



Love In-Between

Laura Candiotta¹ · Hanne De Jaegher^{2,3}

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Abstract

In this paper, we introduce an enactive account of loving as participatory sense-making inspired by the “*I love to you*” of the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. Emancipating from the fusionist concept of romantic love, which understands love as unity, we conceptualise loving as an existential engagement in a dialectic of encounter, in continuous processes of becoming-in-relation. In these processes, desire acquires a certain prominence as the need to know (the other, the relation, oneself) more. We build on Irigaray’s account of love to present a phenomenology of loving interactions and then our enactive account. Finally, we draw some implications for ethics. These concern language, difference, vulnerability, desire, and self-transformation.

Keywords Luce Irigaray · love · desire · becoming · enactive approach · participatory sense-making · loving and knowing

1. Introduction

We put forward an enactive approach to love as participatory sense-making, inspired by the “*I love to you*” of the Belgian-born French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (1996). We understand romantic love as the emergent quality of the many interactions in the life of the partners as they develop and get to know each other, themselves, the world, and their relations. Love is the fundamental dialectic that essentially involves the lovers—forming and transforming them and their interactions.

Emancipating from an abstract concept of love that regulates the lovers’ practices, the enactive approach sees the continuous process of building the meaning of

✉ Hanne De Jaegher
h.de.jaegher@gmail.com

Laura Candiotta
laura.candiotta@fu-berlin.de

¹ Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

² Universidad del País Vasco, Leioa, Spain

³ University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

love in daily life interactions from a participatory perspective. Loving sense-making is a signification of you and me as protagonists of a relation that is not defined *a priori*, but made by continuous and recursive practices of giving value to our being and becoming, both separately and in relation.

On the enactive approach, loving is connected to living and to knowing. Enaction—an embodied approach to cognition and mind—sees living beings as continually engaged in making sense: from the most basic sensing and interacting with energetic and material conditions of existing, which even bacteria and plants do, to humans' most elevated endeavours like writing poetry, doing science, acting ethically (Colombetti 2014a, b; Di Paolo et al. 2017, 2018; Gallagher 2017; Thompson 2007; Varela et al. (2016/1991)). This is expressed by the life-mind continuity thesis: the basic premise of the enactive approach, which states that to understand the mind, we need to understand the organisation and the processes of life, and vice versa. All living beings are cognisers: they make sense of their world, by engaging—as their bodies and situations allow and invite them to—with what is pertinent to their existence and their becoming, *for* their being and their becoming.¹

The life impulse and the impulse to sense-making both emerge from the living being's core: from its need to exist, *and* is directed to specific others: specific beings, things, and events in the world that the living being needs. Sense-making is the relational process between an autonomous, self-organising agent and the world, on which the agent has a certain perspective based on its self-organisation, which entails certain needs and constraints.

The enactive approach sees loving as entangled with these processes of living and of knowing. De Jaegher (2019) has put forward an enactive approach to epistemology that makes this point explicit. She proposes that *loving* is a pivot point for understanding how humans know. For De Jaegher, loving is knowing: both loving and knowing are basic, existential ways of relating that involve the lover (or the knower) deeply in what they engage with. Further steps are needed to flesh out this argument, and one of them is to finesse the phenomenology of loving. This is what we do here.

In particular, we elaborate on the phenomenology of loving, by drawing on Luce Irigaray's "*I love to you*" to show that we can understand loving as *participatory sense-making*. Participatory sense-making is the theoretical framework through which enactive researchers investigate intersubjectivity—our rich social lives. It is also a way to describe what goes on in social interactions. This theory grew out of a dissatisfaction with classical cognitive science theories of social cognition that focused on individual behaviours and brains to explain how people predict and explain each other's intentions. Participatory sense-making theory established that social understanding rests equally on individual sense-making activities (fundamentally related to the processes of living self-maintenance) and on the social interaction processes that emerge between people (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; De Jaegher et al. 2010). These dynamical social interaction processes are measurable and operationalisable, i.e. they consist of coordination patterns with specific dynamic signatures, as well as have an inextricable experiential dimension (Fuchs

¹ From Varela (1979, 1991), over Thompson (2007), to Di Paolo (2005, 2009, 2018, 2020).

and De Jaegher 2009; Gallagher 2013). We will immediately see the fruitful connection with Irigaray's philosophy in the fact that participatory sense-making theory starts from the individuals engaged in social understanding, *and their interaction*. Understanding each other (intersubjectivity), then, is the way we make sense of and with each other, co-determined by ourselves, the other, and the interaction processes we engage in. All three of these elements—the (at least) two participants, and their interaction—are effective factors in our intersubjective skills and lives.

The enactive account also encompasses an approach to language, which also plays a crucial role in our analysis. In *Linguistic Bodies*, Di Paolo et al. (2018) extend Bakhtin's proposal that language is a living stream that everybody participates in. Humans are all *linguistic bodies*, meaning that we build ourselves out of language, participate in language, modify and transform it, as it modifies and transforms us. Again, the basic three of enaction are present: humans engage not only with each other, but also with the normativities of the interactions that emerge between them. As for language, we incorporate and incarnate others' ways of living and perceiving the world, through our and their utterances, i.e. by speaking with, of, and through them, and as they speak with, of, and through us (when we quote or refer to them, or contest them, for instance). As Kym Maclaren (2018) puts it, we are ontologically intimate. She means that we transgress each other all the time. We live in and through each other.

All these ideas will become clearer throughout the paper. First, we introduce Irigaray's account of love as "I love to you," along with the criticism of the fusion model in the contemporary philosophical conceptualisation of romantic love (2). Then, building on Irigaray's work, we propose our enactive phenomenology of loving as participatory sense-making (3). Finally, we work through this approach towards its implications for ethics (4). If living, loving, and knowing are entangled and we are always vulnerable to each other—both sensitive and powerful to each other and the world we share—then these most basic existential relations are inescapably ethical. The ethical implications have to do with how difference matters and how language matters. It matters how we speak to, with, of, and against each other. Distance, silence, and the embodied rhythms of interacting guard against the impulse to appropriate one another. In difference, we can let each other be and speak. This generates new ways of loving and communing.²

² At this point, a note about how we are speaking here is in order. This being *The Journal of Ethics*, and our approach being feminist, it will be accepted that our discourse is normative as well as descriptive. However, we also expect there to be cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind amongst our readers, and for them, we need to make explicit why we are not just speaking descriptively here, but also normatively. Feminists and decolonial theorists especially have made it amply clear that any description of reality is made from a certain standpoint (see e.g. Harding 2004; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Velez and Tuana 2020). Not acknowledging this hides the norms, values, and assumptions that are implicit in descriptions. All descriptions are normative. Differently put, there are always power dynamics at work in speaking and listening. In this paper in particular, for Irigaray, the supposedly "neutral" hides the masculine domination that characterises (especially European) patriarchal systems. With her discourse, which we both follow and critically engage with, she criticises this. The normative/descriptive non-intersection generally implicitly assumed in traditional cognitive science is, in fact, also criticised and bypassed by enactive cognitive science (see e.g. Cuffari 2014; Cuffari and Jensen 2014; de Haan 2020; Di Paolo et al. 2018; Loaiza 2019). The entwining of normativity and description aligns well with approaches to mind that

