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# “XX + XX = XX”: Monique Wittig’s Reproduction of the Monstrous Lesbian

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## Introduction

The genetic equation of my title is taken from Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* (128), and this paper investigates Wittig’s deployment of the body and language in the “lesbianization” of the text. Through close textual analysis I explore the dynamics of bodily and linguistic power at work between the protagonists, demonstrating that conflict is prevalent and that power positions are not pre-ordained. A wider discursive form of power relations will then be analyzed, showing the variant forms of authoritative discourses which Wittig employs to expose the registers of medicine, religion and myth to be in conflict with one another and subject to de-hierarchization. Wittig’s lesbianization of these dominant discourses dislocates their claims to authority. She manipulates discourses to produce a trope of the lesbian body embracing multiplicity and flux. My conclusion recognizes the problematics of Wittig’s reworking of the concept of the lesbian as inclusive in relation to “real” lesbian identities, for which specificity has generally remained essential, whilst not discounting the political force of Wittig’s work.

Before discussing *The Lesbian Body* in particular, it is vital to comprehend Wittig’s use of the word “lesbian.” The terminology she uses to describe lesbians replicates and exaggerates that promoted by the heterosexual patriarchal order. For example, her collection, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, is infused with direct references to lesbians as “not women,” “for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems” (32). Elsewhere, Wittig describes the lesbian as “a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society,” as “run-

aways, fugitive slaves," "standing at the outposts of the human," "located philosophically (politically) beyond the categories of sex" (*The Straight Mind* 13, 45, 46, 47). These provocative descriptions are used positively by Wittig because this neo-human position "represents historically and paradoxically the most human point of view" (*The Straight Mind* 46). Indeed, the power of the lesbian is unique:

[L]esbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. (*The Straight Mind* 20)

Wittig is a severe critic of what she sees as the artifice of the categories of sex, the division between sex and gender being irrelevant, as she views both as ideological machinations. Her conceptualization of the lesbian possesses some surprising similarities to the work of perhaps the most contentious and well-known theorist of sexual difference: Luce Irigaray.<sup>1</sup> In a manoeuvre similar to that of Irigaray in reformulating a position from which women can speak, Wittig deploys hyperbole, parody and humor to redefine from the lesbian point of view the position already ascribed to the lesbian by the mainstream order. Unlike Irigaray's, however, Wittig's concept of difference is not based on sex or gender. The lesbian becomes a trope for the ambivalent monster excluded from the heterosexual system. It is worth noting here that Wittig's disavowal of the categories of sex and gender divorces her from notions of "feminine writing" or *écriture féminine*, as she states: "one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression," for it evokes the myth of "Woman" which is "an imaginary formation" (*The Straight Mind* 59).

Turning to *The Lesbian Body* itself, the text's appearance demarcates it as unconventional in literary terms. Structurally, the text consists of fragments of frequently poetic prose, of approximately a page in length, separated both semantically and typographically from one another. These are interspersed with eleven lists, primarily of body parts and emissions, differentiated

from the prose segments by their large bold capital letters. The prose segments are self-contained descriptions of scenes or events in no apparent linear order. They are narrated in the first person present tense, and predominantly take the form of an address by a focalizer to an addressee. It is unclear whether this couple is the same couple throughout the segments, or whether the narrator is consistent, as the protagonists are not given names, and there is no uniformity of characterization. Neither is agency stable: at times the addressee is the active participant, at times the passive. These strategies defy conventional literary categorization of the work into a "novel" and confuse concepts of "character" and "plot."

Such characteristics force the critic to employ a different vocabulary in order to refer to *The Lesbian Body*. The critical terminology I shall be using must be imagined in inverted commas, since it is not completely satisfactory and does not convey the full potential of Wittig's project. The word "novel" does not apply to a work such as this which distorts features of the novel genre, such as plot, character, and narrative. Instead, I shall refer to the work as "text," although with reservations, as this does not incorporate the visually disruptive elements of the work. Some critics have referred to the non-list sections as "poems," but I find this problematic, as the label again seems reductive and inaccurate.<sup>2</sup> The prose segments are discrete units of description, usually of a particular scene or event. They are separate from one another and yet build up a picture of life on an island apparently inhabited only by women. My use of the term "prose segment" conveys this feeling of simultaneous inclusion in, and yet separation from a larger scheme. Wittig's text also discourages the word "character," since there is little characterization in the form of giving names, in attributing specific characteristics or in consistency of behavior. The reader is never sure if the first person speaker is identical in each segment, or if there are two or more speakers, or whether the addressee remains constant or is different. The term "protagonist" seems more fitting, not in its literary sense of meaning "central character," but to be used equally of all participants in Wittig's text.

The problems associated with vocabulary for the critic of *The Lesbian Body* underlie a larger scale barrier concerning the dogmatic rationalization which the critic is encouraged to bring to her/his argument and perhaps impose upon the text. Discussing such a fragmented text in terms of a whole is problematic and contrary to the text's substance. Concomitantly, discussing the fragments as isolated components is equally misleading. The critic is left with no option but to use Wittig's own devices of maintaining a balanced relationship between viewing the segments both as discrete units and as part of an integrated totality. I have attempted to maintain this balance in my investigation of Wittig's deployment of the body and language in the creation of a position for a lesbian speaking subject. This has tended to result in very detailed analyses of relatively small portions of the text to unravel the intricate weaving of the language. This approach has proved to be the most fruitful way of understanding the text and its operational mode. From these detailed analyses stem more general implications which nevertheless substantiate the text's multiplicity, without, I hope, being too reductive.

