

Watch that gap: reflections on the struggle for equality

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Abstract:

Is there a difference between women's struggle for equality with men, and the according of full human status to women? This paper considers the discourses available to Australian feminist activist Patricia Jessie Giles when working to develop policy in the international arena in the context of Luce Irigaray's insistence that policy work must be accompanied by philosophical work, and that, in order to accord full human status to women, we must find a place for woman philosophically. In so doing, the paper begins a conversation about ways to negotiate that mysterious gap between hope and happening that is so often the stuff of policy change.

In this paper in my attempt to begin a conversation about ways to negotiate *that mysterious gap between hope and happening*¹ that is so often the stuff of policy change, I'll be considering the thinking and activism of two quite different women from the same generation—Australian feminist activist and internationalist Pat Giles (born 1928), and Belgian/French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (born 1932). My reasons for bringing them together in this forum are both serendipitous and strategic: serendipitous because my current research preoccupations bring me into close contact with the work of them both; and strategic because, in thinking through ways to address a conference called *Women in the Modern World: the Struggle for Equality*, it became apparent to me that the work of the one can usefully address the dilemmas of the other. Specifically, I'm thinking here of Irigaray's philosophical work on negotiating sexual difference, and Pat Giles' lifetime commitment to what she and her activist colleagues frequently call *the struggle for equality* through introducing legislative and policy changes.

In this paper I'll be arguing that we already understand, conceptually, the difference between aspiring for equality and aspiring for recognition of difference—most intricately explored by Luce Irigaray²—but what we're not so clear about yet is how to create the discursive space for that kind of manoeuvre to be articulated. How do we, for example, make space in a policy document to ensure that the philosophical context it's embedded in—the desires that underpin it—desires for women to be accorded full human status—are visible, audible, and able to be acted on? Those are the conversational spaces I hope this paper will open up.

So, why my fascination with Irigaray? I'm an Australian feminist academic, and for the past couple of decades I've been enchanted by poststructuralist notions of subjectivity and power. In a sense this has been a risky kind of enchantment, because for a long time such discourses have been regarded with suspicion by many feminist activists and scholars, and probably for good reason: specifically, in thinking about poststructuralist notions of subjectivity, many activists feared that the fracturing of (personal and collective) identity implicit in these discourses would mean a similar fracturing of political solidarity; and further, many feminists feared that to view power as fleeting and fluid invited a slippage into a kind of nihilistic relativism which automatically required an abandoning of feminist ethics. Today, though, for many of us these fears have been replaced by an intense interest in ways to read and negotiate across and around interpersonal and collective sites of difference.³

¹ Kenway and Willis, 1997:xx

² Irigaray, 2004; 1995; 1993a; 1993b; 1991; 1987; 1986; 1985

³ Hopkins, 2006, 2001; Davies, 2000; Fook, 1999; Lane, 1999; Richardson, 1997; Gatens, 1996; Healey, 1996; Gunew and Yeatman, 1993; Yuval - Davis, 1993; McNay, 1992; Luke and Gore, 1992; Pettman, 1992; Lather, 1991; Haraway, 1990.

For inspiration on how to prepare students for activist community based practice through learning to read and negotiate such sites of difference, I have turned again and again to the work of Luce Irigaray. It's Irigaray's work on negotiating difference, specifically sexual difference, that I find most relevant to the questions I'll be considering today. In particular, in considering how to bridge that mysterious gap between hope and happening, Irigaray's argument, that the most crucial arena for changes to occur in order to recognise the full human status of women is in the philosophical realm, is one I find to be most useful. Irigaray argues that for the work of sexual difference to take place, we need *a revolution in thought and ethics*.⁴ Before I introduce you to Pat Giles, I want to draw on Irigaray's recent work and on the early work of African American scholar and activist Audre Lorde to rehearse the differences between notions of permitting equality and recognising difference, and to signal, very briefly, the ways these notions can be seen to resonate philosophically.

