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# Revolutionary Love: Toward the Abolition of Anti-Black Colonial Desire

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## Abstract

Luce Irigaray offers a critical account of feminist desire in response to Hegelian, Freudian, and Lacanian models of desire based on lack. However, she reproduces anti-Black and colonial logics within her feminist, supposedly liberatory accounts of desire, thereby creating false utopias and limiting possibilities for liberatory struggle. This article brings Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) into conversation with theorists in critical Black studies. Drawing on Denise Ferreira da Silva's articulation of Unpayable Debt (2022) and Joy James' concept of the captive maternal (James 2015; James 2016; James 2021; James 2022), I offer a radical proposal for the abolition of desire. Following revolutionary abolitionisms' dual method of destruction and creation, I theorize both the destruction of the death-dealing concepts and practices of desire, as well as a sketch of revolutionary love as the inventive dimension of the abolition of desire. The features of revolutionary love that I engage include a valuing of freedom by any means necessary (including sacrifice) and a commitment to social life that honors and defends unpayable debts. Revolutionary love embodies difference without separability, toward the abolition and decolonization of the (colonial, anti-Black, racial capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal) world as we know it, rather than its reformation.

What are the functions and dangers of desire under modernity? How can desire be decolonized, given its colonial and enslaving (after)lives? Can desire itself be liberatory and revolutionary? And if not, should it—or could it—be abolished? A prominent scholar who addresses the liberatory potential of desire by way of psychoanalysis and philosophy is Luce Irigaray. Irigaray attends to the embodied and theoretical contradictions of femininity and motherhood within phallogocentric structures of power. In *This sex which is not one* (1985), Irigaray challenges the phallogocentric seminal accounts of femininity, desire, and ego development articulated by theorists like Hegel, Freud, and Lacan (among others). But, as I will argue through a Black studies based

philosophical reading of her text, her feminist account of desire is undermined by an uncritical acceptance of (feminine) desire as an uncontroversial good.

The value of desire might seem beyond question, especially for revolutionaries who call for the abolition of the world as we know it alongside the creation of new, anticolonial worlds that celebrate Black social life rather than attempt to annihilate and profit off it. For such theorists and activists, considering the cisheteropatriarchal, anti-Black, colonial, racial capitalist oppression that has denied the existence and fulfillment of so many desires of the Fanonian damned (*les damnés*), a reformation of our philosophical and political understandings of desire, such as that offered by Irigaray, could seem like a positive answer (Fanon 1961). From this perspective, we need simply make space for the desires of the damned to utter themselves, to feel safe to try to fulfill and find pleasure from their desires. Let us call this the common-sense view of desire.

However, there are problems with the way desire has been theorized and practiced, even by feminist philosophers, which should give significant pause to our taking up a common-sense view of desire. As I will show, many philosophical and psychoanalytic accounts of desire presuppose a structure wherein the desiring subject lacks an object that promises to fulfill it and make the subject whole (again), thereby extinguishing the desire. This structure of desire has played a disastrous role in fueling what Muindi Fanuel Muindi calls “global apartheid and planetary ecocide,” in the forms of coloniality, racial capitalism, the slave trades, cisheteropatriarchy, and more (Muindi 2022, 2023).<sup>1</sup> While a common-sense view of desire suggests that the form and content of desire can be decolonized, I argue that desire cannot be disentangled from a subject-object ontology that relies on anti-Blackness for its coherence.

Black studies theorists offer valuable insight regarding the subjection that is entangled with subjecthood and its motivating desires. For instance, Hortense Spillers argues that the quasi-familial relationships and arrangements founded during slavery through routinized sexual violence threw the lexis and practices of sexuality, motherhood, pleasure, and *desire* “into unrelieved crisis” (Spillers 1987, 76). In another essay, Spillers draws on Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (2004) to describe a societal compact made with Black women, wherein the cost of their admission into society as subjects is “to go hungry (on all the registers)—to demand nothing of anyone, to *slay [their own] desire*” (Spillers 2003, 8, emphasis added). Relatedly, David Marriott offers an interpretation of Fanon’s *Black skin, white masks* (1967) as working through how “in the colony negrophobia is written into the very possibility of desire itself” (Marriott 2018, 163, 171). Borrowing Denise Ferreira da Silva’s language, the subject can be understood as an ontoepistemological pillar of modern Western philosophy, which is further taken up by states, institutions, and individuals to uphold “an ethico-political program that . . . [reproduces] the violence of modern thought,” wreaking havoc on those whose lives and bodies are exploited for the sake of reproducing and stabilizing modernity (Ferreira da Silva 2016, 58).<sup>2</sup> The subject becomes, by way of and yet, in violent opposition to the object.