A further difficulty arises for a non-native speaker such as myself, in analyzing a text in translation which is so overtly concerned with linguistic manipulation and subtleties. Just as many translated works are prefaced by the translators' recording of the problems and limitations of their project, so an analysis of such works must begin with acknowledging the difficulties of its trajectory. However, like the translator who is not deterred by those problems, but perhaps even fascinated and partially motivated by them, the critic of the translated work cannot be defeated on the grounds of the futility of being able to uncover, or even being aware of, what has been "lost" in translation. The relationship between the texts and the ethics of the project are subjects for another paper, and are not of major concern here. For our purposes, the benefits of translating a work and of studying that translation far outweigh the disadvantages of being unable to access a text. As to *The Lesbian Body*, the fact that one of its central tenets is to defamiliarize language and create a subject position from which the lesbian can speak her experience poses a challenge to its translator, David Le Vay. Le Vay's position as "an



eminent practicing anatomist and surgeon, [who] has abandoned any male chauvinism long enough to translate this book," is one of privileged knowledge of the medical terminology which Wittig frequently employs, and also a position of privilege with regard to language and subject position. The above quotation from Margaret Crosland's introduction to the Beacon edition is a self-consciously ironic testimony to this (7). Again, I do not wish to dwell upon the possible tensions between Le Vay's own position and Wittig's project, but merely to note their existence.

Wittig's text also challenges the translator, the publisher and the reader on the issue of representing language in typed form, most noticeably in respect of splitting the first person pronouns and possessive adjectives: "j/e," "m/on," "m/oi" etc. The English version can replicate the split in pronouns such as "m/y" and "m/e," but encounters difficulties with "I" by simply italicizing it throughout. Crosland states in her introduction that "the typographical implausibility of splitting our English monosyllabic 'I' is obvious" (7). Critics have questioned this "implausibility" existing in "our" language: Emily Culpepper suggesting that a crossed "I," one with a line drawn through it, would fittingly resemble a broken or cut phallus (Daly 327).<sup>3</sup> In quotations I shall be using the italicized "I" to remain faithful to the English publication, but fully concur with Culpepper's observations. Of course, this debate takes place primarily with regard to visual representation, as orally and aurally the words are pronounced and heard without disruption. This substantiates Wittig's presentation of the literary text as "The Site of Action," the title of one of her essays expanding on literature's function (*The Straight Mind* 90-100). The centrality of the pronouns to Wittig's project of lesbianization is described by her thus:

The bar in the *j/e* of *The Lesbian Body* is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of "I," an "I" exalted. "I" has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. (*The Straight Mind* 87)

Ambiguity is certainly central to the identities of the protagonists. Martha Noel Evans reads the protagonists of *The Lesbian Body* as the same couple throughout, but Jean H. Duffy is more accurate, I would suggest, in her remarks that "a traditional plot- or character-based interpretation [is neither] fruitful [n]or apt. ... The trials and tribulations of a single, identifiable couple hold no interest" for Wittig (Evans 187, Duffy 225). Instead, Duffy continues, the lovers "are representative figures who are constantly adopting, dropping and qualifying the multiple poses and personae of love" (225). Although the singular "I" and "you" of the text may be representative of multiple stances, grammatically they are used as singular and in dialogue with each other in a power-charged dynamic. Namascar Shaktini's data suggests that the protagonists rarely act together or share experiences, confounding interpretations or expectations of the text as depicting a harmonious community (*The Problem of Subjectivity*, Appendix B B1-B4). She identifies 3,284 first-person singular pronouns and adjectives and 2,712 second-person singular pronouns and adjectives, in contrast to 180 first-person and second-person plural pronouns and adjectives. Intrinsic to the pronoun "I" or "j/e" is this ambiguity of singular and collective which, as I shall demonstrate below, is perpetuated on the corporeal plane.

### Corporeal and Linguistic Conflict

The destabilizing of categories by the narrative style is co-extensive with the unsettling of bodily boundaries. The lesbiанизation produces a monsterring not only of the text but also of the body, as Wittig's protagonists at times incorporate one another, expel one another, tear each other, spill into each other, and metamorphose into or from animals or landscapes. The simultaneous singularity and plurality of Wittig's lesbian body, coupled with the dissolution of its boundaries, reflects a concern regarding the relationship between the bodily boundaries and society which is found in the work of theorists (from disparate disciplines) such as Mary Douglas, Susan Bordo, Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin. Mary Douglas's anthropological work has identified the role the individual body plays as a symbol for the body of society, so that when, for example, social boundaries are

