthy boundaries. After critiquing their shared assumptions, it turns to Irigaray for an alternative explanation of why women are more vulnerable to burdensome experiences related to boundary issues. It then shows why setting boundaries is not the ideal solution for these situations. Finally, it discusses Irigaray's suggestions on how women can develop a more loving relationship with themselves.

Before presenting Irigaray's analysis, I should clarify who we are referring to when we talk about women. Irigaray's use of "women" and "female" is a contentious topic in its own right. In some writings, Irigaray clearly biologizes female identity, addressing beings with certain anatomical features and reproductive capacities. However, in the writings that this paper focuses on, Irigaray is more concerned with womanhood as a structural position. I accept this structuralist approach by considering women as a position of socialization. Nevertheless, I also take a step further to say that the problems I outline and the analyses I present include anyone who does not fit into the masculine position and therefore finds themselves closer to the position occupied by women in a binary gender system.

2. The discourse of boundary issues

A quick Google search, limited to the first page, shows 26 English-language self-help books on setting boundaries. There are many more blog posts, magazine articles, and podcast episodes on this topic. It seems clear that we are struggling with something, and "boundary issues" is the widely accepted diagnosis. For example, we are often torn between conflicting desires and thoughts, trying to determine which are truly ours and which are subtly imposed by others. Some of us are haunted by guilt because others

[1]For instance, "It [liberation] clearly cannot be a matter of substituting feminine power for masculine power. Because this reversal would still be caught up in the economy of the same, in the same economy -in which, of course, what I am trying to designate as 'feminine' would not emerge" (Irigaray 1985b, 129–30).

constantly tell us what we are doing wrong or what we should do. Many of us feel drained from responding to others' needs and not finding time for our own. Indeed, just looking at the book titles, we can see that the most common symptom of boundary issues is our difficulty in saying "no" to other people's requests. Popular literature suggests that these experiences indicate an inability to establish boundaries that protect one's needs and desires.

While the concept of boundary setting is relatively new, it is rooted in the dominant models of healthy psyche, shaped and reshaped by post-Freudian and developmental psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis, boundaries help organize psychic life and shape our perception of reality. According to Freud, the ego—our sense of an "I" that regulates itself—is formed when disorganized drives get attached to specific objects and become bound (Freud 2001, 45; Freud 1961, 25). This way, we start discerning between objects more clearly because we are now looking for specific objects of enjoyment. This binding forms the initial basis for experiencing a unified self and a boundary that distinguishes us from the rest of the world.

Although it is impossible to fully capture the debates among different schools and thinkers within developmental psychoanalysis, their shared assumption is that a healthy mental life requires a strong and independent ego that is well adapted to external reality. The object-relations school refines this core idea by arguing that a healthy psyche forms a self-concept by synthesizing how it feels and acts in relation to various people, contexts, and objects. The school of self-psychology adds that it is healthy to conceive ourselves as more powerful than we actually are. A degree of grandiosity, if it does not go too far, is necessary for finding motivation to expand our capacities (Bellow 1986). The shared foundation is the emphasis on a self-representing and regulating subject who firmly believes in its distinctness.

In psychoanalytic discourse, the issue of having or lacking healthy boundaries is broader than simply prioritizing our needs or knowing when to say no. Some argue that boundary issues relate to how well our various self-images are integrated (Kernberg 1976), how well we can regulate our emotions (Tyson 2006), and how we can govern ourselves based on our judgments (Jacobson 1964). From this perspective, boundary issues are primarily about being pulled in many directions or having contradicting feelings and thoughts. Self-psychologists suggest that healthy boundaries require the ability to balance our inherent sense of grandiosity with an awareness of our actual abilities (Kohut 2009) and by recognizing the thoughts and feelings of other people (Coates 1998). Therefore, boundary issues arise from a distorted perception of reality, such as a failure to recognize our own limitations or to understand how others perceive us.

It is widely accepted that women struggle more often to establish healthy boundaries (Gabbard and Lester 1995, 55). Since Freud, this has been explained by women's inability to separate themselves from their mothers and by their sense of inferiority due to not having a penis. As we will see, this is because the penis is considered the sign of eligibility to satisfy one's desires. Feminist psychoanalysts have politicized this process. Nancy Chodorow (1978) famously connected women's difficulty in forming a strong ego with the patriarchal division of parental labor. Similarly, Melanie Klein explains an infant girl's valorization of the penis or masculinity as a defense mechanism against patriarchal culture (Irigaray 1985b, 52). Still, no one questioned whether the ideal of a strong ego with clear boundaries was not at least partly a product of sexism.

Self-help and popular psychology literature on boundary issues, with some exceptions, do not support their claims with scholarly work on the human psyche. Instead,

they rely on common-sense metaphors. Psychotherapist Avery Neal defines a boundary as "a physical or metaphorical line between us and others" (Neal 2017), Cloud and Townsend see boundaries as like fences that "define what is me and what is not me" (Cloud and Townsend 2017, 14). Others borrow the biological notion of a membrane (Whitfield 1993, 2). Boundaries are like membranes that contain us and regulate what we can receive from others or what we can give to them. The membrane metaphor has a rhetorical power in implying the continuity between biology and personality. It naturalizes the idea of the core or true self. For instance, Pia Mellody (1989) and Charles Whitfield (1993) focus on how internal boundaries primarily delineate who we are, marking our individuality or specific character. Shainna Ali notes that setting boundaries around "core self" is the most "warranted" form of protection (Ali 2023, 55).