2. I Love to You

Against the fusion-model of love and the imperialist desire of possession, for Irigaray, love requires the space of difference as *the space of autonomy* of both the partners, and desire is *a rebirth*. By saying “I love to you” instead of “I love you” we keep open the distance and the difference between the partners, and this is how the two are distinct but in relationship, since love is in-between. You are who will never be mine (Irigaray 1996). But through desire, we together are born anew and give birth to one another (Irigaray 2017). In the center, there is neither the lover nor the beloved, but their relationship—what makes the difference for both. This means that being in a relationship is a *meeting* with otherness. In the meeting, we approach the other as other, searching a balance between openness and closure in intimacy (Irigaray 2002a).

This, in a nutshell, is what Irigaray suggests about a positive conceptualisation of love. In this section, we will analyse Irigaray’s contribution along with the criticism of the “fusion model” in the contemporary philosophical conceptualisation of romantic love. We first discuss Irigaray’s approach in more detail, also contextualising it within her philosophical production. Then we prospect some accounts that emerge from the criticism of the “fusion model”. This will form the ground for our phenomenological analysis and conceptualisation of loving as participatory sense-making.

Irigaray’s work can be divided into three phases: the critical one, beginning with *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Irigaray’s criticism is addressed to the “neutral subject” or the “neuter”, referring to the linguistic class as neither masculine nor feminine. For her, far from being universal, the neuter is set up to serve male interests and exploit women.³ Not taking into consideration the sexualised subject silences women, since they are not allowed to speak on their own. Very often the neuter is assumed to be the man, and the other, though it is not said, is the woman. In this picture, the woman has no identity by herself, but only in function of that of the man. After the critical phase, Irigaray moves to a constructive stage where she defines the values of female subjectivity and the relationship between the two, men and women, in books such as *I Love to You* (1996) and *Democracy Begins Between Two* (2001). In a third phase, Irigaray takes inspiration from Eastern cultures, especially that of Yoga, and she further develops her investigation in the practices that men and women can do together. Essential books of this phase are *Between East and West* (2002a, b) and *To be Born* (2017).

We focus here on the second phase in which Irigaray offers an alternative to the fusion model of love (Irigaray 1996, 1999, 2003). For Irigaray, the fusion model is centered around the need of the partners of becoming *One*. She challenges it along with a critical reading of Hegel. For Irigaray, the fusion model is linked to the logic of recognition, according to which my identity is not only dependent on yours, but

Footnote 2 (continued)

sidestep dualism, i.e. those that do not assume mind is simply dealing with representations of reality, but instead theorise subjects who co-constitute their worlds.

³ Please bear with us while we introduce Irigaray’s approach to sexuate difference, which is basic to her account. We expand this to include trans, gender-fluid, genderquestioning, and non-heteronormative love a little later in this section.

it also implies a tension towards the Absolute Spirit as the Universal Neuter One.⁴ This dynamic is for Irigaray very dangerous because it leads to the imperialist domination of the other who in patriarchal society is always woman (Irigaray 1985). The critical stance of the first phase is thus very present here since the myth of love fusion reveals itself as the power of the Neuter, which suffocates women. In fact, in Irigaray's reading, it is always the man who swallows up the woman's identity in his imperialist power of recognition. For Irigaray, therefore, the necessity to overcome the fusion model is rooted in the need to avoid the desire of possession, which is an expression of the logic of recognition in the hands of the powerful man. We can say that the objectifying relationship with the intimate other and the configuration of identity which is constituted only through the recognition of the other are two faces of the same coin in Irigaray's understanding.

In the contemporary debate, the fusion model has been criticised by different approaches. Noël Merino (2004), tracing back to the Greeks the invention of love as a fusion of two partners in a joint identity, has highlighted that in love as fusion the individuality of each partner is sacrificed for the sake of a joint identity, understood as blurring of boundaries in the generation of a third identity, the one of the "we". For Merino, it is true that identity changes in romantic love and that the feeling of connection to the partner is partially in virtue of having developed our identity in relation to her; however, this does not mean that we should think of and refer to our partner as our "other half", thus meaning a fusion as sharing of identities which becomes a single fused individual.⁵ The problem for Merino is that the identity of the "we" assumes supremacy, and this for Irigaray would mean that the woman's identity disappears under the power of the neutral "we" regulated by the man in a patriarchal society. What is at stake here is the preservation of different identities in loving relationships. But this goal is even harder to achieve because identities are culturally shaped, and the domination of man's identity over the woman's is not only in his hands. As María Lugones (1987) has stressed, identification is a serious risk in loving relationships, and we need to fight against it. In fact, it is not that the fusion model is not real; many cultures exploit it for the domination of women, but that it is very dangerous. And many women are victims of it also because they are co-participants in the masculine domination, as several thinkers have highlighted (Bourdieu 2002, Jónasdóttir 1994). The point of criticism here is thus not merely conceptual, but ethical and political.

This engaged dimension has recently been stressed by Kym Maclaren (2018), who says identification is an expression of the objective neoliberal Cartesian model of identities. Irigaray's perspective is in line with this criticism since her advice to maintain the distance in loving relationships is thought for the sake of the preservation and development of each partner's identity. But this distance, in Irigaray, does

⁴ The critical reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic is explicit, see for example Irigaray (1996: 19–33). For an analysis of Irigaray's criticism of Hegel's dialectic and her reply to it with sexual difference and a reconfiguration of love as intermediary, see Roberts (2017).

⁵ Here Merino is referring to Nozick (1989) and Solomon (2002) regarding the conceptualisations of the shared identity of the "we" and to Fisher (1990) about the ideal of love as becoming a single fused individual.

not mean that identities are already made objects that should be left untouched. We thus think that Lugones' advice of "travelling to each other's 'worlds'" as what "enable[s] us to be through loving each other" (Lugones 1987: 8) can fruitfully apply to Irigaray's idea of the path of freedom that we need to undertake for meeting the other, through desire, as we will see in a moment. Intimacy is in fact realised in the precarious balance between distance and closeness. As Maclaren (2018: 24–25) highlights, in loving the other, transgression is inevitable, but this jump into the other's world can be done as a tool of exploitation, or as care and concern. This means that power dynamics are embedded in every kind of relation, as Foucault teaches. But recognising this, far from being only a negative assessment of loving relationships, discloses the opportunity to enact another type of power, one that cares for the wellbeing of the intimate partner. Again, the criticism of the fusion model leads to an ethical and political commitment, which is conjunct to the need to develop new imaginaries, beyond the ideal of fusion, about what it means to be in an intimate relationship.