threatened, physical bodily boundaries are elevated and secretions viewed as pollutants (124). Susan Bordo's more recent work reinforces Douglas's observations with regard to contemporary western society's regulation of the female body in its pedestalization of slenderness, suggesting that body boundaries come under scrutiny at times of gender role conflict (185-212). Julia Kristeva's work on abjection discusses the central nature of the regulation of individual bodily boundaries in the constitution of identity. Kristeva suggests that the child becomes aware that the effluences of the body must be controlled and the maternal rejected as it undergoes sphincter training by the mother figure prior to its taking up its position in the social and symbolic order (71-73). Although the focus of the work of these theorists is quite different, each illustrates the recognition of the significant role which the construction of the body and its boundaries plays in the maintenance of social order. The bodies of *The Lesbian Body*, in their repetitive exaggerated spillages and effluences, are emblems of disorderly disruption not only on the individual level but on the level of the society in which they operate. In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's discussion of the subversive potential of the grotesque body as a process of becoming—incompleteness and disorderliness—substantiates the appropriateness of Wittig's bodies to their function in the text. Wittig's reproduction of the ambiguously bounded body as a site of conflict demonstrates her recognition of the body as a forceful subversive device and her appropriation of this bodily function for her own purpose. Wittig's lesbian body is always already outside and nonhuman in her own terms and therefore a pre-manufactured site of social and ideological conflict.

The instances of bodily dissolution pervade the text and here my discussion entails only representative examples. The following quotation demonstrates the fragility of bodily boundaries when the addressor painstakingly peels away the skin of the addressee to reveal the contents of the skull: "[n]ow m/y fingers bury themselves in the cerebral convolutions, ... m/y hands are plunged in the soft hemispheres, I seek the medulla and the cerebellum tucked in somewhere underneath" (*The Lesbian Body* 17). Both incorporation and metamorphosis are evident in a further segment where the addressor sets about eating the ad-



dressee and we are given an intricate description from the tongue moistening the helix of the ear to the crushing of the bones, to journeying inside the ear to enter the mouth:

*I make an opening into the maxilla, I study the interior of your cheek, I look at you from inside yourself, I lose m/yself, I go astray, I am poisoned by you who nourish m/e, I shrivel, I become quite small, now I am a fly, I block the working of your tongue, vainly you try to spit m/e out, you choke, I am a prisoner, I adhere to your pink and sticky palate, I apply m/y suckers to your delicious uvula. (The Lesbian Body 24)*

This example concisely illustrates several characteristic features of the text. Firstly, it is ambivalent who is incorporating whom, and with whom the power lies. Secondly, the quasi-sexual tone of the language of intrusion and surrender is paramount throughout the text. Thirdly, the sadomasochistic implications are also frequently in evidence. Finally and importantly, the example does not explicitly refer to the sex of the protagonists, indicative of Wittig's politically motivated disregard for the categories of sexual difference.

Wittig explores the manner in which the body and language are used as forces of oppression and subversion. This is particularly well demonstrated in the segment cited in full below. The contradictions of representing an embodied lesbian speaking subject are in evidence:

*I start to tremble without being able to stop, you m/y iniquitous one m/y inquisitress you do not release m/e, you insist that I talk, fear grips m/e m/y hair is shaken, the soft hemispheres of m/y brain the dura mater the cerebellum move within m/y cranium, m/y tongue uvula jaws quiver, I cannot keep m/y lips closed, m/y teeth chatter, m/y arteries throb in furious jerks in m/y neck groins heart, m/y eyes are compressed by their orbits, m/y intestines lurch, m/y stomach turns over, the movement spreads to all m/y muscles, the trapezii deltoids pectorals adductors sartorii the internals the externals are all shaken by spasms, the bones of m/y legs knock against each other when you do not steady them you wretch, there is a prodigious acceleration of movement to the point where freed from gravity I rise up, I maintain m/yself at your eye-level, then you m/y most infamous one you chase m/e*

brutally while *I* fall speechless, you hunt m/e down m/y most fierce one, you constrain m/e to cry out, you put words in m/y mouth, you whisper them in m/y ear and *I* say, no mistress, no for pity's sake, do not sell m/e, do not put m/e in irons, do not make m/y eyeballs burst, deign to call off your dogs, *I* beg you, spare m/e for just a moment longer. (*The Lesbian Body* 27)

This segment depicts the effects on the addressor's body of the addressee attempting to force her to speak seemingly against her will, "you insist that *I* talk." The addressor describes her bodily reactions, both internal and external, in detail as being manipulated into spasms and throbbings under the influence of the addressee. An analysis of the syntax of the segment shows that the transitivity choices, who is doing what to whom, parallel the sense of the addressor being subject to the control of the addressee.<sup>4</sup> Seven of the verb phrases have the first person "*I*" as the subject, and seven have the addressee "you" as the subject. Of those which take the first person singular as the subject, four of them have material consequences and are intended by the subject. These are known as material action intention processes, which in this case are "*I* rise up," "*I* maintain m/yself," "*I* say," and "*I* beg." Three of those which take the first person singular as subject have an external cause and are known as material action supervention processes: "*I* start to tremble," "*I* cannot keep m/y lips closed," and "*I* fall speechless." Each of the seven verb phrases which takes the addressee as subject is material action intention, for example "you insist" and "you chase." In this respect, it can be seen that the addressee is in a stronger position of control than the addressor, as all of her actions are reported as intentional. The perspective is that of the addressor and, therefore, it is her perception that the addressee is in control and this perspective is transferred to the reader. The reader is dependent on the addressor being a reliable source and the character of the addressor is obviously not impartial. The addressee is in control of her own actions and those of the addressor, since the agent of supervention in the addressor's actions seems to be the addressee. The types of verbs used are indicative of power, as are their positions in the segment. For example, the slavery imagery becomes more explicit toward the end of the segment, with the