Some authors focus on attitudes and practices to make this metaphorical line more tangible. Nedra Glover Tawwab defines boundaries as "expectations and needs that help you feel safe and comfortable in your relationships" (Glover Tawwab 2021,13), and Ora North suggests that boundaries are "the rules we set for our own existence" (North 2019, 94). In a recent podcast, clinical counselor Julia Kristina defined them as requests we make to others so that our well-being is not compromised in the relationship (Irias 2024). Boundary-indicating requests differ from the others in that, if the request is not accepted, instead of going along with the other's preference, we step away from that current interaction, though not necessarily from the relationship.

The paradigmatic examples that saturate this literature are those of defending ourselves against non-empathetic or arrogant others. Kristana's example is a friend who often comes to our house without telling us in advance, despite our saying that we prefer it if they ask before they come. A boundary setting in this case could include, she says, telling our friend that we will not open the door when they come without asking (Irias 2024). Indeed, boundary discourse is teamed with the metaphor of invasion and trespassing. For instance, Cloud and Townsend's influential book starts with an analogy between property lines and personal boundaries (Cloud and Townsend 2017, 14). While all writers emphasize that rigid boundaries with no flexibility are not functional, they caution that flexibility is not synonymous with porosity (Glover Tawwab 2021,15; Mazzola Wood 2023, 17). Flexibility should be within our control. For example, Pia Mellody writes, "I visualize my internal boundary as a bullet-proof vest with small doors that open only toward the inside. I am in control of" (Mellody 1989, 26). Hence, we can relate to our needs and desires as our territory; we are and should be in charge of what we do with them.

Self-help books do not typically examine the underlying causes of the issues they address or justify their fundamental concepts, as their primary goal is to reach a broad audience and offer quick, straightforward solutions to their problems. However, two assumptions they make can significantly impact their efficacy. First, in popular psychology, the unconscious is often discussed as a minor obstacle against boundary formation. We may not know ourselves fully, but with some reflection, we can have enough self-understanding to see where our boundaries lie. Similarly, they do not question one's authority over oneself. Hence, we are supposed to set boundaries by following the tactics they offer. Second, popular self-help writers often fail to address the ethical and existential questions that surround the topic. If our sense of responsibility toward and existential intimacy with others makes us reluctant to draw self-protective boundaries, this would likely be considered a personal issue that we should overcome. I will illustrate these problems by reflecting on care burnout and affective burdening.

Care or dependency work bears boundary ambiguity as an inherent possibility. This ambiguity can be exhausting when we struggle to meet our own needs or let many desires go. Here, setting boundaries to protect our well-being—assuming that we can afford it—may seem like a necessity. However, in situations of caring, our well-being might be closely tied to that of others. The dilemmas we experience might not be in terms of our needs and others' needs, but our different needs, one being directly tied to the other person. Indeed, Nel Noddings considers the fluidity between self and other as the very condition of caring for others: "I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality. I am not thus caused to see or to feel—that is, to exhibit certain behavioral signs interpreted as seeing and feeling—for I am committed to the receptivity that permits me to see and to feel in this way" (Noddings 2013, 30). Caring for Noddings does not mean observing the other with a distant eye but experiencing the other in us. Similarly, Eva Kittay suggests that care work often involves affective devotion and a sense of ethical obligation (Kittay 2020, 104). When other people matter so deeply and most of their demands seem vital, it becomes difficult to see where a boundary might be drawn—or even to want to draw one. While it is not ideal to say "no" when our bodies or minds are completely overwhelmed, the discourse of boundary setting neglects the ethical and existential depth of the issue.

As a second example, the discourse on healthy boundaries cannot address the problem of affective burdening adequately because it undermines the extent to which others shape our emotional lives. Other people's happiness, anger, or sadness are not theirs alone, but we feel with them. While we cannot assume to feel exactly as others do, our ability to feel with others becomes a fundamental part of our emotional experience. Teresa Brennan (2004) refers to this phenomenon as the transmission of affects. She demonstrates that our "own" affects also develop in response to others' affects. Affects do not stem from our inner life and exceed our attempts to control them (Brennan 2004, 3). The most widely accepted example is that, when a mother is stressed or depressed while nursing an infant, the infant can carry negative or sad affects or feelings of insecurity resulting from these early physical interactions. Beyond such immediate embodied transmissions, affects are transmitted as we project them onto others as if they are the causes of our feelings. Brennan argues that projecting negative feelings onto others or finding causes of our feelings in others is a first step in identity or boundary formation (14). This becomes a problem when we reinforce this infantile formation in adulthood.

Women, socialized to be caregivers, are particularly prone to carrying other people's negative affects. Women are considered safe havens to whom their children or partners can display their sadness or anxiety, sometimes in the form of irritability or aggression, and sometimes by letting their feelings dominate the relationship. Healthy boundaries are offered as a way to designate what is in our responsibility and what is not (Mellody 1989, 27; Glover Tawwab 2021, 51). Accordingly, a person with healthy boundaries can know how not to take blame when someone shows aggression. Such a discernment is, in general, helpful. However, in complex and intimate relationships, our emotional reactions are likely shaped together, so it may be challenging and perhaps not the best approach to reject responsibility for others' feelings.

Furthermore, claiming that a negative feeling is "about you, not me" risks neglecting the interpersonal nature of affects. While not nearly as bad as blaming others for our feelings, neatly locating the sources of feelings and delineating the realm of responsibility can reproduce the problem by reinforcing the individualist assumption that one's feelings are personal issues. Indeed, for Brennan, affective burdening is not explained by

the invasion of boundaries, but by our inability to accept the interpersonal nature of affects and to live with feelings together (Brennan 2004, 15).

Care burnout and affective burdening are two examples of suffering that could be partly explained as boundary issues. However, in these cases, trying to set boundaries may mean simplifying more complex relations. In the remainder of this paper, I will draw on Irigaray to present an alternative perspective on the problems related to boundary ambiguity that affect women or those subjected to the normative upbringing, social treatment, or division of labor assigned to the role of women within a binary sex and gender structure.

