
Presidential Address

DESIRING CHAOS:
GENDER, DIFFERENCE, AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Cris Mayo

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Symposium has been a key text for thinking about desire, most often with Socrates' account of Diotima presumed to have articulated the best definition. For educators, Diotima's account of the progression of desire from bodies to ideas has provided a way to think about the motivations inherent in learning. But her advocacy of sublimation has also had a chilling effect on thinking about what can be learned and experienced through embodied desire. In this essay, I argue that a discussion of desire that moves us away from real bodies engaged in worldly activities takes away too much of desire's productive force. I return to Aristophanes' story of the androgynes to argue that desire's task is futurity, but not through a sublimation of bodily desire into contemplation of timeless ideas. Rather, desire moves us toward possibility because its action is rooted in the world and in particular bodies. I examine key criticisms of Aristophanes and counter claims that his account of desire is nostalgic and backward looking. I then turn to claims that desire only works through sexual difference and offer a more complex account of the play of difference than is given the work of Luce Irigaray. While Irigaray concentrates on Diotima, I examine her work because it epitomizes work on embodied desire, in her case, heterosexual tension. Finally, I argue that the sexual chaos of new forms of identity and association in gay straight alliances in public schools provide us with a way to think through the embodied movement toward futurity that desire motivates.

Where desire, especially sexual desire, is often seen as pitted against reason and learning, I will argue that there is a long philosophical tradition that understands desire as part of learning in the world. Reconsidering the place of desire or eros in the educational task is especially important now that faith-based programs are being passed off as sex education and educational research is increasingly moving away from the complications of living in bodies and participating in day to day relations with others. Desire, especially bodily desire, gets short shrift in all of these conversations. Particularly when sexuality is framed by curricula, desire is defined as an impulse that will not listen to reason, as the action of hormones, or the selfishness of pleasure over responsibility. But if we look more closely at how desire binds communities and stimulates learning, I think we see that desire's task is futurity. Most importantly we will see that the futurity of desire is rooted in the world, in work, in politics, and in actual physical and emotional relations among people.

Unlike the unchanging Ideas that Diotima encourages Socrates to consider, worldly desire involves shifts, ebbs and flows, and potentially adds to human experience an immediate sense of chaos. Part of the rationale for Diotima's discussion of desire is to move its productive force from disruption to timeless certainty. I am drawn to the educative potential of desire because of its uncertain qualities, as well as its tendency to provide surprising disruptions to categories, identities, and activities, a point I will return to as I use qualitative research to show how these philosophical ideas play out in interactions in public school. Part of my purpose is simply to recentralize the distractions of desire in educational projects because philosophical approaches to desire act as reminders of the place of physical, mortal interactions in our discussions of ethics and responsibility. Another part of my project is to show how, against the tide of policy in public education, students themselves are ethical actors who engage with one another in a context of examining desire. These students show surprising ability to maintain clear ethical vision within the shifting potentials and distractions of desire.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RE-ATTACHMENT

While desire is distracting, it is not a distraction without purposes. I focus on Aristophanes' story of the androgynes from the *Symposium* because it roots desire in bodies in the world and suggests that the dynamic of desire works through remaining unsatisfied. To summarize the story: the androgynes were originally two headed beings who could move either by walking or by cartwheels and reproduced like cicadas. Extremely prideful, they attacked the gods. The gods were reluctant to kill them because the androgynes provided the gods with sacrifices, so Zeus decided to punish them by splitting them in half, making them weaker, doubling their number, and thus making them more profitable to the gods. Zeus had Apollo rearrange their heads and heal their wounds, keeping the navel to remind them of punishment. As the androgynes were overwhelmed by grief for their missing halves, the halves clung together and died. Zeus took pity on them and moved their reproductive organs to the front. For male/female couples, this meant the consolation of reproduction; for male/male couples, this meant they could have sex and then go about the business of life, in other words, work and politics. While Aristophanes acknowledges female/female couples, he has no comment other than to characterize them as "lewd." In his more detailed discussion of male/male couples, Aristophanes opines that they are the highest form of manhood because they engage in public life. As Paul Ludwig argues, because they are not tied by family loyalty or driven by nepotism, they can focus all their energies on the needs of the city, as well as enjoy bodily eros.¹ They experience the intensity of desire, in other words, but their experience of the distraction of desire enables their action in the world because desire ties them to the social world by making them interested in more than private, familial relationships, and thus, they are directed toward politics. As Stanley Rosen puts it, "Although

