

The Power of the Word: The (Unnameable) Lesbian Body

Janne Cleveland

It is our fiction that validates us.

-- Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*

In the twenty-five years since *The Lesbian Body* was published in English translation, the question of how to present and represent lesbianism has continued to be a source of challenge, resistance, and more than a little anxiety. Central to this inquiry has been the question of language. What language is adequate to constitute the homosexual woman, the lesbian, without running the risk of devolving into an essentialist critique that does little to advance the project of creating a visible and viable presence? Is it possible to define lesbianism in any meaningful and satisfactory way? From what point, or points, is this even a useful exercise? While embarking on a recent course entitled “Theories of Lesbian Sexuality”, I was struck by the number of scholarly works that continue to refer to Wittig’s work. Regardless of whether the readings had their origin in the 1970s, or the late 1990s, it became clear that Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* continues to be a site from which to engage the question of representation. More than a quarter of a century after its initial English publication, Wittig’s novel continues to stimulate debate, and provide an arena in which to explore the difficult terrain of the textual construction of female subjectivity upon which Wittig broke the ground for much feminist critical analysis that has since followed.[1] A close reading of this text reflects a strategic use of language that challenges the reader to consider ways in which to construct the lesbian subject from a body not bound to normative and limiting configurations of masculinist discourse.

In 1973, at the height of what is now referred to as the Second Wave Feminist Movement, Monique Wittig published her experimental novel, *Le Corps Lesbien*, with the English translation, *The Lesbian Body*, following in 1975. The 1970s were marked by wide-spread social upheaval, both in North America and Europe. Massive demonstrations in France in 1968 led to riots in the streets of Paris, and in the U.S. anti-war protesters demonstrated against American involvement in the war in Vietnam. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s evolved into the Black Power Movement in 1970s America. The Women’s Liberation Movement gained momentum, particularly among young women who agitated for equal opportunity for education and access to professions traditionally considered to be male domains. The newly available contraceptive pill provided heterosexual women with the means to assert some control over their reproductive functions, and was instrumental in promoting discussions of women’s sexual oppression.

A burgeoning gay rights movement was gathering strength, particularly after the riots ignited at the Stonewall Tavern in 1969 in New York. The emergence of a new Leftist political movement, and the rediscovery of Marxist critique among the intelligentsia provided a forum in which to examine the oppression of the under-class. The resistance to authority, and the desire for change was everywhere a marker of pervasive social unrest. It is within this context that *The Lesbian Body* first appeared.

Working within the confines of phallogentric language to construct an autonomous feminine subject, materially constituted in the body, has produced contentious debate among feminist theorists. Some have sought to locate the feminine subject within the maternal body, suggesting a feminine language that departs from the Lacanian model in which the dichotomy of Self/Other reflects a subjectivity only accessible through the hierarchical Law of the Father. Others have objected to this use of the maternal body, arguing that to locate the feminine within the absence created by its exclusion from a normative masculine tradition merely entrenches the subordination and oppression of the very women whose subjectivity remains in question.[2] Judith Butler, for example, has noted that “to invoke matter is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should surely be an *object* of feminist inquiry, but which would be quite problematic as a *ground* for feminist theory” (*Bodies That Matter* 49, emphasis in the original). How then, does it become possible to represent through the always already phallogentric constructions of language, the feminine, the lesbian, without perpetuating an essentialist perspective in which the feminine is once again cast as the reflective surface of a masculine originary? What modes of resistance can be attempted in which a lesbian subject is created while simultaneously repudiating the female body as conduit for, but never the possessor of, the power of the autonomous subject?

In her bid to create a lesbian speaking subject, Wittig returns to the body as the site at which subjectivity is created, a site at which desire and identification command equal attention. However, in this use of the female body as a ground for lesbian subjectivity, she proposes a violent reworking of that body that witnesses both fragmentation and reassembling, in order to create, but not procreate, a continuously metamorphosing body whose integrity and coherence is in question. The process of naming is one strategy by which Wittig seeks to simultaneously produce and relieve the anxiety created by this transitive body that has no stability within the conventional social arena.

Replicating the format of her 1969 novel, *Les Guerilleres*, Wittig incorporates eight pages of lists, the most obvious function of which is the naming of the parts of the body. Each list is contained within a single page, appearing in large, bold capital letters interspersed throughout the text. Parts of the body like “the lungs” (115), “the nerves” (28), “the vulva” (115, 153), and “the skeleton” (115) are named, as are the fluids and

excrescences contained therein, such as “the arterial blood” (76), “the fat” (40) and “the saliva” (28). As well, the uses to which the parts can be put, such as “the blows” (141), “the embraces” (141), and “the shrieks” (128) are contained within the litany.