3. Irigaray's theory of sexist individuation

From an Irigarayan angle, the phenomenon colloquially referred to as "boundary issues," when considered an experience that women are particularly susceptible to, manifests a problem of individuation and subjectivation. Subjectivity and individuation are not synonymous. Subjectivity, broadly construed, is about having agency in shaping our lives through our perspective on the world. Individuation is the event of emerging as a relatively independent being, irreducible to any other, and for Irigaray, individuation applies to all living beings. This essay emphasizes individuation because it is more closely related to the question of the extent to which we are merged with or separated from others. However, since inadequate individuation necessarily limits subjectivity and since subjectivity is a more common term in Irigarayan and feminist literature, I will use them interchangeably.

Irigaray's most extensive treatment of the problem of individuation is in *The speculum of the other woman.* This work examines how Western thought has cast women out of the subject position by taking the characteristics of a masculine existence as norm and engaging with women only insofar as they approximate to or fall short of this form. The first part of the book consists of a close reading of Freud's infamous writings on feminine sexuality. These engagements with Freud are crucial to understanding how female individuation is obstructed and how she is denied subjectivity.

Irigaray's reading of Freud reveals the conspicuous absence of feminine or non-phallic forms of desire and pleasure in his work and his implicit association of healthy development with masculinity. However, for Irigaray, this is not a reason to reject Freud's theories. Freud is useful for describing how a particular way of signifying women's bodies, along with other sexist cultural norms, leads to the denial of women's subjectivity. As Rachel Jones writes, "Irigaray shows that psychoanalytic theory is valuable for feminism if it is read as revealing this representational burden, that is, if it is read as a description of the ways in which the 'logic of the Same' results in the negation of woman" (Jones 2011, 222). However, steeped in this masculine logic instead of criticizing it, Freud cannot see how women exceed the sexist socialization and what other possibilities they have.

Irigaray demonstrates that women's development as individuals tends to be inhibited because of the phallic interpretation of what it means to be an individual subject. That is, in patriarchal societies, owning a penis enables one's development into an independent individual. For Freud, the infants' discovery of autoerotic pleasures derived from their genitals plays a uniquely important role in their sexual development (Irigaray 1985a, 28). The genital phase of infantile sexuality is important because it leads to the discovery of sexual differences and to the organization or concentration of sexual drives around the

genitals. Having a penis and not having one becomes the ground of self-understanding and development.

Irigaray, following Lacan, denies that the penis has an intrinsic importance and a natural role in sexual and personal development. Lacan argued that the phallus does not possess this power due to anatomical reasons, but rather because of its cultural signification. For Lacan, "the child establishes a relationship to the phallus insofar as it is the object of the mother's desire" (Lacan 2020, 168). Infants, wanting their mother solely for themselves, try to figure out what the mother desires, so that they become her primary object of desire. When they believe the mother wants the father or the phallus, they gain the means to decipher the logos of her desire.[2] This quest to decipher the mother's desire is a fundamental step in the development of language and thinking. Thus, the phallus, the key to women's desire, becomes the signifier of the possibility of signification or meaningfulness as such.

Irigaray also views the phallus as the foundation of a certain signifying or representational economy, rather than as an organ with inherent meaning.[3] For her, the phallus gains this function partly because representational thinking is connected to the metaphysics of presence and ocularcentrism. In Freud's metaphysics, the visibility of the penis compared to the female genitals is the reason why anatomy shapes sexual destiny (Irigaray 1985a, 47–48). Visibility is the measure of presence, and presence is the measure of sex and identity. Differences are evaluated in this logic of presence/absence; they are assessed from the perspective of the same.

Irigaray is critical of the biological determinism of Freud's account of infantile sexuality. However, she follows Freud's account because his biological reading reflects the cultural norms of attributing meaning to genitals and interpreting sexuality through them. Such interpretations, crystallized in Freud's account, guide and shape sexual development and individuation like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hence, Freud's account of Oedipal sexuation is still a valuable tool in understanding women's experience.

Phallocentric individuality is associated with the images of an erect penis, having an upright position, being solid, and sticking out from the environment with neat boundaries. The symbolic meanings accompanying these images are self-identity, self-sovereignty, setting laws, and achieving mastery over being, especially over women's mysterious desires and emotional fragility. Women are excluded from the status of individuality and subjectivity in principle. This principle shapes actuality because having a penis acts as the condition for differentiating oneself from the mother and achieving independence. Understanding how the phallic meaning of individuality shapes the process of individuation requires an examination of Freud's narrative of the Oedipus complex, along with Irigaray's interjections.

During early infancy, sexual differentiation does not exist. The mother is the first love object both for the boy and the girl, as she satisfies their vital needs (1985a, 31). Freud, as

[2]"The phallus is the privileged signifier of this mark in which the role *[part]* of Logos is wedded to the advent of desire. One could say that this signifier is chosen as the most salient of what can be grasped in sexual intercourse *[copulation]* as real, as well as the most symbolic, in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent in intercourse to the (logical) copula. One could also say that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation. All of these remarks still merely veil the fact that it can play its role only when veiled, that is, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, once it is raised *(aufgehoberi)* to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this very *Aufhebung,* which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance" (Lacan 2006, 581).

[3]This Lacanian reading of Irigaray finds its support in her discussions of how phallus gives access to signifying economy (Irigaray 1985a, 41–43).

Irigaray observes, considers the little girl also as a little boy, only with a smaller penis. That is, he thinks that all infants in this sexually neutral state are masculine (26). The gradual separation from the mother, which is completed with weaning, is a painful experience and a trauma. Individuation is achieved to the extent that the child learns to overcome this trauma and cultivate a desire of one's own.