The institutionalized and ritualized practices of anti-Black desire I examine in this paper are part of the violent ethico-political program of (colonial) modernity. Along this line, for scholars and activists who take issue with subjecthood as grounded by anti-Blackness and the idea of a world as an object, the subject/object binary *itself* needs to be deeply questioned—if the aim is to end the world as we know it and in doing so, nurture abolitionist and anticolonial possibilities. As such, I understand the common-sense view of desire as inadequate for revolutionary agendas, which envision another world and refuse to understand personhood as fundamentally centered around rational,

ontologically separable “subjects” with a primal lack and unique status as participating in culture.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I engage with Irigaray as a philosopher who has criticized common-sense accounts of desire as lack while herself reproducing a problematic structure of desire through anti-Black and colonial logics and grammars. Given the ongoing dangers of desire, I offer a radical proposal for the abolition of desire, while accounting for the powerful longing and need for other worlds and other ways of embracing anticoloniality and Black social life.<sup>4</sup> In the final section of this paper, I briefly map a theory of revolutionary love, as an alternative to both the common-sense view of desire and the philosophical reformations of desire offered by Irigaray.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. A brief philosophical and psychoanalytic history of desire

Desire for Hegel (as well as Freud and Lacan) is driven by a fundamental lack or absence in being, which the subject experiences as an unsettling loss, pushing them to find an object to fill the absence and thereby satisfy the desire (Hegel 1977, 362; Grosz 1989, xv–xvi). Desire is purportedly fundamental to human being; in Kojève’s reading of Hegel, “The (conscious) Desire of a being is what constitutes that being as I . . . The (human) I is the I of a Desire or of Desire” (Kojève 1980, 3). Desire here is essentially the desire for recognition from another self-consciousness. When one “I” is recognized by another, one can recognize and value oneself as, and become, an equal self-consciousness with a subjective reality (4). Human desire thus “produces a free and historical individual, conscious of his individuality, his history, and finally, his historicity” (6). Yet within this atmosphere of humans desiring and recognizing one another, as Hegel claims in his reading of Sophocles’ (1928) *Antigone*, the individual qua woman “does not, cannot, will not, attain self-consciousness,” and cannot act ethically, given that she does not know what she is doing when she does it (Chanter 1995, 82). In another text, Hegel offers an account of anatomical difference wherein the penis is characterized by an “active sensibility,” whereas the clitoris embodies “inactive feeling in general” (Hegel 1970, 175).

Freud’s theses on development and desire are similarly rooted in the primacy of the penis/phallus, such that “only one kind of genital organ comes into account—the male” (Freud 1924a, 126). In his account, “the female organ is still undiscovered” (Freud 1924b, 420). Women and girls are understood as having undergone a castration of the penis, such that “maleness is concentrated subject, activity, and the possession of a penis; femaleness carries on the object, and passivity” (Freud 1924a, 126, 129). Desire is shaped by the acceptance, denial, or threat of castration and inferiority. Hence, as Irigaray summarizes it, women’s “lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value” (Irigaray 1985, 23).

Heavily influenced by Freud and Hegel, Lacan similarly articulates the condition of women to be “fundamentally that of accepting herself as a man’s object of desire” (Lacan 2006, 222). He describes how women serve as objects of exchange in structures of kinship, “while what is simultaneously transmitted in the symbolic order is the phallus” (565). Lacan explicates how the phallus is a signifier “whose function . . . is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole” (690). The phallus functions to signify “the lack of being [*manque à être*] that is wrought by the subject in relation to the signifier” (710).

Irigaray revises and challenges these kinds of philosophical and psychoanalytic accounts to theorize desire through a feminist framework of sexual difference. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, she looks to “the *lived body*, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways,” to articulate “a strategic and combative

understanding [of femininity and desire] . . . whose function is to make explicit what has been excluded or left out of phallogocentric images” (Grosz 1994, 18 emphasis original; Grosz 1989, 110). But, as I will argue, this feminist revision of Hegelian and psychoanalytic analyses of desire also traffics in racist tropes of anti-Blackness and coloniality, and it is therefore an insufficient weapon against the intertwined mechanizations of cisheteropatriarchy, coloniality, and anti-Blackness. Part of the problem is that Irigaray assents to the assertion of the phallus as *the* master signifier, such that race, class, and ability become “politically and ontologically secondary to sex” (Hom 2013, 420). But she also deploys racist tropes in her own feminist accounts of desire, which raises a more fundamental question about whether desire, as inextricably entangled with anti-Black coloniality, itself is a problematic starting point for philosophies struggling toward revolution and liberation.

Over the years, various feminist philosophers have since taken up Irigaray, stretching, challenging, and assenting to their theories in differing ways. Some, like Mary Poovey, have argued that Irigaray’s feminism is essentialist, in that she homogenizes women as a white and middle-class category.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as Monique Plaza, reject the interpretation of Irigaray’s essentialism, arguing that her insistence on radical alterity through sexual difference is “a constant reminder of the other categories of difference, such as race and class, that structure our lives and texts” (Plaza 1978; Showalter 1989, 3).<sup>7</sup> Finally, theorists like Tina Chanter (1995), Sabrina L. Hom, and Alison Stone (2006) attempt to diffuse the binary of essentialism and social constructionism, “to revalue the material as active and formative, or, as Stone puts it, as having its own distinct but non-determinative *rhythm* (Stone 2006)” (Hom 2013, 420). While some of these texts engage with the question of race (Bloodsworth 1997; Mori 2002; Hom 2013), none have considered the more radical critiques of desire and subjectivity in recent Black studies, geared toward the abolition of the world as we know it. Thus, in this article, I examine Irigaray’s work through critical Black studies; I will argue that Irigaray reproduces colonial and anti-Black theories and practices of (feminist) desire, even as she commendably and actively works against the paternal hold that Hegel, Freud, and Lacan have had over psychoanalytic and philosophical understandings of desire.