The lists themselves serve multiple functions within the text, most importantly to disrupt the notion of a language system in which binary opposites are assumed to be naturally occurring and hierarchically valued. While they interrupt the lyrical movement of the narrative, the lists also function to insist upon the presence of the body within the text. The body is continuously apparent within the text even while it is brutally dismembered before being reconstructed as lesbian. Each of the parts connotes the presence of a body in transition, at once fragmented and made whole in the process of naming. As Leigh Gilmore suggests, this fragmentation proposes a body that is beginning to cohere differently from that proposed in the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage (246). The polemics of complete/incomplete are revealed to be inadequate to this body which is simultaneously both.

Further, the lists act, on one hand, to restore order to a narrative in which the body is violently acted upon, chaotically (dis)figured. The disruption of the narrative provides an abrupt, if momentary, respite from the often brutal depictions of a body enduring extreme violence:

Having absorbed the external part of your ear I burst the tympanum, I feel the rounded hammer-bone rolling between m/y lips, m/y teeth crush it, I find the anvil and the stirrup-bone, I crunch them, I forage with my fingers, I wrench away a bone, I fall on the superb cochlea bone and membrane all wrapped round together, I devour them, I burst the semicircular canals...(24)

The lists insert a break in the reading of such overwhelmingly visceral imagery, allowing the reader a reflexive space in which to grapple with and digest the complexities of the text. This rupture between the flow of narrative language and the clinical detachment of static medical terminology is also reflective of the fracturing and dismemberment of the body within the narrative. Mirroring the narrative strategy of the text in which binary concepts are resisted, the lists also challenge the very establishment of order that they would initially appear to assert.

The incorporation of emotionally charged descriptive terms within the lists prevents the reader from completely retreating to a safe distance from the distressed body being dismantled within the narrative. The sixth and seventh pages of lists include such descriptors as “the reactions pleasure emotion” (128), “the sobs” (128), “the gesticulation” (141), “the brawling” (141), before returning to the clinical language of medical nomenclature witnessed in the final list. The insertion of these terms, while

presented in the same detached manner as the medicalized appellations, serves to remind the reader that the body being constructed in the naming of its parts is constituted both physically and psychically. Neither physical nor psychical constituents of this body are hierarchically valued, but are equally integral to the constitution of the social subject. The body as constructed here is revealed to be an amalgam of both its orderly material characteristics and the emotional components that animate its physical actions. The opposing concepts of chaos and order are thus rendered as an unworkable binary that refuses to be fixed in or by those terms. Rather than escaping the chaos of the destructible body, the reader is challenged to consider the very meaning of the concept of order. The word usage and syntactical structure employed in the construction of the lists effectively questions what definition of order is validated in a language of medicine and science that would split the physical body from its emotive functions, valuing one aspect while denying the importance of the other. In Wittig's usage, both aspects of the body, the physical and the psychic, are of equal importance in creating meaning.

Notice is also drawn to the ways in which language and writing itself are corporeal, as well as cerebral, productions. The visual presentation of the lists, set in bold type, in a much larger font than the rest of the text, commands the attention of the reader. Writing and reading are signified here as visual, and therefore physical practices which demand the interaction of both the intellectual and the material body. Wittig makes use of the lists to signal the presence of the material, not through its absence, but in the visual disruption of the ebb and flow of the narrative. Thus, the body, through the language that constitutes its presence, invades the text.

Mimicking this notion of textual and physical intrusion, the medicalized language contained in the lists, and its spatial placement within the text, recalls the ways in which the practices of medical discourse have historically invaded women's bodies. Nowhere is this encroachment on female bodies more evident than with regard to sexuality and reproductive functions.^[3] The containment of the female body and female sexual desire is maintained in a history that includes forced marriage, clitoral excision, forced sterilization of women among racial minorities, the denial of access to adequate and safe contraception, and the conflation of female desire with mental instability and illness. Couched in language that assumes a masculine referent, the female body bears a long history of social and medical management. It is this history that Wittig exposes and resists through her reworking of the language.