Conceptual alternatives to the fusion model have been provided. Within the "relation-focused model" of romantic love, the dialogic model proposed by Angelika Krebs (2014), for example, is particularly challenging for the fusion model. Inspired by Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, Krebs proposes to understand love as constitutively shared. What is shared here is not the partners' identities, as in the fusion model, but their love. We think relational models of romantic love are of paramount importance for going beyond the fusion models. However, we disagree with taking *sharing* as the prime form of relationality, since it points to a *whole as sameness*: "what the participants individually do is integrated into a whole, that is shared action. (...) In joint action, the participants continuously attune their inputs to the inputs of the others (...) and they take the others to be doing the same." (Krebs 2014: 12). The togetherness is here understood in terms of *common* action. Instead, what we want to take from Irigaray and further develop in our account, is the preservation of individual autonomy as *difference* and, at the same time, the tension of the dialectic among partners that does not resolve into a whole. This tension is not the togetherness implied by the sharing, but is the creative dialectic of becoming in loving relationships.

We need to conceptualise relationality in terms of difference and becoming in order not to fall prey to the fusion model once again. An enactive phenomenology of loving can assure both. It is true that togetherness for Krebs is not the sharing of identities, as in the fusion model, but of intentional actions. It is a sharing of love. But here too, we have some problems, because to take love as intentionality seems to employ the cognitivist approach to emotions that is fundamentally disembodied (see Nussbaum 2004). Doing so, she understands joint feelings as joint value judgement, also adding that bodily sensations are not sharable (Krebs 2014: 20). Contrary to this, we argue that the dialectic generation of meanings, concerns and values is embodied and embedded, even at the intersubjective level of participatory sense-making. Our problem here is thus not regarding intentionality, since it can be effectively conceptualised as embodied (see Slaby 2008), but with the disembodied stance. Loving as participatory sense-making is not a matter of sharing disembodied

minds but of mutual intercorporeality. We will come back to this in Sect. 3, but let's first focus on Irigaray for summarising some key points.

We said that Irigaray's criticism of the fusion model is conjunct with her criticism of a very specific mechanism of identity-building, one that causes objectification. The crucial point is to understand that this criticism implies neither a solipsistic view of identity nor a dualistic conceptual framework of gender. This means that Irigaray's proposal is relational but in a very different way. Irigaray understands relationality as a meeting among differences, which is fundamental to love. This means that the logic of recognition is not the only possible framework for understanding the generation of identities in fundamental relationships. For Irigaray, what the logic of recognition does is to produce an effect of objectification, which historically has been directed towards women. Contrary to this, for her, love is the space for self-definition and self-discovery where the lovers can rebirth as what they really are, and it is only in this space of autonomy that a balance between closeness (to me, to you) and distance (my partiality, your world) should be found. This is the real place where we can freely be "two". As Maclaren (2018: 34) claims, the freedom of transformation is germination: for Irigaray (2017), love offers the opportunity to rebirth, since freedom should be found in loving the intimate other in a manner that does not obliterate the differences. Sara Heinämaa (2018) insightfully highlights that, for Irigaray, this can be done in a nurturing desire, or in admiration as wonder. In fact, wonder "does not try to seize, possess, or reduce this object, but leaves it subjective, still free" (Irigaray 1993: 13).⁶ As we will see in a moment, our main intuition is that this proposal can be fruitfully developed as participatory sense-making.

There is a fundamental difference between duality (Irigaray's "being two") and dualism. The paradigm of the woman as an object to use or—even—to love, functional to building the power of the masculine, took shape within the dualism of Western culture. As Val Plumwood (1993) points out, there is an essential link between this dualism and male domination over women, nature, children, and non-human animals.⁷ Contrary to this, the *duality* of beings allows the emancipation from the universalising power of the neutral "one" or "we" and thus to recognise the sexual difference. Duality, unlike dualism, results in nurturing plurality and multiplicity as expressions of relationship. This is a culture of "between two" that allows for the becoming of two subjectivities (Ryan 2015). The recognition of one's subjectivity is not constituted through mirroring because the other is not a "function" of myself. We are aware that the intimate other is irreducible to oneself.

In a culture of 'between two' as opposed to the culture of the One, the other's *difference* brings one back to oneself and to the recognition of one's gender (Irigaray

⁶ Wonder is a key element of Irigaray's conceptualisation of love as "in-between". For the intermediate character of love in Irigaray and the role of wonder in it, see Roberts (2019, especially 105–109).

⁷ Ecofeminism has clearly shown how violence against women is linked to violence against nature and non-human animals, and, conversely, it claims that the fight for the rights of nature and non-human animals must also take into account the violence against women. See also Carol Gilligan's (2003) definition of patriarchy, Mariana Ortega's work (2006) putting into question the violence of white feminists to women of colour, and Toby Rollo's (2016) on the domination strategies of colonial thought through the figure of the child.

1999). This is a fundamental step for avoiding the embodiment of an identity which is the product of the other's projections. In love relationships, both women and men can find themselves: the woman can search not only for her subjectivity but for the values which build something of universal femininity. Respecting his partiality, the man has the chance to not dominate the woman and thus not be dominated by the schemes of the masculine role. In fact, the man is also "caged" within cultural pre-concepts which he projects onto his relationships, more or less consciously (see Cuffari 2016; Hooks 2004). We are thus not naïvely saying that to get rid of this violence we need love—we are aware that this kind of abuse is often perpetuated precisely in loving relationships (see for instance Ben Ze'ev and Goussinsky 2008; Candiotta and De Vido 2016; Gunnarsson 2014). We do argue that we need a new understanding of love, free from the categories of domination grounded in dualism.⁸ Finally, otherness is the beginning of a respectful relationship for all the many sexes and genders, a prerequisite for every exchange, for every authentic existential meeting. Before refining this conceptualisation of love in Sect. 3, we need first to make explicit some contrasting elements with respect to Irigaray's account and, then, to precisely highlight what we take from it in building our original enactive proposal.