Aristophanes does not actually say that Eros is just, there can be no doubt that his whole speech is intended as a defense of political justice and peace.²

Aristophanes' speech traces three major ways of thinking about desire. The first desire the androgynes attempt to satisfy is ambition, which motivates them to attempt to overthrow the gods. This first desire is grounded in an attempt to gain certainty and control through the exercise of power. That attempt fails and the gods punish the androgynes for overreaching their mortality in their attempt to move out of the world. Their second desire is nostalgic: they attempt to return to their pre-split condition and fail. In their attempt to return to beginnings they have been forcibly moved beyond, the androgynes neglect the productive potential of the desire that motivates them to make new connections to one another. Bound by old ways that they presume will lead them to certain satisfaction, they die. Their third attempt at desire is the one I am most interested in exploring for its educative potential: the recognition that desire is not desire for a return, but a movement toward possibility. As Rosen explains the dynamic of Aristophanes' story, "In logos as practiced by Eryximachus or Socrates, man rises up to the divine; in mythos the divine descends to man....While Eryximachus is concerned with the human body as a gateway to the body of the cosmos, Aristophanes is concerned with the cosmos for the sake of the human body."³ In what is a reversal of Diotima's story, then, Aristophanes suggests that attempts to control heaven are eventually given up in an attempt to improve earthly existence.

This attempt is no less formidable than the assault on the gods, as the desire the split androgynes are left with continually motivates them, but does not offer satisfaction.

There is no satisfaction in Aristophanes' story because the split androgyne can never reattach itself, it can only try. In other words, desire is constant and dissatisfied. As Plato has Aristophanes explain it, the desire motivating the split androgynes is a desire "attempting to weld together two beings into one."⁴ Desire can only attempt what cannot happen; the androgynes cannot reattach once they are split. Their actions appear backward looking, but they are in fact dealing with a new contingency. The point, in other words, is that desire pushes us to continue to move toward some moving goal. Even as desire's goal remains elusive, it is nonetheless oriented toward something beyond where it first finds itself.

It is likely that Plato intends Socrates provide the fullest account of what eros should be, but because he links desire with the immortality of great ideas, his version of eros maintains the prominence of eros but moves it out of the world. The other interlocutors go in the opposite direction, not arguing for eros itself but for eros as a means to politics—one engages in noble acts to impress one's beloved. Aristophanes gives us, like Socrates, a defense of eros "for its own sake."⁵ Kenneth Dover argues that Aristophanes is "a target for Diotima's

fire” because Aristophanes stresses “the particular and the familiar.”⁶ That is, by drawing on a commonplace form of romanticism, Aristophanes gives the audience of the *Symposium* a place to recognize its own familiar and homey beliefs about desire before Diotima shifts the focus of desire to spirituality and the Good. But Dover misses, I think, the way in which the other half of the now split androgyne is not fully familiar, is not a homelike figure. After the split, there are no more “halves,” there are only beings who try to find their other half, but who cannot. Even if people might agree to have Hephaestus reattach them to their other halves,⁷ that is impossible. Further, after the split, eros is a thing of the world, not a condition the gods can intervene in. Eros provides no completion, only a pull to attempt to connect to another actual, living being whose tasks are worldly. As Ludwig points out, focusing on the male/male couple, Aristophanes argues that these are the people in the world who work, whose focus is not on procreation but rather on creating a state, engaging in actual labor.⁸ Rosen argues that “by making Eros fundamentally sexual, Aristophanes illustrates two inseparable principles of his teaching. Human striving, whether for truth or fame, is essentially physical: the psyche is defined by and depends on the body.”⁹ Even rooted in the body, though, desire eludes a concrete solution, instead offering lovers “riddles.”¹⁰

As a paradox that has an aim but no attainable object, desire, like all paradoxes strives to counter ignorance. Even in its failure, desire continues. Because desire is about what comes next and about the possibilities of other people and their shifting potentials, it is a concept that ties us physically as well as intellectually to others. Clearly I’m reading Aristophanes against Plato’s intention of portraying the task of philosophy as pointing away from bodily pleasure and into spiritually-driven contemplation. As Socrates says in the *Phaedo*,

the lovers of learning understand that philosophy found their soul simply imprisoned in the body and welded to it, and compelled to survey through this as if through prison bars the things that are, not by itself through itself, but wallowing in all ignorance...the danger of this prison came through desire, so that the prisoner himself would be the chief helper in his own imprisonment.¹¹

Socrates disapproves of how desire is a nail that keeps the soul attached to the body, but we might also emphasize how desire links us to the world.