That the body in question in this text is female is assured by the evidence of specifically feminine attributes in the lists which include "the breasts" (153), "the womb" (115), "the vulva" (40, 115), "the vaginal bulbs" (115), "the vagina" (28, 101), and "the mammary" (76). The first list begins with the declaration "THE LESBIAN BODY", and

the final list ends with the same address. By beginning and ending the recitation of the body with this declaration, Wittig has insured that the female body is not only present within the text, but is interpellated and read as lesbian. This cyclical return to the declaration of 'the lesbian body' also functions as a displacement of the linearity of conventional language construction. Echoing the strategy of Gertrude Stein in her children's novel, *The World is Round*, in which the character of Rose stubbornly attempts to insist upon relieving a circular narrative journey of its chaos by inserting linear lists, Wittig presents lists which by their very linearity would assume to restore order to a chaotic body.[4] However, by employing the circular return to the opening proclamation, this linearity is at once exposed as an impossibly inadequate attempt to define the lesbian self. Rather, it is the circle, the female symbol, that is empowered to confer meaning in this text.

That is not to suggest that Wittig is proposing a new language; rather she provides a reconfiguration of the existing mode that is transformative and expresses the potential for creating alternative meanings not limited in their scope. Within the narrative Wittig addresses the problem of creating new language, and points to the inevitable failure of such a project. She weaves a myth in which the women in the narrative announce the disappearance of vowels from the language, which is at first a source of consternation, and then humour. This language is no longer intelligible, but rather "so comical that I choke with laughter" (104). The result of this experiment is the realization that reinventing language will not, in itself, guarantee the validation of the lesbian body. As Wittig suggests here, this attempt to reformulate language is revealed as only a clumsy endeavour, the failure of which is mocked. For Wittig, the successful transformation of language is dependent upon a conceptual transforming of the categories of woman and man that have historically been bound to a heterosexual economy.

In other essays Wittig has expounded on the necessary resistance to the social construction of gendered bodies. She disavows the concept of feminine writing, or *écriture féminine* as it was proposed among French feminist theorists, arguing that the appellation of the feminine acts to ascribe bodily investment, but not material production to such writing, the result of which is the reification of gender and the historical disappearance of women's texts exemplified by the treatment of the works of Sappho ("The Point of View" 87-91). She writes that the point of being lesbian is to suppress genders, particularly given her view that gender is a linguistic construct the sole purpose of which is to denote the feminine – the masculine needing no such denotation as it is assumed to be the paradigmatic form from which all other is constituted through exclusion ("The Point of View" 88). She asserts that it is within the heterosexual economy that these gendered categories exist to perpetuate and justify the subordination of women, all the while being socially constituted as 'natural' ("One is Not Born a

Woman” 108). Making reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s critical analysis of gender in her work *The Second Sex*, Wittig further proposes that the lesbian cannot be considered a woman within this hegemonic definition given that she is neither economically, politically, nor ideologically linked to heterosexuality (“One is Not Born a Woman” 108). In *The Lesbian Body* she interrogates and maintains a refusal to participate in this very notion of a naturalized heterosexual economy in which women are the objects of exchange.

As Namascar Shaktini has pointed out, Wittig breaks the heterosexual contract in this narrative, disallowing the presence of a masculine signifier. A heterosexual economy in which women are the objects of exchange, as proposed by Levi-Strauss, is resisted here wherein it is the attributes of colour, and not the women themselves, that are exchanged (292). The passage denoting this alternate mode of exchange begins with another reference to the female symbol, the circle, in which the women dance, followed by a list of the goddess figures in attendance at the dance, each bearing a different colour. The narrator submits that each of the dancing figures is known from their descriptions found in library books. Their history, although suppressed within mainstream culture, is therefore available for recovery by anyone who will take the time to seek it out. As the dance progresses, the women exchange their colours, thus suggesting a reciprocal relationship in which all are valued equally. In fact, as the ritual dance unfolds, we are told that even while the dancers “share the sacred mushroom...no one asks to become bigger or smaller” (70), clearly a reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice consumes a morsel of mushroom in order to be restored to her original size (Carroll 68). In Wittig’s narrative, the exchange of colours among the women occurs after the sharing of the sacred mushroom, suggesting a heightening of desire while under the influence of hallucinogens that was a particularly popular practice at the time Wittig was writing. Clearly it is desire that is the focus of the passage, especially given that it is the goddess Aphrodite who signals the exchange of colours during the ritual (70). This reciprocal sharing of desire among the women disavows the notion of a naturalized heterosexuality; rather this passage proposes the existence of libidinal investment among women.