We do not endorse Irigaray's idea that the intimate partners who differ in the dialogue-in-difference should have a different sex. There has been a lot of criticism of Irigaray's view that sexual difference is the most fundamental form of difference (see Stone 2006). This idea can be seen as heteronormative and an expression of biological determinism, although this interpretation of Irigaray has been challenged with convincing arguments (see Hill 2016; Roberts 2019; Whitford 1991). We cannot discuss this debate here, but it is important to highlight that there can be a risk of ignoring the diversity and malleability of sex/gender, and of marginalising other important kinds of difference, like race and disability. Queer theorists, therefore, prefer to speak of plurality instead of duality (Butler 1990).⁹ In this paper, we maintain a starting point in the relation between "two", but we do not exclude the possibility of expanding this approach to a plural conceptualisation of love, as in the case of polyamory. Then, as will be clarified in the next section, we introduce a *third element* that should be primarily taken into account: the relationship. We maintain Irigaray's fundamental intuition about "I love to you" as a dialogue-in-difference because, for us, a dialogue is always among differences, despite sexual orientations or someone's sex or gender. People of the same sex, or trans, non-binary, gender-fluid or genderquestioning people in a relation with each other, whether two or more, are still different. Their dialogue, therefore, is also a dialogue between differences. Therefore, we take Irigaray beyond a "two-sexes" view (see Poe 2011; Yanagino 2017), while maintaining her fundamental intuition about the centrality of difference in loving yourself and other(s).

⁸ This is thus, again, not a "mere" conceptual, but a political-ethical, ameliorative project.

⁹ But it should be noted that some thinkers have interpreted Irigaray's account from the point of view of queer theory. See Grosz (1994a, b) and Huffer (2013).

The specificity of Irigaray's model, and what inspires our account, is the analysis of the enlanguaged generation of meanings. Why should we say "I love to you" and not "I love you"?

Previously, we saw that this was required by the need to preserve the partners' identities, thus emancipating from the ideal of love as fusion. Now, we want to highlight its linguistic dimension to introduce one of the central concepts of the enactive approach, namely sense-making.

"I love to you" is a linguistic provocation that shines a new light on the loving relationship. By saying "I love to you" I do not want to subdue you or alienate you in my verb since you are ineffable and irreducible to my concepts. Irigaray has said a lot about the negative dimension of language as a tool for objectifying women (see for instance Irigaray 2002b), and she has also highlighted the differences between men and women from an analysis of how they use language, starting from childhood (Irigaray 1999), and for example in writing poetry (Irigaray 2004). But this irreducibility among the intimate partners, instead of disclosing a space of void incommunicability, is the starting point for creating meanings. The dative (to you, *à toi* in French) guarantees a movement from me to you which does not aim at domination or homologation, but is a symbol of the space that should be preserved within loving relationships for building our meanings and also inventing new meanings together.¹⁰

What I love about you is not mine, you are not mine, that is why I am ready to move into the path that brings me close to you. Irigaray conceives this path as the path of desire. Again, desire here should not be conceived within the framework of the fusion model for which I want to possess what is not mine, and when I get what I want, I do not desire it (you) anymore. Desire in the fusion model is to be one with the beloved (Merino 2004), and therefore, for Irigaray, it suppresses the fundamental duality that should be preserved within loving relationships. Desire should not be craving, but the living force of desire should be protected and nurtured as what allows each to rebirth.¹¹ In Irigaray, differently from de Beauvoir, this means to rebirth to my own nature, free from the function attributed by the dynamics of objectification (see Heinämaa, 2017). As we will see in the next section, this rebirth acquires a wider meaning in our account, as the flow of self-transformation triggered by the dialectic tension of erotic desire, and the ongoing becoming in the face of the other. But the crucial point for us here is that the conceptualisation of language in Irigaray is open to being developed within an enactive account, according to which the meaning of love we enact in our languaging is part of a broader significance made of interacting feeling bodies (Di Paolo et al. 2018). Mostly, in the enactive approach, sense-making is primarily embodied (Colombetti 2010, 2014a, b; Thompson 2007; Varela et al. 1991), and desire seems to be a perfect match for further developing this account in participatory sense-making.

¹⁰ Irigaray has initially pursued this research regarding French and then she extended it to Italian, English and German. See Irigaray (1990) for a comprehensive study of sex and gender in different languages (French, Italian, and English) and Irigaray (1996: 69–78) specifically regarding the language of love. In a further inquiry, Irigaray's hypothesis could be tested in languages and cultures other than the Indo-European ones.

¹¹ On desire as force of life or life impulse, see Spinoza (2006), Deleuze (1988, 1990).

Starting from the “I love to you” we want thus to show how participatory sense-making is at the root of a love freed from the ideal of the fusion model and the desire of domination. Love sense-making is thus a signification of you and me as protagonists of a love which is not defined *a priori*, but is made by continuous and recursive practices of giving value to our being two (or more). The type of relationship that is foreseen by Irigaray is one through which each partner builds their own meanings in the meeting of their radical differences. We argue that this is a form of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher 2015; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009). Based on and in dialogue with Irigaray’s insights, we develop the enactive phenomenology of loving in the next section. Doing so, we expand the analysis of loving interactions to *the embodied sense-making of desire* and *mutual signification* of loving experiences, and we analyse the phenomenology of loving interactions, especially focusing on desire in *mutual intercorporeality*.

3. The Phenomenology of Loving Interactions and Love as Participatory Sense-Making

For Irigaray, what is basic is that we are sexuate beings (see Jones 2011). This is our primary nature and our primary being, and herein lies our difference, the one that regulates our meeting. The reason why it is important for Irigaray to start from this difference, as we have seen, is to protect against the male dominance that hides in a universality that has assumed all perspectives under just one: the male one (presumed to be universal, but not so, as has been amply shown, most famously by de Beauvoir 2012). Considering sexuate difference ensures that no person or group of persons dominates others, because it puts a fundamental difference right at the bottom of nature. Irigaray’s point is that there is difference, always. And for the development of subjectivity, for each person’s rightful development—that is, for their becoming in accordance with their own nature—it is necessary to recognise one another as different, and to meet each other as such. Only then can we each dwell and become as we are. While the matter of gender is fluid and spectral (see e.g. Fausto-Sterling 2012, 2019), Irigaray’s point stands that we meet each other in difference, and that there is a basic duality that we all live in and live through.

We can expand, then, on Irigaray’s point about the fundamentality of difference if we consider her idea of love from an enactive perspective—within an embodied cognitive science that starts from concrete, bodily, situated interactions between people. As we will see, understanding love as participatory sense-making maintains Irigaray’s insights about difference and about relationships, while also deepening it by better understanding the dynamics at work. We will show that there is a primordial tension in participatory sense-making, both because we are all different bodies and because we relate to the interactions that emerge between us. Our aim is to keep the universal of difference, but not to hang it all up on the itself exclusionary difference between man and woman.¹²

¹² On the many layers of difference and complexity, see Ben-Ze’ev and Brunning (2017).

We first describe loving phenomenologically, to then gradually move into an enactive characterisation.