## 2. Dystopic (sexuate) difference in *This sex which is not one*

In *This sex which is not one* (1985), Irigaray diagnoses how women are stuck in a system wherein they are defined by lack or atrophy of their so-called sexual organ (23). In this diagnosis, she takes to task psychoanalytic accounts of desire that posit the phallus as the “*one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning” (26). From this perspective, women are not one person or one sex. Instead, their sex is that which is not one, “counted as *none*” and their personhood is quantified as and restricted to (re)production (26, 102). Interestingly, rather than arguing that women *do* have a sexual organ that is (one) equivalent to men’s, Irigaray argues that feminine desire and pleasure are multiple and diffuse. Irigaray holds that, rather than being defined by lack, “Woman . . . overflows the ‘subject’” (112).

Irigaray’s understanding of womanhood is arguably restricted to cisgender women, which we can and should challenge from transfeminist lenses.<sup>8</sup> That said, Irigaray is responding to issues raised by Lacanian discourse, wherein reigning psychoanalytic understandings of gender and desire held that women have “penis envy,” because the penis (or its symbolic form, the phallus) is the only recognizably valuable sexual organ (or master signifier) (23). Given such societal imaginaries, structures, and relations,

according to Irigaray, the state in which we live is a “dominant phallic economy . . . [and] women’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the [phallogocentric] logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks” (24–25). Irigaray goes on to describe the phallic economy as one in which divisions of labor prevent people from “making love,” particularly insofar as women’s bodies are restricted to (re)production (28). As mere commodities and mediums of exchange and relation between men, women are unable to “make love” (192). As such, even if we were to attempt to understand women’s sexuality within this economy, Irigaray rightly argues we would need different language and grammars than the ones we have (25).

Irigaray’s account of gender affirms that women’s sexuality is more than one. To do this, she emphasizes how women’s genitals are “formed of two lips in continuous contact” (Irigaray 1985, 24). Thus, unlike man, a woman requires no mediation to touch herself, and does so all the time. From this, Irigaray argues that women are “already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” (24). Women’s interiority involves silent, diffuse touch between inseparable selves (29). Irigaray’s assertion that (cisgender) women alone require no mediation to touch themselves (whereas men do via their hands, a woman’s body, etc.) seems plausibly rejectable, especially when considering something like Merleau-Ponty’s account of “double sensations” felt when pressing his hands together.<sup>9</sup> As he states, “when I press my two hands together, it is . . . an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched’” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 106). Constant and diffuse touch between different and inseparable dimensions of a body—autoeroticism, as Irigaray terms it (Irigaray 1985, 24)—is arguably a non-gendered phenomenon.

Irigaray also notes that, contrary to her understanding of women’s interiority and capacity for self-touch, female sexual desire is often interpreted and feared within the phallic economy to be a kind of insatiable appetite that can consume a person (29). She speaks to the phobic interpretation of women’s sexuality as voracious but makes no mention of Blackness or Black women specifically, nor to race more generally. This is significant given the stereotypes of Black people, which David Marriott articulates via Fanon as involving “an *imago* of the black (attached to the *hallucinatory* idea of sexual potency), which everyone *knows* not to be true but nevertheless acts as if it were)” (Marriott 2018, 124, emphasis original). Per Marriott, “the fundamental denotation constituted by the black body is that of a naturalized sexual aggression in which the body is either violating or violated” (71). Hortense Spillers offers an account of how the “*theft of the body*” marked by transatlantic slavery resulted in the captive body becoming “the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality,” among other terrifying, violent tactics used to “sever the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers 1987, 67, emphasis original). Slavery marked Black women as objects of exchange and (re)production such that they were simultaneously objects to be feared, used, and sold, while being sources of purportedly unquenchable sexual desire.<sup>10</sup> These markings or effects are specific to Black people and are not the same as the way non-Black women are oppressed. These stereotypes and their colonial durations complexify Irigaray’s abstract claim that female sexual desire is often figured and feared as being insatiable, and that women are exchanged between men as commodities.

In *Sensational flesh* (2014), Amber Jamilla Musser builds on Spillers’s work, articulating “the flesh that black women inhabit [as] one that does not allow her access to her own sexuality but renders her available for the use of others” (Musser 2014, 159–60). In a 2019 lecture on her book, Musser claims that “the idea of otherness hovers around black femininity itself” (Musser 2019, 00:13:40–00:14:07). She argues that this otherness

is produced by racism *and* phallogentrism, such that blackness and gender differentiation are bifurcated, and blackness and femininity form an aporia. Some readers of Irigaray, such as Rachel Jones, find that while Irigaray theorizes sexual difference as having a primary ontological status (more foundational than race, class, ability, etc.), Irigaray “repeatedly insists” that an *ethics* of sexuate difference would enable (and demand) a new relation to difference, such that differences of all kinds are attended to, without assimilation or appropriation (Jones 2015, 164). Yet, if blackness and gender or sexuate difference are themselves at odds in the ways described by scholars like Spillers and Musser, how can sexuate difference be ontologically primary? Grounded in their work, I read Irigaray’s account of women’s interiority and sexual desire as amassing “the” feminine experience as a monolith, while claiming to focalize multiplicity and diffusion. This is problematic given the various experiences and reconfigurations of coloniality, anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchy, and unveils a sinister false utopia as her answer to a phallogentric dystopia.