In 1984, in her collection *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde explores questions of difference, marginalisation and fear. In this collection Lorde distinguishes between the practice of *othering* (excluding) and the alternative practice of *recognising difference*. She writes: *We have all been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human difference as equals. We need to develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives...*⁵

Drawing on Derrida's work, Lorde and others argue that our philosophical system of *othering*, which encourages the central, socially dominant figure to assume a *universalising* stance, permits man/not man, rather than man/woman. That is, from a man's viewpoint, either you are a man, or you are not a man. In this philosophical regime, 'woman' has no specificity. She does not exist philosophically except as a not-man. Such binary thinking, characteristic of colonial empires and oppressive regimes, was implicitly the kind of thinking that the women's movement set out to contest.

Irigaray responds to the restrictiveness of this binary thinking by arguing for the creation of an alternative system of thinking and interacting, built upon the reciprocal acknowledgment of femininities and masculinities in conceptualizing sexual difference. This she calls *the work of sexual difference*: the intellectual, conceptual work involved in thinking beyond the oppositions of the dichotomous conceptual order to recognise the differences between the masculine and the feminine and to value them both, rather than thinking within the binary oppositions of modernist thinking to value one above the other. *For the work of sexual difference to take place*, she argues, *a revolution in thought and ethics is needed. We must re-interpret the whole relationship between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic*.⁶ Importantly, she argues that the work of sexual difference and the creation of a feminine genealogy will together allow for the articulation of a feminine symbolic.

Irigaray draws a clear distinction between undertaking the work of sexual difference and striving for equality. She argues: *To make the Black equal to the White, the woman to the man, is still to submit them, under cover of*

⁴ Irigaray, 1987: 166

⁵ Lorde, 1984: 115 – 116

⁶ Irigaray, 1987: 166

*paternalist generosity, to models put in place by Western man, who resists living together with the different. He even accepts becoming a little Black or a little female rather than going through a revolution of thinking that is totally unavoidable. All the strategies of integration—with more or fewer reversals of hierarchy, blendings and plurality of cultures, of languages, of identities—yes, but not to the gesture that recognizes that the subject only exists thanks to limits and that, before the universe and especially before the other, the subject becomes structured not by mastering or dominating but by accepting that he, or she, is not the whole, that he, or she represents only one part of reality and of truth, that the other is forever a not I, nor me, nor mine, and **not a: not yet I, not yet mine, to integrate into me or into us.***⁷

Supporters of Irigaray's scholarship inevitably view her work as being intensely political. Indeed, as Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz points out, Irigaray's notion of the reciprocal acknowledgment of difference between the sexes has ethical, ontological and epistemological dimensions which themselves can create a new mode of politics and poetics. An exchange between the sexes such as Irigaray envisages creates a dialogue where neither can subsume the other: *such an interchange, in which the saying has as much value as what is said, constitutes an ethics as well as an ontology and epistemology. It is ethical insofar as it involves, for each subject in the relation, the recognition and valuation of the other as other; it is ontological insofar as it is based on the existence of two fundamentally different beings; and it is epistemological insofar as it implies two irreducibly different positions and ways of knowing.*⁸

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Running parallel to my interest in Irigaray's thinking is my interest in biography and the history of feminist activism. For the past three years I've been involved in a biography writing project about the life of Patricia Jessie Giles. Pat Giles is an Australian feminist activist, whose work as a trade unionist, parliamentarian and grassroots activist has been acknowledged locally, nationally and internationally. In a public life that has spanned five decades, beginning in the 1960s with community based education campaigns, and continuing into the 21st century with an ongoing commitment to addressing women's health issues locally and internationally, Giles' goal has been "to facilitate the move towards a more just society for women and others who experience disadvantage".⁹

