

WITTIG'S MATERIAL PRACTICE

Universalizing a Minority Point of View

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*I*t is not easy to know how to read Monique Wittig's assertion that a text by a minority writer is effective only if it succeeds in making the minority point of view universal. Perhaps there is something called, for instance, a lesbian point of view, that in being universalized is being legislated to everyone. The consequence would not be that everyone is henceforth a lesbian, or even that everyone is henceforth lesbianized—whatever that might mean. The task is, rather, to establish a minority point of view that can sustain or bear a universal perspective. Of course, it is not immediately clear in what this universal perspective might consist and what it means to “bear” it, but let us consider for a moment how this works, if it works.

There are, of course, traditions within philosophy that call for a position characterized as a concrete universal (Hegel) or a singular universal (Kierkegaard), and these seem to suggest only that the subject is at once situated and generalized, and that a dual perspective is occasioned as a consequence. Sometimes the dual perspective can be occupied without conflict, as is eventually the case with Hegel, but sometimes it is lived as a contradiction or paradox, as it is with Kierkegaard. If the conjunction between the universal and the particular is a smooth one, then one can say, with ease, “Yes, I am a lesbian, but I am also a human, and I speak from both positions.” In this case, the particular adds to the universal or specifies it, but does not produce a problem for the universal as such. This is not Wittig's claim, since the universalizing of the particular that Wittig seeks is one that poses a very serious problem for the universal, as it has been traditionally understood.

Could it be that Wittig is putting forth a standpoint epistemology, a way to see and describe the world from a particular point of view that nonetheless becomes authoritative over time? Could it be that the truth of the social structure

is comprehensible as a whole only from the position of oppression? To answer these questions, we have to understand what Wittig means by *universalizing*. What kind of action is this? I have already offered a few mistaken formulations in an effort to find out what it means. For instance, if we take universalizing a point of view to be *legislating* the point of view, then we have done nothing more than oppose a dominant point of view that legislates itself as the universal with a minority one that does the same; the logic remains the same, and nothing changes, though some groups have changed places. At the end of *Paris-la-politique*, Wittig writes: “Neither gods nor goddesses; neither masters nor mistresses.”¹ Wittig here signals that whatever reversals of power take place, it will not do simply to reverse positions of power without radically changing the framework that configures power relations themselves. Something fracturing, if not brutal, must happen to the framework itself. Paradoxically perhaps, it is this nihilating exercise that is undertaken by the process, the action, of universalization. For instance, in “The Mark of Gender” Wittig writes:

In *Les Guérillères*, I try to universalize the point of view of *elles* [feminine plural]. The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language. I therefore set up *elles* in the text as the absolute subject of the world. To succeed textually, I needed to adopt some very draconian measures, such as to eliminate, at least in the first two parts, he (*il*) or they-he (*ils*). I wanted to produce a shock for the reader entering a text in which *elles* by its unique presence constitutes an assault, yes, even for female readers.²

To universalize, then, means first of all to render categories of sex obsolete in language. Wittig uses the plural feminine, and by using it precisely in the way that she describes, the categories of sex can no longer function. It is unclear whether the categories can no longer function in the old way (but may be open to a new way) or whether they can no longer function ever again—whether, that is, they are obsolete. But *obsolete* is a strong word, both in English and in French. To universalize means secondly to set up the feminine plural as an absolute subject. As absolute, the subject makes the world, finds the world reflected in her own image, becomes the foundation and guarantee of that world. Of course, Wittig does this *textually*, which means that there is still some further thinking to do on the relation of this textual action, this assault, to the project of a normative political stance. For the moment, let us take stock. To “universalize” the minority position, in this case the feminine and the lesbian, is to pluralize the feminine and the les-

bian, to render existing categories of sex obsolete, to set up the plural feminine as an absolute subject, to produce a shock for the reader, any reader, and to conduct an assault of some kind. None of these meanings is compatible with setting up a new hegemony, but all of them are associated with fracturing and even destroying existing categories of sex. Tentatively, then, we can conclude that to universalize a minority point of view is neither to legislate that point of view nor to redescribe the world authoritatively from that point of view; it is, rather, to launch an assault on the basic categories of sex, ones that include easily universalized precepts: culture, society, the body, the structural unconscious, the exchange of women, and the very categories of men, women, and sexuality.