Loving is a basic, existential way of relating that goes out from one's core being. We are existentially involved and implied in loving. Jean-Luc Marion puts it like this: "Loving puts in play my identity, my ipseity, those resources of mine that are more inward to me than myself." In love I "implicate myself". I love "in the flesh, and this flesh is one only with me" (Marion 2007: 9). Loving is a movement towards the world out of one's own inner direction and directedness. This also goes for the one who is loved: it is this particular one that one loves. The movement of loving not only starts in a precise place; it also goes out to a specific place: the loved. In loving, *who* loves matters. Lovers are particular and concrete, and this also goes for what takes place between them: their relation.

This phenomenon has not two but three basic elements: the lover, the loved, and their relationship. All three make up the concrete dynamics of loving.¹³ Lovers are particular and concrete beings, meeting each other in concrete and particular worldly interactions. One cannot love abstractly.¹⁴

In loving, while loving, I am directed towards you, facing you, wanting to be with you, to be by your side, have you by my side. My arms, my posture, my stance, my movement, my thought, my lips, my body open to you. Specifically you. Not just anybody. You. There is a space for you, next to me, in me, in my world. And I am particularly me in this loving. Loving is *of these bodies*.

Bodies are particular and concrete, situated and different. Indeed, in their sexuate being, but not necessarily in their specific difference as man and woman. In difference is where we maintain duality. In fact, the enactive approach to language (Di Paolo et al. 2018) shows how we are *all* different bodies—that there are, literally, billions of bodies. Not just everyone is a different body, but we each of us consist of and also relate to ourselves as different bodies. This is because, as living bodies, we self-maintain and self-organise. For enactive thinkers, the basic way of relating to the world is always in terms of an interdependent autonomy, i.e. of a need to produce

¹³ Conceptually, these are three: the different partners and their relation. In practice, they can be more than three, for instance between more than two partners in a polyamorous relation.

¹⁴ At this basic level, we are talking about loving in a general sense, not in an exclusively romantic one. What we describe is a core relating that happens also between parent and child, between friends, and so on. Terms like "lover" therefore need to be taken in this general sense. We do think, however, that some of these basic tensions play out most strikingly in romantic relations, and more even in sexual encounters. Moreover, since loving is concrete and we cannot love abstractly, the specific kind of relationship between the lovers is unique and thus we cannot equate loving relationships, say romantic love and friendship, for example. These are important sites to study the basic dialectic of loving and the difference that pertains to each relationship.

To say something in particular about sexual encounters, penetration is one form of intimacy with a particularly striking embodiment of the intimate transgression that Maclaren (2018) brings to light. But many other interactions—even all, perhaps—share a form of this. Think of how personal space can be invaded, or not, depending on whom you are embracing, hugging, or touching. In fact, as Maclaren says, transgression is ontological, meaning that we always transgress each other in our interactions. Transgression is our pervasive both-coexistence-and-divergence. If this is true, and we think it is, then the embodiment of love, in all its forms, involves the dialectic of this transgression.

and maintain oneself, always in relation and interaction with our environment. This conceptualisation of autonomy is therefore different from the one that rules liberal subjectivity. Interdependent autonomy is, at the same time, producing ourselves out of and with the environment, and distinguishing ourselves from it (Varela 1979; Di Paolo 2018). So, we are in a relation of—at the same time—adaptive self-production with and self-distinction from the environment. We do this metabolically, as we exchange matter and energy with the environment. We do it sensorimotorically, when, for instance, we maintain a bodily habit such as smoking, in accordance with an acquired neurophysiological need and in defiance of certain cultural expectations. We also do this intersubjectively and linguistically, for instance, when we speak and interact differently with our sister than with a colleague. These levels of self-organisation, moreover, interact in intricate ways. Think, for instance, of how a wrong word from a loved one can make it hard to digest a dinner that was—up until then—delicious. We are all of us different bodies, from moment to moment, from place to place, from encounter to encounter, yet we sustain a flow of identity by working at being these bodies. Difference, then, in the approach, is not necessarily or only tied to being sexuate.¹⁵ It is, however, as much as it is for Irigaray, basic. And meeting each other in difference is also, like for her, basic for ethico-political reasons (see chapter 12 of Di Paolo et al. 2018). This is because, without meeting each other in difference and taking both individuals and interactions as equiprimordial starting points for understanding intersubjectivity, we cannot truly participate in each other's sense-making.

We can illustrate this in relation to loving. The question Marion starts from in *The Erotic Phenomenon* is “Does anyone love me?” (2007: 29). Reading Irigaray and Marion in tandem, we can wonder whether Marion's question is a masculine way of asking about love. Irigaray, in contrast, sees women ask, “Do you love me?”. Note the difference. The first question presumes an anonymity, addressing nobody in particular. The second one is second-personal; it addresses a *you*. To Irigaray, what the women's question “really means” is, “What am I for you? Or, Who am I? or, How can I return to myself?” (1996: 98). The women's question both reaches out to a particular other, and directs back in earnest to themselves. Here, then, difference, specificity, concretion, becoming, and relation are all present. Whereas Marion's lone philosophical wanderer asks, rather disconnectedly, if anyone out there loves him. This makes him think about the space he is in, and about the abyss that opens up under his feet asking for this assurance (Marion 2007: 29 ff, and 41ff).¹⁶ We must recognise that both these ways of asking about love are real. They are realistic preoccupations.

Because we are existentially implicated in loving, that is, because there is a particular me who meets a particular you (or yours), there is transgression (Maclaren 2018). This means that “others reach into our experience, so that we are influenced by them whether we like it or not” (Maclaren 2018: 20). We unavoidably reach into

¹⁵ Though this is, for enaction, an interesting phenomenon to consider, and a worthwhile starting point for a future investigation.

¹⁶ Marion seems to never quite leave this solipsistic starting point in *The Erotic Phenomenon*.

each other, because we co-inhabit the world, and because we intercorporeally attend to and intend the world. Together, with, against, and through each other, we act in and know the world. In our interactions, we are drawn into bodily, immersedly, sharing with others. At the same time, Maclaren says, “each individual inevitably maintains some degree of *écart* or divergence from others’ perspectives.” And, “[t]ransgression thus involves both difference and coexistence—or, as Merleau-Ponty notes, ‘solitude and communication [are] ... two moments of a single phenomenon’” (Maclaren 2018: 25, quoting Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012: 376/535)). We deeply shape each other’s agency, perspectives, and intentions in our moving with each other in the world (De Jaegher 2015).

