Monique Wittig. Courtesy of Colette Geoffrey
Monique Wittig’s Materialist Utopia and Radical Critique

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La pérennité des sexes et la pérennité des esclaves et des maîtres proviennent de la même croyance.  
[The endurance of the sexes and the endurance of slaves and masters derive from the same belief.]  
— Monique Wittig, “La catégorie de sexe”

The whole is the truth, and the whole is false.  
— Herbert Marcuse, Reason and Revolution

The essays here assembled, variegated in methodology, tone, and texture, are the fruit of a memorial conference in honor of Monique Wittig that was, in turn, the fruit of friendship and its traces. In 2002 Brad Epps, encouraged by his friend Carol Pavitt, a friend in turn of Sande Zeig, Wittig’s partner and occasional coauthor, invited Wittig to Harvard University. The dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Drew Faust (recently appointed president of Harvard), kindly agreed to finance the invitation. All was in place for a visit—to the very room in which the memorial conference took place—by a writer whose work had long dazzled readers with its conceptual brilliance, theoretical verve, poetic elegance, and political power. That visit, however, never took place: on January 3, 2003, Monique Wittig suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. Reeling from the news, the organizers of Wittig’s visit were left at a loss: as to how to respond to the loss of someone whom we had never met but had felt certain that we would meet (the arrogant or insouciant optimism of life); as to how to respond to Sande Zeig, so
close to Wittig; as to how to respond to a body of work that had been strangely quickened by death.

Knowing that every attempt to put into words this sense of loss is bound to all sorts of infelicities and failures, missteps and maudlin projections, overstatements and understatements, we turned to other friends, old and new: to Judith Surkis, codirector of the Seminar on Gender and Sexuality at the Humanities Center; to Jonathan Katz, then director of the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University; to Nancy Cott, director of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe; and, most importantly, to Sande Zeig, whom we finally met, after many an electronic exchange and more than a few telephone calls, at the memorial conference in which Wittig’s absence was everywhere present. It is just this turning to friends and colleagues that we would like to propose as honoring, in some small way, the memory of a thinker, an activist, and a writer who understood the importance of group efforts and collective projects beyond the petty isolation of the self and in tension with, if not indeed beyond, the power of powerful institutions, Yale and Harvard surely among them.

The ties and tensions between individuals, groups, societies, and systems are crucial to Wittig’s critical and creative practice. In the introduction to a collection of essays published in English in 1992 under the title *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* and in French in 2001 under the title *La pensée straight* (the title, of course, of one of Wittig’s most celebrated essays, first presented at a meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York City in 1978), Wittig, writing from her adopted home in Tucson, Arizona, revisits her work and expresses her gratitude to some of the women without whom she says she would not have had the strength to take on the straight world, its conceptual systems, its symbolic and material power: Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Paola Taber, and Sande Zeig (“Introduction,” *PS*, 12).2 The list of proper names, not unlike other lists in Wittig’s work (most famously, the list of body parts in *The Lesbian Body*), gestures toward a unity out of otherwise discrete parts and persons as well as toward a reconfiguration of dominant society by way of a “lesbian point of view,” in the sense that Wittig formulates in “One Is Not Born a Woman” (1980): not as some autonomous formation romantically outside heterosexual social systems or beyond the vicissitudes of history, as some of her critics have contended, but as a pragmatic demonstration in the here and now that the putatively natural division of the sexes, with its basis in heterosexual reproduction, is “in fact” artificial, that is to say, political (“On ne naît pas femme,” *PS*, 51 n. 3).3

For Wittig, the violently imposed reality of reality, its coercive artificiality, is axiomatic:
Heterosexuality is the political regime under which we all live, [a regime] founded on the enslavement of women. . . . In such a desperate situation, comparable to that of serfs and slaves, women have the “choice” between being fugitives and of attempting to escape their class (as lesbians do) and/or of renegotiating daily, term by term, the social contract. There is no other way out. ("Introduction," PS, 11, emphasis added)4

Between fugitive flight to an unfamiliar, as-yet-unavailable outside and daily renegotiation from within an all-too-familiar inside lies a vast yet restricted space of existence, ordered by a long-standing social contract in which the daily lives of men and women “naturally” and “normally” unfold.5 According to Wittig’s famous pronouncement, “Lesbians are not women” because they refuse to be defined in relation to men. In rejecting the natural and normal unfolding of daily life, in evading and/or renegotiating the dominant heterosexual order, lesbians reveal that life and that order to be oppressive and, in the process, exercise their own fractured yet forceful quotient of freedom.6

Although flight and renegotiation may appear to constitute two extremes, they are actually, in Wittig’s formulation, part of the same struggle. The “and/or” that we have taken the liberty of throwing into relief, of re-marking in italics, is not, in other words, a mere stylistic tic but a sign of a struggle that moves between refusal and engagement or, more ponderously, between radical utopianism and radical realism, neither of which is sufficient in itself. The point is important, for a number of queer and feminist critics have taken Wittig to task for being utopian (which tends to be tantamount to being “too utopian”) without always recognizing that utopianism is profoundly involved in realism and both, in turn, in a mode of materialism that strives to unveil and to ground the idealism of both utopianism and realism. Conventionally, idealism is understood as a virtual synonym of utopianism and as a virtual antonym of realism, itself in turn often simply conflated with materialism. Yet, from a materialist perspective such as the one that Wittig champions, the division or difference is not nearly so neat. If the idealism of utopianism is all too clear, occluding, in its excessive clarity, the material bases of utopianism, the idealism of realism is all too opaque, occluding, in its excessive opacity, the ideological framing of that which passes for reality.

For Wittig, reality as “naturally given” is a congeries of ideas whose historical force is such that the ideas—say, black and white in a racial register, or man and woman in a sexual register—are naturalized as real, purely and simply, that is to say, “self-evidently.” But the self-evident, like the regime of evidence to which it belongs, is for Wittig deeply suspect, if not simply false:
What we believe to be a direct and physical perception is but a mythic and sophisticated construction, an “imaginary formation” that reinterprets physical traits (in themselves as indifferent as any others but marked by the social system) across the web of relations in which they are perceived. (He/she is seen as black, and so he/she is black; she is seen as woman, and so she is woman. But before being seen in this manner, it was necessary for them to be made black, women.) (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 54–55)

Reality, at its most self-evident and commonsensical, is, in short, ideological, and realism, as the systematic rendering of reality, is an idealism whose historical force, or violence, is tendentiously pacified as the natural order of being.

For Wittig, there is arguably no greater example of idealization and pacification, of utopianization and dystopianization, than maternity, traditionally presented as the alpha and omega of femininity, as the most palpable sign of woman’s difference and, to loop the loop, of her supposedly “privileged” relationship to materiality (mater, matter, matrix):

Instead of considering . . . that the act of making a child issues from a forced production, we regard it as a “natural,” “biological” process, forgetting that . . . births are planned (demography), forgetting that we ourselves are programmed to produce children, when it is in fact the only social activity, “except for war,” which presents such a danger of death. (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 53)

Deploying such aspects of material history as the mortal dangers of childbirth and its attendant plays of sacrifice and self-abnegation in order to expose the utopianization of reality and the idealization of materiality, Wittig ridicules the “it’s marvelous to be woman” rhetoric that marks a mighty strain of dominant ideology and feminism (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 56). But even as she exposes and criticizes the utopianism of dominant reality, Wittig also rescues, paradoxically, the utopianism of another reality, one in which the division of the sexes would cease to signify, to matter. The paradox of utopia, there and then, is that it exists no-place (ou-topos) other than the here and now of oppression and suffering; in the words of Linda M. G. Zerilli, it engages a “no-more” and a “not-yet” in which “free acts tend to take on the form of necessity.” Further directed as it may be (though it may also be past directed), utopianism arises from the recognition or experience of suffering in the hic et nunc. So too its gestures of transcendence, which are not shamanistic mumbo jumbo, as some critics seem to believe, but the effects of a politically engaged and materially based flight from and/or renegotiation of reality.
as ever so “ideally” constituted (where the ideal is negative). Put all too quickly, utopia, as the imagined, desired, or anticipated disappearance of suffering, is that through which suffering appears, makes its way into material consciousness, and motivates politically concerted action to transform reality.9