In the phallic stage that comes after weaning, the little boy starts a quest to conquer the mother's desire in a rivalry with his father, who is now perceived as the mother's object of desire by virtue of having a phallus. Because of the fear of being castrated by the overpowering father who does not allow the boy to possess her mother, the boy accepts his fate. The father is now the figure of law, more potent than the mother. Since masculinity is the norm, the mother is seen as castrated. The boy thus obeys the law and distances himself from the quest for his mother. Instead, he identifies with the father or takes him as his ego ideal. He internalizes the father's laws and prohibitions as the codes that will make him as potent as the father. Through identification with the father, the boy resolves his Oedipus complex, and his superego sets up (81).

The boy begins to govern and shape himself according to ideals and norms whose Oedipal origins are occluded. This internalization helps to substitute his original object of desire with an ideal one or with a maternal function that many other objects can fill. As Irigaray describes, "Better than a mother, then, is the working out of the idea of the mother, of the maternal ideal. Better to transform the real 'natural' mother into an ideal of the maternal function which no one can ever take away from you" (81). Shaping himself after the phallic ego ideal gives him hope to achieve what he desires. At that point, the phallus becomes a position that is independent of the actual father. The boy's desire becomes a project that he follows by deciphering the signs and rules for occupying the phallic position. Irigaray notes that this project is not truly independent from the original desire, and it remains a nostalgic desire for maternal relations.

Lacking a penis, the girl is not qualified for the contest for the mother's desire (41). Instead, the girl changes her love object from the mother to the father. Hence, she needs to identify with the mother. Irigaray conceives this transformation as a forced one (33–34). This forced transformation is not so much about soothing the girl's separation pain but about making her a mother substitute for men. Thus, instead of living her desire, the girl learns to be an object for men's desire.

Turning toward the father complicates the girl's relationship with her mother and, in turn, her ability to desire. On one side, she hates her mother as a rival for her father's affection. She also despises her for lacking the phallus, as if the mother were the cause of the daughter's deficiency. On the other side, her initial attachment to her mother remains unresolved. She is not given a symbolic substitute for the origin: "Woman cannot turn it into her project of return or turning back. It (id) is counted and reproduced in figures, but the woman is not able to take a(c)count of it or to supply any symbol for it" (41). She cannot mourn her loss or heal from it, because, as Margaret Whitford explains, "she has no representation of what has been lost" (Whitford 1995, 86). Her desire aims to become the father's object of desire, but the repressed origin disrupts this phallic logic. Her desire remains ambiguous due to the absence of a clear object or direction.

The inability to symbolize the origin means failing to achieve independence from it. It means to live under the whims of drives that are not bound to or contained under acceptable and articulable objects. In Freudian terms, this means that the little girl struggles to develop a strong ego that can regulate her id. A strong ego is all the more difficult because, as Irigaray notes, it results from phallic identifications (Irigaray 1985a, 68–9). In that

sense, unified selfhood, which regulates affects and drives to protect physical and psychic coherence, is a masculine privilege or norm. Identifying with the mother, who is lacking like the girl, curtails ego development. The mother does not present a solid individual identity in her caregiving function. She does not present a *being for oneself* but a *being for the other*. The difficulty is compounded because the girl's ego ideal remains identical to her love object. The desire to stay attached to the mother works against the project of taking her place. For better or worse, this desire for attachment can achieve success to a certain degree, as the girl is expected to develop a close relationship with her ego ideal. Hence, her process of individuation is crippled by a triple blow.

Added to the non-symbolized id, the frail ego, and the condition of remaining relatively attached to the primary love object is the difficulty of becoming a speaking and representing subject. Irigaray writes, "access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers, is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to their norms" (Irigaray 1985a, 71). Not symbolizing the relation to the mother leads to a generalized alienation from language because language is also sexed. The phallocentric culture is dominated by a representational use of language, which aims to divide beings into substantial identities and reveal their truth. In the masculine culture, language primarily serves to "achieve mastery through an organized set of signifiers that surround, besiege, cleave, outcircle, and outflank the dangerous, the embracing, the aggressive mother/body" (37). The mother/body encompasses the whole realm of nature, which generates us and retains a force that shapes our lives despite our wishes. Language and representational thought, in general, aim to decipher one's embodied reality and desire through a system of signs. Hence, phallocentrism entails phallogocentrism. However, women's ambiguous relation to the mother, their "failure" to grow out of the infantile and needy body, and their confused desires and suffering, make them unfit for the signifying economy, which aims to represent the truth of each thing. For this reason, Irigaray concludes that women constitute a hole in the representing economy. That is why women are considered mysterious or fluid beings.

Let us summarize Irigaray's restatement of the problem that the unhealthy boundary discourse is rooted in. Irigaray agrees with Freud that women are not offered the opportunity to differentiate themselves from their mothers adequately. However, unlike Freud, she does not explain this through women's anatomy or relation to the father, but through the sexist socialization that orients them toward becoming men's objects of desire by identifying with the mother. For Irigaray, unlike Freud, the ambiguous relationship between mothers and daughters does not come from an aggression for not having a penis, but from a forced abandonment of the mother as the love object. This obstructs women's individuation in three ways. First, women learn to identify with a general maternal function and learn to exist for others instead of themselves. As a result, they become prone to nurturing others without a set boundary on how much they can give. Second, due to their unresolved attachment to their mothers, women struggle to form a separate identity. Hence, their emotions and thoughts tend to reflect those of their mothers. This reflection is not only about similarity or learning how to think and feel from their mothers. It results from feeling the other's sadness and joy with them and carrying the remnants of these feelings throughout one's development. Third, because women are not given a symbolic substitution for their original love object, they cannot use the symbolic order to situate themselves as subjects who represent themselves and their objects of desire. Hence, their affective life and identity lack a logic that would enable affective regulation and control. Having a more fluid affective life, women tend to experience difficulty in finding where their boundaries might lie.

