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(Re)Reading Monique Wittig: Domination, Utopia, and Polysemy

J. A. Szymanski 

School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, The University of Queensland, Room E306, Forgan Smith Building, St. Lucia QLD 4067, Australia
Corresponding author. Email: josh.szymanski@uq.net.au

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Abstract

This article offers a rereading of Monique Wittig’s philosophical writing on sex, gender, and sexuality against some of the major criticisms that have led to limited engagement with her work. I argue that reorienting our understanding of Wittig’s lesbian-feminism away from notions of sexuality per se enables us to read her in terms of a larger project that takes aim at the primacy of phallogentrism in how we understand subjectivity. In doing so, I establish and situate three themes in her feminism that have remained largely unremarked upon in contemporary philosophical treatments of her work: domination, utopianism, and polysemy. Part of this reorientation also involves taking seriously the place of language in her philosophy and examining the ways in which she textually expresses the “lesbian” in her literature—a facet similarly underexamined. Although the account of Wittig’s philosophy given here is by no means definitive, I aim through this preliminary re-evaluation to provide a richer reading of Wittig’s work against prevailing criticism, demonstrate her continuing relevance to feminist thought, and present further avenues of investigation.

Neither gods nor goddesses; neither masters nor mistresses.

(Wittig, *Paris-la-politique*, quoted in Butler 2007, 520)

[I]n the world we have, is it possible for us—any of us—not to have at least some inferior others? It is a question that needs to be asked now that, in theoretical terms, the affirmation of difference has become almost a new orthodoxy.

(Dollimore 1991, 331)

And we need to think about that: how the restriction of life when heterosexuality remains a presumption can be countered by creating spaces that are looser, freer, not only because you’re not surrounded by what you are not but because you are reminded there are many ways to be.

(Ahmed 2017, 219)

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Does this mean, then, that the better programme for feminism now would be—to minimize “women”? To cope with the oscillations by so downplaying the category that insisting on either differences of identities would become equally untenable? (Riley 1995, 112)

(Re)Reading Wittig

Monique Wittig is best known for her literature. In 1964, her first novel, *L'Opoponax*, won the French literary award, the Prix Médicis (Wittig 1976). Her later works, *Les guérillères* (1969) and *Le corps lesbien* (1973), found similar prominence among feminist and lesbian literary critics (Wittig 1985; 1986).¹ Yet, compared to her intellectual contemporaries (Wittig wrote during the same period as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, and presided on the editorial board of *Questions Féministes*), Wittig's theoretical works on heterosexuality and language have received scarce attention.² Queer and feminist theory demonstrates a complex and often indebted relationship to Wittig's work, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Wittig 1992), yet these essays have largely been met with resistance or passed by in silence. This lack of engagement may be due to Judith Butler's significant, though critical, treatment in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), which has apparently had the final word on Wittig.³ Wittig's theoretical work (and its explication in her literature—or, perhaps, the reverse) remains, furthermore, unfortunately limited due to her early death in 2003. However, I suspect difficulty also arises from simply *engaging* with Wittig's work. As Sandra K. Soto writes:

I want to keep coming back to *The Straight Mind* . . . conveying to students that *the skepticism and disbelief are precisely part of the work* of staying with *The Straight Mind*, that those responses are understandable precisely because Wittig demands so much of us, taking us seriously as she does. (Soto 2007, 538; emphasis mine)

Wittig asks us to challenge our intuitions regarding sexual difference, heterosexuality, and society, and this confrontation can lead one to recoil or misread. In the interest of (re)engaging with an understudied figure, I thus attempt here to contend with that skepticism and disbelief and offer a rereading of Wittig's lesbian-feminist theory against some of her major critics. In this endeavor, I focus on what I see to be three core themes to Wittig's philosophy—domination, utopianism, and polysemy—which inform her feminism and the confrontational means by which it is articulated. In identifying and exploring these interrelated themes, I aim to respond to major critiques (also interrelated) that I believe have obstructed new appreciations of her work.

To begin, in response to criticisms that Wittig essentializes lesbian identity, I argue that Wittig is not explicitly concerned with questions of sexuality, but rather places her term *lesbian* in a critical relation to the phallogocentric basis of subjectivity in domination, as supported by categories of difference and the heterosexual social contract that engenders them. Against criticisms that such a notion must rely on a subjectivity “outside” the hegemony of heterosexism and phallogocentrism, I argue that Wittig's *lesbian* is better understood as a continual process of de- and reconstruction, a *movement toward* (from a marginal position) an idealized social form that Wittig expresses textually. Finally, against criticisms that this process would merely re-enact the phallogocentric structure of a universalized (masculine, becoming *lesbian*) subject, I argue that Wittig's emphasis on *polysemy* (within language and subject/s) suggests, rather, a

simulacrum of phallogocentric universalization and an orientation toward un-fixing subjectivity from monosemic, heterosexist, phallogocentric constraint. That is, Wittig orients toward a reconceptualization of universalized subjectivity through language; a universalization of the “I” that does not determine itself as *the* Subject, that does not establish itself through hierarchicalization nor naturalization.

Part of this rereading will involve an admittedly limited consideration of the intersection between Wittig’s lesbian-feminist theory and her literary works, given the scope of this topic. In the various approaches to Wittig’s work, however, these two strands are often considered only independently—Wittig as *either* a writer *or* a theorist—or only with oblique reference to each other. As Naomi Schor writes: “What Wittig’s critics often fail to take into account in their readings is the centrality of literature in Wittig’s theoretical writings on gender” (Schor 1995, 22).⁴ Yet, in more than one critical treatment, interpretations of Wittig’s theory are contrasted with the supposedly contradictory themes of her literature (or vice versa).⁵ I approach Wittig’s literature only tangentially here, however; pointing out connections with her theory I view to be immediately significant, and drawing upon illuminating analyses already laid out by Jeffner Allen, Diane Chisholm, Karin Cope, Diane Griffith Crowder, and Namascar Shaktini. However, I wish to emphasize the largely unexplored link between Wittig’s theory and her literature, not only because it presents new possibilities of interpretation, but because the unfolding of her theory *through* her literature is central to understanding her political and theoretical project. “If one is to take Wittig on, it is not as an essentializing anti-essentialist (Fuss), or even as an unrepentant metaphysician (Butler), but as a producer of war machines,” a feminist philosopher whose literature *enacts* her philosophy (Schor 1995, 22). To sever Wittig-the-philosopher from Wittig-the-writer is to make impossible grasping the whole of Wittig’s unique lesbian-feminism.⁶

Domination

Perhaps Wittig’s most contentious philosophical contribution is her disavowal of sexual difference as the means to women’s liberation. In “The Category of Sex” Wittig claims: “there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary” (Wittig 1992, 2). That is, Wittig understands sexual difference to be the *result* of women’s oppression, a social mark levied against women by an oppressive system, and therefore not the *cause*. Indeed, “what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor”; that is, a “myth” of Woman (11).⁷ For Wittig, then, women do not experience oppression *because* they are “women,” rather, “women” are sexually differentiated as such *as part of* the system that oppresses them. Through the naturalization of this myth, sexual difference is taken to be a “sensible given” located in “physical features” that themselves have yet *already* been interpreted and marked through a relationship of sexual oppression (11). The distinction between what would ordinarily (within an Anglo-American context) be viewed as biological “sex” and culturally constructed “gender” is thus collapsed for Wittig.⁸ The terms *woman* and *female* denote not naturalistic categories—which would be to buy into the oppressive myth—but are rather *both* culturally constructed markers indicating a *class*. That is, a purely *social* grouping of persons.

In viewing the women’s movement in terms of a class struggle, Wittig orients toward an *abolition* of these classes involved in making these sexual differentiated categories known *as* classes—as *constructed* social oppositions. However, as she writes in *The Straight Mind*, this abolition of sexual difference can occur only through the

simultaneous destruction of “heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression” (Wittig 1992, 20). Lasting change in the lives of women (and queer persons) cannot occur so long as the dominant discourse and social organization of heterosexuality refuses to reflect upon itself. Heterosexuality continues to take its own hegemony and concomitant categories of sex as *given*. Aiming toward disrupting the straight mind and abolishing categories of sex, Wittig turns to the figure of the *lesbian*, who “provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely” (20). Given that “woman” appears as a category only through the operation of a system of oppression (heterosexuality), and thereby exists through a specific social relation to the dominant (class of) “man,” the *lesbian* appears to reject this relation. Indeed, for Wittig, the *lesbian* “is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically” (20).

