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FROM THE STRAIGHT MIND TO QUEER THEORY

Implications for Political Movement

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I recall the first time I read *Les guérillères*: for a week I was in an ecstasy of rage, savoring the image of a glorious war where, for once, “elles” won. It was 1975, and the American feminist movement was making great strides in abolishing unjust laws. Three years later I was in a huge room packed with people to hear a lecture by Monique Wittig titled “The Straight Mind.” I was as astonished as most of the audience when Wittig dramatically concluded with the now famous phrase: “Lesbians are not women.” People did not quite comprehend what she was saying. Wittig’s mission to eliminate the very concepts of sex and gender, so clear to her and a small group of other French feminist thinkers, made no sense to me. It was only later, when Wittig began to publish her philosophical articles, that we could see the radical implications of that little phrase.

If I begin with these personal memories, it is to remind us of the context in which those articles appeared in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. With a few notable exceptions, American feminists accepted biological sex as a given and sought to alter gender roles to end the oppression of women. At the time, almost nobody was talking about postmodernism; it appeared self-evident that women formed a socially oppressed group; and lesbians were “women-loving women.”¹ Only a few American feminist theorists, such as Shulamith Firestone, dared imagine abolishing sex and gender differences altogether.² At the same time, the gay liberation movement, in collaboration with feminist and socialist thinkers, was articulating a radically anti-assimilationist and anti-essentialist theory of sexuality. In fact, as Gary Lehring notes, “The guiding thread of gay liberation was a rejection of enforced heterosexuality, marriage, traditional gender roles and family arrangements, and sexual privacy—all built upon an understanding of sexual identity as

something other than fixed.”³ It is in such a context that Wittig’s assertion that lesbians are not women takes on meaning. Wittig was at least fifteen years ahead of what would become queer theory. And, like most prophets, Wittig has been often ignored in her own “country,” in this case not France but queer theory.⁴

My goal here is to sketch in broad strokes what links and what separates Wittig’s philosophy from queer theory, while recognizing that the latter includes a number of often conflicting and contradictory strands.⁵ Although the relationship of feminism, gay liberation, and queer theory has been tortuous, it is clear that, as Annamarie Jagose notes, many important queer theorists self-identify as feminists (119). Judith Butler herself declared in a 1993 interview that she considered herself more as a feminist than a queer or gay/lesbian thinker.⁶ As Teresa de Lauretis reminds us, like queer theorists, the majority of feminists hold that gender is not innate but is instead a sociocultural construction.⁷ Wittig’s radical anti-essentialist feminism is explicitly recognized by queer theorists, including Butler, Jagose, Diana Fuss, and others, as a significant influence on their ideas.⁸ Indeed, Jagose affirms that the theories of sexual identities developed in the 1990s incorporated Wittig’s understanding of the power of discourse, the fact that the categories of man and woman are cultural formations, and other aspects of her redefinition of lesbians.⁹

Yet, tellingly, where these and other theorists reject Wittig is at her conclusion that lesbians are not women. On this point, Butler has accused her of autocratic tendencies: “In a self-consciously defiant imperialist strategy, Wittig argues that only by taking up the universal and absolute point of view [of lesbians], effectively lesbianizing the entire world, can the compulsory order of heterosexuality be destroyed.”¹⁰ Jagose, for her part, charges Wittig with both essentializing the lesbian and with placing her as a “third term” in a utopian move that, far from threatening compulsory heterosexuality, reaffirms it.¹¹ Fuss has similarly accused Wittig of that most mortal of sins, essentialism, in her conception of lesbianism.¹²