addressor calling the addressee "mistress," and begging not to be sold or put in irons. Concomitantly there is an increase in the second person singular pronoun as subject, "you chase m/e," "you hunt m/e," "you constrain m/e," "you put words in m/y mouth" and "you whisper them." The first three of these verb phrases portray particularly forceful actions in contrast to the weaker "I maintain," "I say" and "I beg" of the addressor in the same final third of the segment.

Having previously fallen "speechless," the addressor has words put in her mouth by the addressee:

[Y]ou put words in m/y mouth, you whisper them in m/y ear and I say, no mistress, no for pity's sake, do not sell m/e, do not put m/e in irons, do not make m/y eyeballs burst, deign to call off your dogs, I beg you, spare m/e for just a moment longer. (27)

The addressee has succeeded in forcing the addressor to speak, yet the speaker is merely beseeching the addressee to have mercy. To speak here is to be enslaved, to become subject to the control of the other. Although the words spoken are in supplication, the act of speaking signifies a victory for the addressee, and the addressor remains powerless. The significance of this act is multilayered. The addressor, of course, is the one who is speaking to the addressee, the one who is speaking the whole of this segment to her. Even when she falls "speechless," the addressor is telling the addressee she is doing so. This is due to the text being recounted in the present tense and taking the form of an address throughout the book. If the act of speech indicates enslavement, as this instance suggests, are we to assume the whole segment is spoken by one who is enslaved? This imagery of enslavement through language which is not one's own ("you put words in m/y mouth") is a fitting depiction of lesbians or women being forced to speak in the language of mainstream patriarchy. Wittig has made the connection between women and slaves elsewhere: "The perenniality of the sexes and the perenniality of slaves and masters proceed from the same belief, and, as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men" (*The Straight Mind* 2). The protagonist's aim to remain silent suggests

that she will not be forced into using a language which is not her own. The "community of equals" which Evans identifies is clearly not evident in this extract (206). Instead, the protagonists are in conflict with one another. Wittig might be seen as drawing in a representative for patriarchal heterosexuality in her depiction of the "mistress"/slave relationship in this extract, but in the fictional world of the text these participants are individuals inhabiting the island upon which the events take place.

This example has the power in the hands of the addressee, but just as frequently it is in the hands of the addressor, illustrated in a segment where the addressor lovingly pieces together the body of the other (*The Lesbian Body* 112-3). The segment which I cite below has both protagonists apparently under the influence of some power greater than themselves. The image depicted is that of the addressor and addressee being drawn down together into sand. As their immersion is almost complete, their bodies split and start to become fused with one another as they are about to die:

We descend directly legs together thighs together arms entwined m/y hands touching your shoulders your shoulders held by m/y hands breast against breast open mouth against open mouth, we descend slowly. The sand swirls round our ankles, suddenly it surrounds our calves. It's from then on that the descent is slowed down. At the moment your knees are reached you throw back your head, *I* see your teeth, you smile, later you look at m/e you speak to m/e without interruption. Now the sand presses on the thighs. *I* shiver with gooseflesh, *I* feel your skin stirring, your nails dig into m/y shoulders, you look at m/e, the shape of your cheeks is changed by the greatest concern. The engulfment continues steadily, the touch of the sand is soft against m/y legs. You begin to sigh. When *I* am sucked down to m/y thighs *I* start to cry out, in a few moments *I* shall be unable to touch you, m/y hands on your shoulders your neck will be unable to reach your vulva, anguish grips m/e, the tiniest grain of sand between your belly and mine can separate us once for all. But your fierce joyful eyes shining hold m/e against you, you press m/y back with your large hands, *I* begin to throb in m/y eyelids *I* throb in m/y brain, *I* throb in m/y thorax, *I* throb in m/y belly, *I* throb in m/y clitoris while you speak faster and faster clasping m/e



*I clasp you clasp each other with a marvellous strength, the sand is round our waists, at a given moment your skin splits from throat to pubis, m/ine in turn from below upwards, I spill m/yself into you, you mingle with m/e m/y mouth fastened on your mouth your neck squeezed by m/y arms, I feel our intestines uncoiling gliding among themselves, the sky darkens suddenly, it contains orange gleams, the outflow of the mingled blood is not perceptible, the most severe shuddering affects you affects m/e both together, collapsing you cry out, I love you m/y dying one, your emergent head is for m/e most adorable and most fatal, the sand touches your cheeks, m/y mouth is filled. (*The Lesbian Body* 51-52)*

The agent attributed the most power in this segment is that of the sand which is engulfing the couple as they are dragged down into it. The segment begins with a balanced sentence in terms of semantics and linguistics in which the closeness of the couple foreshadows the literal fusing of their bodies towards the end of the segment. The syntactic parallelism of the beginning and end of the sentence, "we descend directly" and "we descend slowly," emphasizes the enclosure of the couple. At this stage it might seem that the couple are intending to descend, as no external agent is introduced to suggest otherwise. It is only on reading the next two sentences that the reader realizes that it is as a result of the sand engulfing them that their descent is slowed down, and that semantically the couple is being enclosed by the sand as linguistically the syntax of the first sentence suggested enclosure, "[t]he sand swirls round our ankles, suddenly it surrounds our calves. It's from then on that the descent is slowed down" (*The Lesbian Body* 52). Any illusion of power which the couple has in the first sentence is thus quashed.