Another light in which to understand the issue with an unwavering claim that sexual difference is the primary ontological difference can be found in Irigaray’s writing that “ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually” (31). In her argument, all women are (at least symbolically) positioned as possessions/objects of exchange/property, rather than as owners. Irigaray refuses this positioning, arguing that women’s desire is not structured by ownership or possession, and they don’t *want* to be owners (31). This, however, elides differences between women across time and space, in their relationships to possession and property. For example, rich white women’s experiences of possession and *possessing* throughout history (even if only via their husbands’ or fathers’ accumulations) is vastly different from Black and colonized women’s experiences. Many women do in fact desire to own (property, possessions, etc.). This further reinforces how “pleasure without possession” is a white feminist fantasy of identification with enslaved and colonized women, as well as a disavowal of the possessiveness of white women’s pleasure in an anti-Black libidinal economy.

Irigaray goes on to consider the possibility of women undertaking exchange with each other, that is, commodities exchanging with other commodities (196). In her argument, this “economy of abundance” would involve exchanges without endings, accumulations, or additions (197). Rather, in this economy, “Nature’s resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions: enjoyment without a few, well-being without pain, *pleasure without possession*” (197, emphasis added). She concedes that this figuration is perhaps utopic, “unless this mode of exchange [of abundance] has undermined the [phallogentric] order of commerce from the beginning” (197). But as Ursula K. Le Guin writes, “every utopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a utopia” (Le Guin 2017). Colonial dystopia underlies the utopic vision Irigaray proposes, regardless of whether the economy of abundance underlies the phallic order.

I arrive at this conclusion by engaging her account on her own terms while forefronting historical material conditions. Without an anticolonial examination of property and enjoyment, Irigaray’s theorizing “pleasure without possession” in her picture of women exchanging with other women is abstract and incomplete at best, and more realistically, it is a utopic fantasy that conceals a dystopic, torturous power relation. As many theorists in the Black radical tradition have argued, pleasure is, in many significant ways, imbricated with possession. For instance, Saidiya V. Hartman writes of historical scenes of subjection (beginning with the theft of Africans from their



homelands), wherein the fungibility of enslaved Black people as commodities is a condition for white enjoyment (Hartman 1997, 26). Even after the partial abolition of slavery in 1865, as Hartman argues, the laboring Black body “remained a medium of other’s power and representation” (40). Moreover, Frank B. Wilderson III argues in *Red, white, and Black: cinema and the structure of US antagonism* (2010), institutions like cinema make offerings of Black flesh that “can give civil society the pleasure of seeing Blacks maimed as well as the pleasure of Blacks taking pleasure in this process” (115). Thus, we can better understand why Hartman concludes that, in a world shaped by white supremacy, “enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive” (Hartman 1997, 26).

These scenes of subjection underlie the “historical-racial schema” that Fanon describes as living underneath the body schema (Fanon 2008, 91). Irigaray’s morphology of the body, in insisting on the unique ontological primacy of sexuate difference, cannot phenomenologically or politically account for the lived experience of Blackness specifically, or of race broadly. Just as Irigaray was refusing and moving beyond Freud and Lacan, so too was Fanon. All of this is to say, if something like an economy of abundance is the best option to fight the phallic economy, what does it involve if not specifically the decolonization of pleasure? While Irigaray proposes a utopian economy of abundance in resistance to patriarchal theories of desire, she simultaneously engages in a colonial fantasy of pleasure without possession.

Not only does Irigaray have shortcomings in her work with regard to Blackness, there are also some equivocations which are in ill taste if one is being generous with one’s description, and racist if one is being blunt. While theorizing what love between women looks like, she describes herself and the woman she loves as being red and “so very white . . . You are white because you have remained close to blood. White and red at once, we give birth to all colors . . . For this whiteness is no sham. It is not dead blood, black blood. Sham is black. It absorbs everything, closed in on itself, trying to come back to life” (Irigaray 1985, 207). In my understanding, this love among women is less about romantic homosexuality and more about how they find value in themselves and each other as women and refuse the phallic economy in which they live. Whatever her intentions in describing this love, the above quote is undeniably anti-Black. Not only does she omit considerations of race or Blackness specifically in her account of women’s interiority and capacity for self-touch, but here, Blackness is again made to signify death, void, and enclosure. Even while she is trying to articulate a liberatory or liberated desire and love, anti-Blackness permeates the text at an aesthetic level. It’s almost ironic given how, in “The discourse of power and the subordination of the feminine,” she meticulously castigates psychoanalysis and philosophical discourse for its ongoing discursive violence (Irigaray 1985, 74–75). Even as her account of desire and feminine interiority is an attempt to refuse and combat phallographic logics of psychoanalysis and philosophy, her work remains entrapped in white supremacy, coloniality, and cissexism.

