Liminality in Delany and Irigeray’s Conceptions of Bodies, Desire, and Identity

Merike Andre-Barrett*

Abstract
While they work in seemingly disparate pursuits, science fiction writer and literary critic, Samuel R. Delany and feminist psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray share a preoccupation with the concept of liminality. In Delany’s “On the Unspeakable” and Irigaray’s “This Sex Which Is Not One” this concept is employed to demonstrate and critique the ways in which heteronormativity delineates and limits the potential of bodies, gender and identity. Both authors’ demonstrated concern with space, topography, and geography puts emphasis on the productive potential for liminality in each of these areas and their influence on language, sexuality, and desire.

In Delany’s (1999) “On the Unspeakable” and Irigaray’s (1977) “This Sex Which Is Not One” the concept of liminality is central to an exploration of the design of bodies and space, the demarcations and thresholds inherent to an economy of desire and to how these things inform and construct possibilities for identity. For both authors, the production of a transgressive form of writing that continuously flirts with the boundaries of normative genres, language, and authorial voice underlines the importance of this liminality as it informs both the form and content of their writing.

Generally, liminality refers to the place, state, or transition between things. More specifically, ontological liminality can affect those who are stateless, transgendered, bisexual, or even fictional characters such as cyborgs and shapeshifters defining them as subjects who inhabit with an in-between state of being. Liminality in this study is characterized by an indeterminacy of state, an ambiguity in meaning, and a focus on the thresholds and transitions found in time and place.

* Merike Andre-Barrett is a fourth year Psychology and Sexual Diversity Studies undergraduate student at the University of Toronto.
“On the Unspeakable” forgoes any introduction or instruction as to the content or form of the text. From the outset one must attempt to unravel Delany’s work – a work that starts with the sentence fragment “the positioning of desire that always draws us to ‘The Unspeakable’ in the first place” (Delany, 1999, p. 1). One is thrown into the text headfirst, necessarily implicated by and located within the description of the porn theatre that follows the first sentence fragment. Furthermore, as one only recognizes later, the first word on the page is not actually the “first” word of the text. The page itself is delineated into two columns cuing a reading exercise similar to that induced by a newspaper or magazine editorial, yet these columns weave both apart and together to create narratives which separate initially, only to later be linked in cyclical oneness. There is no instruction, however, to this exercise. The reader is knee-deep in seeming disconnected descriptions of Rose (the ‘cracker prostitute’) and the black, gay male who cruises the porn theatres (the ‘Author’) interlaced with social and political commentary on place, race, and sexuality by page two. Only then, might they realize that to be able to more coherently read this narrative requires a different approach to reading. To shift the geography of the text, Delany has organized it in two columns that run side-by-side, yet are to be read in a way that the reader skips every other column only to return to those unread once they’ve reached the ‘end’ of the piece. Through doing this he is actively engaging in a deconstruction of the sanctioning of some content over other, positing explicit and pornographic content that is generally deemed ‘unspeakable’ directly in the reader’s path ensuring that s/he must read through it prior to accessing the more socially palatable, or ‘speakable,’ academic commentary.
This textual design serves two purposes: first, to underpin Delany’s (1999) assertion that it “is as if we must establish two columns, with everything of one mode relegated to one side and everything of the other relegated to the other” (p. 63-4); second, to spatially situate (and thus implicate) the reader in the rows of the porn theatre that acts as the site of Delany’s narrative. The textual geography signals the unique topography of the porn theatre in which there is a continuous play on public/private and interior/exterior divisions of space – and by extension on the division between speakable and unspeakable. While the interior, private space of the theatre might be marked as detached by architectural design, Delany wishes to demonstrate it as embedded in the exterior, public space – and thus, inseparable. Both the text, as well as the content, set out demarcations but continuously work to transgress them. The columnar design is only one example of this. In forcing the reader to engage in an exercise of textual navigation that doesn’t follow the rules of any conventional literary or academic writing Delany wants to examine the unquestioned assumption that boundaries, be they literary or otherwise, are “lucid, absolute, and unquestionably everyday” (Delany, 1999, p. 65).