The narrator of the passage, remaining hidden from the celebrants, surveys the scene of the ritual dance and exchange from an unobserved position among the laurel trees, indulging her own desire through a voyeuristic gaze. The object of her desire is the one woman among the group whose name is not revealed, who is instead referred to as “m/y best beloved, m/y unnameable one” (69). This unnamed woman is not a participant in the exchange of colours, but rather is transformed by the touch of the goddesses, her body shining “with many fires” (69). This scopophilic moment in which the narrator confers and names her desire for the unnameable one recalls the work of feminist film theorist

Laura Mulvey in which she asserts that, in visual representation at least, women are consistently positioned as the objects of the male gaze, and thus robbed of the opportunity to be active agents controlling the gaze and asserting their own desire (Mulvey 29). As Teresa de Lauretis has noted, the conventions of seeing, constructed through the relationship of desire and meaning, continue to position the gaze of the spectator within the frame of heterosexuality (“Sexual Indifference” 153). In this narrative, however, it is a female gaze that initiates the subject into being. Further, in the following passage the gaze is returned, thus depriving the voyeur of the power to control and consume the object of her desire. The exchange of the gaze between the two women acts as a quotation of the exchange of colours in the previous passage. Wittig effectively presents women – outside the heterosexual contract, at least – as having the potential to be both subjects and objects of the gaze. Whereas in the Freudian construction female sexuality is a dark continent, mysterious and unknowable, in Wittig’s narrative it is the site at which female desire and identification merge to invest the lesbian body with substance and meaning. In this passage it is through the gaze commanded by one woman toward another, and subsequently returned, that sexual desire among women is configured as the locus from which identity is instantiated, refusing to maintain the passive role assigned by social conventions and ideologies.

The tension created between the continual fluctuation of the subject and object positions between the two women is repeated throughout the text. It is this very reciprocity that enables female desire among women through a resistance to a phallic economy in which women have historically been positioned to be always and only the objects of a male gaze. It is not, however, a reciprocity achieved without some anxiety. In a later passage the narrator reflects that the consuming gaze of the other woman renders her immobile. The force of this all-encompassing gaze is reflected when the narrator states that “m/y entire body is riddled by your gaze” (134). The discomfort of this ocular invasion of the body is never fully resolved in Wittig’s narrative; rather it is employed as a further strategy in the reconfiguration of the body upon which the gaze is focused. The fluidity of boundaries between subject and object in this text is reflective of the simultaneous pleasure and fear instilled by the permanent instability of these binary categories. This very instability of normative terms and conceptual configurations creates the potential for other desires and other bodies to become visible.

Wittig’s narrative is constructed as a journey, the purpose of which is to create a visible space for the lesbian body. In her resistance to the binaries of language in which female desire is subordinated, the narrator is positioned as abdicating her hierarchical authority, entreating her beloved thus:

may you lose the sense of morning and evening of the stupid duality with all that flows therefrom...may you yourself in this place strive in a frenzied confrontation

whether in the shape of the angel or the shape of the demon, may the music of the spheres envelope your struggle (145).

For Wittig, it is through a resistance to and a reconfiguration of linguistic binaries that other modes of address are made possible. As she has stated elsewhere, conceptual and material realities are social realities accomplished through language ("The Point of View" 107). In *The Lesbian Body* it is the metaphoric journey converging with the mythic journey toward a utopic space in which a conceptual transformation of the material body leads toward a realization of self.

This journey begins with Wittig's warning to the reader that there is no place for "tenderness or gracious abandon" (15) in the ensuing struggle to create and name the lesbian subject. The mythic voyage toward the island where lesbian desire can be articulated invokes images of Amazons and pays tribute to the figure of Sappho, simultaneously denoting pride in the heroic lesbian figure and remarking upon the historic erasure of the same. Concurrent with this voyage toward paradise is the metaphoric journey through the body. As the body is violently disarticulated, and subsequently rearticulated as lesbian, the materiality of language is illuminated (Gilmore 230). Distancing from notions of a feminine essence signified as maternal in psychoanalytic discourse through the Oedipal investment of gender, Wittig reflects upon a simultaneous brutality and tenderness necessary to construct a multi-dimensional lesbian subject. Even as the body is viciously fractured and fragmented, there is evidence of gentleness toward its parts, as witnessed when the narrator speaks of caressing and polishing the bones (31). This refusal to adhere to the social construction of the feminine is later recalled when the narrator notes that "now I hear them singing about someone who confuses essence and appearance" (158). Here she resists and problematizes the biological determinism inherent to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In this narrative journey toward the island, and a re-constituted self, there is a refusal to separate the violent and the tender. Instead these concepts work in tandem to constitute a body that is comprised of and capable of multiple modes and dimensions.

As the exterior and interior journeys toward lesbian self actualization come to a close, the narrator notes that a group of women known as mountebanks, or tricksters, leads the larger group encircling them in a song of celebration. The tricksters proceed to share the balls with which they have been juggling, allowing others to take up the practice. Namascar Shaktini has read this as a moment in which the women who have learned to reclaim language pass on their skills to other women who are encouraged to write their own poems, new texts in which the women are subjects (299). This reading converges with Butler's analysis of the text in which she proposes that Wittig's project is one that directs women to assume the authoritative position of the speaking subject (*Gender*

Trouble 115). As Wittig's narrative journey progresses, it is the rearticulated body that assumes this authority as a speaking subject, signified as lesbian.