Let us circle back to Irigaray’s account of love between women, having noted its anti-Blackness. Irigaray contrasts the way that men say, “I love you,” with how women who love women do (206). Men’s declarations of love, once said, disappear into a kind of void, searching and waiting for the other. It is a gift which involves indebtedness and is given on his terms in ways which (re)produce his own form. Such love seems to be reason-dependent, acquisitive and egoistic, and responsive to value in the other. Meanwhile, in Irigaray’s account, women’s declarations of love to other women (as a liberatory celebration of femininity) are neither gift nor debt. She writes of such love, “You don’t give yourself [when you touch yourself or me or tell me that you love me].

What would I do with you, with myself, wrapped up like a gift?" (206). This love is not based on a union, but is a kind of co-creation, a common becoming outside of "men's reproductive laws" and gender roles, for example, of mother, sister, daughter, wife, etc. (209). It is a valuing of femininity and a manner of living; together, "always several at once," and non-dominating (209).

While I appreciate her rejection of the dominant phallic economy and attempt at formulating love (and concomitantly, desire) beyond recognition, I am unable to accept her refusal of debt in love. Irigaray says "we don't owe each other anything" in love, but I am more convinced that, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue, we owe "all us" everything. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write in *All incomplete* (2021), "Our indebtedness is all we have, and all we have is what we owe to 'one another.' . . . That indebtedness is what we live, is the living we make, as the invaluable" (83). The key is, in their picture, unpayable debt which is "served without mastery" or property (84). This idea of debt seems, at surface level, to be harmonious with Irigaray's own ideas about relationality ontologically preceding relations between specific sexuate beings. Perhaps though, Irigaray's insistence that we don't owe each other anything forecloses the more radical ethical and political possibilities of owing each other everything.

While Irigaray's vision of pleasure without possession is especially utopian and idealistic, Harney and Moten's analysis of mutual indebtedness is thoroughly situated in the materiality of the violence of subjection and anti-Blackness. They write that the "militant preservation of what you (understood as we) got, in common dispossession . . . is the only possible form of possession [which is not 'self-possession']" (Harney and Moten 2021, 30). They contrast this common dispossession with the colonial logic of "possession-by-improvement" (29). Possession-by-improvement is constituted through the Enlightenment as "the universalization/globalization of the imperative to possess, and its corollary, the imperative to improve" (29). In her utopic vision undergirded by Blackness as a marked absence, Irigaray's utopic fantasy of pleasure without possession asserts that women are always already beyond possession (and are not in need of improvement), without acknowledging the long history of white women's complicity in both the imperatives to possess and improve. Her absencing of considerations of the lived realities of coloniality, anti-Blackness, or racism prevent her from engaging with our common dispossession as *possession*. As Harney and Moten rightly state, "all we got is us in this continual giving away of all" (Harney and Moten 2021, 30–31).

Given the interminable brutality of coloniality and anti-Blackness, Harney and Moten offer a helpful differentiation between good debt and bad debt. Good debt forms part of unpayable debt. It "is constantly paid . . . [It] can be paid but never paid off, endlessly accrues and multiplies . . . [as] opposed to the bad debt that is never paid, only ever partially remitted and only in name, gesturally, oppositionally, tragically, in the rich, deadpan austerity of our refusal of austerity" (Harney and Moten 2021, 85). Bad debt is the kind of debt which is linked to credit in racial capitalist institutions, and good debt is the kind of thing we all have with our beloveds, teachers, nourishers, and comrades in struggle. Good debt is also involved in the labor of captive maternals, caretakers, nourishers, teachers, and comrades.<sup>11</sup>

In her 2022 book *Unpayable debt*, Ferreira da Silva argues that every person in North America "holds an unpayable debt to the original inhabitants and ancestral guardians of these lands, which is also a debt that we own (even if through no decision of our ancestors) and that is ours to honor" (295). This understanding of debt includes the debt we owe to land defenders and water protectors, for example, who protect land, water, and other kin in ways that benefit us all, everywhere, just as we owe unpayable debts to



anticolonial and Black radical fighters and ancestors everywhere. This debt is part of what it means for no one to be free until everyone is free (Lou Hamer 2011, 136).

Irigaray argues that the feminine imaginary is excluded and rejected such that women experience themselves fragmentarily, as waste, excess, and/or the residue of a reflection/copy of a (masculine) subject (Irigaray 1985, 29–30). In a lecture on “Hacking the subject,” Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that the foreclosure of Black women’s capacity to signify or practice motherhood shows that the Black female form is nothing(ness). She says, “with Spillers, I am convinced that the category of gender, figured by the wife and the mother, has very little to offer a Black radical feminist project” (Ferreira da Silva 2015, 00:24:45–00:26:00). Hence, she understands the Black female form as nothing(ness), as opposed to waste, excess, or the residue of masculine subjectivity. As we have seen, Irigaray articulates the repression of the female imaginary as the sex which is *not* one, and yet also *not nothing*, and she seeks to articulate a multiplicity of possibilities for feminine pleasure beyond the opposition between one and none. But, as I have argued, and following Ferreira da Silva’s own account of the Black female form as nothing(ness), the (hidden but looming) figure of the Black woman/female “serves as a marked absence” in Irigaray’s work (Ferreira da Silva 2018a, 23). Attending to this absented presence allows for an understanding of her contributions in struggling against phallic psychoanalytic and philosophical orders, while also taking her to task for offering a false utopia rife with anti-Blackness and cishnormativity.