A brief sketch of her activism provides the social and political context inside which she worked. Pat Giles was politicized during the heady days of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Australia, like much of the Western world, was in the grip of a social and political upheaval such as had not been seen before. The reformist left-wing Australian Labor Party under Gough Whitlam was swept into power in 1972 on a wave of optimism about people power, peace and social change: discourses endorsing equality of opportunity, anti-discrimination, social justice and human rights abounded.¹⁰ By the middle of the decade the women's movement was diverse, passionate, energetic and hard-working, and quickly became networked into bureaucracies, political parties,

⁷ Irigaray 2004: 25 – 26

⁸ Grosz, 1989: 182-3

⁹ Giles, 2005

¹⁰ Curthoys, 1992

trade unions and community-based campaigns.¹¹ University campuses, fuelled by opposition to conscription and Australia's participation in the Vietnam war, were alive with radical protest. Taboos on discussion of sex, fidelity, contraception, abortion and homosexuality were lifted, and the possibilities for radically re-thinking the shapes that Australian society might take were endlessly aired in new national newspapers like *The National Times* and *Nation Review*.

Pat Giles' entry into public life and political activism occurred via community-based education campaigns in the late 1960s, and via simultaneous engagements with the fledgling women's movement and the Australian Labor Party in the early 1970s. Unlike separatist feminists who saw engagement with existing patriarchal structures as something of a betrayal of feminist integrity,¹² Pat Giles sought the reform of those same institutional structures through the introduction of practical policies to benefit women and the disenfranchised. Australian feminism is noted for its diverse approach to enacting social change¹³ and Giles was one of the women who enjoyed working inside the institutions whose patriarchal values she contested. Not surprisingly, her methods were not always appreciated by her feminist sisters. However, she stuck fast to her reformist agenda and to her engagement with existing institutional structures as a means to create cultural change. As a trade unionist from 1974 – 1981, Pat Giles did not confine her activities to her own union, but worked actively on local and national trade union committees towards internal reform of the union movement itself. Similarly, as a parliamentarian from 1981 - 1993, her focus was on the internal reform of the Australian Labor Party itself as well as on the enacting of legislation to remove disadvantage. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, after her retirement from parliament, her focus shifted from the broad range of parliamentary issues to a more specific focus on women's health issues, internationally and locally.

One of the strategies Pat Giles used throughout her activist career, in seeking to persuade decision-makers of the need to end discriminations against women and other marginalised groups, was to appeal to the force of international conventions. In June 1975 she travelled to Mexico for the United Nations International Women's Year celebrations as the Australian government delegate to the Non-Government Organisations Tribune meeting, in place of her ageing friend and mentor, Irene Greenwood. Thereafter she became a confirmed internationalist, and as her parliamentary career unfolded she found herself in the position of being able to participate in shaping and developing policies at the highest international levels. In 1985 as an ALP Senator with a particular interest in women's issues, she led the Australian delegation to the United Nations End-of-the-Decade-for-Women conference in Nairobi. Two decades after Mexico, in June 1995, in the midst of a glittering international career as a women's advocate, she attended the 4th UN International Conference on Women in Beijing in her capacity as Chair of the UN Global Commission on Women's Health. One of the highlights of her Parliamentary career was her appointment in 1992 as one of the two representatives of the Australian government to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 47); and almost a decade later, from 1999–2002

¹¹ Bulbeck, 1997; Kaplan, 1996; Bergmann, 1993; Pritchard Hughes, 1997

¹² Giles & Fatin, 1982; Pritchard Hughes, 1997; Sawer, 1992

¹³ Bacchi, 1996; Bulbeck, 1997; Magarey & Sheridan, 2002; Pritchard Hughes, 1997; Sawer, 1990; Summers, 2002

in her capacity as President of International Alliance of Women, she was an NGO delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York.¹⁴

Working on the biography of Pat Giles has presented its challenges for a poststructuralist scholar interested in negotiating sites of difference, not least because Pat Giles herself adopted an explicitly egalitarian approach to her feminist activism, assuming that equality of access to the public world of employment, training, education, and politics, underpinned by appropriate health care and social services, would provide the economic independence and wellbeing necessary to enhance the status of women and other marginalised groups. While I would certainly not contest the premise that economic independence and good health care are useful, essential even, I think we need to look more closely at the assumed connection between these material changes and the improved status of any group. In particular, I think we need to look at the ways that the desire for a change in women's status is spoken about and written about in official policy documents, reports and by activists themselves.