For a positive example of how subtly this can play out in the interactions of a romantic couple, take this description from Gregory Currie, about Janet and John, having just arrived at their holiday destination. Janet stands in front of the open window and takes an appreciative breath of the air, in such a way as to make sure that John perceives it. Currie wonders:

“What does Janet mean by doing this? That the air is fresh? The freshness of the air is already evident to John. Janet is arranging things so that she and John attend to the freshness of the air, in a way that is mutually manifest to both of them. But Janet is doing more: she is adjusting John’s cognitive and affective take on the world: trying to get John to see the world in somewhat the way she is currently seeing it. There is a small, highly salient portion of the world visible to both of them, and Janet wants John to attend to that portion of it in the way that she is attending to it: appreciatively, gratefully, with excitement at the possibilities for the holiday that has just begun. She does not want to convey any propositions to John: she wants him to notice certain things; to engage imaginatively with certain possibilities which these things present; to see these things and possibilities as valuable in certain ways. She wants John to frame the visible world in a certain way. It would be vastly impractical – perhaps impossible – for Janet to try to say all this, to make explicit the way she wants John to frame the bit of world they are looking at. It would also be pointless: the minimal gesture does the job very well.” (Currie 2007: 21–22)¹⁷

Transgression also happens because lovers and their relation (like everything) are continually becoming. Lovers do so in particular ways also because of their relation. A particular becoming takes place *here*. The particular becomings of the lovers and of their interactions unfold here, take place here, have to be given space here. Irigaray also says this:

“This distance is never covered, always to be passed through, and even to be started anew. And the gap has to be maintained. The transcendence between

¹⁷ For other examples, including more grating ones, see Berne (1964), relayed by Maclaren (2018), or Gilligan (2003). Many films and novels also grapple with how we shape each other in our attempts at moving through life together. For a recent subtle cinematic depiction, see *Call Me By Your Name* (2017, directed by Luca Guadagnino). Or think of the novels *Stoner* (Williams 1965) or *The Buried Giant* (Ishiguro 2015).

us, this one which is fecund in graces and in words, requires an interval, it engenders it also. The space will be more or less left in its elemental form, the air, or will be more or less woven from the flesh of the one or the other, and from the flesh generated by the encounter. But it is important that an irreducible distance will remain where silence takes place.” (Irigaray 2003: 66)

All this can also be described as participatory sense-making. Participatory sense-making understands intersubjectivity as an unfolding relation between individual becomings, where the body-mindly relations and interactions between the subjects are themselves effective dynamics in bringing about their (ambiguous, divergent, joint, mutual, contrastive,...) understandings. Love or loving has these same basic dynamics. In loving and in participatory sense-making, subjects are existentially involved and engaged in the world, in the other, in themselves, and in their relations and interactions. Loving, then, is an existential engagement in a dialectic of encounter¹⁸ between ongoingly becoming, different beings. What is particular to loving, but not shared by all interactions of participatory sense-making, is that it is mutual interest in each other, and in each other’s becoming. This, we can call *desire*.

When loving you, I hope, wish, want, that loving also goes out from you to me. I desire you. But not only you, I also desire mutuality. Mutuality would mean we hold this relation in common. And I desire reciprocity: I wish that this relation bears on and binds each of us equally. I may desire a “product” of our relation, which is unity (maybe a kind of recognition of the relation, like a marriage). Above, we followed Irigaray when she criticised the idea of love as unity and fusion. And yet, as a loving relationship comes to exist, it becomes something the lovers participate in and as such, it determines their participation to an extent. There is unity, but unity is only one half of the coin, and it is never fixed, never stable (nor are the lovers), never finished, never a whole.

Could desire be the *need to know more*? And could absence of desire be disinterest, no need to know more? Even in love-making, desire is the need to know the other’s body more, even to know the act of making love more, to know it again, even if you’ve done it many times. And it will, in a sense, always be new, so it makes sense to desire it, to need to know more.¹⁹ And the same goes for desiring each other. We are all always ongoingly becoming, and this makes knowing never finished. Desire as the need to know more is inexhaustible in good love relations, i.e. those where lovers keep interested in each other, no matter (or because of) their ongoing becoming (and the loss of desire, not wanting to know the other any more, is the loss of interest in them or in the relation as it ongoingly changes). The point,

¹⁸ Not: of recognition. Below, we will see why Irigaray is critical of both recognition and of dialectic, and we will suggest replacing it with the enactive use of dialectic (Di Paolo et al. 2018), which doesn’t suffer from the problems Irigaray sees.

¹⁹ Love is thus “in-between” ignorance and knowledge, as claimed by Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* (201d1-202b5; see Plato 1989). For a discussion of Diotima’s talk in Irigaray’s conceptualisation of love, see Walker (2006) and Roberts (2019: 96–111). We want to thank an anonymous reviewer who has suggested this important connection. In this paper we stressed the “in-between” character of love as the ongoing process of interaction between lovers, but it would be interesting in future work to go deeper into the “in-between” character of desire as need to know more in dialogue with the Diotima’s talk.

then, is that while we desire to know more, we can never know exhaustively. We will never exhaust the object of desire or the other in loving them. They remain rightfully unknown or mysterious, and this unknown or mysterious itself is not fixed. By interacting with it, it transforms, even while we do not know it. This is in part what engages us, what pulls us into loving and knowing relationships (see De Jaegher 2019).

This is one way to describe desire enactively. We can describe it in its embodied, relational forms: desire happens in movements towards and away from each other. For Irigaray, there is an analogy between desiring and breathing. Breathing, like desiring, is the ongoing movement of in and out, towards and away from, that penetrates. A continual contact, towards me, away from me, towards you, the world, away from you, the world, and into me. It is also circular. As breathing sustains life, so does desiring sustain love? Perhaps yes. This, we think, is what Irigaray means when she says desire is a re-birth. In desiring each other, we give birth to each other, but this is a continual re-birth, in line with our continual becoming. Desire ensures a loving support for each other's becoming.

There is holding here, and containment. We can hold and contain each other. Our relationship can hold, contain us. Love is a place where we can fall, be ourselves, fall into ourselves, fall into relation, I can fall into you. (I can also fall out of love.) We expect to be accepted as we are in love, and to accept the other as they are. This takes work. We do not even know who we ourselves are, often. Loving and knowing go together, imply each other, are the same, in essence and to an extent. Desiring comes from always becoming, in relation. We can keep desiring each other, because of this, and it helps us be ourselves and be with.