In many respects, Wittig’s project resembles that of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: both posit reality as an ideological formation and as a negative ideal in the service of some rather than all; both aim for the abolition of the very categories or classes whose oppressive inequality causes them to cohere as categories or classes (proletariat and bourgeois, woman and man); and both configure said abolition in terms of struggle, conflict, even war. In other important respects, however, Wittig parts company with Marx and Engels and a lengthy history of Marxist thought in which sex and gender have figured little, if at all. Nowhere is the separation more pressing than in the arena of subjectivity, which, according to Wittig, Marx and Engels all but spirit away from those in whose name they purport to work: the oppressed. Deriding the Marxist derision of subjectivity as always already individualist and bourgeois (or, worse yet, petit bourgeois), Wittig asserts that “Marx and Engels reduced all conflicts to two terms” and that “Marxism denied the members of oppressed classes the quality of subject” (“Homo sum,” PS, 89, 60). Going further, Wittig claims that Marxism has had two consequences for women: “It has prevented them from thinking of themselves, and consequently of constituting themselves, as a class . . . by making the relation women/men elude the social, by making it a ‘natural’ relation,” and it has cast, via Lenin, every attempt to reflect on or to regroup women as a “class” in their own right as a divisive and diversionary act (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 61). Although Wittig bases her assertions on Marx and Engels’s The German Ideology and not on Engels’s Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, in which the family is explicitly cast in terms of slavery, her point is as clear as it is controversial: subjectivity is not to be derided, and it is certainly not to be celebrated as fissured and fractured, but defended and, as it were, “repaired”—not in the sense of a redemption of past suffering (which, as past, is impervious to redemption) but in the sense of a mending of insufferable social rifts in the future.10

The defense and future-directed, nonredemptive reparation of subjectivity set Wittig apart from any number of post-structuralists with whom she is often associated willy-nilly, as if fractures, fissures, splits, and divisions were always and only the stuff of liberation rather than the residue of oppression.11 In this, Wittig evinces more than a passing resemblance to Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and, albeit more somberly, Theodor Adorno, all of whom also defended, from within a dramatically reconfigured Marxism, the resistant potential of concrete individual subjectivity, fragmented though it may be under capitalism. Wittig,
in other words, is not alone in her defense of a dialectical interplay between a relatively concrete individual subjectivity and a relatively abstract collective non-subjectivity. For Wittig, of course, capitalism is on a par with patriarchy and heterosexuality, as production is with reproduction, and the concrete subject, fragmented still, remains that by which another social order, more equitable, just, and, yes, pleasurable might ever so fugitively be glimpsed. Wittig’s recourse to split subjects in *The Lesbian Body*, given graphic form in the virgule that marks each and every articulation of the “I” (“j/e”) and its attributes (m/e, m/y, m/ine), accordingly posits the exercise of subjectivity, the saying of the self, as a contentious and contested activity that is of especial significance for the dissonant subjects known—or rather, not quite known—as lesbians.

The split is not a figure of utopia, mind you, but of dystopia, that is to say, a figure of lesbians’ and other oppressed people’s situation in a long-standing reality whose “ideal” form, in and as the straight mind, is for them, and indeed for anyone with a radical sense of justice, intolerable. As Wittig states in the introduction to the English translation of *Le corps lesbien*: “J/e is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as subject. J/e poses the ideological and historic question of feminine subjects.” J/e is also, for Wittig, the symbol of a dualistic division of the sexes, of the imposition of a binary notion of difference as truth and value. The split, or virgule, is, in other words, the diacritical “evidence” of a viciously binary system in and by which men are (made) men and women are (made) women—with the twain meeting, over and again, in a romantically “free” reproductive copulation. Turning the heterosexist accusation that lesbians are not true or real women on its head, Wittig argues not only that lesbians are indeed not “true” or “real” women but also that they are not women at all, inasmuch as “woman” signifies, as already noted, only in relation to “man,” as its (or his) underside and shadow, as that by which “man” reproduces itself (himself).

Wittig’s contention that lesbians are not women, which is all too often the only thing that many of her critics acknowledge, does not mean that they miraculously hoodwink traditional history or that they occupy, as Diana Fuss maintains, “a free cultural space—free of violence, free of control, even free of social determination.” Nor does it mean, as Fuss also contends, that “the category ‘lesbian’ remains intact” and hence that it is impervious or oblivious to the violent force of history (43). Fuss’s contention that Wittig’s anti-essentialist materialism harbors an essentialism of its own (the essentialism of radical anti-essentialism) is undoubtedly compelling, but it is forged, we submit, on an inattentive consider-
ation of Wittig’s own nuances and caveats and, more bewilderingly, on an elision of the force of figures of conflict (the split pronouns, the countermythic recourse to mythical Amazons, the embattled calls for a nongenocidal destruction) that pepper Wittig’s critical and creative texts. Accordingly, where Wittig writes that “for us sexuality [meaning here, as Fuss notes, “lesbian sexuality”] has only a distant relation with heterosexuality” (“Paradigmes,” PS, 107), Fuss finds only the previously noted “free cultural space,” and where Wittig writes that “lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely” (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 63), Fuss finds only the uncompromised and uncompromising integrity — or intactness — of the lesbian.14 Overlooking such significant details as “a distant relation” and “for the moment,” and hence overlooking spatial and temporal markers that qualify Wittig’s argument, Fuss effectively accuses Wittig of a totalization that is, in many respects, of Fuss’s making.

A more attentive — dare we say, “generous” — reading reveals, however, a more ambivalent picture: ambivalent not in the sense that Wittig is unsure about the oppressive nature of reality but in the sense that Wittig is intensely aware that lesbianism does not constitute some utterly “free cultural space” or some immaculate integrity but, quite the contrary, that lesbianism is only distantly related to heterosexuality (within yet without its arrogant purview) and that it is for the moment the only social formation in which she and others can live in relative freedom. True, Wittig bemoans the fact that not all lesbians share her view of lesbians or, rather, of the lesbian, thereby revealing an arrogance (in the Latin sense of claiming for oneself) that has hardly gone unnoticed or unchallenged.15 True, Wittig skirts the issue of the disappearance of “lesbian” even as she advocates the disappearance of “man” and “woman,” thereby suggesting not only that “lesbian” is not indelibly impressed by the mark of gender (as if being “not woman” were not marked by the regime of sex/gender) but also that its distance from heterosexuality and the moment of its liberational charge are indeed immense. Interestingly, and in anticipation of an inquiry into the fraught status of the “relation” between Wittig and queer theory that is at the center of more than one of the essays included here, the sense of exceptionalism that animates Wittig’s defense of “lesbian” (Fuss calls it a “third term”16) is no more emphatic than that which animates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s defense of “queer” as resistant to “obsolescence,” indeed as “inextinguishable.”17 Of course, the sense of exceptionalism is itself a function — however distant or close, however momentary or enduring — of the very heterosexual order that meets and maligns every challenge to it as “exceptional.”

Teresa de Lauretis is, on this score, enlightening, for rather than resort to a rhetoric of exceptionalism and (excessive) utopianism, she understands that
Wittig’s work, and more specifically her claim that lesbians are not women, “had the power to open the mind and make visible and thinkable a conceptual space that until then had been rendered unthinkable by, precisely, the hegemony of the straight mind.” Anti-essentialist as Wittig is, her endorsement of lesbianism as contrary to an arrogant replication of the dominant and divisive order of difference is not perforce a covert endorsement of an immaculate essentialism any more than it is a wistful obviation of materialist thought. De Lauretis, who is unquestionably one of the most discerning of Wittig’s critics, recasts Wittig’s lesbian as an “eccentric subject,” that is to say, as “a different kind of woman,” one that not only deviated “from the conventional, normative path” but also “did not center itself in the institution that both supports and produces the straight mind, that is, the institution of heterosexuality” (52). Although Wittig would certainly wince at the notion of the lesbian as “a different kind of woman,” de Lauretis offers a compelling account of how Wittig’s radical proclamation—that lesbians are not women—was historically processed by feminists who had, by and large, taken the path of vindicating, even celebrating, femininity.

Wittig pushed, even shattered, common assumptions about sexuality and subjectivity, and advanced, amid a great deal of confusion, uncertainty, and derision, but also a great deal of conviction, urgency, and power, what de Lauretis presents as a potentially unending process of disidentification and displacement. Recognizing the importance of geopolitical provenance and biography without, however, making them simply “determinative,” de Lauretis, who herself is a transnational subject, points to Wittig’s movement between France and the United States as crucial to her understanding of disidentification and displacement and, ever so subtly, as crucial to misunderstandings on the part of a number of U.S. critics whose own national provenance, movement, and identification remained (and remains) either unexamined or taken for granted: the dubious privilege, one might say, of working less in a nation among nations than in an empire that would hold sway over other nations. Although Wittig’s work evinces, as we argue below, a tense affinity — via its equally tense affinity to Marxism — to certain aspects of the Frankfurt School, many of whose most salient members were also transnational subjects, de Lauretis proposes other, arguably less tense affinities to “the writings of women or lesbians of color such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith, and Chandra Mohanty” and hence to postcolonial feminism, amply understood (53).