There is no doubt that the discourses most readily used by Pat Giles in international forums were the discourses of equality. For example, rather than arguing, as Irigaray would, that to change women's status we need to create space philosophically for the articulation of a feminine symbolic, or even that we need some philosophical shift akin to Irigaray's revolution in thought and ethics, Pat Giles argued in Nairobi in 1985: ... *Our longterm goal is for women to achieve equality with men so that governments will automatically respond to women's needs as they do to men's. In the shorter term, however, the women's case needs to be constantly argued before governments which have many other competing priorities.*¹⁵ ...*By the year 2000 the goal should be that no policies or programs be put forward by governments without full and informed consideration of their impact upon both sexes.*¹⁶ Arguably, in this speech Pat Giles is calling for the kind of recognition of women's human status that does indeed place women alongside men as full human beings. But the language she uses does not imply the kinds of philosophical shifts in thinking that Irigaray's call for a revolution in thought and ethics might imply.

This is not to suggest that, from the 1970s onwards, scholars and activists in Australia and elsewhere were not expressing similar thoughts to those underpinning Irigaray's notions in wanting women not simply to be seen to be equal to men, but rather to be accorded full human status *as women*. The consciousness raising groups of the 1970s women's movement, for example, in unravelling the multiple layers of women's disadvantage, created new visions for a woman-centred world, splendidly articulated in Australia and other countries in a range of locations, from households to street demonstrations, from radical feminist grassroots broadsheets to academic publications, from funding applications for the provision of women-specific services to women's festivals and celebrations of women's creativity.¹⁷ Sometimes such visions were articulated by those in power. Soon after his election in 1972, for example, Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam echoed the sentiments of Elizabeth

¹⁴ Giles, 2006

¹⁵ Giles, 1985a: 2

¹⁶ Giles, 1985a: 2

¹⁷ Summers 2002; Saunders and Evans, 1992; Rich 1977

Reid, his Advisor on Women's Issues, when he called for *a psychological revolution* to re-think the status of women (Whitlam, 1975). There is a strong argument that these shifts in thinking permitted the kinds of cultural shifts that have allowed women's issues to be taken seriously by politically powerful decision-makers (Sawer, 1990).

Nevertheless, UN documents monitoring improvements in the status of women continue to use the language of equality. In addition, and perhaps quite disturbingly for those women who participated in the Cairo forum of 1993 and explicitly drew crucial distinctions between the notions of equality and the preferred notion of equity, these same UN documents tend to use the terms *equality* and *equity* interchangeably. For example, at the Beijing + 5 Conference in 2000, held to review and appraise progress towards implementing the Beijing Platform for Action drawn up in 1995 in Beijing, the Conference noted that there was *strong evidence that gender equity was being viewed more positively. As a result, in most regions domestic violence, once regarded as a private matter, has become a public issue and therefore a concern of the State, although public opinion may lag behind legislation and governmental policies. Perhaps most positively, in many countries women's equality is now seen as a prerequisite of the achievement of sustainable human development.*¹⁸