There is a difference between love and desire, however, in our view. Desiring, unlike loving (or: as a stage of loving) goes out from me to you. It can be one-directional. Whereas in loving, the three elements are necessary: the lovers, and their relationship.²⁰ Desire within a loving relationship can indeed be a rebirth, but not when the love is unrequited. Then it is one-directional, and its fecundity is barren—it remains bare, there is no rebirth, desire remains lonely.²¹

What understanding loving in an enactive framework brings to Irigaray's work is an enrichment of the idea that difference and relation are both primordial in love. This is why she proposes to say "I love to you" (1996). She says, "[t]he 'to' is ... a barrier against alienating the other's freedom in my subjectivity, my world, my language" and it is "the guarantor of two intentionalities: mine and yours. In you I love that which can correspond to my own intentionality and to yours". Summarising,

"I love to you thus means: I do not take you for a direct object, nor for an indirect object by revolving around you. It is, rather, around myself that I have to revolve in order to maintain the *to you* thanks to the return to me. Not with my prey—you become mine—but with the intention of respecting my nature, my

²⁰ By speaking about these elements like this, we do not intend to reify them. All three are continually in flux, changing, becoming, and they are not guaranteed to hold.

²¹ This is a provisional claim that we hope to further investigate in future works, especially regarding those thinkers, as Nietzsche for example, who argue that unrequited love is indispensable to the lover.

history, my intentionality, while also respecting yours. Hence, I do not return to me by way of: I wonder if I am loved. That would result from an introverted intentionality, going toward the other so as to return ruminating, sadly and endlessly, over solipsistic questions in a sort of cultural cannibalism” (all quotes from 1996: 110).

This aligns with the two pillars on which participatory sense-making theory is built: the individuals—participants to the interaction (here: the love in-between)—and their interaction. The basic threeness of loving (being two-in-interaction), needs to be maintained for it be a good loving relationship. If one of these elements falls or fails, then all three fail. This can happen with any of the participants *and* the relationship. That is the core basic of loving: that there are three here.

It is important to stress that these numbers should not be taken as referring to thing-substances already made and independent from their relationship. Maybe, as suggested by Bruno Latour, we need to stop counting, not to avoid ontological commitment, but to avoid reification and stagnation (Latour 2015: 21; see Candiotta and Pezzano 2019: 39–40). Instead, we can breathe, in the continuous flux of loving each other. Irigaray’s insistence on breathing (On this, see Stone 2006; Roberts 2019) should not be taken as a metaphor only, but as the very same embodiment of loving as participatory sense-making and in relation to the metabolic rhythms. Breathing both represents and *does* a difference in becoming, a rhythm of elements in a continual flow, with opposite movements that yet are one. It also connects realms that are not so easy to disentangle: the inside and the outside, mine and yours, ours and neither’s.

We can thus say that Irigaray’s insistence on saying “I love to you” *is* loving understood as participatory sense-making: the lovers are autonomous, and yet they are inter-dependently becoming. And, as they relate to each other, this relation itself is an effective factor in their becoming. Their relation becomes with them—including its and their *un*becoming.

In *I Love to You*, Irigaray writes (1996: p. 52) “I am limited by myself owing to the objectivity of my sexed body and to the particularity that ensues from my inscription in a genealogy. In this sense, there is no immediate subjectivity. ... [I] must be distinguishable in order to be appropriate to myself and positive in relation to others while respecting their own identity.” But if there is also transgression—if indeed, transgression is inevitable, then we cannot but participate in each other’s becoming, in each other’s unfolding, and in our relation, transforming all of these. Remaining different, but also reaching into each other.²²

The elements and their relations are often in tension with each other, and here is where the notion of dialectic is important. Irigaray does not like the notions of dialectic or of recognition, because of how they build identities in a process of domination. To her, they are dangerous because they obstruct women’s capacity of *being*

²² Work in the enactive approach to intersubjectivity variously elaborates this (see e.g. Cuffari 2011; Cuffari and Jensen 2014; De Jaegher 2015, 2019; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Di Paolo et al. 2018; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Kyselo 2014).

by herself, as we saw in Sect. 2. Therefore, love should not be dialectical. But the enactive use of dialectic is different. It is not a subscription to a role-defining school of thought. Instead, the enactive approach takes “dialectics broadly and nondogmatically, as the thinking of opposites and circularities, of relations and tendencies, together with their countertendencies, and of transformation and becoming” (Di Paolo et al. 2018: 107–8). Enactive thinking makes dialectical moves, and thematises the third element: the relation or the in-between (See Varela 1976). This kind of dialectic—an active, critical mode of thinking—allows meanings to emerge, following the study of things—subjects—and their relations. It is not putting the relation first, forgetting the subjects. Instead it focuses on the in-between of subjects as the generative source of sense-making and becoming. Understanding loving as participatory sense-making overcomes—or, better, incorporates and even incarnates—Irigaray’s “I love to you”. This is made possible by this enactive understanding of dialectic as becoming. Saying “I love to you” indeed acknowledges and keeps the distance open, and is spoken from my own ground (not from yours, and not from the in-between). All three of these grounds, yours, mine, and that of the relation, constitute the phenomenology of loving.

In all of this, loving is risky. I will be transformed, parts of my individuality will disappear or become secondary in importance (and this may even happen without me really wanting to or without my full acceptance, which may, but also may not be a problem). Understanding loving as participatory sense-making, we can go beyond both Irigaray and fusion models, while at the same time acknowledging their concerns: on the one hand for individual self-maintenance, and on the other hand for the longing for unity. We see that there is indeed a strong relational force at work against the self-positing individual in concrete love, which can make things go wrong, and in patriarchal society, system(at)ically wrong very often. But it can also make things go right in ways that were beyond my individual reach. We cannot remove from our understanding of loving this risky and self-transformational element, this out-of-our-control aspect of love, its transgressive dimension.

Now that we can understand loving as participatory sense-making, we can say I love you, and mean it in the rightful way of distance, difference, subjectivity, and relation—bodies becoming in dialectical tension.

4. The Ethics of Love as Participatory Sense-Making

This understanding of loving as participatory sense-making implies important transformations of our behaviours. Overcoming the dualism between theory and practice and endorsing ameliorative aims, we supply our philosophical account as a pragmatic device for emancipating ourselves from the pitfalls of both the fusion model of romantic love, and Irigaray’s perhaps too great emphasis on individual protection from being dominated. We offer this enactive model as a way of learning how to “care for freedom” (Maclaren 2018: 19) through love. The ameliorative aims are required by the recognition that very often, willingly or not, our loving relationships are marked by violence and exploitation. Put concretely: we need to “assume responsibility for the unfreedom we inflict upon others: the ways we shape their

agency,” which is inevitable in a world of ontological transgression (Maclaren 2018: 20). In this final section, we therefore sketch some implications for the ethics of love in the horizon of self-transformation as self-improvement.²³