Chief among the affinities are, as already mentioned, those of the Marxist hermeneutical tradition. Here, too, geopolitics matter. As de Lauretis notes: “Most of us, at that time [the early 1980s], shared a Marxist understanding of class and
a materialist analysis of exploitation, although in Europe that understanding preceeded feminism whereas in anglophone America it often followed and resulted from the feminist analysis of gender” (54). The ethnolinguistic precision — anglophone America — is important, because what de Lauretis says of continental European intellectuals can also be said of Latin American intellectuals, for whom Marxist thought was, and in many ways continues to be, fundamental to any progressive, materially engaged mode of critique. To note such widespread differences in intellectual formation — part, after all, of the differential functioning of ideological state apparatuses — is not to reify them in the name of some pan-national divide (continental Europe and Latin America versus the United States, Canada, Great Britain, etc.); rather, it is to note how place, language, and institutional practice impress themselves on thought, conditioning though not determining it. Moreover, it is to signal, or at least to suggest, that the transnational and translational plays of Wittig’s work — some of it written first in French, some first in English — are crucial to any appreciation of the dislocated, disidentified, and dissonant subject that Wittig at once defends and enacts, even as she aims for its overcoming. As Ann Cvetkovich has remarked with respect to the following essays, the differences between, say, Alice Jardine’s self-implicating translation, both literal and cultural, of French feminism (in an Anglo-American frame) and Robyn Wiegman’s decidedly more distant relation to Wittig may well be a function of their respective institutional locations in French studies and American studies after the landmark work of Judith Butler, who has provided Anglo-American scholars with a dazzlingly rich and sustained meditation on sex, gender, feminism, identity, and politics written originally and exclusively in English.19

The status of translation (and of the bilingual, multilingual subjects that it entails) is unstable, even, if not especially, when it is “self-translation.”20 The and/or that we have previously re-marked might serve as an inevitably inadequate summation of the inevitable inadequacy of translation itself: unstable, dislocated, disidentified even as it seeks, through the adequation of a word in one language to a word in another, an identical replication, a repetition without fault or fissure, without, that is, any significant difference. That search, a sort of righting of Babel, is utopian too, and yet it tends to go unnoticed by Anglo-American critics who, writing exclusively in English, do not grapple with the French and who criticize Wittig’s utopianism as if their own practice of reading in one and only one language were not in any way a “problem.” Apparently assuming that Wittig’s meaning comes across without a hitch, such readers, such reading practices, not only have implicit faith in the stability and adequacy of translation but also effectively suppress the back-and-forth crossings, le va-et-vient, that place Wittig and her
work at the crossroads of critical and creative configurations: feminism, women’s liberation, gay and lesbian liberation, queer theory, Marxism, post-structuralism, post-Lacanianism, the **nouveau roman**, and so on.

Wittig herself acknowledged the force of *le va-et-vient* in, for instance, the tense interplay between materiality and conceptuality, subjectivity and objectivity, in the comprehension of, and struggle against, oppression:

The operation by which [an oppressive] reality is comprehended should be undertaken by each of us: one can call it a subjective, cognitive practice. This practice is accomplished through language, as is the back-and-forth movement between two levels of social reality (the conceptual reality and the material reality of oppression). (“On ne naît pas femme,” *PS*, 62)

De Lauretis cites the same passage to bring to the fore the back-and-forth movement between Wittig and Simone de Beauvoir, famous for saying that “one is not born woman; one becomes woman.” In so doing, de Lauretis signals a less obvious translational play within the same language (French) even as she gestures to what we would here unfurl more amply: a translateral, indeed multilateral movement that understands reality, for all its oppressive sedimentations, as still open to reconfiguration, as not merely knowable and describable (what Horkheimer called “traditional theory”) but also, and more acutely, changeable (what Horkheimer called “critical theory”).

It is precisely out of respect for the complexities and challenges of transnational, translational critique that we, writing in English, have preferred to work from texts written in, and translated into, French. Like Seth Silberman, who leaves aside the published English translation of *The Lesbian Body* to delve at once more intimately and more strangely in *Le corps lesbien*, we follow Wittig’s emphasis on working through language (à travers le langage), not with the presumption of capturing her meaning in some pure, original state (we repeat: some of Wittig’s most influential articles were written and published originally in English), and less still with the presumption of discounting monolingual critics, but with an eye to something cryptically queer. As Sedgwick styles it, *queer* “is a continuing moment, movement, motive — recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means across — it comes from the Indo-European root -*twerk*-, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (xii). The working through language, which is more precisely a working across language(s), offers, then, an intriguing supplement to more straightforward renditions of the queer as a twisted or bent subject and places the accent on the act of saying and unsaying,
of writing, erasing, and rewriting, as it inflects conceptual, political, and material production, Wittig’s most certainly included. Yet, as we argue below, the cross-cut to the queer, and most especially to “queer theory,” is far from clear-cut and straightforward as well. It is along these lines, indeed, that the decision to translate “The Straight Mind” as “La pensée straight” rather than, say, “La pensée hétérosexuelle” or “La pensée hétéronormative” may be said to preserve and render explicit a translational, transnational meeting or crossing that does not issue in a melding or crossing out. Lest translation be taken in its strictest, most delimited sense, it is important to remember that Wittig understood lesbians, as well as gay men, people of color, and the oppressed in general, as always already involved in a translational act vis-à-vis dominant heterosexist and racist discourse.

The straight mind through and against which Wittig and the relatively loose amalgamation of writing designated as “queer theory” work may not be, that is, the same straight mind; in other words, and as a number of the articles included here make clear, there is no easy alliance between Wittig and queer theory — far from it. Indeed, where Jardine tends to see Wittig and queer theory as a more or less coherent unit at odds with a maternally positive feminism, Diane Griffin Crowder tends to see Wittig and queer theory, despite certain shared concerns, as largely at loggerheads; where Wiegman posits a relation, or nonrelation, of silence and indifference (going so far as to cite her students’ lack of interest in Wittig’s work as “evidence” of its preterition in general), Silberman remembers and reactivates Wittig’s literary prose by folding it into his own critical practice and into a meditation on queer theory. Interestingly, only Butler, one of the undeniable touchstones of queer theory, makes no mention of queer theory, choosing instead to read Wittig as a philosopher.

Yet, if the essays share anything other than their engagement of Wittig, it is a recognition of a historical, even epistemic, passing: not only in the more obvious sense of the author’s death but also in the less obvious sense of missed encounters, shifting fortunes, unfulfilled promises, nostalgic homecomings, resilient returns, quasi-melancholic retentions, and institutionally motivated “unrememberings” — many of which may well be more of the critics’ making than of Wittig herself. Striving to be agnostic as editors, we here note only that Wittig’s call for the destruction of the heterosexist system remains a fraught proposition even among those who seem to wish, desire, or demand something similar. Aware that “centuries of thought” (PS, 11) are against her and that even many of those who most want to change reality often invoke it as some reified, untranscendable horizon, Wittig states, as we have seen, that the “only way out,” the only truly
evasive act, is to “consider oneself a fugitive, a runaway slave, a lesbian” and “to destroy politically, philosophically, and symbolically the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (“Introduction,” PM, 11 – 12). Though some readers may be troubled by the implicit leveling of history at work in comparisons of lesbians to slaves (serfs and serfdom are, at least in the United States, another matter), Wittig’s project, her vision of a better and more just world, is structured by a striving for liberation and, as mentioned, by a turning to others, others who would not be constrained by the straightjacket of such concepts and categories as “woman” or, for that matter, “sex” and “gender,” two words whose disaggregation, so dear to those of us working primarily in English, Wittig derided as inconsequential if not downright deleterious to a truly radical transformation of society.25

Of course, Wittig did not live to see a radical transformation of society, nor in any likelihood will any of us, though she certainly did live to see the transformation, or at least the destabilization, of some of its most cherished concepts. However Wittig will be read and remembered, the essays here grapple in various ways with loss and remembrance, with memorialization. As the principal impulse that animates this collection, memorialization hinges on the notion that there once was someone who is no longer. The rift that obtains, yawning before us, spurs efforts to mind the gap and make good the loss, to find a response that, attending or not to the customs and inventions of friendship and solidarity, might do justice to someone as committed as Monique Wittig was to a truly just understanding of justice: beyond the constraints of “common sense,” “intuition,” and entrenched tradition. “It would be perhaps appropriate,” as de Lauretis writes in an important collection of essays published shortly after Wittig’s death, “to mourn her passing and honor her memory with a story, a fiction in the style of Les guérillères, an allegory after Paris-la-politique, or an epic poem remade like Virgile, non.”26 Indeed, as already intimated, Silberman attempts to do just that: to fold Wittig’s literary practice, as manifested in Le corps lesbien, into a lyrical-critical meditation on death: his mother’s, Wittig’s, and, indeed, everyone’s—each in its own way.