Irigaray's critical appropriation of Freud is compelling in its ability to show the psychic implications of (hetero)sexist family systems. By decentering Freud's account from the anatomically grounded penis envy to the forced abandonment of the mother, she overcomes the latter's essentialist statements. However, her appeal to psychoanalysis is not well-received by all feminist thinkers. For example, Shoshana Felman (1975) asks, if women are the silenced Other of the symbolic structure, then how can women critique this phallogocentrism without using its language and voice? She argues that, although Irigaray's account is powerful in showing how oppression operates at the level of reason and language, it forecloses the possibility for women to speak for themselves and reduces them to victims (Felman 1975, 4). The problem with Felman's account is that she takes the structure Irigaray describes as complete and seamless. However, as we will see more clearly in the next section, phallic rationality is not entirely rational, and the positions of the subject and the Other are not absolute. Thus, speaking does not assume complete mastery of signs, and no one's speech is fully legible. As such, women are not denied the ability to discover new uses of signs. They can utilize their experience with the opacity and complexity of language to complicate reality without fixing it anew.[4]

4. Questioning the need for boundaries

In Irigaray's account of women's problem of individuation, we can find an alternative explanation for why women are susceptible to conditions commonly referred to as boundary issues. Women are more prone to feel exhausted from neglecting their needs and desires or immersing their lives fully in roles within intimate relations, since they are taught to become the objects of others' desires rather than the subjects of their own desires. They are more susceptible to being saddened by others' affects and sometimes to being overwhelmed by them, because their prolonged intimacy with their mother figures allows for a fluidity between themselves and others. They can be less confident in their judgments, more willing to accept other people's judgments on them, because they tend to grow up with a visceral sense that they are impostors in a masculine world and language. In such a framework, boundaries can at best function like surgical masks, offering only partially effective protection against an overwhelming problem and failing to fit our faces comfortably. What is more, the very diagnosis of boundary issues risks reproducing the sexist gaze that curtailed women's individuation.

Irigaray's reading of sexism in psychoanalysis shows that a strong ego with the ability to set boundaries is an ideal rooted in a sexist logic. It is a capacity achieved at the expense of feminine subjectivity. As the title of *Speculum* indicates, women function as mirrors through which men can see themselves magnified. Associating women with dependency, emotional immaturity, and weakness, men can define themselves as independent and autonomous beings. Furthermore, feminine sexuality is structured to provide an object for masculine sexuality, depriving her of a desire of her own. As the little girl is directed to identify with the mother in preparation to become the mother substitute for the little boy, the little boy can relieve himself of the need to resolve the separation from the nurturing connection with the mother and from the comfort of

[4]Judith Butler praises Irigaray for showing that the binary of the subject and Other is destabilized by its own logic. However, she also criticizes her as repeating the totalizing gesture of structuralism. Her critique differs from Felman's in that she does not think Irigaray forecloses women's subjectivation. Rather, she sees Irigaray's as failing to account for the possibility of diverse logics of sexism (Butler 1990, 19). Yet this critique does not undermine the conclusions we will draw from Irigaray's analysis.

this initial enmeshment. In other words, the little boy could achieve self-identity and self-sufficiency by displacing the provision of the unresolved original needs to other women. Hence, the very structure of self-identical individuality rests on murky grounds or a displacement.

We can draw three conclusions from this dialectic of individuality. First, this displacement presents a structural obstacle to establishing boundaries. For the subjects affected by this structure, an endeavor to draw boundaries would be like riding against the waves, since the social positions we occupy largely determine our sense of identity. For instance, my mother prioritizes her dependents' needs over hers with an existential, viscerally felt necessity, even if her exhaustion is also equally visceral. If we want to overcome the suffering caused by imbalanced relationships, we need more fundamental changes in subjectivity. This structural change in one's self-relation or subjectivity must be a relational one. Not only must it address the problem at the level of the social position shared by many, but it also must transform the relations between social positions. It requires a change in the norms of sexual relationships. Hence, women's boundaries, if we accept this need, require changes in men's boundaries.

Second, since the achievement of male individuality and subjectivity relies on a displacement, it also reveals its own inadequacy or failure. The sense of individuality, self-transparency, and self-sovereignty is dependent on the amorphous femininity that it poses itself against. As Philippa Berry puts it, "to assert his own subjectivity, man must forever distance himself from a feminine and corporeal reality, through a process of deliberate misrecognition (Berry 1994, 232). Lynne Segal—who is otherwise a harsh critic of Irigaray—explains this distancing and misrecognition more concretely: "Many of us, but especially men, remain uneasy before their oldest attachment, to a mother, with its memories of helplessness and need. This can be displaced onto a stubborn avoidance of any engagement with the maternal—clinging to the illusion that in adulthood our dependence on others has long been superseded" (Segal 2023, 37). Since the idea of a strong ego that sets boundaries is modeled after masculine individuality, or the relative success of distancing from maternal attachment, questioning this success entails challenging the notion of boundaries.