While desire may structure our attempts at recognition and relation, desire is also about tension. Like the inability of the androgynes to reattach, interest sparked by desire impels one to attempt to know another better. But while this encourages an act of close reading of the other, the force of desire also obscures one’s view. While that is potentially frustrating, the gap between attempted understanding and unknowability are also part of desire’s allure. Desire moves us toward recognition, but also gives us an understanding of the

power of secrecy and discretion, partially because part of the energy of desire is about what is only barely beyond understanding. So desire motivates us to move into public relations with others and into relations of recognition, but it also has qualities that are not discernable or that need to remain opaque in order to remain tantalizing and productive. Secrecy, after all, produces as much as it attempts to hide and because of its complications encourages particularly nuanced forms of reading and thinking. As Sissela Bok points out, secrecy “bespeaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines: a capacity that underlies not only secrecy but all thinking, all intention and choice.”¹² What we discern is not just the value of what is held secret, but the inability to fully grasp the secret. Even as we run up against the limits of secrecy, the fact of it draws us further in.

But whether desire is bound up in practices to become known or to remain in some way hidden, desire is about possibility, about what might be. This relationship between desire and futurity is also central to what Judith Butler points out in Alexandre Kojève’s reading of G.W.F. Hegel:

Unsatisfied desire is an absence that circumscribes the kind of presence by which it might relinquish itself as absence. Insofar as it posits itself as a determinate emptiness, i.e., as empty *of* some specific object or Other, it is itself a kind of presence: it is ‘the presence of an absence of reality;’ in effect, this absence “knows” what is missing. It is the tacit knowledge of *anticipation*. The anticipation of fulfillment gives rise to the concrete experience of futurity. Desire thus reveals the essential temporality of human beings.¹³

For Butler, this means that the subject, who is constituted through desire, is also uncertain:

Desire in the form of anticipation (the negation of the present, the desire for the not-yet) reveals the ambiguous “place” of subjectivity, as neither here nor there, but spanning both; anticipation discloses subjectivity as a being projected into time and as a being who projects time.¹⁴

GENDER AND THE “COINCIDENCE OF CONTRARIES”

Some theorists have argued that these possibilities of desire are rooted, not in the chaos of diverse sexual and gendered meanings, but in the tension between male and female. Luc Brisson argues, for instance, that sexual difference and desire is at the heart of ethics and that being in which “contraries coincide,” that is, where beings have both female and male characteristics, often mark the opening moves in cosmologies and ethical systems that structure meaning through differences. As he puts it,

The only way they can represent the origin of the universe, and that of the human and animal worlds, is as a state of indistinction in which all contraries coincide, in particular the male and the female. Out of this state there emerge, painfully and slowly, like so many breaks and rents, the indistinctions that govern reality as we know it in our daily experience.¹⁵

Thus the splitting of the androgynes is the necessary start to making distinctions and thus making judgments. In his argument about the stabilization of these contraries, he suggests that once the chaos of nongender/multiple gender has been sorted out, clear ethical systems can be formed. He argues, like Luce Irigaray, that sexual difference, understood as distinctly separate and different, is necessary for the productive antagonism of desire. But unlike Irigaray, he maintains that the tension of difference stabilizes relations and moves them out of the realm of the divine and closer to human. Once people are able to make key distinctions like gender, they also move into making other conceptual or ethical distinctions, or so his argument goes.