Let me back up momentarily, if only to consider whether Wittig really does not want to redescribe the world authoritatively from a minority point of view. In a sense, that is close to what she claims for her project. In "The Mark of Gender," she cites Marx and Engels from *The German Ideology* in order to seize the claim that each new class must represent its own class interest as the common interest, and that this class, in its specificity, must "give the form of universality to its thought." Wittig understands that there is something of a mistake here: a representation of one's own class position as if it were common, when one knows well that most people would refuse the representation and articulate their interests in a different way. But "representation" here is not meant to be understood as democratic representation. A minoritarian point of view that universalizes itself does not pretend to describe everyone else's perspective and interests; it is not representative in that sense, although it can say that it represents the "objective" interest of all people, even if some of them do not quite recognize it. To represent, though, in the sense that Wittig finds useful is something other than registering the stated interests of others in a loyal way. To represent is not to describe existing reality or to correspond to existing points of view or existing interests. On the contrary, it *posits* interests and positions that do not yet exist, setting them up, founding them, and is thus "futural," if not performative, in its aspirations and effects.

We might say that a new kind of reality is imagined, and that would be simple enough to understand. But Wittig's point is stronger, since the language that effectively assaults the taken-for-granted conceptualization of things actively brings about a different reality, posits a new reality, and, in that positing, helps facilitate its possibility. And whereas one might say that Wittig is but a textualist, believing in the avant-garde presumption that rearranging language rearranges reality, it is important to remember that she is also a materialist and that she does not accept a distinction between the textual and the material in the last instance. Her aim is to act on a reader, and to act on a reader's preestablished understand-

ing of language by instating a different language, one that wages war against a set of dominant conceptualizations. Her hope is that a reader will be shocked and assaulted, so that the very conceptual framework by which we proceed politically will be undermined in the course of reading. If the form of universality can be given to, say, lesbian thought, or if lesbian thought is presented as the only reasonable thought, the only universally valid one, then something happens not just to universality itself, or to reasonableness itself, but to the necessary modes of their presentation. Indeed, here another crucial point comes into the clear: a universal and reasonable perspective is established not by thought alone; it has to be *presented in some way*. The very possibility of “universality” and “reasonableness” depends upon a presentation so that, strictly speaking, they do not come to exist apart from the presentation that bears them; to “bear” them, moreover, is not to be an accidental vehicle for their articulation but to constitute a precondition of their existence. The universal depends, then, on being presented in particular ways in order to appear valid, and validity itself depends on this presentation as well. Consequently, any shift in that presentation produces a shock because suddenly we see that the universal is not abstract and free-floating apart from any media, which means as well that the universal is not purely formal. Rather, the universal depends fundamentally upon its appearance in certain forms, that is, its presentation under certain kinds of descriptions. Further, the categories of sex determine in advance whose perspective will qualify as universal and whose will not.

Thus, to universalize the minority point of view in relation to sexual categorization is precisely to dethrone the presumptive place of masculinity as the precondition for the articulation of the universal itself. To universalize in this sense is not only to shock but also to assault, to wage an assault precisely on that gendered presumption of universality. To universalize is to act upon the sensibility—and the body—of the reader so that a fundamental disorientation occurs at the level of our basic sexual categories. To universalize, then, is a *material* action, an action on the body, an exposure that shows that the theories of sexuality and the theories of culture that act upon us were never merely formal; they are modes of knowing, but modes of impingement as well, and their effect is to constrain our bodily lives. In this respect, then, the relation between theory and the body is inextricable and insurmountable. Theory does not constitute an abstraction from the body but is, rather, what acts upon the body, articulating its contour, morphology, and legible categorization. To assault the theory that does this is not to assault theory in general; rather, it is to devise a theoretical action of a politically consequential sort. This would be the simultaneously theoretical and material action of words that assault the dominant order (it is important to remember that materialism is a theory).