The first dimension we want to highlight is that of *language*. As we saw discussing Irigaray’s “I love to you”, language matters, both in negative and positive ways. It can be the tool through which the other is objectified, but also the means through which what really counts can emerge. For Irigaray, the “neutral” words of love should eventually disappear since they are dependent on historical patriarchy. Enactive thinkers, as well, understand that through language, we build meanings, and our sense-making is at the ground of the experience of who we are, how we meet each other, and who we are together. Thus, we need to sensitise the way we speak: naming the partners in relationships in their difference will allow their authentic signification and self-signification. This means to adopt precise pronouns, and to avoid the neutrality of nouns such as “men” (English), “Menschen” (German), “uomini” (Italian), for expressing “humanity”. But also this (supposedly!) neuter word “humanity” can be problematic, in Irigaray’s terms, since its inclusiveness makes the specific differences disappear. What we need to do is be careful, precise, and respectful in the (pro-)nouns we use for and with each other. As Melanie Yergeau, a neuroqueer researcher of autistic rhetorics, describes, pronouns are relational, meaning that they “are indexes that configure how we interact with and come to know one another” (Yergeau 2018: 212).²⁴ We need to take care of meanings as they actively pervade interpersonal and societal institutions—love and language among them. Speaking about love or in love, we might “care for freedom” better if we can speak in terms of participatory sense-making: if we can name and do relating in terms of the basic three becomings: those of each of us, in relation.

This brings us to the leading concept we share with Irigaray in understanding love: *difference*. Ultimately, loving relationships have the power to “remind us” of the necessity to build relationships in the frame of difference (Candiotta 2020). For Irigaray, the loving relationship can become a source for creating a new society, a new policy, where respect for sexual difference becomes the driver of a new democracy, of real rights that respect each one. The space of difference has been depicted by Irigaray as breath, and in our phenomenology of loving we understand it as the embodied rhythm where each one can find herself and meet the other in irreducible difference. This means that in loving we need to learn to *let others be* (Maclaren 2002; De Jaegher 2019). Letting others be, in the frame of irreducible difference, means appreciating their *infinity*. As Sarah Heinämaa (2018: 166) said, notably referring to Irigaray and Levinas, “human being carries an ... infinity in herself and ... love between human beings must therefore be understood as a relation between two infinities, or, better, two finite beings that both harbor infinite depths in their core selves”.

²³ We cannot develop them in detail here, but we nevertheless introduce them to emphasise that our approach is explicitly directed at ethical and political concerns. We hope to further this line of research in future work.

²⁴ See also <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>.

This meeting, the in-between of love, is never pre-ordered but is a *space of vulnerability*. I am not an already made subject, but I am constantly in the process of becoming (Di Paolo 2020). This makes me vulnerable to change and transformation, which is often painful. But learning to let the others touch me, in a way different from objectification, discloses paths for really meeting myself and the other, co-emerging together in the vulnerable opening. This is not in contradiction with autonomy, because autonomy is relational, and it can avoid solipsism only if it is open to the vulnerability of meeting the other. There is thus a generative dialectic between autonomy and vulnerability of the partners in loving as participatory sense-making. In this sense, difference ascribes maximum value to receptivity as the power of vulnerability or, we could also say, “the power of impotence” (Candiotta 2016). This expression indicates a form of thought, perception, feeling, and action capable of freeing itself from the rhetorics of power typical of the “phallogocentrism” of our Western Culture, thanks to the active forces of listening and vulnerability.²⁵

On the other hand, demanding that vulnerability to transformation and transgression come with a kind of warranty against being dominated, as Irigaray does, would consist in a sanitisation of loving that, in our view, is not apt. It is more realistic to accept that there will be power dynamics at play at some point, and to emancipate ourselves through linguistic and relational prowess to partake in these dynamics, to be *participants* who understand and can play with intersubjective dynamics, and move “beyond doer and done to” into a “third” of which we are a part and which is part of us (see Benjamin 2018, also Varela 1976).²⁶

We end with the ethical implications of the pivotal concept of our enactive phenomenology of loving: *desire*. We depicted desire at the core of the very same process of participatory sense-making as the need to know the other(s) more; here we want to stress its transformative dimension in processes of becoming. Far from understanding the practice of desire in the extremes of rational subjugation, as in the long-standing tradition of the refusal of the body, or as the hedonic jouissance of the culture of short-term excitements, the power of desiring the other in loving relationships is at the source of the capacity to transform oneself. Desiring the other is a path of self-improvement, since desire ensures a loving support for each other’s becoming. Instead of wanting to change the other, as depicted by Irigaray in dominance relationships, in desiring to know the other I can come back to me, to my processes of becoming and responsibly take care of them. As we argued, desire is an embodied rhythm that marks distance and closeness in loving the other. What we

²⁵ Contrasting arrogant perception whose aim is not simply to dominate, but to make knowledge claims about the object of perception, this practice is very much in line with what has been called “loving perception” (Frye 1983). The “loving perception” does not consume the object of perception, but is aware of one’s own and the other’s interests, desires, and wishes, understanding the boundaries between the loving perceiver and what is perceived. In this paper we discuss romantic love, but the ethics of love we are describing in this section has a bigger scope and it can be extended to other dimensions in which we encounter other human beings. In particular, Mariana Ortega (2006) has employed it in discussing Third Wave feminism’s commitment to diversity.

²⁶ An investigation of the interaction of feministic psychoanalytic ideas—like Jessica Benjamin’s, Irigaray’s, and enactive concepts, remains work for the future.

want to stress here is the distance. Of course, desire is also the force that makes me strive to meet the other, to be closer to her, but it is primarily rooted in my needs. The life impulse and the impulse to know that both emerge from the living being's core in the enactive conceptual framework are here understood as desire. A desire that triggers me to revise my needs in order to better love the other(s), and thus to orient my processes of becoming. As Audre Lorde said, the ground of this is difference, which is "that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" and which "must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde 1984: 111, 112). This creativity is nurtured by the dialectic between desire and vulnerability in the frame of difference as a continuous and never-ending process of becoming.

In conclusion, ethically and politically, conceiving of loving as participatory sense-making promotes a space for distance in the meeting. The opening of listening, the receptivity in generating meanings, the transformative power of vulnerability, and the spark of difference are ways to avoid assimilating the others I love, and to improve myself. Finally, in our enactive model, desire appears to be the keystone which in part shapes the processes of becoming of the partners and their relationship. For the constructive thought of the later Irigaray, precisely silence and breath are what create this "sacred space" between the subjects and allow a "loving sexualized dialogue". For Irigaray (2003), dialogue is also "a novel production of speech determined by the context of an exchange in difference" (p. 35). Silence and creative transformation are deeply entangled since refraining from the desire of appropriation allows the other to speak (and oneself too). Resisting the desire of appropriation, on the other hand, allows us to question ourselves, each other, and our relation. All these mean to be open to the other's thoughts (and one's own) in a participatory generation of new meanings and words. Finally, the attentiveness to both the other(s) and oneself is an echo of the dative form of "I love to you".

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