However, Wittig’s critics argue that her separation of lesbianism from the categories of sexual difference leads to a concerning relationship between homo- and heterosexuality. Butler writes that Wittig’s decisive split between sexualities means that her political strategy involves only “radical departure from heterosexual contracts—namely becoming lesbian or gay,” a position that arises “if one understands all ‘participation’ in heterosexuality to be a repetition and consolidation of heterosexual oppression” (Butler 1990, 121). Diana Fuss argues similarly that a generalization of heterosexual practice and categories as oppressive renders Wittig’s theory “unable to account for heterosexual feminists except to see them as victims of false consciousness” (Fuss 1989, 44). This is echoed by Leo Bersani, who writes: “[For Wittig] It is not that we have been ruled by bad heterosexuals; the need to be identified as heterosexual is already a heterosexist position” (Bersani 1995, 38; see also Butler 1990, 127). For each of these theorists, the underlying criticism operates on Wittig’s supposed conflation between heterosexuality as a *sexual practice* and as an *oppressive ideology*, or “heterosexism.”

The issues presented against her portrayal of heterosexuality furthermore link to a deeper critique of Wittig’s recourse to the *lesbian* as a subversive or disruptive figure: namely, the apparent deployment of *lesbian* as a metaphysical or humanist (and therefore essentialist) category. Such critics assert that although Wittig criticizes the ontology of the natural, unified, heterosexual subject, she merely replaces it with an ontological *lesbian* subject. Butler argues that Wittig takes *lesbian* as a position outside of sex and is therefore able to assume subjecthood, “confirm[ing] rather than contest[ing] the normative promise of humanist ideals” (Butler 1990, 20). Wittig’s distinction between *lesbian* and *woman*, Butler continues, is founded on a defense of “the pregendered ‘person,’ characterized as freedom” (20), a move that implies a presocial status of *lesbian* subjectivity. Along similar lines, Bersani explicitly designates Wittig’s *lesbian* as a “metaphysical category” (Bersani 1995, 44), and this apparent essentializing of *lesbian* leads Fuss to conclude that the term “functions as a transcendental signifier, occupying none other than the place of the Lacanian phallus” (Fuss 1989, 43–44; see also Butler 1990, 127). One of the dangers of Wittig’s theory is thus “not only that she universalizes ‘the’ straight mind” but risks universalizing her own understanding of presocial Being (Butler 1990, 118).

However, these criticisms overlook Wittig’s specific positioning of heterosexuality as a *social contract* linked with the perpetuation and legitimation of phallogentrism.⁹ Wittig outlines *both* systems as predicated on the domination of one social group (women) by another (men) through the material appropriation of women’s bodies and the symbolic appropriation of subjectivity to a (universalized) masculine position.

Wittig's emphasis on domination as a key structural aspect of heterosexuality can be seen to establish an indissoluble connection between heterosexuality and phallocentrism—thus the domination of women *and* nonheterosexuals remains significantly linked for Wittig. Yet, through a focus on heterosexuality as a *social form* that privileges certain structural forms of domination, heterosexuality (as a practiced sexuality) and heterosexism (that dominating mode) are clearly differentiated—it is only the latter that is at stake for Wittig. In this vein, Wittig's *lesbian* can also be understood as a firmly *social* construction: not a *metaphysical* but *political* position that seeks to denaturalize and deconstruct the primacy of domination and ontological sexual difference in the process of subjectification.¹⁰

Calling back to Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex*, Wittig argues that since the masculine occupies the place of the universal, the category of sex is *always* feminine. That is to say, the feminine is the *only* sex, the particular and the relative. To be man/male/masculine is specifically *not* to be sexed, to occupy the universal and the neutral.¹¹ Thus, as Beauvoir writes: "man today represents the positive and the neutral. . . whereas woman is only the negative, the female" (Beauvoir 1974, 455); Wittig rejoins:

Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general. The result is that there are the general and the feminine, or rather, the general and the mark of the feminine. (Wittig 1992, 60–61)

Further, because sex is seen not as a *natural* category but "a political and cultural interpretation of the body" (Butler 1990, 113), sex does not operate with substantive distinction from gender. Sex as a "biological" measure of sexual difference is *also* subsumed under Wittig's critique of gender. Indeed, the *difference* between (natural) sex and (cultural) gender is taken to be part of the process by which systems of women's oppression institute and naturalize themselves. Butler succinctly writes: "gender is built into sex, and sex proves to have been gender from the start" (113). It is in part *through* the identification of woman with sex (as particularity) that man assumes a universal position. Insofar as phallocentric ideology enacts a "conflation of the category of woman with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies," woman is denied access to a subjectivity constructed as *indifferent* to embodied existence (19). Sex as an *attribute* has thus, through phallocentrism, come to take the place of personhood for women. This process is, in fact, essential to the operation of phallocentrism, creating a negative Other against whom both a binarism (subject to other, man to woman) and hierarchy (subject *over* other, man *over* woman) is instituted.¹² The refusal of sex (and gender) then, for Wittig, is a refusal of the phallocentric denial of women's subjectivity.

However, "the primacy of difference" in thought and discourse makes it difficult to question this basis by which sexual difference asserts itself (Wittig 1992, 2). Wittig defines this hegemony in discourse as "the straight mind": the totality of discourses that deploy (heterosexual) categories of sex as *a priori*. Categories of *woman*, *man*, *sex*, and *sexual difference* function as "primitive concepts" and leave a mark on the objects of discourse—*history*, *culture*, *the real*—one that remains unexamined, taken as *given*. Wittig writes:

although it has been accepted in recent years that there is no such thing as nature, that everything is culture, there remains within that culture a core of nature which resists examination, a relationship excluded from the social in analysis. (27)

Insofar as it takes its categories to be *natural*, the straight mind creates a “totalizing interpretation of history,” its concepts are “immediately universalize[d]” and applied to “all societies, all epochs, all individuals” (27). This action, begun at the level of abstract (philosophical) discourse and disseminated through language, is the same operation by which Man assumes the role of an absolute or universal subject. For “the category of sex is a totalitarian one” (8): heterosexuality and its attendant terms, like phallogocentric discourse, seek to universalize and naturalize themselves, to make thought outside such concepts impossible. Thus, Wittig argues, when Claude Lévi-Strauss outlined the exchange of women and its “fundamental” place as the status quo of culture, “he was obviously drawing for us the broad lines of the social contract” (43). It is a social contract “from which women are excluded, a social contract between men” (43): a phallogocentric organization of society. Indeed, for Wittig, this is confirmed by Woman’s place *within* the heterosexual contract: to *be* Woman is to be the dominated, the ruled.

With the assumption garnered by the straight mind that “society cannot function without this exchange,” heterosexuality is exposed as “not only an institution but as *the* social contract, as a political regime” (43). Importantly, Wittig notes that “sexual pleasure and sexual modes are not the question here” (43). Indeed, it should be clear Wittig is not speaking of heterosexuality as a sexual preference, but as a social structure predicated upon a phallogocentric appropriation and domination of women (separate from sexuality *per se*). We have already seen the importance of the *lesbian* as a figure that rejects *both* categories of sex. However, in an earlier essay titled “Paradigm,” Wittig explicitly condemns the difference between homo- and heterosexuality as *also* a naturalizing product of the straight mind:

All categories that conceal and dissimulate this political, economic, ideological order issue from idealist thought that accepts in nature, or by divine will, differences that are given a priori, that are already there before any sociality. The difference between men and women is dependent on this thought. *The difference established between heterosexuality and homosexuality is also dependent on it, even if this difference does not present itself in the same way.* (Wittig 1979, 115; emphasis mine)

Though Wittig is never explicit on this point—at least in her theory—it appears that *anyone* who rejects the heterosexual contract (and its concomitant terms) as natural or eternal may be considered a *lesbian*. Wittigian *lesbian*-ism might be generally understood as the desire for a social relation and organization of society that does not predicate itself upon, nor operate according to, the categories of sexual difference by which (the class of) women are denied full subjectivity.¹³