As influential as many of these readings have been, it is my contention that, in order to differentiate themselves from Wittig and others who had already elaborated a radically anti-essentialist theory of sex, gender, and sexuality, some representatives of queer theory felt obliged to denounce Wittig’s redefinition of lesbianism as itself essentialist. The language of these denunciations is at times striking: for Butler, Wittig “fails to consider the totalitarian consequences of [her] theory of sovereign speech acts”; for Judith Roof, Wittig “tends to reify” rather than refuse gender categories in a theory that “reveals not a liberation but a kind of conservatism focused on power and certainty,” and so on for others.¹³ But a closer look at what Wittig has written shows that her “definition” of the lesbian bears no substantive resemblance to the creature posited by certain critics who

see it as “naively” conceived or as a “third gender” that somehow miraculously escapes the reality of obligatory heterosexuality.¹⁴ That so many female queer theorists impugn this one idea suggests, for me, a rift between their acceptance of many of Wittig’s ideas and their rejection, or misunderstanding, of the materialist foundation upon which those ideas rest. It is through examining her reconception of lesbian that I hope to demonstrate how Wittig both anticipates and differs from many later theorists.¹⁵

A key concept in queer theory is performativity. According to Butler’s definition in *Gender Trouble*, “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender: that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”¹⁶ Long before Butler and others set their sights on performativity, however, Wittig had pushed to its logical conclusions Simone de Beauvoir’s insight that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹⁷ For Wittig, not only gender but also the very categories of sex themselves at all levels—physical, social, psychological—are constructed by a totalitarian regime of heterosexuality. This regime forces, in many instances literally under pain of death, the division of humanity into two and only two sexes/genders through the daily repetition of mental and physical acts. In her critique of such a division, Wittig is clear: for human beings, there is no preexistent human nature. In “The Category of Sex,” Wittig explains with characteristic brevity how women are “heterosexualized” by a system that punishes those who resist the molding of their minds, their bodies, their capacity for thought.¹⁸ Wittig’s explanation resembles Butler’s presentation of performativity, but with the very important difference that the ensemble of habits, actions, gestures, and thoughts that form women as women—and men as men—is, according to Wittig, not only obligatory but imposed with a specific goal: the appropriation by force of more or less one half of humanity by the other.

The category of sex does not exist *a priori*, before all society. And as a category of dominance it cannot be a product of natural dominance, but of the social dominance of women by men, for there is but social dominance. (“Category of Sex,” *SM*, 5; *PS*, 46)

The violence done to those who do not conform to sex and gender norms is a collateral effect of social structures that seek to ensure that “you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be” (“The Straight Mind,” *SM*, 28; *PS*, 72).

Straight social law — its mechanisms and powerful effects — has been labeled “sexage” by Colette Guillaumin and described in detail by her, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Paola Tabet, and other social scientists with whom Wittig worked closely in developing her ideas.¹⁹ For Guillaumin, sexage designates

physical appropriation itself, the relation in which it is the producing material unit of labor power which is appropriated and not just labor power. Called “slavery” [*esclavage*] and “serfdom” [*servage*] (in the feudal economy), this type of relation can be designated by the term *sexage* in the case of the modern domestic economy when it concerns the relations between sex classes [*classes de sexe*].²⁰

This concept, that men as a class appropriate women physically, underlies Wittig’s understanding of heterosexuality. In “Paradigm,” Wittig makes it clear that “heterosexuality is a cultural construct designed to justify the whole system of social domination based on the obligatory reproductive function of women and the appropriation of that reproduction.”²¹ Sanctions against nonheterosexuals exist in order to force collaboration with the division of humans into two, and only two, sexes for exploitative purposes. As Gayle Rubin has also argued, the entire sex/gender system is predicated upon men’s appropriation of women’s (re)productive labors.²² For Wittig, sex is gender, since the latter is only the socially defined means by which the former is imposed upon the human body as a “mark” to justify domination.²³

Wittig is clear about why lesbians represent a model for disrupting the system of *sexage*. Lesbians, for Wittig, refuse “to become or to stay heterosexual,” to enter into or remain in an economic, political, social, or ideological relationship with a man, and are thus “escapees from [their] class in the same way as American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free” (“One Is Not Born a Woman,” *SM*, 20; *PS*, 63).²⁴ This refusal, this resistance to the societal obligation to reproduce the institutions of the heterosexual regime, is performed in and as a series of repeated daily actions that construct lesbians as not-women and not men. If today we put quotation marks around the words “women” and “men,” it is in large measure thanks to Wittig and her colleagues, who in the 1970s put the accent on the obligatory, repetitive material actions that form the (heterosexualized) subject. As early gay liberationists and lesbian feminists emphasized, one can *resist* enacting the social script, resist repeating it as if it were inevitable.