Semantic confusions aside, such UN documents implicitly carry the view that changes to the status of women occur via the attitudinal changes that accompany or are generated by policy changes. For Pat Giles, policy change and attitudinal change go hand in hand. Her speeches reflect this view. On 1 November 2001 in a Presidential keynote speech delivered to the International Alliance of Women in Odense, Denmark, for example, Pat Giles recalled the significance of the 1975 Mexico Conference for shifting international diplomatic thinking about women's issues. The Mexico Conference produced a UN Plan of Action document, which was considered to be masculinist and sexist by many women who had attended the vibrant NGO Tribune meeting that ran parallel to the official UN Conference in Mexico. In her 2001 speech, Pat Giles placed the masculinist focus of the UN Plan of Action document in its historical and political context, noting that such a focus was not remarkable in 1975, *a time of few women parliamentarians, diplomats or even bureaucrats*. However, she noted that *the vibrance of the Tribune, and even the inadequacies of the Plan of Action, had a remarkable effect on the consciousness of the women who were fortunate enough to attend and the occasion was the catalyst for unprecedented political action at national and regional levels.*¹⁹ In particular, she noted that a radical shift in thinking about women generated by the Tribune's focus on establishing a woman-centred world view paved the way for the framing of the hugely significant UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Often described as the international Bill of Rights for women, CEDAW establishes legally binding obligations to end discriminations against women. She recalled that *there was world-wide rejoicing that the human rights of women were definitely on the UN agenda.*²⁰

¹⁸ ECOSOC, 2000a :10

¹⁹ Giles, 2001, p 4 Bianca refs

²⁰ Giles 2001: 5

In this 2001 speech, Pat Giles claimed that the shift in consciousness that had begun at the NGO Tribune forum in Mexico impacted on the entire series of UN women's conferences that started with Mexico in 1975 and included the Mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980, the End of the Decade Conference in Nairobi in 1985, the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and the Beijing+5 Conference in New York in 2000. As evidence of this shift in consciousness, she said, UN organisers themselves became aware of the significance of placing women's lives at the centre of enquiry, and consciously sought to facilitate greater access to NGOs to enable this to happen. *As the UN has facilitated greater access to NGOs, she argued, the experience of participating in the multilateral procedures of preparatory meetings, as well as the conferences, has heightened our motivation, sharpened our skills, and, most importantly, expanded our knowledge and understanding of the lives of our sisters from every part of the globe.*²¹ The woman-centred focus which the NGO forums insisted on, she argued, uncovered issues previously hidden from the world. For example, the Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 *drew the world's attention to the appalling and widespread practice of circumcision of women and heard the African women insist it was their problem to be solved by them. A sub-committee of the Human Rights Commission was given the task of investigating all such abuses of women, and [after] the review to direct its efforts toward the three evils of female circumcision, son preference, and traditional birth practices which harm women and children.*²²

Arguably, for Pat Giles, identifying and charting the development of such a shift in consciousness was a necessary political manoeuvre, and was one she made repeatedly throughout her public life. She was enthusiastic in her support of the NGO forums that accompanied international gatherings of women for their capacity to persuade the international community that women must be seen as full human beings. Her speeches of the 1990s chart the development of a kind of collective voice adopted by women of the world, frequently via the NGO forums accompanying international gatherings of women. In a speech at Nairobi in 1985, after the comprehensive series of *Forward Looking Strategies*, designed to help end discriminations against women internationally had been drawn up, she argued *Although the Forward Looking Strategies will not have any legal status in Australia, it will, we hope, have considerable moral persuasive power as a consensus document agreed to by all governments of the world...*²³ She was enthusiastic about the attitudinal change generated at Nairobi: *In the sphere of progress for women, attitudes are vital, and world conferences do have an impact upon attitudes: this may not be visible at the time, yet it is nevertheless extremely potent in the long run.*²⁴ Her optimism was not unfounded: soon after the Australian delegation returned from Nairobi, the Office of the Status of Women announced that, as part of the Australian Government's undertaking to interpret the Forward Looking Strategies document for Australian society, a National Agenda for Women was being developed, and Australia-wide consultations with women were being initiated.²⁵