Transitivity choices throughout the segment illuminate where the power lies linguistically. Sixteen of the verb phrases take a subject other than the protagonists or their body parts, and seven of these are directly attributed to the sand. "You" is the subject of twelve verb phrases, all of which are material action intention processes. The body parts of the addressee are the subject of six verb phrases, all of which are material action supervention. "I" is the subject of fourteen verb phrases, four of which are superventional, one intentional and nine mental. Six



take the body parts of the speaker as subject, all superventional. Three take "we" as their subject, two superventional and one intentional. There are far more verb phrases which take inanimate subjects in this section than in the previous one analyzed. The addressee would still appear to be in control of her actions with all of her material actions being intentional. However, exactly half of these "actions" are those of looking at or speaking to the addressor. The physical actions she performs are of small movements often to comfort the addressor, for example, "you ... hold m/e," "you press m/y back," "you ... clasping m/e" and "you mingle with m/e." Only one of the verb phrases with the first person singular as the subject is a material action intention: "I clasping you." The addressor is in a weaker position linguistically than the addressee here as before, but both protagonists remain subject to external forces. This is further indicated by the use of the words and phrases "suddenly" and "at a given moment," where some force has predetermined when events occur.

To conclude this section, therefore, Wittig's text shows power being distributed in different times and places to various agents. Her text dislocates power from one central source, which contrasts to the way she views the patriarchal heterosexual order where the heterosexual male has constructed an identity which is all-powerful and self-perpetuating. The juxtaposition of short segments whereby the power dynamics alter from one to another, and even intrinsically, exemplifies the transitory nature of power in the text. It is essential for Wittig's project of de-categorization that power relations are not finite and that there is no ossification of hierarchies. The society Wittig depicts, and the means of depicting it, celebrates flux, shifting perspectives, bodies and language to produce a radical challenge to the attempted fixity of hierarchies in mainstream society.

### Discursive Incorporation

The preceding section examined how alterations in language coupled with innovative bodily representation permit a reformulation of the lesbian body. If categories of sex are produced by ideological discourses and are not in any way natural, as Wittig suggests, then manipulation of the discourses allows a

reformulation of those categories: "For as long as oppositions (differences) appear as given, already there, before all thought, 'natural' – as long as there is no conflict and no struggle – there is no dialectic, there is no change, no movement" (*The Straight Mind* 3). Wittig's belief in the discursive production of sexual difference, "the material oppression of individuals by discourses," leads her to recognize that the level of the discursive is where the challenge to authority must take place, *The Lesbian Body* being testament to this (*The Straight Mind* 25). This section examines Wittig's de-hierarchization of three supposedly authoritative discourses, that of medicine, of religion, and of myth, to demonstrate how her lesbianization operates on a larger discursive level in addition to the grammatical and bodily levels discussed above. It is not coincidental that the first of these discourses to which I refer, medicine, is bound up with representing the body and becomes a target for Wittig, as this illustrates her recognition of the intimate relationship between the body and discourse. I discuss religious and mythical discourses because they pervade Wittig's text, and her manipulation of them operates to erase heterosexual perpetuating ideologies which construct sexualized bodies. This section takes three juxtaposed segments of the text and analyzes them closely to demonstrate Wittig's forceful deconstruction of authoritative discourses.

Medical terminology is found not only in the lists of body parts but also throughout the prose segments, as the examples cited above demonstrate. In the lists, parts of an objectified body are laid open before the reader like a blazon. The use of the definite article makes the body parts both specific and general, for "the" can refer to one specific body or can be a collective determiner for any body. The reader's own body is implicitly included in the litany of body parts. The reader might therefore actually be the subject of the description performed by the list. He/she is invited to partake in an objectification of the body, and, by implication, objectification of her/his own body.

Taking an example of one of the lists, it can be seen that categorization and positioning are marked features, as it can be divided into five sections, pertaining initially to areas of the body. The list begins "THE BRACHIALS THE CIRCUMFLEXES