This analysis of Wittig’s project draws upon what is implicit in her theoretical writings, but her literature makes this position much more explicit. For instance, Diane Griffiin Crowder’s reading of *Les guérillères*—in which a group termed the *elles* wage a war against the universal masculine subject of the *ils*—notes that over the course of the text, the ranks of the *elles* are filled with *any* person “who does not find the call to destroy all vestiges of the sex/gender system too radical,” including defectors from the *ils*. Although these persons take up the collective label of *elles*, there is no indication that this social shift also involves their “becoming” lesbian or gay (Crowder 2007, 493).¹⁴ The openness of Wittig’s *lesbian* is further reinforced by the characters of *Le corps lesbien*, who, despite the title, are never overtly identified by gender or sexuality in the text. As Seth

Clark Silberman notes: “the word *lesbien* [is kept] as an adjective modifying *corps*” indicating its status as a *critical, textual* relation, rather than sexual (Silberman 2007, 470). Instead of condemning men and women who practice heterosexuality, Wittig separates sexual practice from a social contract that “stabilize[s] class oppression as a permanent facet of human nature” (Bersani 1995, 38). Wittig’s supposed exclusion of heterosexual feminists therefore seems like a conclusion drawn by considering *lesbian* only as a sexuality, and not as a political and relational category. *Lesbian* does not necessarily mean homosexual, but rather takes up a critical stance toward phallogentrism and the heterosexual social contract. By considering *lesbian* in this way we can account for not only heterosexual men and women who also take up this stance (they *are lesbians* in this schema), but also those whom Wittig does not view as *lesbians* because they perpetuate systems of difference.¹⁵

Of course, the problem of the straight mind is that it does not describe this situation as a social contract. Rather, as Wittig writes, “it is indeed much simpler to take what I call ‘social contract’ in terms of the status quo, that is, in terms of something that has not changed, will not change” (Wittig 1992, 42). Through the operation of philosophy as a master discourse, legitimating its ontological and categorical systems across *all* discourses, the heterosexual and phallogentric social contract universalizes and naturalizes itself: heterosexuality is presented as *the* obligatory social relationship.¹⁶ Importantly, much as with the operation of phallogentrism, this relationship is hierarchical; both Man and Heterosexual become privileged terms whose status as absolute is achieved by differentiation from and domination over all Others. The *lesbian*, then, takes aim at the current obligatory structuring of society through a de(con)struction of these privileged terms that perpetuate and legitimate a system of domination. Indeed, it is the very denaturalizing history of the term that Wittig appeals to with “lesbian.” For Wittig, Lesbians (referring to the denizens of the isle of Lesbos):

were a living proof that women are not born as the natural servants of men. What’s more, they demonstrated that nonheterosexual societies are conceivable, *that there is no norm for the constitution of society*. . . . Lesbianism is the culture through which we can politically question heterosexual society on its sexual categories, *on the meaning of its institution of domination in general*. (Wittig 1979, 117–18; emphasis mine)

We have already established the straight mind as that which affirms the sexes as presocial, pregiven categories (Wittig 1992, 4). This is understood insofar as phallogentrism seeks to naturalize itself, the categories of sex, and *the dominance of men over women*. As Wittig writes: “This thought based on the primacy of difference is the thought of domination” (4). The category of sex is a category of dominance and, since no dominance between humans can be “natural,” the categories themselves cannot be natural either. Yet categories of sexual difference continue to exist as largely unexamined metaphysical determinants. Woman, for Wittig, continues to be viewed as the presocial *cause* of the heterosexual system of oppression, rather than the *effect* of a *social* system of subjection predicated on the domination of one social group by another. In orienting toward a deconstruction of categories of sexual difference, it is ultimately *domination*, and the ontological status of domination in relations between subjects (as in the philosophies of Hegel, Sartre, and much of the Western philosophical tradition), that Wittig seeks to critique.

We see Wittig's view of sexual categorization as "an ontological concept that deals with the nature of Being" corroborated by the popular discourse of *being* one's gender or sexuality, as Butler points out (Butler 1990, 21; see also Wittig 1992, 76). This understanding "subordinate[s] the notion of gender under identity" and leads to a sense of *being* one's gender "in virtue of his or her sex, psychic sense of self, and various expressions of that psychic self" (Butler 1990, 21–22). This naïve association serves to "unify" the self and maintain that "unity" against an opposite sex, "whose structure is presumed to maintain a parallel but oppositional internal coherence among sex, gender, and desire" (22). Much like the maintenance of the masculine, one *is* one's gender only insofar as one *is not* the opposite gender. To be one's gender *requires* both the construction and negation of the *other*, "a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair" (22).¹⁷ Yet the creation of the different/other is explicitly a process of domination, for "what is the different/other if not the dominated?" (Wittig 1992, 29). To create difference, to produce an *Other*, is an act of expressing power, creating a relation of dominance over another subject so that they are not the *same*, *no longer a subject*. Thus the act of creating difference is an act of the privileged few (who themselves are *not* different), an operation performed and encouraged by the ruling class to institute themselves as *subject* and maintain that position: "the concept of difference ontologically constitutes women into different/others. Men are not different, whites are not different, nor are the masters. But the blacks, as well as the slaves, are" (29). Within specific contexts of Anglo-American culture, White Heterosexual Man assumes the universal, the neutral, and subjugates all Others to claim this position, rendering them *different*.

This close link between relationships of difference and relationships of domination is what leads Wittig to reject difference as a site of political action. Difference "is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination" (29)—difference is a mask of domination. As Bersani suggests, because "antagonism is bound up in the very origins of differential perception" it becomes nigh impossible to consider differences nonantagonistically (Bersani 1995, 40). Being a *lesbian* (adopting *lesbian* as a political category) is thus as much a rejection of domination as the basis for all relations as it is a rejection of Woman and Man. Wittig makes this position clearer when she identifies that sex "does not concern being but relationship" insofar as it is a "political category" that institutes the social contract as heterosexual (Wittig 1992, 5). In this way, *lesbian* itself concerns *relationship*, not *being*. *Lesbian* is placed in opposition to the categories of heterosexuality, not as a third term (which would be to create a new ontology), but to critically evaluate the way domination is expressed and naturalized in and through the heterosexual social contract. The action of *lesbian* is not to "break off the social contract *per se*" but to "break it off as heterosexual" (35). It is to question the sexes, "which [themselves] delineated very narrowly the general design of society" (35). Contrary to the views of her critics, this suggests that Wittig is not appealing to a new ontology but is rather offering a shift in the social contract, however drastic, toward a notion of subjectivity not based on relationships of domination.

In this process of what I am coming to term "*lesbian-ization*"—the critical movement in philosophy and language toward a Wittigian *lesbian*-"ism"—the interrogation of sexual difference starts early in the history of philosophical discourse. Wittig traces the origins of the "status quo" to Aristotle's *Politics* and establishment of categories of opposition, themselves insinuated into "all mental categories" with "dialectical thought (or thought of differences)" as their champion (43). The introduction of duality in Aristotelian thought, following the Pythagoreans, involved a mixing of conceptual

oppositions with ethical concepts: “terms of judgement and evaluation” (50). There followed a transposition of conceptual opposition into a metaphysical dimension: the ethical terms modified the meaning of the technical terms, and hierarchy accompanied division. The category of the One—expressed in language by “I”—ascended to a dominant position with the signifiers Male, light, good. All Others are accorded the status of non-Being and the position of dominated. The series of oppositions thus rests on a metaphysical connotation—Being or non-Being—that dialectics operates upon (51). We can see this connotation clearly played out in Hegel and, later, Marxism that, despite its attempt to historicize metaphysical opposition into political conflict, remained for Wittig “a prisoner of the metaphysical series” (51).¹⁸

Wittig’s questioning of dialectics thus proceeds in interrogating it “in relation to its terms of opposition as principles and also in its functioning” (52): that is, in bringing to light the jump from conceptual to ontological opposition, and questioning the *givenness* of this oppositionality, of difference. Accordingly, the struggle for women (as a class) is to cast off the assertion of metaphysical difference, to question the categories of One and Other *as categories*. Naomi Schor’s discussion of the universal and particular echoes Wittig’s claims. Difference is understood as a result of sociopolitical discrimination, by which the universal ascends to its seat in establishing the particularity of others:

what is significant is not that particularity is puffed up into universality or even that universality depletes particularity; it is that what appears as a prior cause (i.e., particularity) is in fact a subsequent effect, it is that the very opposition between the universal and the particular is driven by a distinction that is embedded in the social. (Schor 1995, 9–10)