At the symbolic level, men continue to depend on women to form a grandiose image of themselves. At the material level, they depend on women because they still need to satisfy their—unrecognized—need for maternal intimacy. Men rely on women for care and emotional nurturing, specifically for the reproduction of their autonomous individuality. In *Ethics,* Irigaray argues that men depend on women to form and sustain self-love (Irigaray 1993, 64). Distanced from himself to occupy the position of a rational individual, man returns to himself or seeks unity through the maternal feminine. The search for unity with the maternal feminine is the remnant of the Oedipal desire. This search for an object of desire is also always a quest for being loved, and for a passivity where one is not in pursuit of objects. Self-love is a relation where one is affected by oneself and experiences fluidity between activity and passivity. Positioned as active subjects of the social and symbolic structure, men pursue this experience through the maternal feminine love. Not only does this insert a lack and restlessness within the image of self-sufficiency, but it also leads to a psychic division between a man-child who preserves a dependency relation to a mother figure and the sovereign individual.[5] This

[5]As psychoanalyst Adam Phillips notes, "the male child has to turn the trauma of having been mothered into the triumphalism of male potency. In this set-up, vulnerability is masculinity's dirty secret, leaving men with a haunting and haunted sense of impotence that only becoming a bully can assuage" (Phillips 2019, quoted in Segal 2023, 37).

psychic division or alienation undermines the assumption of self-transparency, which is necessary for effective self-sovereignty and setting boundaries.

Finally, as men rely on women for both literal and emotional support, we see that a remnant of the original boundary ambiguity between the self and the other persists, despite attempts to dismiss it. This ambiguity, which defies our efforts to conquer it, points to a need to cultivate a better relationship with it rather than trying to eliminate it with boundaries.

Interpersonal boundaries remain ambiguous because we come from a fluidity that cannot be entirely overcome. Even the phallus, "the emblem of appropriating the origin" (Irigaray 1985a, 42), fails in this. Interpersonal fluidity extends beyond the concept of interdependence among all bodies. It suggests that the other is a part of us, and we carry an otherness in ourselves. As a result, we cannot claim ownership of our thoughts and feelings. We are affected by others in ways that escape our grasp, and we cannot be contained within identities or the concept of an authentic self. At any moment, we may find ourselves desiring something we would not have imagined before. Through our relations, we form new modes of existence that blur where one ends and the other beings. We express ourselves with the words we borrow from others, and our abilities and self-concept can change drastically from one relationship to another. Our capacity for intimacy, care, and responsibility can defy any allegedly natural or normal limits.

Boundary ambiguity or fluidity does not always have to be problematic. As Whitford writes, "temporary merging or crossing of boundaries does not put identity into danger" (Whitford 1995, 161). Indeed, Irigaray argues that such fluidity is the very spring of desire. This is not to say that all desires aim to merge with another person and erase different identities. Instead, it means that we feel desire when the other's difference makes us different. Desire is ambiguous because it desires to approach and unify with another while also preserving the difference that entices it. As Irigaray writes: "the problem of desire is to suppress the interval without suppressing the other" (Irigaray 1993, 48). A desire that does experience this problem is harmful to both the self and the other. As Gail Weiss observes, unambiguous desire "ultimately annihilates not merely the alterity of the other (as if that were not enough!) but also annihilates itself insofar as it seeks the termination of desire in complete satiation, rather than prolonging and transforming itself by producing new and different desires in both oneself and the other" (Weiss 2018, 188). When desire remains fixed in the maternal object or remains as a desire to merge with the other, it turns into appropriative desire, erasing the other's difference.

Feminists, including Butler (1990), Moi (1985), and Cornell (in Cheah et al. 1998), criticized Irigaray's ideas on women's fluidity as essentialist. However, from the structural perspective used here, fluidity is not a core female trait; instead, it is an aspect of experience and subjectivity that women are more likely to relate to. The original fluidity is also not a metaphysical axiom. At least in *Speculum,* fluidity appears as a presupposition of the Oedipal individuation. Rather than a universal principle, it is a perspectival statement. Moreover, Irigaray does not claim to state its whole meaning and potential; instead, she explores its possibilities throughout her work.

Still, Irigaray is aware of the dangers of fluidity, especially when it is lived within the confines of sexist identities. Notably, in *Ethics,* Irigaray argues that women can exist in "a fusional state out of which nothing emerges or should emerge" (Irigaray 1993, 104). Women resist differentiation because of their structural inability to love themselves. Instead of loving themselves by affirming their desires, women try to be the objects of men's desire by substituting themselves for their mothers and occupying their *place.*

Rather than singular individuals, women conceive themselves and other women as a place or a placeholder. Anything that shines out of that undifferentiated place can arouse rivalry and envy (105). That is, the signs of their own or other women's singularity or excess to the undifferentiated condition become a threat to their self-love.

Setting healthy boundaries does not address the needs for self-love and differentiation as Irigaray describes them. In fact, the violation of established boundaries that confine women to a specific role and define them only through their relationship with a particular man is part of what is needed. Such transgressions are the positive powers of fluidity. While fluidity can lead to confusion of feelings and desires and a weak sense of identity, it can also mean being open to the unfamiliar, pursuing desires that do not match one's self-image, or taking on different roles in various relationships with less resistance. This movement between attitudes and desires, when it challenges the confined fluidity of patriarchy's view of womanhood, becomes a form of rebellion.

5. Place, the dwelling

We have observed that instead of emphasizing healthy boundaries, Irigaray focuses on the importance of desire and self-love. While boundaries refer to an identity that needs to be preserved, self-love does not assume such a unity or a strict separation between us and others. Nonetheless, self-love also requires distancing and safeguarding. Specifically, women must protect themselves from being erased by the desires of others. Although she is mainly known for endorsing identity fluidity and inner multiplicity, Irigaray does not overlook the need for some protective practices. Instead of boundaries that define a subject, emphasize her well-being and preferences, and allow controlled flexibility and permeability, in Irigaray, we find the concepts of place and dwelling.

In the chapter of *Ethics* titled "Place, the interval," Irigaray notes that women have been seen as the place for nurturing children and as the home to which men return. As we have discussed, women provide material and emotional support for men as a substitute for their maternal attachments. Since she is a place for the other, she is denied an independent existence or a place for her own. Throughout the essay, Irigaray explores how women can become nurturing places for themselves.