In her early fiction, Wittig seeks to narrate such acts of resistance. Like every totalitarian regime, heterosexuality reacts violently to those who refuse to conform to its laws. Wittig’s fictional lesbians of the 1960s and 1970s are war-

riors, amazons who fight sexist ideologies at risk of their lives. The feminine plural pronoun “elles” in *Les guérillères* includes all those who struggle to eliminate the hierarchical division of humanity into two sexed classes for purposes of domination.²⁵ The thrilling and horrifying war depicted in that novel is less a war of the sexes than a war on the notion of two sexes. If the *guérillères* initially glorify femaleness as a way to rediscover the history of female resistance to heterosexuality (by invoking a rich tapestry of myths and legends or by privileging female nonreproductive sexuality), they soon realize that no part of any body should be valued over any other.²⁶ In the war, they, elles, are joined by any biological male who does not find the call to destroy all vestiges of the sex/gender system too radical. Indeed, it was just that clarion call that so stimulated me when I first read Wittig’s epic novel, at a time when nothing seemed impossible for the freedom fighters of the feminist and lesbigay movements.

The Reagan revolution of 1980 and the rise of the religious right, followed immediately by the AIDS crisis, put an end to that optimism. In the 1980s, Wittig’s lesbians no longer make war in the same way. Wittig’s *Limbo*, the lesbian bar that replaces Dante’s purgatory in *Virgile, non*, is a precarious place, where lesbians must arm themselves for protection and where they are starved on the margins of a heterosexual Hell. These lesbians are outlaw warriors who know they cannot vanquish the regime by force. In a comic scene, Wittig makes fun of the image of a lesbian cowboy who can ride in to save the day. When the character “Wittig” wants to get on a horse, her guide Manastabal is obliged to remind her that “we aren’t in a Western” and that she is in the wrong genre (the French “genre” is a pun, since it means both literary genre and gender).²⁷ In a related vein, Valerie Lewis has noted that the lesbian Quixote of Wittig’s 1985 play *The Constant Journey* sees herself as a heroic amazon who may well be “mad” in her rejection of women’s roles. In both cases, the lesbian characters are literally “outside” heterosexual norms, but not in any easy or “magical” way.²⁸

The “outside”: one aspect of the queer is to reject what is normal and natural in favor of what the straight mind finds monstrous, if not unthinkable. The very word *queer* means, among other things, “bizarre,” “strange,” “grotesque,” “bent,” and “twisted,” and as such has been used as an insult for homosexuals. Sue-Ellen Case, for one, presents *queer* as a menace to the notion of the normal and the natural precisely because it designates whatever is disgusting, monstrous.²⁹ By refusing to become or remain women, lesbians are seen as monsters by a society in which there are only men and women. They cannot be assimilated because they are not, or are no longer, like the others, that is to say, women. Claire Whatling, in turn, notes the metamorphosis of the Wittig character in *Virgile, non*: when “Wittig”

tries to convince the damned souls in Hell that she is like them, she takes off her clothes, but what do the damned souls see? First long hairs, then scales covering her body, and finally her long clitoris, at the sight of which the souls cry “Rape!” Later, “Wittig” learns that terrifying myths of monstrous woman-eating lesbians are used to keep damned souls from escaping Hell. Yet, for the Wittig character, the lesbian point of view—the unthinkable, the monstrous—is here the norm, and it is heterosexuality that is revealed as a literal Hell on earth. There is of course more. According to Whatling, the body in the earlier *The Lesbian Body*, rather than illustrate a single notion of “the lesbian,” shows the separation, multiplicity, contradiction, and fragmentation of lesbian identity into a thousand possible combinations.³⁰ The lovers devour, penetrate, rip apart, and reassemble each other in ways that the straight world, in its normative hypocrisy, finds grotesque. Amid so much fluidity and fragmentation, and with the grotesque violence of the straight world “queered” and turned back on itself, Wittig has opened up a field that many queer theorists have found fertile.