Schor and Wittig point out that constructed categories of Man and Woman have been naturalized to legitimate the domination of the class of women, but further, that the very terms and processes of domination have been ascribed metaphysical status through an association with Being, such that it becomes the *only* way subjects, and therefore society, can be constructed. Wittig’s *lesbian*, and indeed her overall project, is recognition of Other-as-subject, a destruction of domination as a necessary dialectical process. *Lesbian* politically emerges in response to this process, exposing and undermining the way domination has posed itself as the natural constitution of society. Wittig’s *lesbian* thus recalls Elizabeth Grosz’s refiguration of desire *beyond* phallogocentric systems of control, as “a way of levelling, of flattening the hierarchical relations between ideas and things, qualities and entities . . . the male over the female, the straight over the ‘bent’” (Grosz 1995, 81). As with the figure(s) of the *lesbian* itself, this deconstructive political work most starkly appears in Wittig’s literature and its operations on language itself. For instance, we can turn to Wittig’s linguistic *lesbian*-ization of bodies (and subjects) to rearticulate them without reference to phallic signification.¹⁹

Jeffner Allen, in her reading of *Le corps lesbien*, writes that the recognition of phallic control over language leads to “the decision of each female to determine the language, or languages, she will speak” (Allen 1988, 112). This decision takes place within “a lesbian writing whose power imbues a subjectivity, *j/e*, the lesbian” that overturns the expectations of dominating discourse (112)—such as the fragmentation of women’s bodies. This moment from *Le corps lesbien* is indicative of Wittig’s approach to language:

Your whole body is in fragments here . . . I gather you up piece by piece. I reassemble you . . . I speak to you. I am seized by vomiting, I choke, I shriek, I

speak to you, *I* yearn for you with such marvelous strength that all of a sudden the pieces fall together. . . . (Wittig 1986, 113–14)²⁰

Allen argues that this linguistic work enacts “a shift in what *is* language [emphasis mine]” (Allen 1988, 113). Other critics have identified Wittig’s writing as a textual violence that works within language, restructuring through “reappropriation, displacement, and redirection of dominant cultural themes, concepts, practices, and literary texts” (Cope 1991, 80). Thus, as Wittig writes in *Les guérillères*: “let those who call for a new language first learn violence. They say, let those who want to change the world first seize all the rifles” (Wittig 1985, 85). The warriors of *Les guérillères* understand the restriction of subjectivity through language, and thus the need to take up a violent, deconstructive (*lesbian*) position against phallo-linguistic domination. In their war against phallocentrism, the *elles* “refuse henceforward to speak this language. . . to pronounce the names of possession and non-possession,” yet shunning a dominating mode of subjectivity such that “If I take over the world, let it be to dispossess myself of it immediately” (107). In deconstructing the phallic hold on language, the *elles* do not seek to continue the mode of domination under a new ontological subjectivity, but instead “to forge new links between myself and the world” (107).²¹

Wittig’s assault also appears in the “narrator” of *Le corps lesbien, j/e*. Her splitting of the *I* (*j/e*) enacts a literal violence on the word such that distances from the universalized masculine that underlies the “neutral” *I* (*je*). Importantly, Karin Cope notes: “[*j/e*] does not name one gender or the other or even some kind of androgyny” (Cope 1991, 82). Rather, *j/e* reminds us that the universal—Being, subjectivity, the “I”—does not designate or belong to a single sex or gender, contrary to the efforts of phallocentrism to disguise this fact. This critique continues in the *textual* body of *Le corps lesbien*, foregrounded by the blocks of physiology that interrupt the “narrative” at regular intervals. The “defamiliarizing morphology” of these pages serves to elaborate a new organization of the body (politic) that does not take the phallus (both literal and figurative) as its center (Chisholm 1993, 197). Dianne Chisholm writes:

While the female body is all there, it is not organized around the genitals. The lesbian body is not exclusively or specifically sexual, and its anatomized, verbal figure presents no specular object for imaginary manipulation, penetration, or mutilation. (197)

In this way, the *lesbian* body is not specifically female, nor does it allow itself to be reabsorbed into a heterosexual or phallogenic structure. Presented as such, *le corps lesbien* resists both the sexed body of Woman and the sexed body politic of the heterosexual contract, organized as they both are in relation to the primacy of the phallus—it resists domination.²² By commandeering the linguistic tools of domination and violently reshaping them, Wittig seeks to recast the social body; a reformation of subjectivity at the conceptual level (the body politic) consequently expressed upon the real (body politics). Thus, the *lesbian* body is “an *anti-body*” (Chisholm 1993, 202), producing a rupture in discourse (via language) “away from sex as what determines what one is. . . so that one may write [or speak or *be*] other than according to their ontological constraints” (Cope 1991, 82–83). As with her theory, Wittig’s aim in her literature is to critique the construction of subjectivity as domination.

Utopianism

Undoubtedly there remains a certain utopianism in Wittig's work, and the articulation of utopian possibilities likely contributes to criticisms that Wittig advocates a lesbian separatism; that she idealizes the status of *lesbian* as somehow *outside* the heterosexual social contract and, as a result, the *lesbian* emerges in reference to a subject *prior* to language and the social.²³ Butler notes such criticisms rest upon a normative dispute "over whether there is a retrievable sexuality either 'before' or 'outside' the law" (Butler 1990, 28). In asserting a "before" or "after" of the law, one articulates the possibility of a presently subversive sexuality that somehow escapes heterophallic hegemony. This results in a "utopian notion of sexuality freed from heterosexual constructs," which fails to acknowledge the ways in which heterosexism still operates upon women even within a "liberated" heterosexuality or lesbianism (29; 156–57, note 53). Fuss similarly asks if "there [can] be such a thing as a 'free space' in a strict anti-essentialist view" such as Wittig's, and "whether, as a social construction, lesbianism is not also somehow 'obligatory' or 'learned,' rather than freely chosen" (Fuss 1989, 43). Butler continues:

the characterization of female [or lesbian] sexuality as radically distinct from a phallic organization of sexuality remains problematic. . . . [I]s specifically feminine pleasure "outside" of culture as its prehistory or as its utopian future? If so, of what use is such a notion for negotiating contemporary struggles of sexuality within the terms of its construction? (Butler 1990, 30)

We should recall that Wittig does not argue for a "specifically feminine pleasure" but that the hegemonic form of (phallic) subjectivity that bases itself upon difference (and thus domination) is an unexamined part of society that must be resisted. As I have argued, Wittig's *lesbian* does not necessarily resort to a metaphysical or humanist position but can be understood as a critical stance taken up toward the heterophallic (that is, dominating) organization of subjectification and intersubjectivity, in the interest of deconstructing such structures. I would suggest that Wittig's *lesbian*, itself a process of critique, can be understood not as taking a utopian sexual position as starting point or end goal, but as a "process-as-utopia," in which the textual realities of Wittig's literature articulate possible utopias subsequently worked toward through a continual process of de- and reconstruction.²⁴

The *lesbian* as process does not find itself *outside* the social but has, in Wittig's terms, "run away . . . partially and precariously" and must continually work against full (re)assimilation into the terms and structures of the heterosexual social contract (Wittig 1992, 47). Despite her assertion that: "[Lesbians] are escapees from our class in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free" (20), this "escape" is neither totalizing nor permanent.²⁵ As Crowder writes: "the fugitives who escape win a precarious freedom, for they leave intact the system of slavery" (Crowder 2007, 494). For such runaways there is no haven to escape *to*; they live with constant risk of re-enlistment under the terms of heterosexuality and indeed *must* re-enlist themselves should they wish to remain intelligible to (heterosexual) society.²⁶ Those discourses that express the straight mind deny subjectivity to those outside its narrow conception and who undermine its universality: "you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be" (Wittig 1992, 28). The hegemony of heterosexuality means that persons must either participate in the hommo-sexual economy and system of

domination—for “what does women being exchanged mean if not that they are dominated” (30–31)—or they must forsake all claim to “cultural intelligibility” (Butler 1990, 17).