The repetitious recitation of the body produces an intertextuality in which the text reflects the materiality of the body,^[5] and the body becomes a text upon which to encode lesbian identity (Gilmore 229). This body is named, and thus comes into being, socially constituted and differentiated from the subordinated feminine body of conventional masculinist theoretical construction. Refusing the codes of language wherein the phallus assumes the power of the primary signifier, in this text it is the lesbian body that operates as the site from which meaning is conferred (Shaktini 291). The dissolution of the figurative body in the text reflects the breakdown of the social body, and the language under which it coheres, proposing instead a text in which the body redefines the language that subsequently redefines the body (Cowen 54). The text performs the body through the act of speech, specifically in the repetition of the body itself.^[6] In Wittig's narrative the metonymic litany of the body asserts the presence of this lesbian body, one which can be constructed from any of the various parts named therein (Gilmore 246). It is this performative utterance of the body that, for Wittig, constitutes the lesbian body in language that is radically transfigured to illuminate and reflect homoerotic relationships among women.

Recalling Wittig's assertion in her earlier novel, *Les Guerilleres*, that "the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you" (114), the language spoken in *The Lesbian Body* is one that invalidates the existing social construction of gender, and denies the silence imposed by phallogocentrism. She writes in the Author's Note to *The Lesbian Body* that to write "I", or *Je* in the French form, as a woman is to confront a language that refuses to constitute her as a subject (10).^[7] She suggests in her essay *The Straight Mind*, that "the Unconscious consciously looks after the interests of the masters" (148), which in this case reflects a construction of the subject predicated upon a phallic discourse. In Wittig's analysis, it is not surprising that Lacan uncovered the structures of the Unconscious, given her assertion that psychoanalytic discourse installed these structures from the beginning for its own purposes (145). Against her charge that psychoanalysis denies the status of the autonomous feminine subject, Wittig proposes in her Author's Note to *The Lesbian Body* to signify the female subject as *J/e*, reworking the concept of the Lacanian split subject. For Wittig the "I" within this narrative operates outside the codes of normative language construction, in excess of the restrictions imposed by a sign system in which gender is designated as the feminine, and therefore abject. As de Lauretis has noted in her critical analysis of Wittig's work, the reconfigured body proffered here must be lesbian in order that it make sense (150). The reassembling of the body, and of the language inscribed by it in the narrative introduces a lesbian subject, a desiring subject, who operates outside the conceptual categories of sex and gender.

While her narrative presents a powerful interrogation and reconfiguration of the linguistic tropes that would enforce a heterosexually coded gender paradigm, the body presented here is not without discursive limits. One must consider Wittig's strategy of universalizing the lesbian body. She fails to remark upon the ways in which language is deployed differently through the intersecting discourses of race and class. Elsewhere she has proposed that narrative fictions must present from a univocal perspective in order to assert a visible appearance in literature, and thus avoid the problem of speaking to the already converted ("The Point of View" 90). Does this univocality not, in effect, serve to perpetuate the disappearance of the minority voice that Wittig purports to reclaim here? There is a tension produced in the narrative between the concepts of collectivity and individuality which rightfully should be a point of inquiry in the exploration of the limits of language. Here, however, the individual is subsumed within the universalizing notion of a single lesbian body which stands to represent all lesbians. If the alternate world created in the text does not register the variations and striations inherent to the collective, does this not perpetuate the exclusion of other bodies that would seek to lay hold of a space under the sign of lesbian?

As Butler has pointed out, all identity categories are regulatory regimes through which certain aspects of signification are embraced, while others are repudiated ("Imitation" 311). Butler asks, and so should we, what imperatives are called upon to regulate the subjects who organize under a particular sign? In Wittig's narrative the universal lesbian body stands as the only ground upon which a refusal of the heterosexual economy can be possible. What then of other constructions of identity that would propose a similar resistance – the transsexual, bisexual or transgendered body for example? Granted, Wittig's project is only concerned with the theme of lesbianism, as she states in the Author's Note to the text (9), but should that then not require a critical analysis of the definitive terms by which the lesbian subject is thereby made manifest? To assume that one can propose a lesbian subject that enables a visible and viable lesbian body without remarking upon the different ways in which language has been deployed to construct bodies that equally marked by multiple signifiers, such as race, religious affiliation, ethnicity and class, repeats the erasure of subjectivities that the project of exposing the limits of hegemonic language seeks to recover.