Before we move to understanding this last notion, though, let us return to the question of what it means to universalize a minority point of view. First of all, such a universalization is paradoxical, since the universalization of lesbian, for instance, will nullify the relevance of the category of women. If we thought we understood that lesbians were women who more or less conduct their sexual lives with other women, we have misunderstood what it is to be a lesbian. For Wittig, “woman”—and even sometimes the plural “women”—is a category that belongs to the “social contract,” which “is heterosexuality” (*SM*, 41). This means that the category has been devised and implemented to keep the presumptive status of heterosexuality in its place at the foundation of culture. That category must be assaulted and nullified, rendered obsolete, if we are to understand what it means to be a lesbian. A lesbian, for Wittig, is one who conducts the nullification of the category of gender, and she does this, as it were, by universalizing her perspective as a minority. In “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” Wittig clarifies that “gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general.”³ The “masculine” already occupies and bears the general, the universalizable. And so it is by laying siege to universalization that Wittig conducts her assault on the very presumption that the masculine is the general. Another way to say this is that the masculine is the specific form of appearance through which the universal is made known. Suddenly, though, the universal proves no longer to depend upon that morphology of the masculine in order to appear. Wittig writes, “Djuna Barnes cancels out the genders by making them obsolete. I find it necessary to suppress them. That is the point of view of a lesbian” (*SM*, 61). Such is, in fact, the active effect of this point of view, the performative and material effect, we might say, of its universalization. For a minority to adopt the point of view of the universal is thus to seize language and rework its power. This use of language is materialist because it acts on bodies and on prior discourse. It refutes the abstract and formal character of universality in favor of an understanding of universality as a point of view conditioned by a sexual category, that is, appearing through a sexual category that goes unmarked. This understanding is *materialist* insofar as it relocates formal truths as effects of positions of power, and also because it acts upon the very language that acts upon the body.

Let us try to understand in what way this language acts upon the body:

One, *on* lends itself to the unique experience of all locutors who, when saying I, can reappropriate the whole language and reorganize the world from

their point of view. I did not hide the female characters under male patronyms to make them look more universal, and nevertheless, if I believe what Claude Simon wrote, the attempt at universalization succeeded. He wrote, speaking about what happened to the main character in *The Opoponax*, a little girl: "I see, I breathe, I chew, I feel through her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her skin. . . . I become childhood." (*SM*, 84)

Important here in the rendition that Wittig supplies of Claude Simon's reading of Wittig's writing is the successive amplification of the readerly "I." The reader, who is separate from the text, is nevertheless altered in her subjectivity or, more precisely, in the identificatory and referential range of the first-person pronoun. "I see, I breathe, I chew"—this seems to mean that the reader sees and breathes and chews *as if* the reader were the character. But Wittig asserts something stronger. The "I" of the reader is amplified and transported in the course of the reading, and these bodily modes of apprehension and ingestion belong at once to the character and the reader. The character's bodily movements are conveyed transitively to the reader, who now speaks in a different "I" and whose pronominal location in the world is altered by the text itself. That character is being universalized, generalized, rendered transferable and displaceable during that reading, and it is the reader's body that, having ingested the character, takes in the world through an altered set of senses, a different capacity for *aesthesis*, that is, for perceiving the world in sensory terms. The statement "I feel through her eyes" suggests that her eyes not only could be mine but that they are mine, as are her hands, her skin. The generalizability of the little girl portrayed by Wittig is specified as this transferability, if not transitivity, between the postulated "I" and the reader. It is confirmed as well by the synecdochal link between the little girl and childhood itself. "I become childhood" means precisely that the "I" ascends to the universality of childhood through the figure of the little girl. This is a scandal, since the generalized and universal story of childhood cannot be told through the figure of the little girl as long as we understand the masculine to function as the presumption of universality itself. If the masculine still holds that powerful place, then it will always be the young boy, the initiate, the apprentice, the prodigal son, who will allegorize the human in its universalizability. When the universal story circulates without that presumptive figure of masculinity, the story of universality reveals its contingency on that figure, and we see that universalization can take place through a figure that unsettles both presumptive notions of masculinity and femininity.

Thus, to become subject to the universalization of the lesbian point of view

is precisely to undergo a fundamental alteration in the way one says "I" and the way one says "we" and in what both of those pronouns can carry or bear. When the impersonal "they" is what is conveyed by *elles*, there is also a certain assault on the senses, of the very sense of the form and gender of human agency in its generalizability and legibility.