In the light of Wittig’s commitment to universality, the universality of death, though fraught with a far-from-innocent ideology of ultimate equality (king and chambermaid, lord and bondsman, rich and poor, man and woman as all equalized in the end), serves as a telling test to the discourse of difference that so many feminists embraced (and embrace) and that Wittig tended to reject as little more than a masculinist and heterosexist lure. Wittig’s insistence on calling herself a writer, “un écrivain,” rather than a “woman writer,” a sentiment echoed in Suzette Robichon’s obituary tribute, did not mean that she endorsed a humanist tradition in which the masculine trumped all; far from it. Instead, what Robichon
recalls is Wittig’s refusal to cede the universal to the masculine, her insistence on “universalizing a particular point of view [here, a lesbian point of view] through the generalization of a pronoun.” 27 Although Butler reads the obituary as lending itself to established humanist readings, she disputes the implication that Wittig was a humanist and, in so doing, seems to have reconsidered, in the dialogic back-and-forth that characterizes her work, her previous assessment in Gender Trouble that “Wittig calls for a position beyond sex that returns her theory to a problematic metaphysics of presence” (124), so crucial to a traditional understanding of humanism. Butler’s return to Wittig might temper, perhaps, de Lauretis’s accusation that Butler’s work “mainstreamed” Wittig within a U.S. academic context in a way that “mistook” Wittig’s radicality as buttressing a prescriptive, literalist separatism. 28

In a critical realm as laden as “ours” is with accusatory and dismissive infighting, such a tempering, let alone a softening, after the death of one of the “fighters” may itself be dismissed as utopian. Wittig herself was hardly a stranger to such fights, nor are Butler and Fuss, nor is de Lauretis, nor, it would seem, are any of us. The complicity of the logic of critical competition in a broader, more devastating logic of capitalist competition remains an open question, but within that general problematic, it seems that de Lauretis is not entirely without reason when she holds Butler accountable for “the relative disregard or condescension in which Wittig’s work has been typically held in gender and queer studies until now” (57). We would be quick to add, however, that where we part company with de Lauretis is in the affective charge of her assessment, which functions as an accusation, as if Butler, however “right” or “wrong” in her reading of Wittig, could have controlled its repercussions, as if the author of a work that became as influential as Gender Trouble could be held accountable for the vagaries of influence itself. 29 Attempting to temper the affect of accusation, we would submit that Fuss and others writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s also had a hand in forging a view of Wittig that, eliding the protocols of post-Marxist thought (which Wittig, as we have seen, engaged but by no means simply endorsed), missed some of the implications of her understanding of subjectivity, universality, and language as a material practice.

A leitmotif in all the essays of this special issue is Wittig’s relationship to feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, and, more tensely, “queer theory,” a relationship that we at once recognize and would yet complicate by way of a back-and-forth engagement with other approaches, most notably, as we show below, those of Marxism and the Frankfurt School of critical theory. To do so is not to discount still more approaches, such as postcolonial feminism, rather telegraphically men-
tioned by de Lauretis, or, more explicitly, an entire strain of literary theory and experimentation, especially in and around the *nouveau roman*, and whose most signal example is, for Wittig, the work of Nathalie Sarraute, celebrated in her essay “The Literary Workshop,” published here for the first time in English. Although most of the following essays focus on Wittig’s relationship to feminism and, more pointedly, queer theory, Wiegman cautions in her essay not to “re-member” Wittig according to our current preoccupations: “Let us not incorporate her into queer studies by memorializing her into the current habits of critique, or . . . use her again as a feminist weapon against queer theory, as if the only thing interesting about second-wave feminist thought were the tug of war it offers to every iteration of post-structuralist thought.”

Whatever the reader’s assessment of Wiegman’s assertions, we concur that the alternatives that she delineates—Wittig as anticipating queer theory or attacking it—hardly suffice. As several of the following essays bear witness, Wittig will continue to be remembered, and even “re-membered,” as one of the most compelling voices of the historical moment that saw the rise of queer theory, however close to or distant from queer theory she “ultimately” may “really” be. Accordingly, and in an attempt to complicate a debate whose major players (feminism, queer theory) have grown somewhat sluggish from overuse, we would like to flesh out, ever so briefly, what we have heretofore only mentioned in passing: that another player, one typically left on the sidelines, is the critical theory pioneered by the Frankfurt School social theorists. By making such a claim, we do not mean to deny the “obvious”: that Wittig does not address such thinkers as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse in any sustained way and, no less important, that these same thinkers evince little if any substantive engagement with gender as a category of analysis, even Marcuse, with his interest in eros, certainly included. Accordingly, rather than argue for any direct “influence” or “inspiration,” we propose that careful attention to Wittig’s deployment of materialism, which distinguished her from others in the feminist movement in the United States, nonetheless reveals significant affinities to a Frankfurt School analytics of social transformation.

Wittig’s insistence on materialist analysis; her attention to economic and political as well as linguistic and discursive forms of domination; her back-and-forth engagement of the particular and the universal; her deployment of a negative and positive hermeneutics of ideology and utopia; her defense of concrete subjectivity (albeit without the psychologistic vocabulary of Marcuse); her suspicion of pragmatism, empiricism, evidence, and “common sense”; her refusal of resignation in the face of a profoundly “unhappy” social reality (more stalwart, though, than that of Adorno); her “yearning for [another] normative totality” against and out of
the oppressive normative totality of the here and now; her creative reworking of myth as a mnemonic or, better yet, an anamnestic device against the naturalized myths of the status quo; and, last but not least, her repeated critical invocation of Marx and Engels: all suggest, ever so subtly, the possibility of viewing the Frankfurt School critique of Marxism as offering a historically intermediate “bridge” between Marx and Engels and a materialist thinker like Wittig. It is an intellectual lineage that, for all its fissures and factions, has, we believe, a good deal to recommend it: as philosophers of the operations of domination, the members of the Frankfurt School, many of whom were Jewish exiles from Germany, modeled a compelling alternative to the influential psychoanalytically inflected accounts of femininity-as-difference promoted during Wittig’s student days and early years as a writer in France and, later, in the United States.

We recognize, of course, that the proposition of “remembering” the Frankfurt School even as we remember or, as Wiegman would have it, “un-remember” Wittig may sound odd, dare we say queer, to more than one “queer theorist” and Wittigian scholar alike, for whom the library of critical references may be open toward the future but closed, all too securely, toward other lines of thought in the past. Yet just as Wiegman argues for reengaging with second-wave feminist thought, we would like to argue for a concurrent reengagement with critical theory. One of the few references to the Frankfurt School in the dawning years of lesbian and gay studies comes relatively early on, in Dennis Altman’s *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), in which the author puzzles over the dearth of attention to thinkers such as Marcuse in liberation literature. Altman wrote that the ultimate goal of “homosexual liberation” was not simply to live in freedom as a lesbian or gay man but to live in a society in which the division of a population into male and female, gay and straight would no longer make sense, a society in which individuals would be free “from the surplus repression that prevents us recognizing our essential androgynous and erotic natures.” Although we would take issue with the notion of an “essential androgynous” nature, Altman does make an intriguing “early” case against a reified homosexuality that would risk mimicking a reified heterosexuality. Altman’s argument has a classically Frankfurt School ring to it, inasmuch as it seeks equality not within a given constellation of available subject positions, but rather through a challenge to the adequacy of these positions as descriptive of a sphere of freedom in the first place. While the terms surely differed, Wittig also contested the notion of liberation written in oppression’s tongue, even though she would take the generally perceived “inadequacy” of “lesbian” as one of the strongest arguments for its adequacy in a contestatory mode.

Inasmuch as critics in the anglophone “world” tend to associate Wittig
with her theoretical essays of the late seventies and eighties, it is perhaps easy to forget that intellectually Wittig “came of age” in the 1960s, for she was in her late twenties and early thirties, and hence at the beginning of her career, when imagination was empowered, however fleetingly, on the walls and in the streets of Paris in 1968. Of course, Wittig was hardly alone, for critical theory, with its subtle if often contradictory and conflicted understandings of political opposition, its refusal of a reified real, its anatomy of domination, and, not least, its anti-ascetic invocation of the body and its pleasures as a means of criticality, made Frankfurt School theorists favorites of 1960s revolutionary thought generally.