The development of feminist theory, and indeed queer theory, over the past twenty-five years has witnessed a growing suspicion of discourses claiming neutrality, and instead has embraced the notion of destabilizing theory and categorical markers (Barrett and Phillips 1). Wittig herself reflects this attitude in her essay *One is Not Born a Woman*, in which she maintains that the failure of Marxism is predicated upon a lack of gendered analysis regarding the divisions of labour. She suggests that this omission

denies women the possibility of being constituted as a class, instead subsuming them within the class of men (“One is Not Born” 107). In *The Lesbian Body* she addresses this oversight in Marxist theory by creating a separate class of women, and yet she fails to recognize that she repeats the problematic slippage of Marxism that ignores “the fact that a class also consists of individuals” marked by historicity (“One is Not Born” 107). The universal lesbian body proposed by Wittig takes for granted a commonality that cannot be assumed. As Butler has asked, “what, if anything, can lesbians be said to share?” (“Imitation” 309). In Wittig’s narrative it is a shared desire made visible through naming that marks the body lesbian, excluding other social constructs which constitute this body.

Despite the limits of the text in presenting a multiply inflected lesbian body, the iteration of desire is the constitutive force that calls this body into being. The repetition of desire throughout the narrative constitutes a performative act in which female homoeroticism becomes naturalized and validated in this utopic setting. The scenes of desire played out here reflect both the violence and tenderness of sexual union, a fluid movement between subject and object. The following passages reveal this interplay between the pleasure of achieving the object of desire, and the fear of losing oneself to that pleasure:

then my blood mingles with yours inundating you entirely, the inwards of our arms finding and pressing each other, ultimately desire finds us, we move towards each other in great travail (91).

I cry out but not from pain, I am overtaken seized hold of, I go over to you entirely, I explode the small units of my ego, I am threatened, I am desired by you (98).

In the end a tempest arrives, it rushes right through us, scattering the muscles. First I hear your cries, then I hear m/yself cry out as you do, there is a bellowing of sirens, they reverberate within the gaping tunnels on either side of our two bodies which now constitute a single organism pervaded by vibrations quivering full of its own currents, is it not so m/y dearest? (109)

There is an intersubjective exchange here in which these two bodies enable desire, while the enactment of that desire constitutes these bodies as lesbian. De Lauretis has suggested that it takes two women to make a lesbian (*The Practice of Love* 235), by which she means that the inclination to stand as both the object of another woman’s desire and the subject conferring her own desire upon the other woman as object necessarily requires the presence of two bodies. That is not to suggest that the autoeroticism of masturbatory fantasy, for example, cannot signify lesbian desire, since even here, the presence of another body, albeit in fantastical form, is necessitated in order to manifest a lesbian erotics. Lesbian desire in Wittig’s narrative is the product of the fetishized body, the parts

of which signify, in their naming, the constitution of a sexual subject who disavows the privilege of normative heterosexuality.

If, as Butler has suggested, the configuration of the phallus, as a site through which subjectivity originates and emanates, is dependent upon the continual resignification through linguistic structuring, then it is reasonable to conceive of signifiers other than the penis from which the phallic imaginary can be constituted (*Gender Trouble* 89). In *The Lesbian Body* it is the disarticulated, and subsequently rearticulated body, and the parts named therein, that present an alternative phallic construction. Reading *The Lesbian Body* through the work of Judith Butler, this alternative space of the imaginary is configured, in Butler's terminology, as the lesbian phallus, empowered to constitute sites of pleasure through resignified symbolic practices (*Bodies That Matter* 91). In her resistance to a hegemonic symbolic in which the body is occluded in favour of the spirit (*The Practice of Love* 211), Wittig engages in a practice of resignifying desire within a body constituted through a reconfigured language in which what was unnameable is now named.

The parts named, whether lovingly consumed or carefully reassembled, become the fetishized objects of desire, conjuring the cathected body. The relational quality of the body and its parts mirrors the relationship between the women wherein the libidinal investment is figured through the fantasmatic object of the female body. Desire makes visible these bodies which are at once distinct in their difference yet connected in their resignification. These bodies retain their separateness in Wittig's narrative, as evident in the narrator's comment that "I do not seek m/y life from you" (21), although later, in a moment of sexual ecstasy the narrator reflects that "you are m/yself" (50). As de Lauretis notes, the loss experienced in the original fantasy of castration is replaced in the lesbian context by the absence of the object of desire, the female body that represents the resignified phallus (*The Practice of Love* 249). Within Wittig's narrative, the narrator notes that "I question an absence so strange that it makes a hole within m/y body" (35).