Irigaray develops her concept of place through critical reflections on Aristotle's *Physics*. Aristotle's inquiry into place centers around a model of containment or a vessel: "the innermost motionless boundary of what contains is place" (212a). A place is like an envelope, which is neither larger nor smaller than the body it contains, but is still separable from the body. However, only the body can leave or enter the place; the place has no life or motion. Aristotle emphasizes that place can neither be the matter nor the form of the thing contained. The body that contains another can be placed within a larger body, but it does so not because it is the place of a body but because it is a body itself. Place, as a function of containment, cannot have a place of its own. If places needed places, it would lead to an infinite regression, which is incompatible with the idea of a closed and definite universe. Importantly, Aristotle distinguishes place from the distance between the extremities of two bodies, which Irigaray calls the interval. If the place were an interval between the bodies, it would be something beyond the contained and containing bodies, and different ontological categories would be needed to identify its being.

Irigaray interjects Aristotle's analyses to reveal how the place, as a container, echoes the womb that contains the fetus. She writes, "The boundary of the 'containing body' can be understood as the womb" (Irigaray 1993, 49). While Irigaray does not clarify her use

of the term womb and its possible implication of biological essentialism, her statements on the womb should be read as a deconstruction of the sexist images that shape our conceptual framework. She brings up the term because she thinks it is the implicit root of Aristotle's understanding of place. She carries the imagination further by describing how the womb functions as a place, allowing us to challenge both assumptions about women's nurturing labor, the relation between layers of our bodies, and the concept of place.[6]

Irigaray criticizes Aristotle's reduction of place to a vessel and the womb to its inner surface, contouring the fetus. She argues, "So there is never any idea that the boundary of the containing body might be the skin, while passing through the mucous membranes and through the body and the flesh. The boundary of the containing body might be the bodily identity of a woman, reborn and touched anew by inner communion" (49). The womb is a living and sensing part of the bodily identity, and there is an interval between it and the fetus. The two have a touching relationship that extends beyond the physical extremities.

The interval between the womb, as a living and sensing part of a woman's body, and the fetus is key to Irigaray's rethinking of the idea of place. For Irigaray, an interval is essential for the womb to hold the fetus: "The womb, for its part, would figure rather as place. Though of course what unfolds in the womb unfolds in function of an interval, a cord, that is never done away with" (49). This role is not unique to the womb; if living bodies can be positioned in relation to each other, or if they can move toward and modify each other, there must be an interval between them. She writes,

> The change of the body and the modification of the interval represent an important issue in the economy of desire. The locomotion toward and reduction in interval are the movements ·of desire (even by expansion-retraction). The greater the desire, the greater the tendency to overcome the interval while at the same time retaining it. (47)

The interval or distance is necessary for arousal of desire and movement. Since movement in and out of place is essential to the concept of place, Irigaray views the interval as a genetic condition of place.

Irigaray argues that when Aristotle dissociated interval from place, he ignored the fact that other bodies, which are mostly fluid, facilitate the relation between two bodies (52). For Irigaray's idea of interval to work, we should take her claims on amorphous fluids between bodies as a partial example. The interval between bodies is rather a statement on their relational emergence: the lack of clear lines separating them, the impossibility of isolating them from the countless contexts of interaction, and yet the necessity to think of a distance that makes them distinct. The interval should be taken as the very movement of differentiation that happens when bodies meet, and that transforms them. As Rebecca Hill notes, by using one of Irigaray's signature concepts, the interval is sensible-transcendental: "Irigaray's interval is sensible-transcendental. To put this in other terms, the interval is the threshold from which matter and form are reconceived. She is particularly attentive to the specific relations the interval engenders" (Hill 2012, 58). Interval is a "generative threshold" (Hill 2012, 82) because it allows the body to

[6]In furthering the example of the womb, Irigaray does not imply an essential connection between having a womb and being a woman. She uses it as an example of how place works. Her main observation about women's relation to place is the structural position of caregiving, and not their experience of pregnancy.

provide nutrients and caress for the other, in addition to sheltering it. It opens the possibility of mutual sensitivity and motivates communication and growth. Interval is not reducible to physical qualities, bodies, or sensations because it has a generative power. It generates growth and form-taking. It exceeds physical boundaries and promotes becoming. In intersubjective relations, it corresponds to encountering differences that make us change and grow.

The body's ability to create an interval within itself allows Irigaray to consider how women can become a place for themselves. The interval indicates that the bodies, both the container and the contained, are heterogeneous, enabling the creation of something that is neither entirely theirs nor completely independent of them. Women can become a place for themselves by recognizing the inclinations, pleasures, and thoughts that do not fit their self-image. That is, by affirming their internal heterogeneity, developing an internal touch, and nurturing their differences.

Women do not need to be located somewhere, to become limited, or to feel secure. They already have such a place: home. However, for Irigaray, women need an organic place that nurtures their bodies while maintaining an interval between themselves and that body. This interval allows for a place that fosters a caressing touch and a nurturing relationship, which in turn encourages change and growth. What a woman needs when she seeks a place is captured in the following passage:

> What is sometimes difficult for women is to provide themselves with a periphery, a circumference, a world, a home. According to a cycle that overflows systems of taking-discarding, or taking-leaving, but which is able to operate and be operated on the periphery. At a distance, should one say? Energy that might be saved, used in self-engendering, in creating one's own horizon, in its imaginary, artistic, and cultural dimensions. (Irigaray 1993, 106)

The boundary or place that Irigaray construes both draws a circumference to secure and situate women and places them on the periphery, allowing them to exist on a threshold. It gives them both the comfort of a home and the expansiveness of the world.