Irigaray’s solution to the exclusion and rejection of “the [white] female imaginary” is its deployment—not as a race for power with man, but as a (re)discovery of herself (Irigaray 1985, 30). This deployment “could only signify the possibility of sacrificing no one of her pleasures to another, of identifying herself with none of them in particular, *of never being simply one*” (30–31, emphasis original). While I agree with the necessity to reject and combat individuation, the idea that the ideal of feminine interiority and “the female imaginary” features a rejection of *the possibility* of sacrifice (of pleasure or anything else) seems absurd, not only in struggle, but also in quotidian life. The fall of “[s]ocieties of sacrifice” as a goal of (feminist) struggle is born from a white, middle-class perspective (Maroney 1985–86, 31). Joy James delineates the unequal distribution of and need for sacrifice through the concept of the captive maternal (James 2016). Captive maternals, like Harriet Jacobs in James’s example, are often motivated by sacrificing for their children (James 2016, 279). James argues that “enslaved women’s willingness to sacrifice their safety on behalf of sovereign children (sacrificed in sovereign welfare) embodies honor” (289). The fact though, that poor, colonized, and racialized peoples are *forced* or coerced to sacrifice under the extreme duress and brutality of coloniality, anti-Blackness, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy does not mean that sacrifice is not an integral part of struggle and sociality broadly, or of revolutionary love specifically. Think of the many innumerable peoples who sacrificed their lives to struggle for freedom, or something sweeter still than freedom. Sometimes, sacrifice is necessary.

The problems of patriarchal domination are invasive and expansive across racial, gendered, and colonial capitalist borders. Audre Lorde writes in “Age, race, class, and sex,” “As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other,’ the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (Lorde 2007, 117). This is a way to summarize the dangers of an Irigarayan approach to the problem of the ongoing socio-political and psycho-affective exclusion and rejection of women and femininity. Irigaray defines womanhood monolithically by way of her own experience, which perhaps is why her answers to the problems of violence and power is “disrupting and

modifying” the phallographic order, rather than doing the dually destructive and creative abolitionist work involved in toppling that order and creating one anew (Irigaray 1985, 68). She claims that the latter, transformative path “amounts to the same thing [as the phallographic order] in the end” (68). Yet, given the terrors of slavery and its afterlives, as well as the continuously unfolding genocidal catastrophes of settler colonialism, the choice to struggle to transform and revolutionize by way of the toppling of the world as we know it *is* our best shot. As Fanon writes, we “should constantly remind [ourselves] that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence” (Fanon 1967, 229). For this reason, I look instead to Black radical feminists like Ferreira da Silva, who seek the end of the world as we know it and find a reason to struggle in the possibilities of total re/de/composition. These re/de/compositions that we struggle for refuse to “deploy the onto-epistemological pillars of modern thought” (Ferreira da Silva 2018b, 4), as Irigaray does by struggling against patriarchy in ways that (re)produce logics of anti-Blackness, coloniality, cisnormativity, and patriarchy itself.

### 3. Abolition and revolutionary love: freedom, sacrifice, and unpayable debts

As Hortense Spillers asserts in her discussion of the perverse, torturous sexual violence within “official” (white) families and “shadow families,” love, desire, and the erotic are in crisis (Spillers 2011, 35). Enslavers and other white peoples used their power to force themselves onto Black people, sexually and otherwise. The families that sprang up from this catastrophic violence embodied and instantiated intergenerational crises of intimacy that continue to reverberate today. Contending with this terrifying reality leads Spillers to state that, “unless one is free, love cannot and perhaps will not matter,” in profound material, social, and psycho-affective ways (35).<sup>12</sup>

Irigaray knows love and intimacy are in crisis—she responds to it in her work and offers paths from which to struggle against and move beyond the crises of love, desire, and gender(ing). Yet, even while she put the “question of woman” at the forefront of her analyses, her direct and indirect anti-Black logics, as well as her exclusion of the facts and lived experiences of racialization and coloniality, enact the very separability that undergirds oppression and alienation (Cixous 1986, 64). The multifaceted forms of anti-Blackness and coloniality in Irigaray’s account of desire, and the implications of these accounts for feminist, post-structuralist concepts of what it is to be human, would suggest that one cannot simply recuperate or individually reclaim the concept of desire by (a) agreeing with (Kojève’s reading of) Hegel (which also influenced Freud and Lacan), that desire defined through lack and recognition defines the human (Kojève 1980), or (b) reorienting desire away from recognition and towards a more pluralist, affirmative account of desire—at least, not by following the lead of feminists like Irigaray. While I appreciate how Irigaray is struggling toward ideas of liberation from patriarchy in her works, her propositions involve betrayals. At times, as we have seen, such betrayals take the form of the “marked absence,” appropriation, and denigration of Black women and Blackness itself, as well as the avoidance of coloniality and/or reliance on colonial logics. Thus, her articulations of desire and love are themselves marked by anti-Blackness and coloniality.