Another productive metaphor for lesbians in Wittig’s works is one that she develops over time: the maroon or runaway slave, the subject that refuses the dominant order and escapes. Guillaumin’s link between serfdom, slavery, and *sexage* may have inspired the metaphor of the runaway for lesbians. The critique of the category of woman by women of color in the 1980s complicated the notion of mass feminist movements. If we compare *Les guérillères*, where there is a triumphant global war against the sexist world, with *Virgile, non*, where the lesbians must escape Hell one by one, we can see, as previously noted, a change over time, a change that is also apparent in her essays. It is especially in such later essays as “On the Social Contract” (1989) and “Homo sum” (1990) that the references to runaway slaves and serfs are most emphatically articulated: “I will say that only by running away from their class can women achieve the social contract (that is, a new one) even if they have to do it like the fugitive serfs, one by one. We are doing it. Lesbians are runaways, fugitive slaves” (“On the Social Contract,” *SM*, 45).³¹ Wittig does not simply conflate race with sex but explores instead the structural similarities of sex-gender and ethno-racial regimes in which “difference” is exacerbated to rationalize domination (“Straight Mind,” *SM*, 29; *PS*, 72). Far from falling into some sort of groundless idealism, Wittig understands that the fugitives who escape win a precarious freedom, for they leave intact the system of slavery. Those who stay in slavery are portrayed as being in Hell in *Virgile, non*, a work, among others, in which Wittig grapples with the reasons why (straight) women do not revolt.

In *Virgile, non*, lesbians serve two functions. First, and in a manner analogous to that of the history of slaves in the United States, they feel the obligation to save as many women as possible, and that is what the hero, Wittig, does with her guide, Manastabal. This is frustrating, and an exasperated Wittig cries that, given the degree of many women's enthrallment, it will take one hundred years to achieve her goal (*VN*, 46). But time is not the only problem: so is space. Put simply, where to go? In contrast with historical slavery, there is no land of freedom; "sex" and its corollary, sexism, exist everywhere in the world. Escaping from Hell is thus obviously a conscious, difficult act that demands a lot of courage. Plunging back into Hell to try to free heterosexual souls, as in *Virgile, non*, proves that, contrary to what Butler has claimed, Wittig does not put lesbians into opposition with heterosexual women.³² For Wittig, it is self-evident that one cannot simply remain in slavery—in the heterosexual regime—and hope to change it from within. In *Virgile, non* the two-headed souls constantly hesitate about leaving Hell, where they "have a total knowledge of the functioning of Hell . . . and have become masters in their fields. On the other hand, they have a total understanding of the mechanisms of domination which have reduced the majority of souls to damnation" (*VN*, 84). Since the Wittig character sees that these souls also have computers (though not the latest models), I cannot but view this passage as referring to those academics and theorists who cannot, for fear of being characterized as "utopian" (as if progressive political thought and action could dispense entirely with some image of something not just "different" but also "better"), think beyond the categories that they at once condemn as oppressive and reiterate as the very stuff of reality.