In recognizing the processual character of Wittig’s *lesbian*, critiques of separatism must thus rely on the assertion of an underlying lesbian-humanism in her work. Linda Zerilli writes:

Readings of Wittig which label her a separatist . . . acknowledge only to circumscribe the radical and deconstructive power of her work within a critique of her “humanism” . . . by reading Wittig as a separatist it becomes far easier to associate her with the kind of humanism that feminist critics would reject. (Zerilli 1990, 161–62)

However, Wittig’s anti-essentialist critique of the division of sex makes it clear the *lesbian* refusal of domination comes not through reference to a presocial subjectivity free of heterosexuality. Further, such views ignore Wittig’s own recognition that the heterosexual social contract continually reproduces itself in all areas of social life (Wittig 1992, 39). As I have argued, *lesbian* is not a naively conceived “third gender” (Butler 1990, 19), nor does it assume to exist miraculously free of influence from heterophallic structures of signification. If the *lesbian* runaway is “outside” heterosexual norms, it is “not in any easy or ‘magical’ way” (Crowder 2007, 493).²⁷ It represents a *process* as opposed to a clean break; a crucial stage (perhaps never-ending) in working toward a new social contract “without categories that empower some humans at the expense of others” (496). Just as Butler asserts that the category of Woman must be read as “a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (Butler 1990, 33), this characterization might be extended to the Wittigian *lesbian*. Its existence as a *critically* oriented political position serves not to sediment a particular subjective position (pre- or postheterosexuality), but rather to engage (violently) with heterophallic signifying and subjectifying structures, in the interest of denaturalizing and deconstructing such systems of meaning-making. *Lesbian* is thus understood not to imply a complete break from the dominant subjectifying structures—as if it could exist completely outside the terms of heterosexuality—but exists in a critical deconstructive relationality with those subjectifying systems at the limits of which it exists.²⁸

Despite establishing a distance between Wittig’s *lesbian* and a pre-/postheterosexual subject position, it is important to recognize that Wittig’s lesbian-feminist vision remains utopian. The *lesbian* societies of *Le corps lesbien* and *Les guérillères* depict peoples and communities who exist beyond categorization by sex/gender/sexuality—they are clearly postsex worlds (though, notably, this does not imply they are in any sense free of conflict, difference, and struggle—both at the subjective and intersubjective levels). Beyond questions of whether a society *beyond* (hetero)sexual classification is *desirable*, there remains a strong inclination that such a society may not even be *possible*. Feminist utopias have, for some time, fallen out of fashion in the face of an overwhelming symbolic hegemony of heterophallic structures and, perhaps more crucially, important questions of political practicality.

Yet, despite these concerns, Wittig reminds us that the history of political philosophy is rife with utopian elaborations and directions. Indeed, when ancient philosophers deliberated on government and the ideal state, there was always a utopian dimension (and limitation) to their elaborations (Wittig 1992, 36). Wittig sees in Plato’s *Republic* this struggle toward utopianism in an exchange between Socrates and Glaucon:

GLAUCON: But the city whose foundations we have been describing has its being only in words; there is no spot on earth where it exists.

SOCRATES: No; but it is laid up in heaven as a pattern for him who wills to see, and seeing, to found that city in himself. Whether it exists anywhere, or ever will exist, is no matter. (36–37)

As a political and deconstructive orientation, *lesbian* society might be seen, like Socrates's city, as a possibility to be embodied and lived *toward*, rather than concretely *built* or *founded*. In parallel, then, just as *lesbian* itself is seen as a *process*, so too should this utopia.

We had previously noted the utopianism of *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien*, and on further examination we can see that the worlds presented therein are also processual. In *Les guérillères*, the text's *modus operandi* is (literally) symbolized in the figure of a circle (appearing alone on a page three times throughout). The text's chronological end—the establishment of a society of *elles* following the war with the *ils*—appears as the *start* of the text's action and narrative. *Elles* of the text's beginning have succeeded in tearing down the social hegemony of the *ils* and now “make [their] way across a labyrinth of a dead culture of ancient signs, of representations” (Wittig 2005a, 41). By the text's narrative end we have come to the chronological beginning: *elles* prosecuting their war against *ils*. The intermediate sections of the text vacillate between these two textual poles (often including sections whose ambiguity might chronologically align them with either). References are made to the war that has yet to take place narratively (but already occurred chronologically) and descriptions are given of “the modification of naïve conceptions the *guérillères* have such as they were just after the war” (42), which is to say, the narrative start of the text but its chronological end. The narrative action of the novel also performs this cyclicity, as Blencowe argues (Blencowe 2011, 17). Battles within the text are not cast as “wins” or “losses” but are rather viewed as transformative for their participants; thus, though the novel narratively ends with “peace,” such stability is not conclusive. The text can thus be read back to front, or front to back, but in either instance “turns on itself to rejoin” at the opposite end (Wittig 2005a, 41), indicating a utopianism that describes not an end goal to be finally reached, but a de/reconstructive cycle. In this way, the utopianism of Wittig's “utopia” is perpetual change itself. Blencowe writes:

Wittig's social constructivism is not, then, simply the denial of given-ness and necessary permanence; it is also a political and ethical affirmation of the construction work *itself*, becoming, as its own end. (Blencowe 2011, 17)

An emphasis on process, cyclicity, and becoming also appears in *Le corps lesbien*, whose *j/e* and *tu* act out their *lesbian* intersubjectivity through a vacillation of destruction and rebirth, life and death. In a stark counterpart to the desire of heterophallic domination, which leaves its Other dead in the wake of the intersubjective encounter, “when the lovers of *The Lesbian Body* kill, they resuscitate” (Wittig 2005b, 47). The process of utopian *lesbian*-ization (of discourse, language, thought, of subject and self) mirrors this lack of closure. *Lesbian* *proceeds*, but not (linearly) toward an end state. Deconstruction is followed by reconstruction (and so on in turn) because speaking writing, or being *desire*, *j/e*, or *lesbian* in the social contract we have now means suffering what Cope calls “contamination by other discursive mobilizations” (Cope 1991, 90).

Cope continues, the textual bodies of Wittig's work are war machines and "the battle (*corps à corps*) to which it enjoins you is endless and never pure" (90). One coup must be followed by another.

What we find in this literary exemplification of *process* is the emphasis on *language* and the creation of *textual* worlds. The utopian worlds imagined by Wittig in *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* find "no spot on earth where [they] exist," yet are built up *textually* and *linguistically* to indicate social-subjective possibilities. As Allen argues, "Wittig claims poetry as a catalyst for transformation in women's lives. . . [she is] a poet of desire and hope" (Allen 1988, 113). In the symbolic prohibition of nonheterosexual society, Wittig's literature develops for us *textual* worlds in which the idealism of the *lesbian*—the utopia of nondominating subjectivity—is played out and becomes possible. In this way, Wittig's literature "speaks the fortunes of a people in such a way that that fortune might be real" (107). Or, in Chisholm's words, the textual body of Wittig's work does not come to represent a *real* physical or political body (separate from the current social contract), but rather "*acts* as a body-metaphor: a *cat-achresis*" to create a radically different *textual* world (Chisholm 1993, 204). Thus, responding in kind with Socrates to those who bemoan the impossibility of such utopian procession, Wittig writes: "Then I will stay with Socrates's view and also Glaucon's: If we are ultimately denied a new social order, which therefore can exist only in words, I will find it in myself" (Wittig 1992, 45). Wittig's utopianism is neither naïve, nor easy; the work of it is the point.

Polysemy

Thus we come to the third major theme of Wittig's work: her focus on polysemy within language and the importance of the free elaboration of meaning within individual subjectivity as part of the *lesbian* gesture.²⁹ The efficacy of this gesture remains suspect, however, for Wittig's critics. Butler writes that Wittig's split between homo- and heterosexuality "replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself characterizes as the divisive philosophical gesture of the straight mind" (Butler 1990, 121).³⁰ Butler goes on to assert that lesbianism, even as a "full-scale refusal of heterosexuality. . . constitutes an engagement and, ultimately, a radical dependence on the very terms lesbianism purports to transcend" (124; see also Fuss 1989, 40). Blencowe provides a similar critique in different terms, questioning the viability of the Wittigian *lesbian* as a form of *negative* critique, "in the sense of being a critique that sets itself up in *opposition* to its target" and thereby grounding the term *in* that oppositionality (Blencowe 2011, 9).

Wittig's process of working toward changes in the social contract, however, takes seriously the question of individual subjectivity (as opposed to focusing solely on "class" consciousness) to *avoid* reinstating the very structure of oppression she is working against. The movement away from categories of sexual difference and domination comes because of a plurality of meaning opened up to the individual subject, allowing for an elaboration of the self beyond the closure of meaning insisted upon by heterophallic system of categorization. For Wittig, this is achieved through an elaboration of subjectivity at the level of a violence performed on language, such that one textually generates a simulacrum of a universal subject without disinvesting such an elaboration of its particularity. To act, write, speak, and live *lesbian* is to make one's point of view appear as both universal *and* particular.