For Irigaray, sexual difference is necessary for the spiritual and ethical power of love. For her, then, the love between men and women provides the clearest path to a mystical sense of sex. She argues that Diotima is most compelling when she examines the divine tension of sexual difference between men and women. She contends that Diotima shows that love:

is the existence or the in-stance of that which stands *between*, that which makes possible the passage between ignorance and knowledge. Between knowledge and reality, there is an intermediary that allows for the encounter and the transmutation or transvaluation between the two. Diotima's dialectic is in at least *four terms*: the here, the two poles of the encounter, and the beyond—but a beyond that never abolishes the here. And so on, indefinitely. The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in a state of becoming. And the mediator of all this is, among other things, or exemplarily, *love*. Never fulfilled, always becoming.¹⁶

Irigaray argues that the “becoming” of desire relies on sexual difference, on the age-old sense that men and women are distinctly different and that between them is an interval or space of tension. That interval is the space of difference and thus the space of desire and possibility.¹⁷ When Diotima turns to a discussion of eros guiding the formation of states and justice, Irigaray says:

Diotima had begun by affirming that the most divine act is “the union of man and woman, a divine affair.” What she asserted at that moment accorded with what she said about the function of love as an intermediary that remains an intermediary, a daimon. It seems that during the course of her speech, she diminishes

somewhat this daimonic, mediumistic function of love, such that it is no longer really a daimon, but an intention, a reduction to the intention, to the teleology of human will, already subjected to a kind of thought with fixed objectives, not an immanent efflorescence of the divine of and in the flesh.¹⁸

But here she freights too much into sexual difference that is defined as difference between men and women. Within and among genders—as well as other forms of difference—there is enough tension, enough provocation, and enough longing to provide the antagonism and yearning for the space between. Irigaray finds civil interactions to be mundane and without the “daimonic mediumistic function” of eros and here, too, I think she is mistaken. Because she has too quickly made eros into a heterosexual sex act, she neglects to see how desire structures, enables, and provides obstacles to social engagements, to the creation of political groups, and maintains the tensions of any coupling, including not just the heterosexual couples on which she focuses.

CHAOTIC IDENTITIES, GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCES, AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Schools are particularly interesting places in which to examine the dynamics of desire as educational practices both incite and frustrate desire. By demanding secrecy from students on a whole range of topics, though certainly centrally by demanding sexual secrecy, schools contribute, in a sidewise and highly problematic way, to the allure of sexuality. Through policies that demand that sexual minority students remain quiet, secrecy begins the difficult creation of oppositional communities, whose members bonds are often improved, but not always, by the need to operate more carefully as protective sub-communities. In visiting one gay straight alliance (GSA)¹⁹ whose existence was being challenged by the central administration, students repeatedly used the word “passion” to describe their attachment to the group and to assert they would not change their name from gay straight alliance to something less obvious like the “Rainbow Club” or the “Social Justice Club.” They did not want to be put in a position of unintentionally remaining secret, they wanted the public face, and were well aware that publicity meant challenge. In addition, they were essentially using what they were saying to bind themselves to one another in a form of intense commitment, even understanding that their stance was generating a certain degree of chaos in the school. The embrace a form of multigendered, multisexualitied chaos, not to the sexual indifference of pre-ethical coinciding contraries is important.

Connected to desire, then, is the passionate yearning for membership and belonging, a yearning that sits in tension with an equally adamant desire not to be seen as a conforming group member. Just as desire for an Other or something outside oneself cannot be satisfied and remains a dynamic longing, the desire to belong is offset by a desire to be distinctive and even remain

unknown. While the students were connecting, there were also ways that the public face of the group was different from the private experiences of its members. As I will show shortly, there are times when the public, non-sexualized, legitimate face of the group is in stark contrast to the quieter side conversations about sex and desire.

Aristophanes' myth marks a founding moment for gender, sexuality, and politics, showing how the chaos of early being became organized into recognizable genders and sexualities and how social organization is enabled by those varieties of identities and attractions. While some critics may argue that the story is backward looking, chaos need not refer back to originary chaos. In contemporary schools we are seeing a way to view new forms of productive sexual and gender chaos. So it may seem like an abrupt shift to go from androgynes as the founding moment of ethics, to gay straight alliances and new complications of desire, these groups show how desire infuses projects aiming at futurity and argue that bodily desire across multiple, varying differences and political desire are intimately linked. Rather than hinging on a simple binary sexual difference, these groups play off myriad identities and recombinations. Some of these interactions raise difficult distinctions among experiences and identities and others illuminate unexpected similarities, but all occur in a framing context of antagonistic and provocative desire intent on organizing to improve schools and communities. Desire infuses their projects, sexual desire for particular others overlaps desire for connection.