As a result, I do not read Wittig as a standpoint epistemologist, since her point is not to redescribe the world authoritatively from a minority position. The redescription acts upon the notion of authorship and the figure and form of human agency. By transforming the minority position into one that can bear universality, she confounds the very configuration of universal and particular within the social order. I am stopped by my own argument momentarily when I consider, for instance, how Sandra Harding has argued that not only is racist and misogynist science bad science, but it lacks objectivity, since science must describe the world as it is.⁴ But there she references a racist and misogynist world that is disavowed by scientific description. Harding insists that a new description gives us a new version of objectivity, one that more adequately takes into account the objectivity of social relations. My sense is that it matters that what Wittig claims is the reformulation not of objectivity but of universality. And "universalization," conceived as a continuous action, is a way to understand the specific effects of a minority authorial position. Thus Wittig posits a world in which the lesbian can become a figure for universality, where a lesbian's life can be a figure for life itself, her desire a figure for desire itself, her cultural predicament a key to the understanding of culture. As a result, we might renew an entire set of ontological concepts on the basis of the lesbian, who is excluded from dominant conceptions of life, desire, and culture, to name but a few.

One consequence that follows from the analysis so far is that the figures through which universality is articulated are historically established and alterable. A different universalization emerges from the presumptive figure of masculinity than one that emerges from femininity, and what emerges from the latter, according to Wittig, will constitute a paradox that renders the binary distinction between masculine and feminine obsolete. How is that paradox constituted, and what effects does such universalization have when it is understood as the process of minority writing? For Wittig, to universalize the minority point of view means that, by way of writing, one acts upon the senses to alter fundamentally the schematisms of space and time by which we gain our basic orientation in the world. In *Paris-la-politique*, Wittig credits Nathalie Sarraute with having discovered that "the usage of a word can accomplish a vertiginous sliding in the organization of space, of persons in its presence. All of a sudden, bodies do not hold themselves

in the same fashion. There is a tension, a radiating in the general disposition. The space that surrounds the interpellated is emptied" (*PP*, 25). Later, she refers to the "disaggregation of sense that is effected by words, the same words by which [sense] had been constituted" (*PP*, 51). A term like *universality* provides the cornerstone for the organization of sense and constitutes a key category by which we name the validity of our abstractions. Yet universality departs from this function when it becomes the vehicle for disorienting and suddenly disaggregating sense. The use of the word *universality* is supposed to indicate the shared and solid grounds for our cognitive experience. Moreover, according to Kant, space and time are the preconditions of a knowing relation to the world. Hence the use of universality against its masculine presumption produces a sort of vertigo of major epistemological proportions. The change in concept takes the wind out of us, makes us breathe differently, changes our gait, our posture, our way of living corporeally in the world. We did not recognize that the masculine was built into that previous way of becoming grounded, and when we experience that loss of ground, a major break takes place.

For Wittig, concepts have the capacity to act upon the body. It is why she is willing to claim, despite its grandiosity, that the category of sex operates as a kind of enslavement.⁵ I resist the analogy for many reasons, and will doubtless continue to do so, but there is in some of Wittig's early writings something close to Kathleen Barry and Andrea Dworkin, including a willingness to identify pornography as the most pernicious exemplar of representational violence. What I do accept, however, is her more general point, perhaps the way in which even the analyses with which I do not agree nevertheless establish her as a subject who articulates the universal, a lesbian theorist. Formalism was, in her view, never true. Formalism sought to act on the body, to efface a certain morphology and to make another coextensive with the human itself. Precisely because it always acted on the bodies of those who were asked to accept its truth, its claims to "formal" truth were undermined. Moreover, formalism always imposes itself at a price to those bodies. In "The Straight Mind," Wittig makes the tangible effect of concepts clear:

If the discourse of modern theoretical systems and social science exert a power upon us, it is because it works with concepts which closely touch us. In spite of the historic advent of the lesbian, feminist, and gay liberation movements, whose proceedings have already upset the philosophical and political categories of the discourses of the social sciences, their categories (brutally put into question) are nevertheless utilized without examination by contemporary science. (*SM*, 26–27)

For Wittig, to be deprived of the capacity to universalize one's experience—an action that she understands as coextensive with authorship—is a specific form of suffering. There is no effort here to reduce the lesbian to her specificity (“Djuna Barnes dreaded that the lesbians should make her *their* writer” [SM, 63]). However, there is a very particular critical action that the lesbian performs on the existing vocabularies of the social sciences. If she defines oppression in these terms (“woman,” “man,” “sex,” “difference”), it is precisely the effect of a false universalization, one that claims for the straight mind the capacity to impose its categories on all people and across all times (SM, 27).