Rather than reform the concept or practice of desire (from Hegel, Irigaray, or others) and risk the reproduction of anti-Blackness and coloniality, I propose abolitionism as the most efficient method to address the crisis of desire and love. As the abolitionist grassroots organization, Critical Resistance defines it, (Prison Industrial Complex/PIC) abolition is about getting rid of prisons and policing, creating alternatives to punishment

and imprisonment, and “undoing the society we live in because the PIC both *feeds* on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people” (Critical Resistance 2022). Moreover, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore, co-founder of Critical Resistance says, abolitionists are concerned with lessening harm in the world (especially as instantiated through the political category of “crime”), insofar as “where life is precious, life is precious” (Kumanyika and Gilmore 2020). Importantly, as Alexander Lee writes, “abolishing prisons’ really means the creation of a society where systemic and historical oppression are wiped out so that everyone’s basic needs are met” (Lee 2008, 111). Abolition is thus a dually destructive and creative struggle. Rather than reform desire, I propose its abolition—or, in Ferreira da Silva’s terms, its decomposition, “the breaking of the code” of desire (Ferreira da Silva 2018b, 4). Correspondingly, the creative aspect of abolition regarding desire is in the composition (conceptualization and practice) of revolutionary love.

The abolitionist approach does not dismiss the potential for harm reduction in reformations of love and desire, but it does help us articulate the rot and gangrene in centuries of philosophical and common-sense concepts and practices of desire and of love. These concepts are embodied and unfold within anti-Black, colonial, racial capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal landscapes, and they can function to reinforce rather than attack separability. The meaning and possibilities of freedom are at stake in any theorization or practice of love and desire, whether that is acknowledged or not.

Thus, I end this essay with a brief sketch of the kind of revolutionary love that would resonate with aspects of Irigaray’s theory of love in the refusal of ontological separability, and move beyond it in being a defense and celebration of what Fred Moten calls, “black social life,” which “tends toward death, [which] enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality” (Moten 2008, 188). The defense and celebration of Black social life is abolitionist, in being an affective and political response to the world as we know it—it is a refusal of this world that is also generative of other worlds.

While revolutionary love can indeed be felt, as an emotion, its driving force is *necessity*, insofar as it is felt and fought for under conditions of anti-Blackness, coloniality, and duress. This is why revolutionary love involves and fuels a struggle for freedom, by any means necessary. It is not born out of desire, which can so easily be manipulated and exploited to reenact scenes of subjection, but rather is a *necessity*.<sup>13</sup> Toni Morrison describes necessity as “something that precedes love, follows love, informs love, shapes love, and to which love is subservient” (Morrison 2019, 135). “Abolition now” is no mere desire—it is a need, born of and for love. Morrison deems love as the arena in which African Americans can “effect the widest possible choice—by deciding to fall in love. Claiming another as the beloved” (319). In a world where society is sustained through the murder, torture, exploitation, and dispossession of those deemed other (by way of race, gender, class, and other such categories), to claim that no one is free until all of us are free is to choose to claim *all* (others) as beloved, and to fight for them as beloved (Lou Hamer 2011, 136). This refusal to abandon each other, and to fight for each other’s *needs* is born of a revolutionary love and is part of the affective response that propels the promise of and need for abolition. Revolutionary love, especially for the wretched *of*/and the earth, fuels struggle against death-dealing systems and structures, and it provides the motivation and inspiration to create new worlds and systems that foster multiple forms of life.

The “revolutionary” aspect of this love lies, in part, in its valuation of freedom by any means necessary, including and especially sacrifice. In her new book, *In pursuit of*

*revolutionary love* (2022), Joy James argues that the sacrifice involved in the caretaking and nurturing offered by the captive maternal functions as a glue for the social, economic, and political orders, as well as the very notion of family itself (141). As I argued in the previous section, Irigaray is wrong in her articulation of a free, feminine imaginary that rejects even the possibility of sacrifice (Irigaray 1985, 30–31). In loving and caring for each other in a world structured by necropolitical empires (Mbembé 2003), we sacrifice bits of ourselves to keep each other alive and afloat, often thereby shifting or shrinking our own phenomenological horizons and revolutionary political will. This happens at micro and macro levels—some such sacrifices include anything from the loss of sleep and money to imprisonment and the loss of life.<sup>14</sup> Such sacrifices are more easily made for those that one deems proximate and familiar; the *revolutionary* political caretaker works to extend the bounds of care and love beyond the bounds of familiarity.

Thus, revolutionary love involves a refusal to grasp the other *as* other. This refusal demonstrates a turn away from the subject/object dichotomy which subtends the logic and orders of anti-Black and colonial desire. The Black radical tradition is abundant with examples of people displaying this kind of revolutionary love. To refuse the subject/object dichotomy in this way is, following Cedric Robinson, to “[define] the terms of their destruction: the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being” (Robinson 2000, 171). Refusing the other *qua* other as a practice of difference without separability involves an openness to sacrificing, even when sacrifice might be unfair or difficult, as it is for the colonized, Black, queer/trans, and poor (Ferreira da Silva 2016). It surely involves the sacrificing of one’s own desires, especially when those desires have been forcefully trained to betray peoples in struggle. Revolutionary love, in my understanding, embodies difference without separability, toward the abolition of the (colonial, anti-Black, racial capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal) world as we know it, rather than its reformation—or the reformation of objects into subjects.