Wittig's resignification of desire and rearticulation of the body as lesbian confronts the normative discursive constructions of a social order marked by the refusal to acknowledge such resignifying practises and presents a space in which lesbian desire and lesbian bodies are made visible. That she constructs this alternative space within a non-linear utopic narrative is simultaneously limiting and liberatory. Given that the culturally understood definition of utopia is an impracticable idealist schema, what then can be the benefit of rallying to constitute a lesbian subject under such an impossible linguistic banner? Utopian narratives, by their very nature, are presented as constructions of a temporal and spatial ideal. In a critical analysis of such narratives it is necessary to interrogate the use of such a term as ideal. For whom, and to what purpose is this ideal state presented and promoted? This line of questioning leads back into Butler's inquiry of

what is espoused against what is disavowed, to which I referred earlier in this paper. For example, given that the male homosexual is equally resistant to the heterosexual social contract, Diana Fuss reads Wittig's narrative as a moment in which male homosexuality functions as the repressed other, thereby reinstating in transfigured form the very regulatory regime she seeks to displace (46). Surely it should not be the objective of a feminist inquiry to secure a visible presence for lesbians by dispossessing other marginalized subjects. Read from Fuss's perspective, it becomes clear that Wittig's construction of a utopic lesbian space produces as many tensions as it attempts to resolve. The question must then be asked whether Wittig's text does in fact function as a seamless utopic construction of lesbian space and subjectivity that would liberate the lesbian body from the erasure proscribed within normative hegemonic culture.

It has been suggested that any political movement seeking social transformation and the reformation of dominant ideologies is necessarily bound to a utopian vision toward which the movement gravitates (Jagose 2). Justifiably, theorists like Martha Vicinus have questioned the efficacy of utilizing utopian language to recuperate lesbian history and thus validate the lesbian social subject (253). If the concept of utopics can be understood as the process through which linguistic meanings are transformed, rather than the destination at which such transformation takes place, then it is possible to conceive of the uses to which a utopic narrative can be put. We should be rightfully suspicious of any proposals for which the aim is the achievement of a state of perfection; rather it should be the ability to conceive of a process by which meaning can be positively resignified upon which we should place value.

In *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig presents a space in which the body, and the language used to represent it, are engaged in a process of continual transformation. There is no linear progression from one fixed point to another, no final arrival at a place of stability. Even in the closing passages, the body presented continues its fluid progress through an unceasing metamorphosis. In the final passage, the narrator observes the women congregated in celebration, focusing her gaze on the object of her desire. As a spectator, watching from the periphery, the narrator closes the novel commenting that "I seek you, m/y radiant one across the throng" (165). Wittig resists the conventions of traditional narrative closure and refuses the seduction of the conventional utopian dream of arriving intact in a new world order. Instead, it is within the realm of fantasy that she reflects upon the possibility of a fluctuating language through which a lesbian subject can be constructed, a subject whose shape can never be determined for all time. Textual space has been opened up in which desire and the body are made visible as transitional concepts, continuously expanding and contracting in their configurations. As de Lauretis has suggested, "it may well be...that fantasy is not only representative, but constitutive of

perverse desire” (*The Practice of Love* 252). It is within this kinetic space of fantasy that Wittig reveals the transformative possibilities.

The social realm in which transformation and reconfigurations of meaning are sought typically reflects great agitation and upheaval. The context of the late twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries is certainly reflective of a wide-ranging call for social change. The move toward global corporatization, an enormous growth in populations, an escalation of poverty, and rapidly eroding social programmes have all contributed to an increasingly unstable social order. Reflective of the anxiety produced by such conditions is the particular and strategic use of language in the face of demands for change from an agitated and volatile public body. Recent events in Seattle and Quebec City, in which thousands of demonstrators denounced the actions of the World Trade Organization and the Free Trade of the Americas Association, were presented in the media as spectacles of dangerous and unruly mobs. Politically marginalized groups, like the growing numbers of the homeless, women’s grassroots activists, and advocates of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered rights are labelled ‘special interest’ groups, which is constructed to mean that these groups are demanding rights over and above what other citizens enjoy, and to which these groups are not entitled. We need to interrogate what and whose agendas are being served by this divisive discourse. In North America, the demand for a resignification of the term spouse in relation to lesbian and gay couples is being equally and vociferously resisted, particularly by those who perceive a decline in traditional ‘family values’. Clearly it is the very definition of the term ‘family’ that is being called into question here. Equally, the much-contested debate over the redeployment of the term ‘queer’ among non-heterosexual communities exemplifies the difficulties of rearticulating language in a bid to resist the marginalization of dominant power structures.[8] It is within this present context of social turbulence that the critical deployment of discursive practices echoes Monique Wittig’s project of reshaping language and making visible the limits of phallogentric discourses grounded in a heterosexual economy.