Given what we have seen of Wittig thus far, Cope is correct in asserting that *lesbian* is "not a question of 'achieving domination' in the world, of remaking the old 'universal'

subject into a new improved universal lesbian subject” (Cope 1991, 79). Integral to understanding this shift in “universal” subject(s), however, is Cope’s further assessment that *lesbian* is “a dispersal and differentiation of subjectivity, of multiple kinds and occasions of revolt against the status quo” (79). This status quo, as we have seen, is a naturalizing and self-justifying social-symbolic system, predicated on the domination of and denial of full subjectivity to certain social classes at the gain of others. Heterophallic domination and denial proceed not only through material means (the control of women’s bodies, sexual violence, medical and legal discourses, and so on), but also through a constriction of the possible meanings one is permitted to articulate (in a culturally intelligible manner) in and through oneself *as* a subject. This focus is not a new one within the history of feminism. It describes the continuing tension between the idealized sign of Woman as (re)inscribed through a heteronormative and phallogocentric system, and the individual experiences of the class of women (and those *excluded* from that class) and understandings of themselves *as* full subjects. Wittig’s materialist understanding of women as a class is tempered by an emphasis on the individual subject in her work. This dual focus results in a double movement toward effecting lasting social change. On the one hand, class consciousness, more than alienated individuals, is required to form real subjects (Wittig 1992, 16–19). On the other hand, recognition and affirmation of individual subjectivity is necessary for real class struggle and transformation to occur, as “one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression)” (16). This realization, like the rest of Wittig’s work, happens on the level of language, with a focus on pronouns.³¹

The significance of the personal pronoun, for Wittig, is that it lays claim to the universal: “For each time I say ‘I,’ I reorganize the world from my point of view and through abstraction I lay claim to universality” (Wittig 1992, 81). It is the very speaking of “I” that posits the speaker as an *absolute subject*. However, given that under phallogocentrism, “the universal is coextensive with the masculine” it means that “woman has been the victim of a veritable universal theft” (Schor 1995, 23). As a result, while Woman speaks “I,” she is stripped of her claim to subjectivity and forced to enter into language “in a crablike way, particularizing themselves and apologizing profusely” (Wittig 1992, 81). The experience of speaking in a language that forbids your speaking, “to be poisoned by a language not one’s own,” is not a “psychological” or “individual” dilemma; neither is the *difference* one attempts to circumvent between that language that imposes itself and the language of the self one seeks to speak a mere matter of “autobiographical confession” (Allen 1988, 113). Woman is deprived of the power of language to construct oneself as subject, and subsequently denied any claim to abstract, philosophical, and political discourse that shapes the social. Emphasizing the necessity of each subject to be able to speak themselves, to assume subjectivity through and in language and in so doing create their own language, breaks down binarism and oppositionality by opening the field of possible meanings available to subjects.³² The class of women, then, must reclaim their right to the position of speaking subject “and overthrow both the category of sex and the system of compulsory heterosexuality” that denies them that right (Butler 1990, 115). This overthrow, however, cannot take place through the current linguistic modes through which oppression is reinforced. Discourse functions oppressively by requiring that the speaking subject participate in the terms of oppression to speak—that they “take for granted the speaking subject’s own impossibility or unintelligibility” (116). To speak the language of the system, then, is to be deprived of the ability to speak as subject.

Thus, for Wittig, articulating individual subjectivities must come through a violent transformation of language freed from the shackles of difference such that “any form of scriptural specificity, including a homosexual one, is rejected” (Schor 1995, 24).³³ It is for this reason that Wittig’s three major novels focus on a transformation of pronouns (to an increasing degree of intensity). In *L’Opoponax*, the formation of the protagonist’s subjectivity through language is subverted in the novel’s use of “one” (*on*), creating a textual reality where the ungendered narrator (and thus reader) comes into conflict with heterosexist discourse.³⁴ *On* is transformed to an “I” (a *j/e?*) only in the final moments of the novel through the mal-appropriation of (masculine) poetry to express the narrator’s (*lesbian*) desire for a peer.³⁵ In *Les guérillères*, the (feminine) third-person plural *elles* is universalized against the (masculine and neutral) *ils* to attack the “neutrality” of “he-they.” And in *Le corps lesbien*, *je* is split to enact a nongendered (*lesbian*) subject and *j/e*’s cyclical, nondominating (*lesbian*), relation to *tu*. In each of these instances, the subject(s) constructed through re-articulation of the personal pronoun is one that strives to describe itself beyond the calcifications of meaning that arise through heterophallic appropriation of universalizing language. The effort at “universalization” serves to undermine the “naturalness” of the masculine/neutral/universal and, in doing so, open the possibilities of articulating oneself as a subject *without* necessary recourse to heterophallic implications of meaning. This is an articulation that can (and should) be performed by *all* individuals, regardless of their position within the closed system of meaning generated by the classes of sex (and their concomitant categories). Thus, the theoretical-political work of revealing the classes of sex *as classes* is supplemented by the *textual* work of deconstructing heterophallic appropriation of language, and pluralizing language (subjectivities) beyond the restrictions on meaning imposed by heterophallic signifying structures.

Wittig’s emphasis on pluralization—as opposed to re-inscription of hierarchy—within *lesbian* results in what Cope describes as “a form of discursive insurgency”: a desire for legitimacy (subjectivity), but not by means of silencing other subjectivities, “other discursive modalities” (Cope 1991, 80). The *lesbian* is not instituting a new hegemony: “it is not in the business of quelling oppositions, of controlling or subtracting from discourse the numbers and sorts of things that may be said” (80). We see this clearly at play in *Le corps lesbien*. *J/e* and *tu* always remain interchangeable and multiple: “There is no hierarchy from ‘I’ to ‘you’ which is its same. . . . One could consider that in each fragment they are different protagonists” (Wittig 2005b, 47). This plurality reiterates in *Le corps lesbien*’s and *Les guérillères*’ listed presentations of the *lesbian* body and the names of *lesbian* warriors, in which we find a “proliferation of images, in excess,” a “polymorphous symbolism” (Chisholm 1993, 199), but no ultimate member around whom others are hierarchized. The *lesbian* is that flattening of hierarchy, a refusal of domination, a refusal of *one meaning*, of *one subject* (phallogocentric and heterosexist), and of the subjugation, denial, and silencing of all others. *Lesbian-ization*, like language, is multiplicative, generative; it “confers on meaning its full meaning. . . . bringing[ing] out in most cases—rather than one meaning—polysemy” (Wittig 1992, 67).³⁶

Maintaining polysemy is an integral consideration for Wittig in the articulation of new subjectivities (and in affording these articulations both a universality *and* particularity)—being reduced to one meaning means to be subjugated again under a category of difference already established by dominant discourse. Similarly, to *enforce* or *privilege* only one meaning—that is, to claim universality as *only* one’s own—is to restrict language and (possible) subjects in the same manner as heterophallic discourse. Wittig’s “subject” is not a return to “an ontological right of speech” or a “pre-discursive fiction”

(Zerilli 1990, 162). Rather, her use of the universal functions as “a simulacrum of [phallic] Being and the [masculine] universal” that serves to effect a “radical decentering of the subject as it has been conceptualized by the straight mind” (162). Maintaining polysemy thus proceeds through a process of universalizing the meaning(s) of the particularized individual, or what Wittig refers to as “the minority point of view,” *against* the dominant form of universalization.³⁷ Polysemy, acted out on the practical level of language, is also to be undertaken at the conceptual level: “one must assume both a particular *and* a universal point of view . . . That is, one must work to reach the general, even when starting from an individual or from a specific point of view” (Wittig 1992, 67). Importantly, though, the universalization of a minority point of view “does not pretend to describe anyone else’s perspective and interests” (Butler 2007, 521). To “universalize” the minority position is not to establish a new hegemony. The universal subject of the minority position serves to undermine the dominant subjectivity, but the recognition of plurality on the level of polysemy means that each individual lays claim to subjectivity—the universal—in their own way, such that “there speaks not one for all, but each for herself” (Allen 1988, 108). The minority point of view, universalized in language, “effectively assaults the taken-for-granted conceptualization of things,” bringing about a new textual reality, “and, in that positing, helps facilitate its possibility” (Butler 2007, 521). Like Pascal’s circle, this new universalism does not place any one subjectivity at its center—it *has no* center, and its circumference, the limit placed on meaning, is infinite—*unlimited*.