THE MEDIANS THE ULNARS" (*The Lesbian Body* 62). These relate to the arteries, veins, nerves, muscles and bones of the arms.<sup>5</sup> The next area which can be discerned explores the region from the lower back down the legs to the feet: "THE SACRALS THE LUMBARS THE SCIATICS THE FEMORALS, THE SAPHENOUSES THE TIBIALS THE PLANTARS." The following denote nerves and arteries communicating throughout the body: "THE PATHETICS THE RECURRENTS THE SYMPATHETICS THE CARDIAC THE DIAPHRAGMATIC PLEXUS THE BULB THE SPINAL." The description then moves to the face to denote the location of four senses of taste, sight, hearing and smell, followed by the more disparately located sense of touch: "THE FACIALS THE GLOSSOPHARYNGEAL THE OPTICS THE ACOUSTICS THE OLFACTORIES THE NERVE-CELLS." The final section is a breakdown of the blood: "THE GLOBULES THE RED CORPUSCLES THE LEUCOCYTES THE HAEMOGLOBIN THE PLASMA THE SERUM THE VENOUS BLOOD" (*The Lesbian Body* 62). What might appear as a random list of body parts is seen to be constructed as an opening up of categories within categories. This list is a depiction of a contained body in contrast to the unstable boundaries of the decaying, metamorphosing, penetrating and perforated bodies which pervade the text both in the prose segments and in other lists. Medical discourse which sets itself apart as the objective true approach to the body is represented in the text as the lists, typographically, grammatically and semantically segregated from the prose segments. In Bakhtinian terms it would seem to be the ideal authoritative language which sets itself apart and does not enter into dialogue with other types of discourse: "The authoritative discourse itself does not merge ... it remains sharply demarcated, compact and inert: it demands, so to speak, not only quotation marks but a demarcation even more magisterial, a special script, for instance" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 343). Wittig literalizes typographically what Bakhtin refers to here in his conceptualization of authoritative discourse. The list even demarcates categories within itself. It is shown here to order itself according to a rigid logic of categorization and separation.

However, this logic is shown to be a construction rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon, because the language is subject to multiple interpretations, as exemplified by the suggestion of love problems in vocabulary such as "THE PATHETICS THE RECURRENTS THE SYMPATHETICS THE CARDIAC" (*The Lesbian Body* 62). This string of juxtaposed words in a piece of literature might imply a repeated troubling of the heart's emotions in the form of love problems. The suspicion arises as to whether this is official medical terminology. These words are, however, according to the "legitimizing" medical dictionary, specific components of the body: the fourth cranial nerve, a type of artery, the autonomous nervous system and pertaining to the heart, respectively. The duplicity of these words is highlighted by their juxtaposition and blurs the boundaries between medical, literary and vernacular discourses. Medical discourse is shown to be subject to de-hierarchization and infiltration by other discourses, just as the classic contained body is subject to infiltration, decomposition and metamorphosis. Wittig therefore demonstrates that this authoritative discourse can be dialogic.

A further manner in which the vocabulary of this list subtly parodies the authoritarianism of medicine is to be seen in the etymology of the word "sacral." *Stedman's Medical Dictionary* defines this as pertaining to the *os sacrum* or sacred bone, which closes in the pelvic girdle and is "so called because it was believed to escape disintegration and to serve as the basis for the resurrected body." The use of this one word beautifully and humorously debunks the scientific objectivity of medical discourse by illustrating how the etymology of the vocabulary parallels that of the etymology of the discipline of medicine, exposing its origins in mysticism and superstition. The list is a fitting account of a lesbian body "beyond the categories" not only of sex but also of medicine's discourse (*The Straight Mind* 47).

In addition to debunking the authority of medical discourse, Wittig's text also destabilizes another major power, that of religion. Religious discourse is paramount in the very structure of *The Lesbian Body*. The Beacon edition has the text described on its cover as "an erotic female 'Song of Songs'," the Old Testament Book depicting love poems addressed by a man to a woman and vice-versa. One far from sympathetic review parodies Wittig's



redeployment of language in terming the book a "sort of extended, and extremely repetitive, Song of Solomona" ("Butch Telegraph" 5). The Biblical Songs have been interpreted by Jews as representing the relationship between God and his people and by Christians as the relationship between Christ and the Church (*Good News Bible*, "Song of Songs" introduction). However, Jean Duffy indicates that in more recent analyses:

The Song of Songs is no longer seen as an obscure allegory on the relationship between man and the church, but as a candid affirmation of human love and sexuality in which the female speaker is quite capable of taking sexual initiative. Wittig's variation on the sacred poem flouts the church's taboos on homosexuality, but it shows a grasp of the source's structure and spirit. (225)<sup>6</sup>

Wittig's blasphemous reworking echoes the Book to some extent in form, sensuousness and pastoral imagery. The Song of Songs also provides an early example of the blazon motif, reworked by Wittig in the lists and fragmentations in the prose segments, in its use of similes in relation to lists of body parts of the beloved. This concerns both the male addressing the female, for example, "Your breasts are like twin deer, like two gazelles. Your neck is like a tower of ivory" (Song of Songs 7. 3-4), and the female describing her lover to other women: "His cheeks are as lovely as a garden that is full of herbs and spices. His lips are like lilies, wet with liquid myrrh" (Song of Songs 5.13). The fact that the protagonists of the Song of Songs have been taken both as individuals and representatives is also echoed in Wittig's text where the "I" and the "you" seem to be simultaneously individuals and more than individuals.