Along these lines, the unpayable debts undergirding social life become clearer and are reinforced within such webs of care and love. Unpayable debts towards one’s family can generally be parsed and stomached more easily than those that one has to others, but the many dead (known, unknown, and forgotten) who died due to or in the struggles against coloniality and anti-Blackness (as well as other forces of repression and subjection) make up a spectral bastion of peoples to whom one owes unpayable debts. These people cannot be repaid what they lost (i.e., their lives), so the debt is unpayable. Revolutionary lovers honor and defend these unpayable debts with their sacrifices and their struggling for freedom by any means necessary. In this way, revolutionary love, as a creative dimension of the abolition of death-dealing desire, exemplifies the abolitionist adage that “where life is precious, life is precious” (Kumanyika and Gilmore 2020).

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## Notes

1 For examples of further texts concerning the role of colonial, racial capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal disastrous functions of desire, see Young 1995; Oliver 2004; Thomas 2007; Yao 2021.

2 See also Fanon 1967; Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2003 for more on the anti-Black formation and performance of subjecthood.

3 Here, I am drawing on Denise Ferreira da Silva's Black feminist account of "difference without separability" (Ferreira da Silva 2016).

4 Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes abolition beautifully, citing DuBois's *Black reconstruction in America* (1998): "abolition is a fleshy and material presence of social life lived differently" (Gilmore 2023, 285). Abolitionists, per Mariame Kaba, start from the understanding that the current system isn't broken, and therefore doesn't require fixing or reform. This then informs how she and others "move in the world and . . . practice [abolition] daily" (Duda and Kaba 2017). As Fanon wrote, "in actual fact, everything has to be started over from scratch, everything has to be rethought" (Fanon 2004, 56).

5 Other aspects of my theory of the abolition of desire include arguments on necessity, invention, and exodus. However, given the scope and length of this paper, I am only currently able to address revolutionary love.

6 Other examples include Fuss 1989; Sayers 1986; Gates 1988.

7 See also Grosz 1989, 1994.

8 See Poovey 1988; Poe 2011; Johnston 2015. In an article published in the same year as Johnston's, Rachel Jones argues that, while Irigaray holds sexuate being/specifcity is disclosed through ordinary relations to the maternal body, Jones "do[es] not think elaborations of sexuate difference need to remain *bound* by the form of these initial relations," thereby opening up space for transgender and transsexual peoples (Jones 2015, 160). Jones also sees room for understanding intersex people as embodying sexuate difference, in that their bodies incorporate irreducible sex difference within themselves. I share Johnston's understanding, though, that "the very coherence of sexual difference as *the* ontological difference relies on the disavowal of TIGNC [transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming] experience" (Johnston 2015, 625, emphasis added). As Johnston writes, for Irigaray, "all TIGNC people are ultimately the same sex they were assigned at birth" (627).

9 In another text, Irigaray offers a reading of Merleau-Ponty's essay "The intertwining—The chiasm" wherein she argues that his account of flesh as "the mother" effaces sexual difference by treating maternal, feminine flesh as neutral and engendered (Irigaray 2004, 127–53). See also Ainley 1997.

10 In *Scenes of subjection*, Saidiya Hartman also discusses the purported "insatiate black desire" that justified and normalized the "effacement of rape in the context of enslavement" (Hartman 1997, 86–87).

11 The captive maternal is a concept formulated by Joy James by way of considerations of the work Black women and femmes do and have done since the beginnings of coloniality and the transatlantic slave trade. Black parents are also central to James's theorization of the captive maternal (James 2021, 21). The captive maternal is an ungendered phenomenon, defined by their "function and legacy rather than identity" (12). There are different stages of the captive maternal (conflicted/celebratory caretaker; protestor; movement mobilizer; maroon organizer; war resistor; betrayer). The care work that the captive maternal does, especially in the first stage, functions to stabilize the state. Their goal might not be to stabilize the state, but the predatory state feeds off captive maternal's "desire and capacity to 'love' through familial and communal ties that cross boundaries and sustain freedom" (James 2015, 185). Thus, "they stabilize political structures that prey on under-resourced communities" (James 2021, 14). See also James 2016.

12 Beyond slavery and its afterlives, crises of intimacy can and should also be mapped across colonial lines.

In the Canadian settler colonial context, the residential school system, 1960s scoop, the crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous girls, women, and two spirit folks exemplifies the crises of intimacy, family, and love under coloniality. See Stark 2016; Kazan 2022; Longman 2023. In a global context, the prison industrial complex provides another example of the ongoing crises of intimacy instantiated by anti-Blackness and coloniality.

See Davis 2003; Maynard 2017; Goldhawke 2020.

13 Necessities are not immune to such exploitation and manipulation. In fact, as Joy James shows through her concept of the captive maternal, our love and care for kin itself are exploited by the state. As caretakers of family and community, captive maternal typically protect their beloveds "by instilling conformity to rules and fidelity to reforms" made by political elites, to keep their beloveds alive and "out of trouble" (James 2021,

14). This conformity and obedience in turn stabilizes the repressive, colonial, anti-Black, racial capitalist political-economic orders that structure the world as we know it. Yet identifying and working toward that which a person or collective *needs* provides a sturdier foundation from which to struggle than desire, particularly given the death-dealing entanglements between desire/desirability, anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, capitalism, and coloniality (see Hartman 1997; Strings 2019; Harrison 2023).

14 James (2022) writes extensively on the peoples imprisoned in Attica during the Attica uprising to articulate the stages of the captive maternal.

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