Wittig’s first novel, *L’opoponax*, was published in 1964, the same year as Marcuse’s treatise for the coming revolution, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, which, tellingly enough, Wittig translated into French in 1968—with revisions by Marcuse himself. The two works bear, to be sure, almost no immediately visible relation other than chronology, but by the early 1970s, when Wittig participated in the first important public demonstration by the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) or Women’s Liberation Movement, the affinities—and differences—between Marcuse’s critical theory and Wittig’s own writing and political practice became compelling, though they more often than not have gone unnoticed. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wittig, in a series of essays whose revolutionary charge is perhaps best measured in the controversy and conflict they occasioned, began to unpack the heterosexual assumptions of feminism, or heterofeminism, and to dispute its reliance on a matrocentric, feel-good, “woman is wonderful” logic. It is a logic that Jardine, in a line that includes thinkers like Biddy Martin, retains—compellingly to our eyes—as a critical problem. Amid all the twists and turns, all the divergences and disagreements, one thing, at least, seems clear: a cohesive and celebratory concept of femininity, which “The Straight Mind,” with its emphasis on the lesbian, presents as a virtual lure, is hard-pressed to stand alone.

Wittig was central to the formation of a materialist feminism that traced its beginnings at least from Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* and included such key feminist intellectuals as the aforementioned Delphy and Guillaumin. Over time, their alliance or détente with other less materialist factions within the MLF developed into opposition. In 1979 hostilities broke into the open as a faction associated with the theoretical works of Antoinette Fouque, Hélène Cixous, and to a lesser extent Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, came to trademark the MLF name. The members of the faction, called Psychanalyse et politique or Psych et Po, foregrounded psychoanalysis, flirted with or even embraced separatism, and dedicated their work to
the rediscovery of a “femaleness” no longer conceived as being in the service of men. In claiming the MLF name as their own, Psych et Po sought, moreover, to appropriate the history of feminism in France to their differentialist perspective and, through a savvy use of the courts, acquired the legal wherewithal to remake the MLF in their own image. Although the MLF for a while papered over a number of doctrinal differences in pursuit of a common goal, by the late 1970s, Psych et Po, with its emphasis on an analysis of female difference, had created a crisis that split the MLF and forced all other groups to respond. Wittig, who had emigrated to the United States, added her voice to the materialist collective publishing Questions féministes, but that group soon split over the issue of lesbianism.

In contrast with Psych et Po, Wittig understood any theoretical or political pursuit of a transvalued femaleness as an inherently conservative position, for in promoting terms as dear to the status quo as woman and femininity, this dominant modality of feminism risked legitimating a belief in a “real” as unassailably factual. The best that feminists could hope for was, in other words, a reevaluation of the social valence of femaleness, not a refusal of the notion of this structuring difference in the first place. As Wittig declared in 1980:

> It is up to us, historically, to define in materialist terms what we call oppression, to analyze women as a class, which amounts to saying that the category “woman,” as well as the category “man,” are political and economic categories and consequently are not eternal. . . . Our first task, it seems, is thus always carefully to dissociate “women” (the class within which we fight) and “woman,” the myth. For “woman” does not exist for us; she is nothing other than an imaginary formation, while “women” are the product of a social relation. (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 58–59)

In this and other formulations, and in clear contrast to many of her feminist allies, Wittig suggests, we submit, a little examined or hushed, even “unconscious,” affinity to a Frankfurt School criticality. In contradistinction to the Enlightenment ideal that by-shining-the-so-called-light-of-reason-into-the-dark-recesses-of-oppression-one-will-necessarily-vanquish-domination, Frankfurt School theorists, like Wittig, suggested instead the myriad ways in which reason could become, indeed had become, a tool of domination, so much so that the subjugated could apply complicated and nuanced forms of analysis to everything but the fact of their own subjection.

For Wittig, feminism’s embrace of womanhood constituted precisely such an instrumentalization of reason in the service of subjection, what Marcuse termed
“repressive desublimation,” in order to signal how seemingly liberational concepts and propositions like sexual liberation could in fact serve the interests of repressive power. As Wittig wrote, and as we have already had occasion to note: “Having stood up to fight for a sexless society, we now find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of ‘woman is wonderful’” (“On ne naît pas femme,” *PS*, 56). Even the most liberationist propositions, born with the best of intentions, become repressive when they delimit a radical reformulation of the present social real by using terms that have historically been complicit with hegemonic idealization (i.e., *woman* in contrast to *lesbian*) rather than by inquiring how the constitution of that real is itself already an act of containment. Moreover, by critiquing the extant social real, and thus making it seem capacious and liberal in its willingness to embrace and cultivate those living at its margins, such criticism runs the risk of shoring up instead of breaking down authority. As Wittig knew, the celebration of the margins with the “positive” language of the center, far from destabilizing authority, might actually only reinforce the center as a beguilingly compassionate and comprehensive site from which definition, which is to say power, emanates.

What distinguished and distinguishes Wittig’s work was its fearless application of a critique of preestablished heterosexist and masculinist ideals to what her allies (feminist thinkers of the MLF) sought to describe as the ground of their political claim: feminine identity. Like the Frankfurt School theorists, Wittig understood the social not as a preexisting material *given* but as a construction, a profoundly mediated world picture premised in part on a violent denial of its ideological foundations. Such works as Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during the Second World War but not published until afterward, and Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) rejected a reified social reality, which is to say, a notion of social reality as being independent of ideology. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the real was historically determined and contingent both in terms of the forms it took and in terms of the ability of the perceiving subject to comprehend those forms. But rather than acknowledge its historical contingency, the real, or rather the witting and unwitting agents of the real, instead sought to naturalize and render transparent its forms, consigning the perceiver not to the active realm of constructing what was perceived but to the passive and politically malleable role of simply “recognizing” what was supposedly always already there. For the Frankfurt School, therefore, to be an agent of social change was to be necessarily coterminous with that to be opposed, and the key task was to pierce the veil of illusion through which ideology structures the perception of the real and to begin the slow, difficult process of denaturalizing it. But the problem was that thought, no matter how self-conscious, was still but an expression of the social
structures in which it occurred and thus carried embedded within it, almost by
definition, a failure of the imagination. As a result, the Frankfurt School criticized
“pragmatic solutions” to social issues as, at best, but incremental adjustments to
the fact of domination.

A refusal to allow the imagination to fail is precisely what motivates Wittig’s novels and short stories, including the one published here for the first time in English, “The Garden,” in which a fantastic allegorical tale of bodies, beings, guardians, and feeders offers a countercritique of the critical forces of violence, interdependency, domination, and resistance. In her pursuit of both a universal and a particular point of view, in her reticence with regard to the first-person singular, Wittig similarly denies the viability of any theoretical construct rooted in
a negotiation with extant social facts, understanding that to accept the privileged
terms of the current organization of the social as the necessarily privileged ground for resistance is to have already lost. It is along these lines that Wittig declared:

If we accept that there is a “natural” division between women and men, we
naturalize history, we make as if men and women had always existed and
always will exist. . . . we naturalize the social phenomena that manifest our
oppression, making change impossible. (“On ne naît pas femme, PS, 53)

In Wittig’s formulation, to embrace the M/F divide, to subsume lesbian into woman
(rather than, perhaps, woman into lesbian) is to take a previously allotted, which
is to say subjugated, position. Or as the more somber and elitist Adorno put it,
“Dialectics seeks to say what something is, while identarian thinking says what
something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly,
it is not itself.”38

It is here, once more, that de Lauretis’s reading of Wittig’s deployment of
“lesbian” as a mode of disidentification and displacement, back and forth, and
not as some facile, literal identitarian assertion (which is how it has all too often
been read) gains, we believe, its full critical force. Wittig understood that a form
of thought, of writing, of political practice that moved back and forth between
the old (call it tradition or myth) and the new (call it betrayal or experimentation)
was required to avoid the trap of “resolving” social problems by accommodating
individuals to their domination. In this, she mobilized a politics of the negative
whose (not so) distant relatives include key Frankfurt School texts like Adorno’s
1966 Negative Dialectics or Marcuse’s 1968 Negations. To negate a thought was
not to accommodate oneself to it but to strike out toward a new form of possibil-
ity. Not coincidentally, Wittig’s most influential formulation, already noted more
than once, took precisely the form of a negation: “It would be incorrect to say that
lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in
heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are
not women” (“La pensée straight,” *PS*, 76). In resisting those discourses, feminist
and otherwise, that understood sexuality to be a discretely private or minority
issue, Wittig did not accommodate the discourse and conditions of womanhood
but attempted to step out of the category altogether.