A more specific instance of Wittig's attack on Christian discourse is seen in the segment which describes a weary protagonist walking along a road, falling down, losing consciousness, and being supported by women (*The Lesbian Body* 63). When she can walk no further, the protagonist lies down on a grassy bank and finds she cannot remember the physical features of the addressee. As is usual in the text, the reader is given no explanation as to the context of these events. Just as contextual knowledge is denied the reader, the use of religious discourse in this



segment reiterates a hierarchization of reader positions in that it depends upon the reader recognizing subtle linguistic echoes and being aware of their sources: "When *I* fall for the first time the women support m/e under the arms, with their aid *I* walk. Loss of consciousness flings m/e to the ground again" (*The Lesbian Body* 63). The words "fall for the first time" echo those attributed to a scene represented in the Stations of the Cross: "Jesus falls for the first time." These Stations, comprising fourteen scenes depicting the crucifixion and found on walls of Catholic churches, are further evoked when the protagonist falls for a second time and she is aided by women, both of which feature as Stations. Religious discourse is thus brought into contact with literary and vernacular discourse, as was the medical discourse in the list, and again depends on the reader's knowledge and awareness in assimilating the references. As the list questioned medical discourse in exposing its origins to be in superstition, the choice of echoing these Stations of the Cross exhibits a similar questioning of the authoritative authenticity of religious discourse. The Stations comprise nine gospel scenes and five from popular tradition (*A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* 498). The three suggested here, two of them depicting falls and one where women help the protagonist (Jesus fell three times, and Veronica wiped his face), are extra-Biblical in source. The symbiosis of gospel scenes, from the authoritative Christian text, the Bible, with scenes from popular sources, has formed a concretized fourteen-stage representation around which a form of worship has developed. This exposes the origins of religious discourse to be a fusion of discourses. The Christian claim to the truth of the gospels is made vulnerable in showing forms of worship not only to be originating from this pure "truth" but from multiple sources, thereby querying whether this "truth" is merely one form of vernacular discourse. The reader cannot find authentication by turning to the authoritative Christian text but must look elsewhere. By implication, these texts assume equal credibility or incredibility, as does *The Lesbian Body* in its own analogous patchwork composition.

This segment illustrates how the text's defamiliarizing techniques produce insecurities and ambiguities inconsistent with the claim to "truth" exhibited by an authoritative discourse. The

text does not therefore set itself up as a "truth" to replace that which it is debunking, but instead fosters an arena for engagement and exchange precisely because so much remains open to interpretation. This segment brings into question the authority of the speaker further still in the following quotation illustrating paradoxical logic operating between syntax and semantics. What is grammatically possible might not be semantically possible in terms of conventional divisions between reality and fiction. For example, in this segment, the body is described in the negative. The addressee paradoxically claims she cannot remember the body she is describing:

The gradually assembled features of your face do not take shape in m/y memory. *I* do not see the curve of your breast. *I* have no recollection of your arms your shoulders your back your belly. *I* am unaware that your hair when licked has a delectable taste. Your pubic hairs are not visible in their quadrangular fleece, your slender clitoris and hood prolonged by the winged labia are not to be seen. *I* no longer see your lungs your stomach your bones your blood-vessels. (*The Lesbian Body* 63)

This description does not follow conventional logic. How can the facial features be "gradually assembled" and yet not "take shape" in the addressor's memory, since assembling would seem to indicate formation of a whole, and how can the addressor claim to be unable to recollect parts of the addressee's body or be aware of its taste when she describes them so vividly? The sentence beginning "*I* am unaware that," followed by a statement of fact referring to taste, is a logical impossibility although syntactically the sentence is comprehensible. The protagonist is creating the body of the other whilst denying it.

This questioning of the credibility of the text's own discourse is paralleled in Wittig's use of myth, whereby semantic and syntactic possibilities are also divorced. As Martha Noel Evans suggests, Wittig reconstructs the world of mythology where fantastic creatures, gods and humans co-exist and metamorphosis is commonplace (211). Added to this are the retellings of specific myths with lesbianized protagonists, for example, Ulyssea and Achillea. Wittig frequently presents a nonhuman protagonist without introduction or explanation. One such example is to be

found in the segment where the addressor is torn apart and eaten by the addressee who is a shark (*The Lesbian Body* 64–65). The reader is initially in a position of uncertainty with regard to the bodily nature of the addressee, receiving a description of a body in partial allusions, but never sure whether to take the allusions metaphorically. The word "shark" is presented only three-quarters of the way through the segment. Thus the segment begins with no contextual references: "Fatal the day when *I* go to seek you in the sweet-smelling sea your gaze sliding over m/y shoulders and along m/y flanks. *I* approach you quite suddenly, m/y hand touches your blue glossy skin, a shudder seizes you from head to tail the water agitated furiously all round" (64). The "blue glossy skin" and "head to tail" imply an unusual body, but, in Wittig's fantastic world, it is feasible for the reader to assume this may still be a description of a human with exceptional attributes, as Wittig deconstructs boundaries between human and animal. Upon further reading, Wittig's monstrous lesbian here conjures images of bestiality and sado-masochism, since the addressor seeks out the shark and seems to relish being consumed by it: "[A]ready m/y blood flows in long red streaks visible in the water, it makes you all the more bent on m/y massacre m/y beautiful accursed shark" (64). The closing lines of the segment read:

You lash m/e with your tail in your comings and goings, m/y face is struck on either side, m/y hands no longer able to raise themselves to protect m/y cheeks, all m/y scattered torn fragments are gathered by you and frenziedly devoured, *I* see you silently relish some flakes of m/y flesh in your teeth, *I*'ve done with watching you m/y eater of ordure m/y most nefarious one m/y so disquieting one, happy if *I* can remain a reflection that disturbs your gliding through the water. (64–65)

The "*I*" of the segment therefore has an existence which is extracorporeal, imagistic and linguistic, the reflection referred to here, capable of seeing its own body being eaten. This image characteristically possesses multiple implications with regard to the relation of the self to the body as both subject and object and of the relation to an other/the Other as reflection.