Universality as a term is tainted as a result, but its taint is also its power, the potential for its resignification, the syntactical site for a possible vertigo: it can be abused, and, hence, it can be reused. There are times when words cannot be remade—they are instruments that are too tightly wielded by the forces of oppression. And then there are times when words must and can be remade. *Women* and *men* seem to be terms that are left behind, because they can only reinstall the straight mind and its presumptuous prerogatives. But *universality* can and must be reused. Wittig writes, provocatively:

If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality. . . . The transformation of economic relations will not suffice. We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is, of the concepts that are strategic to us. For there is another order of materiality, that of language, and language is worked upon from within by these strategic concepts. (SM, 30)

I confess to not knowing precisely when a word must be rendered obsolete and when it can be reused as part of the transformation of key concepts. Wittig asks, “Can we redeem *slave*?” (SM, 30). Wittig, however, vacillates on this question as well, sometimes consigning the plural *women* to a past that must become fully anachronistic, and other times flagging the word as one that can and must be strategically reused. The dominant vocabulary cannot be jettisoned in toto, but it can become the site for a certain feeding, a parasitic usage to nourish an ancillary organism, one that was supposed to starve or remain extraneous. The return to bodily figures here is *not* accidental; seeing, breathing, making love, moving, fighting, crying are the bodily modalities through which this emergent universalization makes itself known. This, what happens between two women, is also called “seeing”; this, what happens between lesbians, is also called “making love,” and

we cannot understand seeing or making love without such bodily figures. There is no ontology of moving and fighting and crying that exists apart from its social articulations. It is equally true that when certain subjects move, fight, cry, see, and breathe, they are doing what the human does and so exemplifying the human in its shared features, its universality.

But can universality survive its exemplification through the figure of the lesbian? When the lesbian figure does any of these human things, it (she) scandalizes the human, the concept of the human, exposing its historicity, its fracture, and its futurity. This is one reason why bodies so often come apart in Wittig's fiction. The human figures in her texts (can we call them "characters"?) are intermittently and passionately disaggregated and reassembled. We might conclude that this is only fiction or some sort of textual finesse, but it seems important to remark again that for Wittig textuality is always a materialism. And Wittig's texts, such as *The Lesbian Body*, not only figure the body in its violent unmaking and remaking but also act upon bodies (raising the question of whether figuration is itself a kind of action, pace Paul de Man), elucidating how concepts touch upon, constrain, and release bodies in ways that constitute and deconstitute a fundamental sense of bodily location and temporality, position, relationality, and boundary.

It is true that, for me, reading Wittig effected some of that disorientation. In 1979 I heard "One Is Not Born a Woman" at the Simone de Beauvoir conference in New York City. It was, in fact, the first conference I ever attended. I think it is fair to say that the room in which I sat became a palpably new space after I heard her. It was all the more disorienting, since I also heard, on that same panel, Hélène Cixous (she and Wittig sat at opposite ends of the table); Audre Lorde, who delivered "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," and Charlotte Bunch, who gave one of those exuberant five-point plans about the future of feminism. I had just graduated from college. I did not know where I was.

In that year, I would secretly go into those bookstores in Paris where Wittig was considered a pariah and buy as many copies of *Questions féministes* as I could, securing the books in the original, even though my French was hardly good enough to understand all that she wrote. I remember another instance of this kind of vertigo, when I was an undergraduate at Yale in 1977 and Olga Broumas won the Yale Younger Poets competition. Suddenly she was there, on campus, and we (whoever "we" were) were packed into a small auditorium, listening, suddenly visible and audible:

I sleep, I sleep
too long, sheer hours

hound me, out
 of bed and into clothes, I wake
 still later, breathless, heart
 racing, sleep
 peeling off like a hairless
 glutton, momentarily
 slaked. Cold

water shocks me
 back from the dream. I see
 lovebites like fossils: *something*
that did exist⁶

It was that same year, or perhaps a year later, when there was a first gay pride day on the Yale campus, and a number of us (who were “we”?) met to stand with our signs and publicly declared ourselves in front of Sterling Library. This was not easy for me. I was a philosophy major and frequenting Hegel and Kant seminars at the time. Someone brought music and amplifiers, and we stood awkwardly as students and faculty with their various books and harried expressions found their way around the crowd and into the library. Sterling was imposing, and cold. It seemed to stand for centuries of men, and it was not as though women felt a strong sense of belonging there. Suddenly the music was louder, and we all started, at first quite awkwardly, to dance. Even now, I cannot quite imagine myself having done it. But it did happen. Something happened that entered the order of existence, fractured and remade that space.