The second function of lesbians, intimately tied to the first, is to represent an alternative. Lesbians are those who see the heterosexual regime as one of oppression and create physical and mental spaces where one can begin to conceive a new world. In *Les guérillères* they say, "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. . . . Or, failing that, invent" (*LG*, 89). More pointedly, in "The Social Contract," Wittig responds to the accusation of utopianism sometimes directed at her by defending the function of utopianism—wherever it may be "located"—in progressive political thought and action: "If ultimately we are denied a new social order, which therefore can exist only in words, I will find it in myself" ("Category of Sex," *SM*, 45).³³ Interestingly, Butler herself has recently emphasized the necessity of fantasy and imagined possibilities for those rendered "inhuman" within heterosexism.³⁴

In short, and amid all the debates and disagreements, I believe that Wittig

poses a particularly compelling challenge to those queer theorists who, while condemning obligatory heterosexuality, nonetheless continue to think that relationships between men and women can be transformed from within those categories. Jennifer Burwell offers a particularly clear and condensed account of the differences between Wittig's strategies and those of queer theory, writ large:

What differentiates Wittig and queer theory is their understanding of the place and role of lesbian subjectivity: Wittig locates this place *outside* of gender and identifies the role to be that of speaking a language that escapes gender; queer theory locates this place at a "point of systemic failure" *within* gender and identifies the role to be that of dismantling gender by working its weakness from within.³⁵

For Wittig, this queer strategy is itself doomed to failure, since it relies upon the very categories it seeks to displace. Since the system already casts gays and lesbians as "queer" and "monstrous," even as "damned souls" (the term in *Virgile, non* for the oppressed), emphasizing our difference by performing it (however differently) risks merely replicating the roles that society prescribes for us.

Any political movement must have a vision of the future toward which it works, and Wittig's is one of a world without the categories that empower some humans at the expense of others. In this sense, she is, as one might say, very "French" in her universalist vision. However, Wittig takes great care to state that at the present time no one can say what would follow the disappearance of the categories of sex. Since we have all been created as subjects within an oppressive regime, "we know nothing about the reproduction of society outside of its context of exploitation" ("Category of Sex," *SM*, 6; *PS*, 47). "Lesbianism provides for the moment," as Wittig elsewhere argues, "the only social form in which we can live freely" ("One Is Not Born a Woman," *SM*, 20; *PS*, 63). If women, in order to become subjects (and not objects), must destroy the categories of sex to destroy the oppressed class and thus oppression itself, lesbianism is a critical stage because it is an example, one of the few that we have today, of people who are neither women nor men.

Gay men who renounce masculine privileges would be equally able to escape the categories of sex, and Wittig indeed does group them with lesbians in "Paradigm" and in "The Straight Mind," where she states, "If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality" ("Straight Mind," *SM*, 30; *PS*, 73). What is here at stake is not a revolution to substitute a gay or

queer mind for the straight mind but a revolution to eliminate the categories of women and men, which would be inconceivable without the anterior categories of sex that define them. Wittig has been specific on this point: “The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world [which would be as bad as its masculinization] but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language” (“Mark of Gender,” *SM*, 85; *PS*, 136–37).³⁶

Wittig is, in other words, too wise and too modest to describe in detail a world *without* the two sexes. Fictional works like *Les guérillères* and *Virgile, non* present us, however, with several important indications of her vision. Long before queer theory burst on the scene, Wittig thought that we needed a proliferation of sexualities to break with the binarisms of woman/man and hetero/homo. In “Paradigm” she affirms that lesbianism offers another dimension of the human because its definition is not founded on sexual difference (especially reproduction), and she remarks that for lesbians and gay men there are as many sexes as there are individuals (*PS*, 107–8). The refusal of the heterosexual contract opens, that is, all sorts of possibilities. The result would not be, as some have thought, a world *without* sexuality and desire but, on the contrary, as in the Paradise sections of *Virgile, non*, a magnificent opera in which all voices blend or a banquet where each angel prepares the best dishes for everyone’s pleasure (*VN*, 111, 136–38).³⁷