Difference (Again)?

The rereading of Wittig’s work through themes of domination, utopia, and polysemy presented here does not mean to imply that Wittig’s theorization of *lesbian* is without fault; significant critiques remain to be addressed. Chiefly, throughout her work Wittig makes frequent reference to the structural similarities between “woman-hood” and “slavery” that are, at best, insensitive to the differences between sexual and racial difference (Wittig 1992, xv, 12, 30, 45, 86). Furthermore, her tendency to privilege sexual difference as a structure of domination over other forms of social oppression leads her to ignore the significant ways in which categories of race as well as class, coloniality, and so on are themselves always already sexed in particular ways—and vice versa.³⁸ Wittig’s silence on the intersection between heterophallic and racist systems of oppression leads, in the best case, to a problematic gap in theorizing the political possibilities of her theory for women of color, and, at worst, a refusal to recognize the interconnectedness of heterosexist and racist systems of meaning that can only serve to perpetuate the latter. Re-interpreting subjectification furthermore carries with it the problematic of a decentered subjectivity. Although I argue Wittig does not refer to a presocial subject position, the political efficacy of establishing a “neutral” field of signification has historically come under criticism from feminists such as Alice Jardine and Rosi Braidotti. They argue that there is an inherent risk in orienting toward a sexual “neutrality” of re-establishing a phallogocentric structure of subjectification: the refusal of the feminine speaking position may very well lead to its appropriation by the decentered masculine subject in establishing a new androcentric subject (merely phallogocentrism under a new name) (see Jardine 1985; Braidotti 1991). Rather than opening the possibilities of meaning-making to women-as-subject, this would lead to an effective *silencing* of the class of women—a deprivation of a speaking position only recently and tenuously recognized.

Finally, it is worth considering Wittig's anti-essentialist position in the context of the "strategic" difference. Denise Riley, Diana Fuss, and Naomi Schor have all maintained a strong social-constructionist stance toward the categories of sex and the heterosexual structuring of society—like Wittig—and yet maintain the politically strategic possibility (and perhaps inevitability) of deploying "essentialist" conceptions of "women" (Fuss 1989; Riley 1995; Schor 1995). In *Am I That Name?*, Riley argues that fluctuations between denying and developing the category of "women" may, in fact, be part of the normal historical operation of feminism (Riley 1995). As the category "women" changes historically alongside the development of other concepts in the Western context, so too does feminism shift to meet the political needs of those oppressed persons within that context. Such criticisms as these emerge, however, only by returning to Wittig's *lesbian*-feminism and reading past reductions of her theory to essentialism or separatism.³⁹ They indicate the importance of rereading Wittig's works (theoretical and literary), evaluating her place within feminist and queer theory, and considering the possibilities of bringing *lesbian* into conversation with current debates surrounding sex/gender/sexuality: categories that have come under increasing suspicion, but remain strong determinants of subjectivity and material status in heterosexualized culture.

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Notes

1 Susan Rubin Suleiman, in *Subversive Intent*, provides a concise summary of the place of *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* in the French literary tradition (Suleiman 1990, 132–33).

2 Following Wittig's death in 2003, a collection of new essays about her work. *On Monique Wittig*, was published in 2005 (Shaktini 2005). Two years later, the journal *GLQ* released a special issue titled *Monique Wittig: At the Crossroads of Criticism* (Epps and Katz. 2007), which featured memorials and new critical treatments of her work. More recently, some works have begun to indicate Wittig's importance to contemporary issues in feminism and queer theory.

Alyosxa Tudor's recent essay in *Feminist Theory* not only places Wittig's *lesbian* in opposition to the increasing transphobia in popular Anglo-American lesbian-feminism, but also engages with Wittig's theory from a critical race perspective to point out the role of racism in possibilities of refusing gender (Tudor 2019). Sanna Karhu has also convincingly argued the need to recognize Wittig's influence on Judith Butler's contemporary critique of violence (Karhu 2016), resonating with Clare Hemmings's treatment of Wittig in *Why Stories Matter*, where Hemming points out and fills in the widespread failure to recognize Wittig as foundational not only to Butler's work, but to queer critiques of the sex/gender distinction more generally (Hemmings 2011, 178–90).

Wittig also appears in Sara Ahmed's important work *Living a Feminist Life* to present the lesbian figure as one of radical revolt against the subordinate and relative positioning of women by heteronormativity (Ahmed 2017, 224–25). These works, significant in their recognition of Wittig as an influential figure in the history of queer theory, nonetheless represent the majority of engagement with Wittig over the past two decades. My thanks to anonymous reviewers at *Hypatia* for indicating the works by Ahmed, Karhu, and Tudor.

3 It should be noted that Butler has, in recent years, seemingly altered her interpretation of Wittig's work. In the *GLQ* Special Issue dedicated to Wittig, Butler's article discusses the worth of Wittig's conceptualization of "universalization" regarding particularized individuals and groups of individuals. Similarly, in an

interview with Rosi Braidotti, Butler refers to and defends Wittig's work in discussing problematics of difference (see Butler 1994, 2007).

4 Similar assertions have been made by Sarah Cooper and Jonathan Dollimore (Dollimore 1991, 58–60; Cooper 2000, 166).

5 In a conversation with Wittig about the political implications of her literary work, Suleiman notes a dissonance between her interpretation of the literary text and the theoretical background that Wittig confirms as the intent (Suleiman 1990, 234, note 31). Similarly, Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that “[Wittig’s] literary works appear to enact a different kind of political strategy than the one she explicitly calls for in her theoretical essays” (Butler 1990, 124–25). Yet in both instances this disconnect is not further addressed or resolved.

6 Jeffner Allen argues that the textual action of lesbian and feminist writings in particular often undermine the strict demarcation between the philosophical and the literary (Allen 1988, 109).

7 The usage of “myth” here can be understood in direct reference to Barthes’s semiology, as part of a “mythology” of heterosexuality, whose significations include that of Man and Woman. Importantly, for Wittig as with Barthes, the process of understanding a mythology is *denaturalizing* the myth to make it known as myth (see Barthes 1972; Wittig 1992, 31–32).

8 Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti discuss the contrast in approach to the sex/gender distinction between American and European feminisms, and particularly think through Wittig’s relation to this binary (see Butler 1994).

9 Wittig draws upon the social contract theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to develop her concept of the “heterosexual social contract” (Wittig 1992, 34–39).

10 “Deconstruct” here is used colloquially to mean a critical re-evaluation of terms and their relations. However, this is not to suggest a reading of Wittig in conjunction with the work of Jacques Derrida is unwarranted (merely that it is too deep of a rabbit hole to appropriately explore here). Considering *lesbian* as a term of deconstruction in the Derridean sense would, I believe, be an illuminating endeavor.

11 Despite the philosophical distance that is generally placed between Wittig and Luce Irigaray, I think this aspect (among others) betrays that Wittig is not “as far away from Irigaray as some might wish,” as Schor writes (Schor 1995, 22). In a similar fashion, there has been a tendency to very closely associate Wittig’s work with Beauvoir’s, Schor also notes (22). Indeed, Butler’s accusation of humanism seems to stem from reading *into* Wittig the kinds of critiques often levied against Beauvoir (Butler 1990, 19–20). Is it possible that analyses of Wittig that see her work as a continuation of *The Second Sex* may not sufficiently recognize the *differences* between her position and Beauvoir’s, nor, for that matter, her similarities with Irigaray?

12 Irigaray’s “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” in *This Sex Which is Not One* presents an analysis of phallogentrism in these terms (Irigaray 1985). Though, of course, Irigaray advocates for a mimetic *expression* of sexual difference by women, against a sexually *indifferent* system, rather than a destruction of the terms altogether.

13 Wittig herself, in a conversation cited by Suleiman, suggests such an interpretation of her work (Suleiman 1990, 234, note 31). *Lesbians—or amantes* (“lovers”), as they are called in *Lesbian Peoples: Material for A Dictionary* (Wittig and Zeig 1979), the context for Suleiman’s conversation—orient themselves toward “that age in which the strict boundaries of sex, as of class, have been transcended” (Suleiman 1990, 134).

14 This recalls Beauvoir’s writing on women’s heterosexual desire: “The woman who does not wish to be man’s vassal is by no means one who always avoids him: she endeavors rather to make him the instrument of her pleasure. In favorable circumstances—dependent in large part on her partner—the very notion of competition disappears” (Beauvoir 1974, 458–59). Beauvoir’s focus on pleasure and desire here, however, remains distinct from the broader social critique Wittig is putting forward.