At one of the first meetings of a high school GSA, one of the faculty sponsors repeatedly reminded students that the group cannot be about sex, it can only organize around questions of justice. At the same time, one of the members, who was a member of a youth group that does peer sex education, was circulating pamphlets to interested students about sex education, excitedly talking about the overlaps between the GSA and that group and planning with other students, really just out of earshot of the faculty member, to have the groups overlap. The students recognized, in ways that faculty could not, that the group's concern with justice was also a concern with particular bodies, with desires, and with their need for information and practices to improve their lives.

At another meeting of a GSA, just before the meeting started, a group of students were clustered around a magazine featuring a group of scantily clad actors and actresses who play gay people on television. In a group that rarely discusses sex, an out gay young man and a number of young women (some of whom have indicated they have boyfriends but who do not identify as straight and who tend to spend meetings sitting on one another's laps) compared their responses to the pictures. They were not just talking about who was good looking but with whom they would be willing to have sex. There was much commenting on the relative attractiveness of actors of either gender and the conversation was specific as to physical attributes, with young women

expressing interest in women and the young gay man pointing to one actress in appreciation. On the one hand, this is a fairly common way for gay men and straight women to interact, but on the other hand, the occasion was also an opportunity, especially for the young women, for the expression of queer attractions in a social group. The activity, while not part of the official group plan, worked to remind the students that their interests in one another are motivated by bodily concerns as well as justice. Indeed, the bonding that happened around this conversation remained apparent throughout other organizational meetings. In other words, there was something about the immediacy of expressing desire that opened connections between members of different sexualities.

The way desire helps make the link between immediately important issues and forms of group association have also come up in the very terms through which students express their sense of themselves as group members and as people with complex sexualities. At a meeting discussing the gaps in curriculum in high school, students expressed an interest in more information about safer sex practices, including activities that indicate their interest in more than heterosexual intercourse, though previously a number of those speaking had indicated heterosexual identity. In the course of the discussion, a number of women began to edge away from self-identifying as heterosexual and talk about themselves as either undecided or curious about how people do decide. One shifted pronouns “they” to “we” while talking about gay people.

In all of these examples, students combine very specific discussions of desire with the creation of a political space and alliance across what may or may not be differences. Their identities do not resolve into easy categories because those categories are contingent on context and particular relation with other group members. Especially around topics that involve bodies and desires, the groups become excited at the prospect of talking through ideas and pushing their own comfort levels further. Their ideas become urgently tied not only to ideas about school climate but about physical, relational possibilities that their group talk and action open up. As Aristophanes’ story reminds us, desire is a social act, an embodied phenomenon, and a way to organize politics. The antagonisms of politics and the frustrations of desire are closely linked—through each individual’s move back and forth into social relations, looking as much for reflections, confirmations, and disputes of their own qualities, identities, and place as for a chance to engage in the same contentious connections with others. All of these tasks involve welding desire to possibilities in the world, a world made up of the shifting qualities, actual bodies, and a new, productive chaos in relations of gender and sexuality.

NOTES

1. Paul Ludwig, “Eros and Law in the *Symposium*,” <http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/ludwig.htm>.
 2. Stanley Rosen, ed., *Plato’s Symposium*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 121, fn. 5.
 3. Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, 137–138.
 4. Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1988), 191c, 62.
 5. Paul Ludwig, “Politics and Eros in Aristophanes’ Speech: *Symposium* 191E–192A and the Comedies,” *American Journal of Philology* 117 (1996), 547.
 6. K.J. Dover, “Aristophanes’ Speech in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 86 (1966), 50.
 7. Plato, *The Symposium*, 192e, 63.
 8. Paul Ludwig, “Eros and Law in the *Symposium*.”
 9. Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, 140.
 10. Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, 151.
 11. Plato, *Phaedo*,
 12. Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 6.
 13. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 72.
 14. Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 73.
 15. Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 114.
 16. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 21.
 17. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 7–8.
 18. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 29–30.
 19. All of the observations of GSAs were done in Midwestern high schools by the author, between 2004 and 2006.
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