At this point, and as I move toward an impossible conclusion, let me summarize. Wittig anticipates queer theory with her anti-essentialism, her focus on resistance, her ideas on the proliferation of sexual possibilities, and her emphasis on discourses as tools of power. But there are differences that are too important for us to classify her as a queer theorist ahead of her time. While I do not have space here to develop all the criticisms of queer theory proffered by many lesbian feminists, I believe that many contemporary queer theorists have taken a number of Wittig’s key insights in directions that are foreign to her thought. The aspect of queer theory that is arguably at the greatest remove from Wittig’s philosophy is what Louise Turcotte has called queer theory’s “virtual” aspect and what others have called its “ludic” aspect.³⁸ As a materialist who understands the materiality of discourse, Wittig does not believe that the heterosexual regime can be modified or subverted by playing or citing roles differently, inasmuch as these roles are still scripted by that regime. (Butler has responded to earlier criticisms of her work as voluntaristic by distinguishing performance from performativity and by emphasizing the obligatory nature of the latter.)³⁹ Mathieu reminds us that in many queer or postmodern theories the emphasis all too often falls on the cultural, psychological, or symbolic aspects of identity while giving short shrift to the underlying economic, legal, and social institutions that reinforce a hierarchy in which women and

others remain exploited.⁴⁰ Iris Young has cogently argued that as movements of social critique, feminism and queer theory must account not only for “individual experience, subjectivity, and identity, but also [for] social structures” that limit access to the power to express one’s subjectivity.⁴¹

It is the disconnection between a sophisticated theoretical exploration of subjectivities and identity formation and a relatively underdeveloped analysis of the sociopolitical structures underpinning obligatory heterosexuality that frustrated Wittig, among others. For Wittig, if the oppressed think that they can separate the symbolic order from the political and economic orders, they are wrong, for they exist in a continuum (“One Is Not Born a Woman,” *SM*, 57; *PS*, 99). Yet the symbolic order is not totally homologous with those other orders, which are the materialist bases in whose interest the symbolic order is erected and maintained. Wittig insists upon the materiality of language, and her fiction systematically works to suppress the marks of gender in order to rework language, but that does not mean that language is the only materiality. Different levels of discursive structures require different modes of analysis and action. To the extent that queer theory has tended to privilege symbolic over political and economic violence intended to expropriate the labor of women for the benefit of men, it has not gone as far as it might in the struggle to abolish compulsory heterosexuality.

The underdevelopment of queer theory’s analysis of materialism, coupled with its tortuous complication of any notion of an identity politics, renders political movement difficult. As the 2004 election demonstrated, a totalitarian strain of compulsory heterosexuality was used to frighten Americans into the most reactionary position possible. Those who mobilized most effectively against homophobia were largely long-established groups dating from the lesbian/gay/trans politics of the 1970s–1980s. At present, “progressive” political movement seems divided between those who favor assimilation—and consequently focus on such issues as gay marriage, family rights, and acceptance in the military—and those who favor a queering of subjectivities that, they hope, will eventually topple the heteropatriarchy. Some queer theorists have so completely denounced earlier feminist and lesbian/gay movements as “identitarian” that the valuable political tactics the latter developed risk being forgotten.⁴² Butler and Jagose are, however, two queer theorists who have criticized how other queer theorists have deformed feminist thought and literalized performativity as a mode of voluntarism untouched by larger socioeconomic forces.⁴³ While on a theoretical and abstract level I find myself agreeing with many points made by queer theorists, on a political level I believe that some aspects of queer theory can lead to political paralysis. In her

nuanced examination of what is at stake in the current struggle over gay marriage, Butler argues that we cannot take a stand either way without creating unacceptable consequences.⁴⁴ Yet not all unacceptable consequences are equally unacceptable, especially when one is obliged, like the voters in many states in 2004 and 2006, to mark either yes or no on a ballot measure limiting marriage to heterosexuals. Susan Stryker, after noting her excitement at the promise of queer theory in the early 1990s, is here instructive:

A decade later, with another Bush in the White House and another war in the Persian Gulf, it is painfully apparent that the queer revolution of the early 1990s yielded, at best, only fragile and tenuous forms of liberal progress in certain sectors and did not radically transform society.⁴⁵

While a decade is too short to “transform society,” Stryker’s frustration is understandable, when the most visible struggle of the recent past—and present—has been the assimilationist one over gay marriage.