When I heard Wittig at New York University in 1979, I felt my own categories dissolve, a sense of epistemic gravity lifted. If “a lesbian is not a woman,” then a lesbian *is* something else. And to say that the lesbian “is” is to destroy a sense of reality, one that depends upon the difference between the two sexes and a heterosexual presumption. How could a copula do so much work? In 1995 Wittig was awarded the Kessler Prize from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York, a prize given in honor of her outstanding contribution to gay and lesbian studies. I was asked to give one of the introductory remarks. I wrote something brief, even though I could not attend the event, and afterward she called to thank me. We did speak a few times during that year. It was clear that she had serious disagreements with me, but I was heartened by the contact and felt that she was glad for the recognition.

If we are tempted to think that, surely, there is nothing scandalous about

being a lesbian anymore now that we have, as it were, Ellen DeGeneres and *The L Word*, let us remember that the majority of people in this country and abroad claim that lesbian and gay people do not have relationships that are as real or as legitimate as those of straight people, that there is an order of power according to which the claim to reality and the claim to universality is rigorously regulated, and that it remains a painful and urgent task to assert minority existence and to have that existence acknowledged as the figure through which something universal can be said about bodies, love, desire, culture, power, and politics. Of course, this is a matter of legal entitlement to a certain degree, but it is also, perhaps more fundamentally, a matter of living and breathing, losing and mourning, persisting and flourishing as a lived body in a social world striated with constraints, riven with exclusions.

So these are the words she liked, that I gave her, that I give you. I am emphatically younger when I wrote them, since I cannot find that utopian strain in myself today:

I remember my shock as I moved in quick steps from the mainly pastoral representations of lesbian sexuality to Wittig's *Le corps lesbien*. It was there that I understood that for Wittig, there is something destructive in this being a lesbian, this writing that takes place in and through this term. At first, I wasn't sure that I wanted it to be true. Couldn't destruction be located elsewhere? What is this talk of war? But then I understood a point of both political and erotic consequence: politically, it makes no sense to adopt a point of view that one might be accepted into the happy pluralism of identity categories, one category among others, when the articulate presence of the lesbian is a scandal, a threat, and that it does, by its insistent presence, force a remapping of what we mean by community, desire, language, bodies, sex and being. Erotically, I understood something as well, and this is, I believe, part of the brilliance of *Le corps lesbien*: that in love-making, lesbians must and do take each other apart, and remake one another in the course of this erotic dismemberment. A body whose gender is marked feminine, crafted within the heterosexual matrix that works through abstraction, reduction, and the regulation of shame and desire, knows the difficulty of remaking required to make an offer of oneself to another, to make a claim upon an other, to submit to a passionate re-inscription of the body. At first it seems that the lesbian body is a certain type of body, that certain bodies are lesbian and others are not. But that is clearly the wrong way to read. The lesbian body is precisely the site for

this dismemberment and re-crafting that is at the same time a peculiar act of re-inscription, a destruction and a reimagining, a reworking of the culturally sedimented body toward its unanticipated future. For me, Wittig opened up a sense of the world that had been, quite literally, unimaginable. She tore us apart. What did it mean in *Le corps lesbien* for those eyes to come loose, to be swallowed, for the insides to spill outside? Was this an engulfing torment, this view of lesbian eroticism? Or, were these figures for what it means to write one's way together through and out of the morphologies of culture in which we live? This was never a facile reinvention of ourselves. This was a certain cultural death that must be lived through in order to survive as something else, in order for sexuality to be both the threat of destruction to a dominant and constraining heterosexuality as well as the unanticipated future of the body. Is there any lesbian who does not know something of this violence and this possibility as it is lived in the erotic struggle to become a body that might love and be loved? It would be one thing to say that Wittig gave us the language for this struggle. But it is perhaps better to say that she gave us to understand that this struggle is in language, that it is inseparable from the struggle of bodies, and that the task of writing one's way into the future is no luxury, but the very name of sexual and cultural survival.