²¹ Giles 1993: 4

²² Giles, 1991: 2

²³ Giles 1985b: 9

²⁴ Giles 1985b: 10

²⁵ OSW 1985: 11 – 12

But in spite of the material successes to emerge from such documents, still there is that mysterious gap between the hope embedded here, and the eventual outcomes in terms of shifting international, national, local and individual thinking about the status or worthiness of women. For example, fifteen years after the Nairobi Conference, the Beijing+5 Conference in 2000 was presented with an overview of progress at the UN system level on a plethora of issues, including women and poverty; the education and training of women; women and health; violence against women; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in power and decision making; institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; human rights of women; women and the media; women and the environment; and the rights of the girl child. Significantly for my argument, the obstacles encountered included are all attitudinal: *the persistence of gaps between global concepts and their translation into practical, country-level strategies to achieve equality between women and men; lack of understanding of gender as a concept or the failure to perceive issues such as poverty, the environment, or HIV/AIDS as having gender dimensions; challenges are also posed by social and traditional environments that might be hostile to notions of women's equality with men, as well as lack of institutional support and political commitment from donor agencies and Governments; poverty, the negative impact of globalization and the persistence of stereotypical attitudes towards the role of women and girls were identified as presenting particular challenges.*²⁶

In summary, then, the reports that emerge from the large international gatherings of women from the 1970s and 80s and 90s are infused with a desire for an imagined future where women take their place alongside men as equal human beings. But the discourses of equality and the gesture towards attitudinal change seem not to deliver, at least, not thoroughly enough. The disappointment that material changes have not delivered such conceptual changes is often palpable.

Clearly, Pat Giles herself openly aspired to create a better world for women and others who experience disadvantage. My argument here is that for Pat Giles and for activist women like her who were prepared to work nationally and internationally within existing institutional structures like trade unions, parliaments and the United Nations, there was simply no public discourse that allowed the expression of the need for *a revolution in thought and ethics* such as Irigaray has more recently articulated. The call to equality was, it seems, as far as they could go. And, as Irigaray argues, rather than demanding a revolution in thought and ethics, the call to equality (on the grounds of 'race' or gender) permits the continuation of a masculinist philosophical system where, under cover of paternalistic generosity, the others, those not-Whites, or those not-men, can be integrated, tolerated, humoured, without any de-throning of the central white male philosophical figure.

Irigaray suggests that if we shift our focus from striving for equality to recognising difference, valuing the one and the one reciprocally, without hierarchy or exclusion, we will feel the reverberations at the level of the symbolic and at the level of the divine.²⁷

²⁶ ECOSOC, 2000b :15

²⁷ Irigaray, 1986

Feminist scholarship and practice-led research in the past decade has shown us how to participate in the revolution of thought and ethics underpinning Irigaray's articulation of the work of sexual difference.²⁸ We can now teach individuals, groups, nations to make the kinds of philosophical shifts necessary for negotiating differences of all kinds with respect for the self and respect for the other.²⁹ The problem now is how we find a space for that manoeuvre to be voiced and to be expressed in public discourse. For Pat Giles and for activist women like her there was no publicly available discourse that allowed the expression of the need for a revolution in thought and ethics such as Irigaray suggests. One can argue that in Australia that space has been created early in 2008 by newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd making his apology to Indigenous Australians on behalf of the nation.³⁰ Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians are claiming that that action has symbolic resonance—and as Irigaray says, we need to bring together the terrestrial and the celestial.

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So the questions that emerge from this thinking include the following: it is really equality that we are seeking? If not, how do we name that condition? Do we say we are seeking recognition of the differences between men and women? Do we say we are seeking for women to be accorded full human status in reciprocal relation to men? Do we say, simply, we want a revolution in thought and ethics that will abolish the philosophical reflex towards othering? Do we say we want a global community built on respect for differences and for similarities? Do we say we want policies and practices encoded in our legislatures that are underpinned with a feminist ethic of reciprocal respect for the self and respect for the other? Do we dare to say that we want a recognition of the connection between the terrestrial and the celestial? Do we dare to publicly call for the conceptualising of a feminine divine? I leave these questions hanging, in the hope that they will begin a conversation on ways to manifest the dreams and desires implicit in much policy formulation.

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²⁸ Hopkins, 2006; Fook 1999, 1996

²⁹ Hopkins, 2007

³⁰ Sydney Morning Herald, 13 February, 2008: 1

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