Wittig warned us of the results of any politics that denies the subject and that exalts “difference,” the carnival, and “the ship of fools” (“One Is Not Born a Woman,” *SM*, 56–57; *PS*, 98). This critique, directed at “difference” feminists such as Hélène Cixous, would apply equally to those within queer theory who believe that promulgating “differences” will “make a difference,” in the sense of bringing heteropatriarchy down. In her 1990 essay “Homo sum,” Wittig adds her voice to those of other activists exasperated with a politics that abandons the subject as political actor at the very moment when oppressed peoples are claiming their rights as subjects (*SM*, 57; *PS*, 98). To the extent that queer theory’s deconstructions of the subject and of identity politics inhibit effective political action, it will hamper its potential to transform society. In a recent reexamination of *Gender Trouble* and political action, Butler herself seems to agree that in order for a radical democracy to come into being, the category of the subject (although not a foundational unitary subject) is useful, even necessary, and that we must not only conceive of the possibility of a “livable life” but also arrange for its “institutional support.”⁴⁶ We need, in short, a politics in which one can strive to refuse to play the game, not just aspire to play it another way. That is why I continue to be inspired by Wittig, who in her philosophy and her literary work offers us a vision of humanity beyond any category of sex.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented in French at the conference “Autour de l’oeuvre théorique, politique et littéraire de Monique Wittig” in Paris, June 2001, and published in *Parce que les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes: Autour de l’oeuvre politique, théorique et littéraire de Monique Wittig*, ed. Marie-Hélène Bourcier and Suzette Robichon (Paris: Gaies et Lesbiennes, 2002), 163–77.

1. The phrase is from the Radicalesbians, “The Woman-Identified Woman,” in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 240.
2. See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1970). Firestone contends that women must be freed from biological reproduction as a first step to changing social gender relations.
3. Gary Lehring, “Gay Liberation Movement,” in *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: Garland, 2000), 1:325.
4. After Wittig moved to the United States in 1975, her fictions were more studied and discussed here than in France.
5. In “Contestations of Queer,” chapter 8 of *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), Annamarie Jagose presents a variety of critiques of and responses by queer theorists.
6. Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994): 32–39. I am citing the version at www.theory.org.uk/but-int.htm (accessed May 21, 2001).
7. Teresa de Lauretis, “Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 255–70.
8. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
9. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 56.
10. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 120.
11. Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5–7.
12. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 39–54.
13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 118; Judith Roof, “Lesbians and Lyotard: Legitimation and the Politics of the Name,” in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 62.
14. Jennifer Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 166–67; Butler, *Gender*

- Trouble*, 113. For a rehearsal of the arguments against Wittig's definition of lesbians, see Renate Günther, "Are Lesbians Women? The Relationship between Lesbianism and Feminism in the Work of Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig," in *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction, and Film in France, 1945–1995*, ed. Owen Heathcote, Alex Hughes, and James S. Williams (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 73–90, esp. 80–87.
15. For a more complete and nuanced discussion of these questions, see my "Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism," in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Namascar Shaktini (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 63–86.
 16. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.
 17. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (1953; New York: Vintage, 1974), 301.
 18. Monique Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 1–8. The French translation is "La catégorie de sexe," in *La pensée straight* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 2001), 41–49. When referring to Wittig's essays, I give a short title, followed by the page numbers in *The Straight Mind (SM)* as well as *La pensée straight (PS)*.
 19. Christine Delphy's work was also critical to Wittig's thinking; see Delphy, "Un féminisme matérialiste est possible," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 4 (1982): 51–86.
 20. Colette Guillaumin, "The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature Part I: The Appropriation of Women," in *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 181. All translations of this work are mine.
 21. Monique Wittig, "Paradigm," in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, ed. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 115. This article was not published in the English version of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* but was included in *La pensée straight* as "Paradigmes" (101–9).
 22. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–209.
 23. Didier Eribon's comparison of the "closet," to which gays and others are confined, with the "private sphere," to which women are confined, misses the fact that the enforcement of secrecy and privacy on nonstraights does not have the same economic and social function that the confinement of women has, which is effectively part of a division of labor in which one class exploits the other. Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 102; this work was originally published as *Réflexions sur la question gaie* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).
 24. Wittig and Guillaumin are aware of the perils of comparing women to slaves. Guil-