Here is where I differ from Wittig today: the terms of heterosexuality are not outside, not absolutely other, and I am not sure they can be fully refused without that refusal "acting" in some way on the subject who emerges in its wake. I would say the same about gender. I am doubtful, for instance, that we could find heterosexuals who are not negotiating homosexuality within their relationships, or lesbians and gay men who are not in some way working within and against entrenched heterosexual structures. There is no purity in these domains, nor should there be, no matter how fixed or stable we might be in what is called our sexual orientation. In my view, the whole idea of "having a sexuality" is a wild and improbable locution, not because we are without sex or sexuality but because sex is something that has its way with us, even when we think we are having our way with it, even when (precisely when?) we are at our most lucid and agentic. I also think that one can theorize masculinity through the figure of the lesbian, as Judith Halberstam has done, that it might be through a trans figure like Brandon Teena that we come to learn about men and masculinity.⁷ Further, it may be that intersexed children teach us more about gender than any person who claims to person-

ify gender norms in standard ways. We could dismiss these norms, but we cannot do that merely intellectually. Wittig herself understood that it was a struggle, even an assault, to render them obsolete.

The final irony emerged in the obituary celebrations of Wittig's work in *Le Monde*, in particular, where she was cited as saying that she was a writer *justement*, not a woman writer.⁸ She had said "un écrivain," using the masculine article, but universalizing it via her own position in language. The newspaper took this to be a celebration of humanism, but they misread her. What they could not read, even as they praised her, was the critique and the remobilization of the category of the writer. She laid claim to the universal status of "a writer" in and through a lesbian point of view, performing a certain impossible grammar by designating herself as "un écrivain." This practice of universalization ran its risks. *Le Monde* would honor her, calling her a great writer, citing Marguerite Duras to the effect that she was "une écrivaine élatante." They noted the Prix Médicis that she received for *L'opoponax* early in her career and then insisted:

Le lesbianisme était au centre de son écriture et de sa réflexion, mais elle s'opposait totalement aux théories de la différence sexuelle et à toute conceptualisation d'une écriture ou littérature féminine.

[Lesbianism was at the center of her writing and reflection, but she totally opposed theories of sexual difference and every conceptualization of a feminine writing or literature.]

It would be a mistake, however, to cast "lesbianism" as a theme for this writer, since writing itself was the universalization of the minority point of view that she called "lesbian." That *Le Monde* refused to honor this suggests that it was more interested in using her literary accomplishments to fortify her humanism than to accept the critique of humanism that her theory entailed. Perhaps *Le Monde* thought that it understood already the universalization performed by Wittig's self-description as a writer, not a woman writer. Did *Le Monde* override Wittig at the moment in which it rendered her universal as a writer? Did it steal back its own notion of universality? Did it fail to understand the difficulty for a not-woman, a lesbian, to achieve universality not as a writer but in her writing? For Wittig, the universal does not replace the *elles* but becomes articulated anew precisely on the occasion of the *elles*. And the *on* recapitulates the grammatical fundament of humanism only to assault it through a mimetic subversion of its own terms. In the end, at the moment in which she is given greatest acclaim, Wittig is

clearly misunderstood, reconfirming the power of the hegemony against which she struggled and thus making the case for her struggle anew. Instead of praise for her achievement, we have something else in that obituary, the outline of a continuing struggle, a violence done to the words that opposed such violence, a refusal to read. As a result and nonetheless, we have to hold out for that other violence, the one that would fracture and reconstitute our senses, producing a universality that does not abstract from the bodily lives we live but gains its meaning through the details of the body, in motion, in relation, reconstituting life against the grain, and against the odds.

Notes

I would like to thank Amy Huber for her editorial assistance with this essay.

1. Monique Wittig, *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* (Paris: Éditions P.O.L., 1999), 51. Subsequent references to this volume appear as *PP*; all translations are mine.
2. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 85. Subsequent references to this volume appear as *SM* in the text.
3. Monique Wittig, "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 2 (1983): 60.
4. Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
5. In "One Is Not Born a Woman," Wittig writes: "We are escapees in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free" (*SM*, 20).
6. Olga Broumas, "Sleeping Beauty," in *Beginning with O* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 61.
7. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
8. Suzette Robichon, "Monique Wittig," *Le Monde*, January 11, 2003.