15 Wittig is particularly critical of those lesbians and feminists who valorize femininity and the status of Woman (Wittig 1992, 10–11). For the remainder of this essay, I refer to *lesbian* as a political category with italics to mark the Wittigian *lesbian* apart from lesbianism as strictly a sexuality.

16 For an explication of the relation between philosophy as master discourse and phallogentrism, see Le Doeuff 2002.

17 Part of this unity is also denoted by *desire*. The question of lesbian desire, as well as its inability to be articulated within psychoanalytic discourse, has been variously taken up by other lesbian-feminists. Although I am choosing to limit my discussion to a more general notion of subject–subject relations,

Wittig's critique of domination could easily be rephrased as a criticism of (phallogentric) desire. For two points of comparison, see De Lauretis 1994; Grosz 1995.

18 Wittig's discussion of dialectics treats Marxism in more depth than I can go into here and is helpful in distinguishing her materialism from that of Marx; see Wittig 1992, 16–19.

19 The focus Wittig places on deconstructing the heterosexualized and phallic body, particularly in *Le corps lesbien*, seems to counter Fuss's claims that Wittig largely elides questions of the body (Fuss 1989, 50).

20 Wittig's focus on orality and speech throughout *Le corps lesbien*, and the focus on language acquisition in *L'Opopanax*, signals the importance of language as a tool for working against phallogentrism and heterosexualization.

21 Important to note further is that the deconstructive work between subjects in *Le corps lesbien* is necessarily *intersubjective*. Lesbian-ization is never undertaken in isolation, it always occurs through the relation of the *j/e* and the *tu*. As Silberman writes, this suggests "not transcendence but interdependence" (Silberman 2007, 472).

22 Wittig also performs various deconstructions of phallic imagery in *Le corps lesbien*, which serves to displace the phallus as primary signifier, as discussed by Shaktini (Shaktini 1982; 1989).

23 These views have also strongly influenced readings of her literature, such as Christopher Robinson's (Robinson 1995).

24 I borrow the phrase "process as utopia" from Claire Peta Blencowe, who uses it to describe the telos of *Les guérillères* (Blencowe 2011, 17). Blencowe herself borrows the term from Ruth Levitas (Levitas 2003, 146–47).

25 Wittig's association between slavery and womanhood is, at best, naive. At worst, Wittig problematically elides the significant differences and intersections between issues of race and sex. This critique is picked up briefly in the conclusion and is an important point of consideration if one is to bring Wittig's theory into current feminist discourse.

26 Interesting to compare here is the feeling of "two-ness" that Bonnie Mann recounts upon being "accepted" into heterosexual society as a lesbian-mother (Mann 2007).

27 Indeed, Crowder notes Wittig's later works *Virgile, non*, and *The Constant Journey* (whose title evokes the "escape" of the *lesbian*) explicitly critique the "lesbian savior" figure.

28 Connections might be drawn to Donna Haraway's figure of the *cyborg* (Haraway 2004). Or Trinh T. Minh-ha's *inappropriate/d other* (Minh-ha 1986–1987). For further possible connections between Haraway and Wittig, see also Walker 1993.

29 Although I have presented these themes individually over the course of my analysis, there is a significant extent to which they existed as interconnected in Wittig's work. Her critique of the heterosexual system of domination, and her resistance to it through processes of deconstruction, orients toward undoing the fixity of meaning prescribed by that dominating system. But at the same time, the textual elaboration of language and subjectivity *against* domination by a heterophallic closure of meaning serves to develop those subjectivity possibilities within individuals, and ultimately undermine the heterophallic system of domination as natural and eternal. Domination, utopianism, and polysemy are thematic threads within Wittig's work that must be considered in tandem and cooperation with one another to arrive at a full appreciation of her political-linguistic project.

30 We should recall that Wittig's lesbian is not synonymous with heterosexuality and indeed rejects homo- and heterosexuality as categories of difference on the same basis of Man and Woman.

31 Again we see linkages with Irigaray's philosophy, somewhat unsurprisingly given the centrality of language in much French feminist theory. Schor writes: "Like Irigaray's, Wittig's linguistic universalism is utopian, voluntaristic . . . both seek to bring about transformations in the prevailing order of gender through the syntactical element of the shifter" (Schor 1995, 24).

32 It is significant that one of the major transformative parts of the narrator's acquisition of language in *L'Opopanax* is the discovery of language's multiple meanings, a discovery that is integral to the development of creativity through writing (see Duffy 1983, 294–96).

33 Related here is Wittig's concern with the loss of a text's transformative potential through its reduction to classifications of difference—the textual reality that subverts through its claim to universality is destroyed by taking the part (homosexual, woman, and so on) for the whole. I have already mentioned Wittig in relation to Trinh Minh-ha, and Barbara Christian's work offers another point of comparison, particularly in exposing the ways that Wittig's theorization of difference (particularly expressed through writing) may or may not have the same force along divides of race as opposed to gender and sexuality (see Christian 2010).

- 34 For Wittig's own discussion of "on" in *L'Opoponax*, see Wittig 1992, 82–84.
- 35 For a closer examination of the conflict between (lesbian) character and (heterosexual) institution, as well as an analysis of the narrator's disruptive acquisition of language, see Duffy 1983.
- 36 Butler argues that Wittig's position toward language is achieved through an appeal to a fundamental neutrality of language (Butler 1990, 199–200, note 42), contrasting Wittig's position with that established in Irigaray's *To Speak is Never Neutral* (Irigaray 2002). However, a strong distinction between Irigaray and Wittig seems difficult to maintain in this way. The linguistic work on pronouns that Wittig undertakes in her novels is arguably an effort to articulate "new" languages, differentiated from their current phallogocentric/heterosexual usage. Wittig's lesbian-ization of language, much like the notion of *lesbian* itself, is a political tool aimed at violently disrupting dominant discourse. Wittig is not uncritically adopting language as an instrument, nor underestimating the ways in which language is politically nonneutral; she is merely asserting its possibility *to be so*. Though Wittig is aware of the ways in which language functions to subordinate women, language remains an institution open to radical change, including the possibility of a reclamation of language against itself.
- 37 This approach relates to Wittig's literary views on minority writing (Wittig 1992, 59–67). Given the close relationship between Wittig's literature and her philosophy, I believe it is appropriate to import those views here.
- 38 María Lugones's writing on heterosexuality and gender binarism as a tool of colonialism, for example, might fill this absence in Wittig's theory (see Lugones 2007; 2020).
- 39 An extended examination of these critiques could not be included here, but they are significant challenges to re-interpreting the work of Wittig in a context sensitive to comorbidities of racism, sexism, colonialism, and heteronormativity. Is Wittig's critique of heterophallic systems of subjectification sensitive to the importance of considering contexts of changing and differing histories and cultures, both local and national? Can her theorization of the heterophallic system extend to incorporate important critiques of colonial imposition of sex-gender-sexuality systems? Why does the question of race, and its intersection with sex and sexuality, not appear in Wittig's theory? How can complexly interconnected but historically and structurally specific axes of difference be incorporated into her theory? To what extent does (and should) her suspicion of categories of difference extend, particularly in the context of those differences (unlike sexuality) that are inscribed upon the body? What does it mean to potentially appropriate *lesbian* as a "neutral" term in the interest of decentering heterophallic subjectivity? What would this mean for those women who identify *as* lesbians in the non-Wittigian sense? For Black or indigenous lesbians? These are all important and necessary questions to consider if Wittig's theory is to be reread in the context of current feminist struggles.

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J. A. Szymanski is currently a philosophy PhD postgraduate at the University of Queensland, with a background in philosophy, linguistics, and English literature. Their PhD research seeks to present a defense and thorough re-analysis of Wittig’s lesbian-feminism as it appears in her theory and literature, including a comparison with deconstructive theory through Jacques Derrida and the literary-theoretical work of Hélène Cixous. They aim to demonstrate Wittig’s continuing relevance to feminist politics, as well as develop new avenues of communication between Wittig’s work, Black, queer, and postcolonial writers, and other French poststructuralist theories. Their previous research has focused on major figures in French feminist philosophy (chiefly Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig) on the topics of phallogocentrism, gender, and sexuality—as well as the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, researching their respective views on freedom, oppression, and violence.