Notably, this negation is the obverse of traditional 1970s constructions of
lesbian difference that largely addressed themselves to that era’s faith in the possi-
bility of the recovery of an inherent “deep” femaleness when women were no lon-
ger called into being as subjects by men. Wittig’s language notably does not traffic
in women-identified women, women-loving women, or any other formulation of an
easy ideal of shared female subjectivity. Rather, negation enacts a rupture in lan-
guage, which is the first step toward promulgating a rupture in the category being
negated. Wittig was explicit: “To understand what really happens, it is necessary
to leave the well-beaten paths of politics, philosophy, anthropology, ‘cultures’”
(“Introduction,” *PS*, 11). Language therefore is inextricably bound up with this
process of domination, and any call for liberation simply written in the language
of domination could in the end only reify the subject’s subjection. Wittig there-
fore sought to wrest language from mere instrumentalization, to turn it back on
itself, and through a kind of dialectical negation, to work toward a linguistic for-
mulation that would not simply reify what she was trying to escape. When Wittig
claimed that lesbians were not women, she was engaging in exactly such a dia-
lectical relation, using negation to disinter the subject from layers of linguistic
entrapment while pointing to the need for transformation.

Furthermore, as Butler observes in her essay in this special issue, in uni-
versalizing her claims, Wittig sought to dissociate the subject from an “always
already” imbrication in an instrumentalized social reality that parades as *merely*
linguistic. “When [Wittig] say[s] that a work of literature can function like a war
machine upon the context of its age,” (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 120), she is obvi-
ously not advocating, here at least, *immediate* political intervention but a ver-
bally mediated universalization of a particular point of view. Rather than being a
gesture without precedent, and hence without history and tradition, it is one that
Wittig finds in Proust: “By the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, it’s done. Proust
has succeeded in transforming the real world into a uniquely homosexual world,”
that is to say, into a world only of homosexuals (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 125).
In reversing the marginalization and exclusion of homosexuals and in constituting
a homosexual world that yet bears the hallmarks of the familiar and the “real,”
Wittig argues that something politically powerful is being accomplished. “It is . . . by way of the endeavor of universalization that a literary work can transform itself into a war machine” (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 126). The ever so exquisite and subtle Proust becomes, in Wittig’s reading, a war machine that lays waste to the exclusion of homosexuals precisely by not foregrounding a homosexual politics in his writing but by depicting the world through his (homosexual) point of view. Such, Wittig claims, is the particular power of universalization.

Of course, such linguistic universalization was simultaneously a gesture of subjectivity and autonomy, a claiming of a particular speaking stance, and, not least, a performance or, better yet, a speech act. In seeking to remake the world through writing, through what Wittig understood to be the heterogeneity of social phenomena like language in which literary historical forms rather than sociopolitical individuals are at stake, Wittig engaged in a back-and-forth movement between the abstract and the concrete, the ideal and the material:

Words lie there like raw material at the writer’s disposal, just as clay is at the sculptor’s disposal. . . . They (words) are things, material things, and at the same time they have a meaning. And it is because they have a meaning that they are abstract. They are a condensate of abstraction and concreteness, and in this they are completely different from all other media that one can use to create art. (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 122)

For Wittig, words are anything but mere transparencies, hence her recourse to the image of the Trojan horse, the “perfect war machine” in which the force of meaning, furtive and surprising, lies in waiting:

Returning to our horse, if one wants to build a perfect war machine, one must refrain from the illusion that facts, actions, ideas can dictate their form directly to words. It is necessary to proceed by a detour, and the shock of words is produced by their association, their disposition, their arrangement, as well as by each one in its isolated use. (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 123–24)

The point then is not to rehearse some mimetically ordered *littérature engagée* or some hypostasized *écriture féminine* but to make words work by remaking them: “Every writer,” Wittig writes, “should take words one by one and strip them of their everyday meaning in order to be able to work, with words, on words” (“Le cheval de Troie,” *PS*, 123). To strip the word of its everyday, embedded meaning is, in short, a way to remake, in some small way, the world.
Wittig’s commitment to literary history and language runs across her commitment to social and political reality, and vice versa. According to Louise Turcotte, “Much has been written on [Wittig’s] literary work, [but] still too little on her theoretical and political thought.” Yet, in the present volume, Silberman, in a gesture whose conceptual and material import should not be underestimated, works across the literary-critical divide that Turcotte, like so many others, appears to take for granted—as if only a divisive mark of gender, and not of genre, were at issue. Whatever the case, and as if in response to Turcotte’s implicit call, all of the other essays, as well as our introduction to them, are much more focused on Wittig’s theoretical and political thought—though all, in one way or another, are redacted in the shadow of death. Obvious as it may seem, the preceding qualification is not without problems. For conventional, everyday understandings of death are a particular danger for a writer like Wittig, who strained to outstrip the familiar comforts that the socially integrated self so deceptively entails and that the finality of death only tends to reinforce. In our polite assent to eulogistic conventions, we risk perpetuating a symbolic violence that Wittig, as an author committed to fighting dominant modalities of symbolic—and real—violence, does not easily allow. Although Silberman’s, and in a very different manner, Wiegman’s essays may be exemplary in their refusal of the aforementioned conventions (the one by way of an intimate entanglement, the other by way of an extimate departure), the entire collection, in its very heterogeneity, bears witness to an understanding of Wittig that reaffirms, as it were, the and/or, back and forth, and across that we have thrown into relief in an effort to resist some of the more confident and lapidary constructions of Wittig as an essentialist, a utopianist, a nondialectical separatist, and so on.

In a time and place that are profusely unsettled, and in which oppression and inequality continue to mark the quotidian, to signal tensions within and without Wittig’s work that continue in the wake of her passing, and to do so through a gathering of essays that “have,” “know,” and even “use” Wittig in a variety of ways is, we hope, to do justice to Wittig’s appreciation of the subject as contested—even while gesturing to something else. To be here, then to not be here, is, it seems, prima facie evidence of a unified subject. Indeed, Silberman remarked that he would hardly be surprised now by a “prematurely” unitary and cohesive Wittig arising like an ironic phoenix from the ashes of her violent rendition of a split self, her je/or. In the following essays, as in our own introduction (itself the effect of a back-and-forth crossing of editorial voices), we have found ourselves in the shadow of such a phoenix, working with a range of authors with strikingly different understandings of Wittig. There is, in short, no consen-
sus here, no settled understanding of Wittig’s import, no single thread pulled out from a varied yet coherent body of work and made representative—if it is not, of course, that very heterogeneity that Wittig signaled as inhering in language as a concrete and abstract social phenomenon. Put all too flatly, in these essays, death does not write over or remake Wittig according to one or another of “our” contemporary preoccupations.42

The first essay, Alice Jardine’s “Thinking Wittig’s Differences: ‘Or, Failing That, Invent,’” takes the risk of what Jane Gallop has termed “anecdotal theory” to explore what Jardine presents as three life-changing intellectual and political encounters that she had (or almost had) with Wittig across nearly three decades.43 Along the way, Jardine offers her current thinking, from the position of the bereaved living, about the questions raised during each encounter. The first one turned on the question of sexual difference as she and Wittig debated it at a conference at Barnard College in 1979 titled “The Future of Difference.” The second one centered on the question of universalism as raised in an interview that Jardine conducted with Wittig in 1986. The third is a “missed encounter” that addressed—or would have addressed—the question of the mother. By way of these three encounters, Jardine pays personal tribute to Wittig and makes an intellectual and ethical call for renewed conversation and debate on these and other questions within and across feminist and queer communities.

Seth Clark Silberman’s “‘I Have Access to Your Glottis’: The Fleshy Syntax, Ethical Irony, and Queer Intimacy of Monique Wittig’s Le corps lesbien” is steeped, sometimes quite uncomfortably, in the kind of fracturing that Wittig visits, or rather revisits and lays bare, on the figures of corporeality in her fiction. His work is an active engagement with Wittig’s novel, which Namascar Shaktini discerningly calls “100 prose poems,” and proceeds by inhabiting and conjoining—fleshing out—Wittig’s voice through his.44 Silberman calls forth the split, refracted, universalized perspectives that Wittig encouraged, with no pretense to trying to “make sense” of Wittig from a distance. Instead, Silberman aims to incorporate Wittig precisely when the personal stakes are highest. Through the narration of his mother’s death, he explores the methodological insights of what he calls the intimate violence, sensual grief, and structural irony of one of Wittig’s most celebrated works of literature: Le corps lesbien.

In “From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory: Implications for Political Movement,” Diane Griffin Crowder makes a brief for Wittig’s materialist theory of gender/sex of the 1970s and 1980s, which preceded by over a decade the development of “queer theory” around 1990 and anticipated many of its key ideas. Despite this genealogy, queer theory, as noted, largely turned away from the mater-
rialist basis of Wittig’s philosophy, a shift that, for Crowder, has had some unfortunate political consequences that have become more evident over the past decade. Wittig called for the end of the “straight mind” that divides humans into a gendered caste system based on the appropriation of females by males; queer theory, in contrast, has inadvertently led to what Crowder sees as an individualistic call for the acceptance of difference that effectively leaves the system of divisive difference(s) intact.