To summarize this section, therefore, the macro-discourses which Wittig displaces are not finitely replaced by the discourse of *The Lesbian Body*. The discourse of *The Lesbian Body* is itself a participant in exchange, for to be otherwise would be to take on the domineering characteristics of mainstream discourse which Wittig so despises. Her manipulation of these discourses illustrates the conflict between them, as does her representation of the language and bodies of the individual protagonists. Her lesbianized discourse is comprised simultaneously of incorporation and defilement of other discourses in a move which parallels and is interlaced with her representation of the body of the lesbian subject. The defilement is of course positive, since it transgresses boundaries and opens up channels for exchange. The bodily and linguistic dialogues which result are not harmonious but conflict-bound negotiations for position.

## Conclusion

The author side-steps any accusation of sex-specific essentialism to a parodically exaggerated degree. Her trope of the lesbian is inclusive of all that is outside of the heterosexual system, all that is threatening to it, incorporating shifting power relations, unstable bodies and discourses. However, if her definition of lesbian depends upon being outside the mainstream, how, as Butler has observed, would such an identity persist should the objectives of the marginal be attained (128)? Marginal identities based solely on a relation to the mainstream are vacuous once the mainstream has been dissolved. For Wittig, what is outside the heterosexual system is a self-defined point of view not related to the mainstream, a point of view which, although currently a minority, does not need to remain so. Wittig explains this point: "[t]he minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject" (*The Straight Mind* 61). Instead it is a subject "whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (*The Straight Mind* 62). Wittig requires a revaluation of the terms "central" and "marginal," for nothing can be marginal to a center which is everywhere and has no bounds. In this respect, *The Lesbian Body* succeeds in lesbianizing men and women, gods and goddesses, as Wittig intended, and succeeds in



lesbianizing the straight-minded reader for the duration of the text. What once was marginal, defined negatively in relation to the mainstream, not woman, nonhuman, unnatural is also self-defined as having its center everywhere and margins nowhere. Lesbian as trope is employed as a textual device to destabilize and lesbianize the reader. The reproduction of lesbians beyond even the bounds of the text is the result of Wittig's use of lesbian as trope for a point of view. But, does this lesbianized world view bear any relation to the identity for which the non-Wittigian lesbian subject has struggled to maintain a specificity? Does this subject become dangerously engulfed by Wittig's monstrous lesbian or endlessly dispersed and diluted?

The very title, *The Lesbian Body*, provides a framework of lesbianism through which to view Wittig's text. I term Wittig's lesbian "generic" in that it shares with the generic "he" of the English language the ability to simultaneously incorporate and alienate its others. Just as the generic "he" may be viewed as a powerful tool of subordination and erasure under the guise of inclusion, Wittig's lesbian embraces others in order to attain and perpetuate its own power. The genericism of the term in this sense invites a reading which simultaneously upholds and debunks the specificity of the lesbian body trope in an acceptance of the characteristically alternative logic of Wittig's text. One is conscious, as is Wittig, of the freedom of the aesthetic which is not transferable to the everyday:

[T]he paradise of the social contract exists only in literature, where the tropisms, by their violence, are able to counter any reduction of the 'I' to a common denominator, to tear open the closely woven material of the commonplaces, and to continually prevent their organization into a system of compulsory meaning. (*The Straight Mind* 100)

Wittig's trust in the aesthetic does not negate the text's political value which lies in its exhibition of the mechanism by which an alternative logic may operate, thereby acutely challenging what she sees as the ideologically constructed foundational categories of sexed bodies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

<sup>2</sup> Namascar Shaktini is a proponent of this in her doctoral dissertation *The Problem of Gender and Subjectivity Posed by the New Subject Pronoun "j/e" in the Writing of Monique Wittig*, "A Revolutionary Signifier: The Lesbian Body" and "Displacing the Phallic Subject: Wittig's Lesbian Writing."

<sup>3</sup> This was brought to my attention in Shaktini's doctoral dissertation *The Problem of Gender and Subjectivity* (34).

<sup>4</sup> In the analysis which follows, I am indebted to Mills for both terminology and the illustration of the fruitfulness of transitivity analysis (143-158). The application to Wittig, however, is my own.

<sup>5</sup> My reference guide for the medical terminology is *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup> Duffy refers the reader to Francis Landy's *Paradoxes of Paradise* for an example of one such analysis.

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*WRITING*

*the*

*BODY*



**PAROLES GELÉES**

UCLA French Studies

Volume 16.1 1998



# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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