In the face of such an assumption Delany’s writing contains a cyclical nature and unusual structuring of text that is able to, instead, present the marginal and silent spaces of the “unspeakable” while hinting at a conclusion that is, in fact, absent. As he points out, “the unspeakable lies in the silence, beyond the white space that accompanies the text, across the marginal blank that drops opaquely beside the text toward a conclusionary absence that finally is not to be found” (Delany, 1999, p. 66). His own piece simultaneously skirts the edges of both the “everyday” – the banal, the public, the speakable – through narrational asides of academic tone and content, as well as the
“unspeakable” – the private, the perverse, that which must remain hidden in the shadows. Through an open and explicit language of pornography and desire Delany draws attention to how any attempt at dividing the unspeakable from the everyday is, in fact, in vain. Furthermore, Delany’s evasion of making concrete any recognizable authorial design or narrative voice underscores the idea that “[t]o speak the unspeakable without the proper rhetorical flourish or introduction…to choose the wrong flourish or not choose any (i.e., to choose the flourish called “the literal”) is to perform the unspeakable” (Delany, 1999, p. 64). Delany’s refusal to adopt the distanced, passive voice of conventional literal form and flourish actively presents the unspeakable, thus demonstrating the performative possibilities that exist in the liminal space.

Similarly, Irigaray’s design of female genitalia presents an undefined space that skirts the limits of both interior and exterior. As she argues, the female body is normatively conceptualized in relation to the male body and its parameters, leaving the female sex organs both formless and without boundaries – as a “non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 23). Akin to Delany’s ‘unspeakable’, we observe Irigaray’s description of the marginality of womens’ bodies as being simultaneously present as explicit and displayed (objectified) as well as hidden and chaste (undefined, invisible). This proposition of the spatial design of female genitalia parallels the textual design of Delany’s piece in articulating a new space that doesn’t acknowledge the divide between interior/exterior, or the necessity to define through reference to a binary “other.” Instead, as Irigaray contends, woman “touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation…for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself – she is already two – but not divisible into
one(s)” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 24). Thus, by denying a definition that relies on reference to a lack of phallus, as well as articulating female genitalia instead to be circular, self-actualizing, self-referencing, and most importantly active, she has cast the geography of female sex organs to a realm outside of reference to an “other” and as such, with regards to women, “the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, than is commonly imagined” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 28).

According to Irigaray’s account, the geography of female pleasure is multiple and divided on account of the fact that female sex organs are diffuse and not “one.” In a culture where everything must be accounted for, and where the economy – even of bodies – becomes focused on a drive “to inventory everything as individualities [woman is neither] one nor two” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 26). Because a female’s sexual organ isn’t seen as one, it can’t actively be counted in the inventory of individualities, and is therefore counted as none. Thus, in this economy, a woman derives pleasure in the “ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 31). Her ensuing place in the economy of desire is as a commodity with an exchange value – be it as a “hole-envelope” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 23) or “lodging” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 43) for the penis. Her desire is always that of the threshold – designated as that which remains unfulfilled.

While Irigaray’s account of the ways in which phallocentric social constructions of female desire leave women unfulfilled and undefined, her reconceptualization of the topography of female genitalia creates a utopian vision of endless, self-fulfilling, female pleasure. Delany, on the other hand, does not see redesign as necessary, for he observes sexuality and desire thriving in the margins. For him, boundaries and thresholds are fields
of tension between contested norms. Desire is at the boundaries of the everyday and the unspeakable in a space that is fluid, dynamic, and continuously shifting and being displaced. In fact, desire is what Delany uses “to tease apart for his everyday audience the boundary, the gap between probe and presentation, between interpretation and representation, between analysis and art” (Delany, 1999, p. 63). The unspeakable, that is to be momentarily glimpsed in such a process is “the epoch’s romantic metaphor” (Delany, 1999, p. 62) and is, due to this, hypnotic and entrancing.