More than twenty-five years later *The Lesbian Body* continues to exemplify the ways in which language is both reflective and constitutive of the social subject. The disarticulation and rearticulation of the reconfigured body, and the resistance to the binarisms inherent to linear modes of thought and speech are the strategies by which Wittig invites the reader to engage in the project of continually transforming and reconceptualizing the meaning of subjectivity. In order to engage with this narrative it is necessary to suspend conventional reading practices, which can be both a joy and a frustration. The elliptical movement of the narrative is empowering in its resistance to conventional narrative traditions, while simultaneously it is equally daunting to a reader systematically trained and inculcated in linear reading practices that have been

institutionally prescribed. It is through this challenge to normative conceptualizations that Wittig's narrative provides a space from which to envision multiple subjectivities released from the normative restrictions of conventional discursive practices. That the narrative can be read as an attempt to assert lesbianism as an alternative to female heterosexuality constructed in the space of alterity should not preclude it from being read as simultaneously presenting the potential for making permanently unstable the ways in which identity and subjectivity are discursively expressed. Wittig's naming of the previously unnameable body insists upon making visible a desiring social subject, a lesbian subject. We can still learn much from her strategic use of language.

Notes

¹ The influence of Wittig's theorization continues to surface throughout the work of much feminist theory, as well as in narrative fiction. Judith Butler's important work in developing her theory of gender performativity (1990), for example, relies heavily on a critical engagement with Wittig's theoretical and narrative writing. Likewise, Teresa de Lauretis turns to Wittig in her psychoanalytically-grounded discussion of the lesbian body as the recathexed object signifying desire in *The Practice of Love* (1994). The importance of Wittig's work is also noted by the lesbian artists' collective Kiss & Tell in their book work, *Her Tongue on My Theory* (1994). And certainly, one can see the influence of Wittig's negotiation of the body as a site of desire in the narrative fiction of Jeanette Winterson, particularly in *Written on the Body* (1994), where the narrator explores the development of cancer in the body of her lover.

² See Audre Lorde "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" *Feminist Frontiers III*, eds. Laura Richardson & Verta Taylor (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993) in which she poses the question of whether or not it is truly liberating to utilize a master discourse in the project of resisting oppression.

³ For a fuller discussion of the ways in which science and medicine have constructed and manipulated female sexuality, see Thomas Laqueur *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the construction of Self through Stein's use of circular imagery in language, see my paper "Circle Games: Inscriptions of the Child Self in Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round*" *Atlantis* vol. 24, no. 1.

⁵ As Judith Butler notes, Wittig's identification as a 'materialist' must not be misunderstood as simply "a reduction of ideas to matter nor the view of theory as a reflection of its economic base...Wittig's materialism takes social institutions and practices, in particular, the institution of heterosexuality, as the basis of critical analysis" (*Gender Trouble* 125).

⁶ It is useful here to consider Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* (1990) in which she makes use of Wittig's linguistic experimentation and theorization, and proposes that gender and sexual difference are not a priori, but rather discursively performed, and thereby constituted, through the repetition of the "locutionary acts of speaking subjects" (115). For Butler, gender is not a noun, but a verb, the repeated performance of which constitutes a socially intelligible identity (25).

With respect to Wittig's work, Butler states that "the 'naming' of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/perceptual construction of bodies in accordance with principles of sexual difference" (115).

⁷ Although this paper does not interrogate the problem of translation within the discussion of discursive strategies for claiming subjectivity, this is not meant to infer that the translation of texts is a transparent operation. Much work continues to be written with respect to the complexities and often the failures of translated texts to adequately address the linguistic gaps between languages. See for example, the work of Pamela Banting in *Body Inc.: a theory of translation poetics* (1995), and Alice Parker in *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* (eds. Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope, 1993). My thanks to the reviewers for bringing these resources to my attention.

⁸ In the final chapter of her book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler provides a detailed and engaged analysis of the practice of resignification, specifically as it applies to the term 'queer'. Butler notes that "no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force" (227). In other words, the reclamation of language cannot be understood as a seamless event in which meanings are easily transformed, but rather the accompanying history of terms continues to influence the ways in which language is deployed. She is also quick to point out that the attending historicity of language should not preclude attempts to reconfigure meaning and power through the processes of appropriation and reclamation.

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