Irigaray is exploring something beyond the permeable membrane that lets certain things in and keeps others out, or beyond a door that is sometimes open and sometimes closed. She is not emphasizing a balance between flexibility and self-assertion. Instead, she envisions a place that both contains and exposes us; both protects us and makes us more vulnerable to affection. Such a place is possible if it offers protection or structure while also making the outside more appealing. It is also possible if its primary role is not to defend my true self, but to help me embrace my inner difference, multiplicity, and capacity to desire.

How can something fulfill both of these functions? Consider skin. What self-help writers often overlook when thinking of boundaries as our internal skin is that skin is excitable and sensitive. What Aristotle forgets when thinking that skin cannot be the place is that our skin is never entirely ours. Consider an apartment in a vibrant city. While protecting our privacy, such an apartment also invites us outside. It makes the outside more desirable than if we were outside without shelter—if we were homeless. Through these examples, we see that a boundary can act as both a container and an exposer, embodying the qualities of being both ours and not belonging to us simultaneously. Christine Battersby captures this perfectly: "The boundary of my body can also be thought as an event-horizon, in which one form (myself) meets its potentiality for transforming itself into another form or forms (the not-self)" (Battersby 1999, 351).

A boundary is like an event in its own right, having various relations to all others but more closely connected to my duration and potential.

In Irigaray's later work, especially in *Sharing the world,* we encounter a new term for this self-placing: dwelling. Dwelling refers to having a rhythm of sensibility and experience (Irigaray 2004, 12) that enables us to enjoy our being. However, it is not reducible to living habitually in a comforting shelter. For Irigaray, dwelling means having a path and a horizon (7–12). A path is not simply about tasks or projects. Thinking of dwelling as a path suggests that dwelling is something to be cultivated. Dwelling implies being comfortable in one's existence. It is not, however, about having a set of values, preferences, or patterns of behavior that define our identity and are taken for granted. Instead, it is something we should approach with wonder (7) and continually work on.

Most importantly, our dwelling prepares us to welcome others because it encompasses a radical heterogeneity that makes us open to others.

> Welcoming requires an availability for that which has not yet occurred, an ability and a wanting to open ourselves to the unknown, to that which is still unfamiliar to us and, in a sense, will always remain unfamiliar. . . . Since we try to receive the other there where we heard his or her call, in a part of ourselves that remains obscure to us, almost strange so that it seems inaccessible to us, although it constitutes the most intimate part of ourselves—that is, a place to which perhaps correspond words that do not intend to show, to make visible, and above all to demonstrate which perhaps. (18–19)

While dwelling, we prepare ourselves to welcome others and our own otherness. Dwelling is a mode of self-affection. We build our dwelling while also living in it. We are both passive and active, and strange and familiar at the same time. We are affected by our inner differences and welcome them at once. To dwell is to have a place for engaging with and exploring the differences within ourselves, allowing communication between different thoughts, affects, or inclinations as they are constantly influenced by a changing world. To dwell is to be at home with one's inner difference; to find enjoyment in one's experience of self-difference.

A place or dwelling, like the healthy boundaries offered by self-help culture, safeguards the individual from being erased, reduced to a role, or existing for the other's desire. However, the place does not do this by defining one's identity or the needs and desires that should not be sacrificed. It does not attempt to resolve the ambiguity between what is mine and what is yours by cultivating the ability to utter and claim "me" and defend it.

Dwelling still shields us from the burdensome forms of ambiguity that lead to exhaustion or our appropriation by others. First, having a space and engaging with our differences aims to awaken and nurture desire. When we experience strong desires, certain boundaries can form before we make decisions about our well-being. Having a place lets particular desires crystallize amid situations of "boundary ambiguity" and provides us with a temporary direction. These emerging and temporary boundaries are, in a way, similar to the boundaries that are drawn without our consent when we are exhausted, sick, or maddened by a situation. However, while the boundaries that desire creates can be as sudden as those of anger or illness, they are not similarly destructive. Second, our place or a dwelling can signal itself and draw us toward it when we are lost. It does not invite us to define the boundary between ourselves and others or suggest

what requests to make to protect our well-being. It does not offer us transparency on how to safeguard ourselves, but it helps us rest and return renewed, with the opportunity to rebuild our relationships. Finally, unlike personal boundaries, your place does not define what is truly and only yours, but it allows you to welcome others. This may seem like the opposite of what we want our boundaries to do; we need boundaries to prevent invasion when we cannot welcome others. However, challenging our sense of invasion and expanding our ability to receive others without losing ourselves can be equally important.

It is important to note that, for Irigaray, women can only make and claim their places in solidarity with other women. She writes, "If this threshold (this ground that is no ground) is ever to be lived for women's benefit, they need language, some language" (Irigaray 1993, 108). That is, in order to experience their place-making ability in an empowering way, they must re-signify their condition by communicating with each other. They need an "interval of exchange, whether of words or deeds" (104) to distance themselves from their immediacy or the flow of relations they submit to and to find potential and value in what is often seen as a sign of inherent weakness. Therefore, place-making, unlike "healthy boundaries," requires intersubjective agency. In this way, our dwellings are not just our own concern, and we are not the sole masters of our places because we owe them to each other.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the phenomenon of boundary issues from an Irigarayan viewpoint. It showed how, in Irigaray's work, this phenomenon relates to the problem of individuation. Framed this way, boundary issues cannot be fixed simply by recognizing our needs and values because insufficient individuation is tied to a problem of desiring and experiencing ourselves as unified and whole individuals. However, strengthening the ego is also not a practical solution because the concept of a self-aware and sovereign ego is rooted in a masculine ideal from which women are structurally excluded. Such an ideal is also problematic because individuality is never fully complete and depends on shifting the ambiguities between self and other. If we still need protective tactics, they should not violate inner heterogeneity or self-difference. I argue that Irigaray's ideas of place and dwelling can offer more suitable protection by preserving inner differences rather than identities.

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