Robyn Wiegman’s “Un-Remembering Monique Wittig” provides a compelling and at times irreverent take on the belatedness of memorialization, not simply with respect to the institutional face-offs between Wittig, feminism, and queer studies but also in its more general social forms. For Wiegman, remembering is what “we do with the dead,” and it tends to have a way of paying a debt that allows the living to win the argument in the end. In the process of this meditation on memorialization, Wiegman issues a challenge to queer critique to think about the temporality of its political desire and how it produces the past as the “failure” against which its own present can reign supreme. At the same time, the essay is a performance of the difference between institutional modes of political struggle and critique itself; hence, it shifts between sections that address the explicit topic of the special issue (i.e., Wittig and her legacy) and others that grapple with a catalog of struggles around race, gender, and sexuality in the institution in which Wiegman works and lives. The function of the division is to signal, graphically, the difficulty if not indeed impossibility of converging different domains of the political. In a back-and-forth movement of her own, Wiegman ends up honoring Wittig by offering a way to perform the splits and contradictions of writing and living, conceptually and materially, ideally and, of course, really.

With meticulous philosophical clarity and care, Judith Butler, in “Wittig’s Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View,” reexamines the social and political weight of Wittig’s universalizing of a lesbian perspective. According to Butler, when Wittig refers to “universalizing a minority point of view,” she does something other than offer a standpoint epistemology. The universalizing practice is compellingly paradoxical, because it seeks to render the categories of sex obsolete, and so it acts to destroy a given set of long-standing conceptualizations. The practice of universalization must be understood, Butler contends, along materialist lines insofar as Wittig seeks, through her words, to act on bodies, to rearrange the categories by which they are organized, and, in fine, to materialize a new set of bodies and their social relations.

Sandra K. Soto, in a short, moving memoir titled “Wittig in Aztlán,” offers a personal reading of Wittig as a professor at the University of Arizona and, more
amply, as a resident of the U.S. Southwest. Weaving together references to the natural environment, reflections on students and colleagues, and reminiscences of conversations, Soto recounts how Wittig mentored her, not in the usual sense of providing insight into the daily “politics” of university life but in the much rarer sense of honing an appreciation of the challenges, contradictions, and commitments of feminist practice. As if extending Jardine’s invocation of anecdotal theory, Soto, a Chicana feminist, offers a vivid, if inevitably partial, glimpse into Wittig’s life that addresses the interplays of teaching, writing, activism, and embodied experience (racial, ethnic, national, sexual, economic, and otherwise).

The special issue closes with two short texts by Wittig herself, one critical and one creative, available for the first time in English. “The Literary Workshop,” cotranslated by Catherine Temerson and Sande Zeig and with an introduction by Zeig, offers a glimpse into some of Wittig’s ideas about the craft of writing fiction, with special emphasis on literary tradition, heterogeneity, and what Wittig calls the point of view of after (somewhat specifically, the critic’s belated position vis-à-vis the writer’s before, but more generally, the position of any writer vis-à-vis the reservoir of the written). It is through recourse to a preexisting yet open “literary workshop,” for instance, that Wittig rewrites Dante (Virgile, non), Cervantes (Le voyage sans fin), Homeric epic (Les guérillères), the dictionary (Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes), and, for that matter, Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose pensée sauvage, or savage mind, is ironically invoked in Wittig’s pensée straight, or straight mind. Closer to Wittig in time and temperament is Nathalie Sarraute, whose cutting-edge, antipsychologistic writing Wittig presents as decisive to her literary practice. In marked contrast, and as proof of Wittig’s mobility across writerly formations, stands the short story “The Garden,” lovingly translated by Lorie Sauble-Otto. A disturbingly fantastic allegory of control and rebellion whose protagonists, and antagonists, are mysterious bodies and beings, it attests to the previously noted commitment to reworking the world through the word that characterizes Wittig’s fiction and that crisscrosses her theoretical, political, and critical production, too.

Notes

1. The first epigraph is from Monique Wittig, La pensée straight (Paris: Éditions Bal- land, 2001), 42. Further references to this volume appear as PS; all translations are ours.
2. The English version, which does not include all of the essays found in the French version, is The Straight Mind and Other Essays (Boston: Beacon, 1992).
3. According to Wittig, “What a materialist analysis accomplishes by reason, a lesbian society accomplishes by deed: not only is there no natural group ‘women’ (we lesbians are living, physical proof of that) but also, as individuals, we put into question ‘the woman,’ who is but a myth for us as well as for Simone de Beauvoir” (“On ne naît pas femme,” PS, 52). As Teresa de Lauretis recounts in “When Lesbians Were Not Women,” in On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays, ed. Namascar Shaktini (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 51–62, “the phrase ‘lesbian society’ had everyone in an uproar. They took it to be descriptive of a type of social organization, or a blueprint for a futuristic, utopian, or dystopian society like the amazons of Les guérillères or the all-female communities imagined in Joanna Russ’s science fiction novel The Female Man. They said Wittig was a utopist, an essentialist, a dogmatic separatist, even a ‘classic idealist.’ You cannot be a Marxist, people said, and speak of a lesbian society. You can speak of a lesbian society only in the liberal political perspective of free choice, according to which anyone is free to live as they like, and that, of course, is a capitalist myth” (54). It is just this constellation of criticisms — utopianism, essentialism, idealism, “improper” Marxism — with which we tarry in this introduction.

4. This formulation, placed at the opening of the introduction to the French version of Wittig’s collected critical essays, is virtually identical to the conclusion of one of her most influential pieces, the aforementioned “On ne naît pas femme”; see PS, 63–64.

5. The “outside” is the ongoing effect of a discursive and politically charged movement, aspiration, or project, not a physical realm that can be occupied, inhabited, and reordered. As Wittig so emphatically puts it, “There is no territory, no other bank of the Mississippi, no Palestine, no Liberia for women” (“Introduction,” PS, 11). By invoking real historical spaces that, conjured out of other liberationist projects, remain fraught with conflict — neither Liberia, nor Palestine, nor even the other bank of the Mississippi is entirely free to this day — Wittig underscores the difficulties, and necessity, of liberationist projects in general and of a lesbian liberation project in particular. Moreover, the social contract that Wittig examines differs, for instance, from that which is implied in Ernest Renan’s daily plebiscite of the nation to the very degree that, to Wittig’s eyes, it calls for an act of refusal and rupture rather than an act of ratification and perpetuation. See Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?” trans. Alfred E. Zimmern, in Modern Political Doctrines, ed. Alfred E. Zimmern (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 186–205.

6. Painful as the splitting of subjectivity — and of language — may be, it nonetheless signals a possibility of action and articulation in the here and now that is not available in Luce Irigaray’s assertion, or concession, that “every theory of the subject is always already masculine.” See Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
7. Translation proves, once more, problematic. In the French, the subjects are in the plural, and their plural pronouns bear the mark of gender as a mark of general or serial particularization: “Ils/elles sont vus noirs, par conséquent ils/elles sont noirs; elles sont vues femmes, par conséquent elles sont femmes. Mais avant d’être vu(e)s de cette façon, il a bien fallu qu’ils/elles soient fait(e)s noir(e), femmes.” Interestingly, despite the profusion of parentheses and virgules, the first sentence cedes something to the conventional masculine plural: “Ils/elles sont vus noirs, par conséquent ils/elles sont noirs.” Taken to its most rigorous ends, and in keeping with the final sentence, the first sentence might read—should read—as follows: Ils/elles sont vu(e)s noirs, par conséquent ils/elles sont noirs.” The diacritical markers, which Wittig here and elsewhere deployed to pointed effect, and which were omnipresent in a wide array of post-structuralist writing far removed from Wittig’s concerns, are fraught with a significance that is, well, lost in translation, where “they,” “them,” and “their” present no such divisive ambivalences but also, as it were, no room for the “feminine mark.” In “The Mark of Gender,” and/or “The Mark of Genre,” Wittig claims that “it is true that English does not give the mark of gender (genre) to inanimate objects, to non-human things or beings. But inasmuch as the categories of the person are touched, one can say that both English and French practice gender (genre) one the same as the other” (“La marque du genre,” PS, 127). Wittig is right yet not quite: both languages are marked, or “touched,” by gender (genre), but they are most definitely not marked, or “touched,” in the same way, to the same degree, with the same visibility (the spoken language, in which the presence or absence of an “e” is not “heard,” is an entirely different—or, to nod to Derrida, “different”—matter). This certainly does not mean that English is less “sexist” or “gender-biased” than French but that sex and gender come across in language differently.


9. Wittig’s understanding, and activation, of utopianism is not without resonance, even among those who have little truck with the “class” of sex and gender. None other than Fredric Jameson declares in The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) that “all class consciousness—or in other words, all ideology . . . is in its very nature utopian” (289). This includes, of course, the ideology of normal, natural, everyday reality.

10. Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (London: Penguin, 1972). In this work, first published in 1884, Engels writes that the family’s “essential features are the incorporation of unfree persons and paternal power: hence the perfect type of this form of family is the Roman. The original meaning of the word ‘family’ (familia) is not that compound of sentimentality and domestic strife which forms the ideal of the present-day philistine; among the Romans it did not at first even
refer to the married pair and their children but only to the slaves. *Famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man” (88). Wittig’s language is strikingly similar to Engels’s (which also includes a reference to the “ideal” of this very real social formation). Elsewhere, Wittig’s language approximates that of Jacques Lacan, whom she excoriates in “The Straight Mind” (“La pensée straight,” *PS*, 65–76), especially in the refusal of “the woman,” “la femme.” There are profound differences of approach, tone, and objective, but the differences do not entirely drown out the echoes between Wittig’s rejection of “la-femme” (“On ne naît pas femme,” 54, 58) and Lacan’s claim in *Le séminaire livre XX: Encore 1972–1973* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975) that “there is no The Woman, the definite article designating the universal” (“Il n’y a pas La femme, article défini pour designer l’universel” [68]). Of course, just as Wittig reworked Beauvoir, she also reworked others like Engels and Lacan.

11. Like the most prominent members of the Frankfurt School, Wittig does not see the future transformation and reparation of human society as entailing the redemption of the past, whose suffering, embodied in countless individuals, no revolutionary project can make good. For an examination of nonredemptive transformation, see Max Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Seabury, 1975), 129–32.


15. Wittig’s “arrogance” arises within the context of a previous, systemically embedded arrogance: that of the institution of heterosexuality. When Wittig bemoans that “certain lesbians, alas, . . . have given themselves the political task of becoming more and more ‘feminine’” (“On ne naît pas femme,” *PS*, 55), she expresses a frustration, analogous to that of other radical thinkers (feminists included), that refuses to validate a liberal politics of variety and diversity, the politics, after all, of capitalist production. One may certainly disagree with her assessment (especially from within a liberal framework), but one would do well to attend to its historical and theoretical complexity. It is in this light that Fuss’s critique of Wittig, published in 1989, merits reexamination. For Fuss has provided one of the most pointed and provocative critiques of Wittig’s insistence on the singular “lesbian” instead of the plural “lesbians”: “‘Lesbian’ is . . . an unstable, changing, historically specific category which all too often becomes reified and solidified in Wittig’s theoretical texts. Phrases such as ‘that is the point of view of a lesbian’ . . . or ‘a lesbian subject as the absolute subject’ . . . are troubling because, in or out of the textual contexts, they suggest that a lesbian is innocent and whole, outside history, outside ideology, and outside change.
To return to Lacanian psychoanalysis for a moment, Wittig’s ‘lesbian’ functions as a transcendental signifier, occupying none other than the place of the Lacanian phalrus” (43–44). There may well be no more damning reading of Wittig than this — and none more misguided. Not only does Fuss resort to Lacan to “out-master” Wittig (who memorably said that “for me, there is no doubt that Lacan found in the ‘unconscious’ the structures that he claims to have found since he had previously put them there” (“La pensée straight,” PS, 67)), she also elides the very tradition of historical materialism out of which Wittig is ever so tensely working. Notions such as the “absolute subject” and a particular point of view that lays claim to universality are part of a rich, if contested, practice of (post)-Marxist thought. They are not, that is, wholly of Wittig’s making — though the placement of the lesbian in the structural position of the proletariat is. Tellingly, Fuss makes no mention of Marx, Engels, or any other major (post)-Marxist thinker other than Louis Althusser in her book and therefore misses, in a manner that is culturally overdetermined (i.e., the general ignorance of [post]-Marxist thought among U.S. intellectuals) a strain of thought that is, we submit, “essential” to a more-nuanced understanding of Wittig.

16. Fuss, Essentially Speaking, 42.
20. For more on the translation of a French writer into French, on the translation of a translation, see Bourcier, “Wittig la politique,” PS, 27.
23. Others have not been so generous in their views of monolingual critics. Bourcier presents Wittig as holding that “unilingual feminists were so dominant that they had made feminism into theory and politics and lesbianism only into practice” (“Wittig la politique,” PS, 32).

24. Bourcier presents Wittig as emitting a warning: “Do not expect to find the original text or to subtitle it. There is no original; you translate a translation. What you already call the straight mind was written in language foreign to the French language and to the straight language. It was its very condition of possibility and the reason that Wittig escaped France. It is also why the text transited from Paris to Berkeley via New York” (“Wittig la politique,” PS, 27).

25. As Judith Butler puts it, “For Wittig, there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of ‘sex’ is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural” (Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity [New York: Routledge, 1990], 112). It is surely no accident that the sex-gender distinction does not hold with the same verbal force in French and other Romance languages as in English.


29. Zerilli, in the previously cited “A New Grammar of Difference,” also notes that “Butler’s reading served for many American feminists as the definitive verdict on Wittig’s work, which is stunningly absent from 1990s feminist debates” (91). But like us, she goes on to remark that the “dismissal of Wittig is not reducible to Butler’s critique, let alone caused by it, but symptomatic of the dominant problematic of feminism at the time, namely, identity” (91).

30. Marcuse understands eros and “the body” as ungendered or unsexed, for he comprehends genital sexuality as part of capitalism’s instrumentalization of desire toward a narrow erotogenic zone. True eros, in contrast, implies an unregimented and non-instrumentalized cathexis free of a genital reproductive imperative and a concomitant desire for possession or control. Of course, such a vision of the unsexed body in free-floating eros was itself a gendered construct. See Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (1964; rpt. Boston: Beacon, 1991), 73.

31. We take the phrase from Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 219. The full sentence, whose dialectic import is critical, reads as follows: “In both Marcuse and Adorno, if in different ways and to varying degrees, the combination of yearning for normative totality in the future and pessimism about its denial in the ‘false totality’ of the present remained potent.” We would extend Jay’s caveat about “different ways and to varying degrees” to a figure far afield from the Frankfurt...
School: Monique Wittig. And we would caution against the almost knee-jerk assumption that a normative totality does not subextend more than one antinormative project beyond Wittig’s, that of queer theory included (where the “normative totality” would be a totalization of its antinormative norms).

32. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Beacon, 1955, 1966), 49–50. Marcuse celebrated “the perversions” as one of the few modes genuinely resistant to co-optation, in that perversity refused the instrumentalization of the body in service to capital.


35. It is surprising that, her translation of *One Dimensional Man* notwithstanding, Marcuse is rarely mentioned in relation to Wittig’s work. In the collection of essays edited by Namascar Shaktini, a philosopher as “dry” as Kant figures, while Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School do not. The same, of course, goes for the present essays, none of which refer to Marcuse and only two of which, Crowder’s and Silberman’s, engage the feminist materialism developed by Delphy, Guillaumin, Mathieu, and others. The players in the “debate” on Wittig are, we submit, considerably more diverse than has often been recognized.


40. Seth Silberman, e-mail message to Epps, February 3, 2007.

41. The authors would like to extend a special note of thanks to Sande Zeig for her movingly dialogic role in this “introduction” to a memorial issue on Monique Wittig.

42. Zerilli, through Hannah Arendt, also examines the problematic purview of “we,” “us,” and “our” in and around Wittig. According to Zerilli, “[F]or Wittig, the problem is how to articulate the emergence of the ‘we’ as something constituted by a free act, that is, without naturalizing or predetermining its appearance in the possible, in the past. . . . Not only is the ‘we’ (the elles of *Les guérillères*) not the reemergence of a collective subject once unmarked by oppression, but it is also not reducible to or merely continuous with the subject that achieves liberation from oppression, for this liberation is not ever achieved once and for all” (“New Grammar of Difference,” 103).
Wittig’s inventions are well known to her readers. They include incursions not only in the realm of style, form, and syntax but also in that of semantics, as with the word cyprine, which Namascar Shaktini proposes that we bring into the English language; see Shaktini’s “Introduction,” in On Monique Wittig, 5. Regarding Wittig’s theory and practice of invention, Zerilli writes: “Freedom emerges not through the rememoration of the past but through invention” (“New Grammar of Difference,” 102).


See Monique Wittig, Virgile, non (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985); Wittig, Le voyage sans fin, in Vlasta (1985); Wittig, Les guérillères (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969); and Wittig, with Sande Zeig, Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes (Paris: Grasset, 1976). The rewritings also include, as de Lauretis notes, the bildungsroman (L’opoponax) and the satire (Paris- la-politique et autres histoires) (58). For more on the role of irony in Wittig’s writing, see Bourcier, “Wittig la politique,” PS, 37.