However, Delany’s presentation of sexuality is one that is largely tied to relations of unmanageable excess and exchange that threaten the economy as desire acts like a drug that incites pure expenditure, excess and consumption. Like Irigaray’s design of female sex organs that resists definition in any economically accountable terms, the unspeakable cannot be fixed or objectified and thus necessarily eludes the possibility of a position of economic value or recognition within the frame of market exchange of equivalents. Since there is no possibility of recognizing or valuing the unspeakable along economic lines, Delany questions the conventional definition of value in commodity exchange, pointing out that “the prototype for all social division” (Delany, 1999, p. 66-8) exists, precisely, at the division between the unspeakable and the everyday.

Liminality in the design of bodies and space, as well as the effects of marginality on desire, illuminates both the possibilities and the limitations of identity in Irigaray and Delany’s work. Delany’s assertion that the division between the everyday and the unspeakable might be the “prototype for all social division” (Delany, 1999, p. 58) should be considered in light of his intended design of a porn theatre as a synecdoche of the whole of America. Yet even this design is elusive and imperfect as Delany undoes his
own analogic thinking presenting against this backdrop a race reversal that overturns the “more usual analogical alignments of primitive and sophisticated, of white and non-white” (Delany, 1999, p. 61) in order to critique such highly bound and polarized conventions of thought. The social situation of those individuals divided, in a sense, from the public exterior presents a situation of marginality – and potentially of oppression. The interior space of the porn theatre acts to simultaneously reverse and at the same time repeat the power relations at work on the outside. It is as though Delany wishes to advance the possibilities of performing the unspeakable that are inherent to individual enactments of transgression in such marginal spaces.

With regards to Irigaray’s work, women’s subjectivity, including their sexuality, is shown to be invisible in the scene of representation. The female is left in the margins either “as waste, or excess” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 30) on the borders of an identity primarily articulated by a dominant masculine ideology. Since this ideology is derived from, and is dependent on, phallogocentrism, Irigaray maintains that the only way for women to understand themselves as autonomous subjects would be through the creation of an entirely autonomous feminine language. In the face of a phallocentric language informed by the privileging of the phallus, in this essay Irigaray is, through the cyclical, boundary-less, and diffuse (re)design of the female genitals and desire, informing a new language. For women to be considered as distinct they cannot be considered complementary. A need for a new language implies the need for a new logic.

Both Delany and Irigaray demonstrate the limitations inherent in the language of the ‘speakable’ that relies on the demarcations laid out through binary-derived distinctions between public/private, exterior/interior, and male/female. Instead, they
privilege the space of the liminal between these as providing a new space of possibility wherein definitions and boundaries are shown to be dynamic and permeable.

With Delany, the potential for desire in the liminal spaces of the unspeakable is simultaneously fleeting and infinite. The excessive desire of the liminal space is necessarily marginal, delegated to such marginality through its unspeakable status. The socially determined division between the speakable and unspeakable is continuously in flux and is responsible for informing the power hierarchy that determines social, cultural, and class divisions. Yet it is precisely in the unspeakable zone that there exists the potential for multiplicity in terms of identity, sexuality, and desire.

For Irigaray, possibilities for women exist in an autoerotic and self-referential feminine subject. The multiplicity inherent to this possibility effectively dismantles the binary divisions that have rendered female sex organs and desire meaningless. Like Delany, Irigaray’s account of the plurality and multiplicity found through the process of deconstruction does not limit, but rather, encourages excess. Excess in the face of an economy of desire with limits and boundaries is, in fact, highly transgressive. By writing along the margins, chasing dynamic and indeterminate liminal spaces, and engaging with styles that evade finite conclusions and language that resists binary-derived definitions, Delany and Irigaray have effectively championed the possibilities of marginality. In privileging the diffuse and undefined in their arguments, Delany and Irigaray are effectively performing the unspeakable, actively carving out a space in literature and theory for liminality.
References


Irigaray, L. (1977). This sex which is not one. In C. Porter (Ed.), This Sex Which is Not One. (p. 22-33). New York: Cornell University Press.