- laumin is an internationally recognized theorist of race and racial discourses. The comparison is to the struggle to withdraw one's labor from a system that creates sexual and racial differences to justify exploitation; it does not mean, as many seem to think, that race is collapsed into sex per se. I return to this question more fully below.
25. In normative French grammar, as in normative society, the masculine trumps the feminine in the plural; Wittig's use of "elles" thus constitutes a graphic refusal of such normativity and the violence that subtends it.
 26. Monique Wittig, *Les guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon, 1985). The translation was first published by Peter Owen in 1971 in London. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text as *LG*.
 27. Monique Wittig, *Virgile, non* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), 63. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text as *VN*; all translations are mine.
 28. Valerie H. Lewis, "Warriors and Runaways: Monique Wittig's *Le Voyage sans fin*," *Theater Research International* 23 (1998): 200–204. Lewis is the only other critic I have found who has noticed the change from the heroic *guérillères* of 1969 to the runaways of *Voyage* and *Virgile, non*.
 29. Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (1991): 1–20.
 30. Claire Whatling, "Wittig's Monsters: Stretching the Lesbian Reader," *Textual Practice* 11 (1997): 237–48. See also Veronica Hollinger, "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender," *Science Fiction Studies* 26 (1999): 23–40.
 31. Note that the two sentences are separated in the French version (*PS*, 78, 85).
 32. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 127.
 33. This sentence does not appear in the French version published in *PS*.
 34. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216, 218.
 35. Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere*, 168.
 36. The phrase in brackets was added in the French edition and does not appear in the English original.
 37. Two comments here. In the opera scene in *Virgile, non* (110–11), it is clear that the angels help those arriving from Limbo to take their places in the opera and that no one is denied entry into the heavenly city. Wittig's insistence that in her future world the categories of sex would be abolished, but not male human beings, is evidence that Wittig does *not* envision a unisexual world but quite the contrary. As for the feast that is our last vision of paradise in *Virgile, non*, I want to point out the importance of the potluck supper in American lesbian culture. Ever since *Les guérillères*, Wittig has used lists of words to suggest the bountifulness of her utopias: fruits, odors, spices, and so on in *Les guérillères* itself and cooking utensils, musical instruments, birds, herbs, and dishes in *Virgile, non*. The sensuality of these lists is obvious.

38. Louise Turcotte, "La théorie queer ou le règne de la réalité virtuelle," unpublished manuscript sent to the author on January 11, 2000. See Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
39. Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Bodies That Matter*, 223–42.
40. Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "Sex and Gender in Women's Studies and Diverse Cultures," in *Sexualités Américaines: Regards théoriques, réponses institutionnelles* (Tours: Publications des Groupes de Recherches Anglo-Américaines de l'Université François Rabelais de Tours [GRAAT] No. 17, 1997), 27–32.
41. Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," *Ratio* 15 (December 2002): 410–28.
42. Dana Heller's anthology *Cross Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) contains several articles that address certain queer theorists' denunciation of feminism, notably those of Teresa de Lauretis, "Fem/Les Scramble," 42–48; Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Feminist Retro-future," 205–20; and Bonnie Zimmerman, "Confessions of a Lesbian-Feminist," 157–68.
43. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 259–60 n. 13, 175–203; Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 123.
44. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, chap. 5, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual," 102–30.
45. Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ* 10, no. 2 (2004): 213.
46. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 226–27.