

Excremental Eros: Pleasurable Decomposition and *The Lesbian Body*

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Para una de las duras, mi amiga, Tatiana de la Tierra. En la estela de tu muerte, te anhelo. Cada palabra, cada frase de este artículo es parte de una conversación que me gustaría tener contigo. Yo sé que no fuiste partidaria de la filosofía de Wittig; aun así, quisiera leer fragmentos de *Le Corps Lesbien* en tu cocina y discutir con pasión estas visiones de éxtasis. Tati, en verdad tu eres de la tierra y con amor continuo hablándote.¹

THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES THE EXCREMENT THE BLOOD THE LYMPH THE JELLY THE WATER THE CHYLE THE CHYME THE HUMOURS THE SECRETIONS THE PUS THE DISCHARGES THE SUPPURATIONS THE BILE THE JUICES THE ACIDS THE FLUIDS.

- Monique Wittig

Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* makes me wet. Her short prose poems – her erotic decompositions – inspire my own unravelling and I become liquid, exceeding corporeal wholeness and flowing toward her lesbian corpus, her lesbian corpse, her lesbian body. Given this opportunity to think through fluidity, I experience a delicious delight in the possibility of exploring what I jokingly have called with close friends the lesbian literature of leakage, linguistic and libidinal liquidity in lesbian letters, Sapphic scriptures of salivation and (other) secretion; or, more crudely, discourses of dripping desirous dykes. Especially within the contemporary political climate in the United States, I take great pleasure in the

opportunity provided by this issue of *InterAlia* to contemplate bodily fluids as they pull us toward the obscenity of the body in its refusal to maintain comportment, its mockery of margins and movement beyond cleansed narratives of the self. While the religious right rallies against all kinds of women's pleasures that exceed a reproductive mandate, the liberal left celebrates the romantic longing for contractual monogamous bonds for queer folk sanctioned by legal, familial and religious institutions. Both discourses, albeit in different ways, converge around the cleansing of non-normative desire and deviant sexuality; one takes up a missionary position against all variance from God's "natural" law and calls queers to abandon all hope of salvation should we continue to worship at the temple of the body, while the other promises to sanctify our monogamous love in holy matrimony, a mating of souls that purifies the lesbian body by making her a wife.²

Returning to a key text of the 1970s with ecstatic nostalgia, it is invigorating to float in the effluent tide of materialist feminist desire and to ooze in experimental prose that speaks of the transformative power of queer sexuality and community. Indeed, I open with a confession about my own pooling bodily subject as a way to highlight the inspiring power of Wittig's poetics – as an expansion of her theoretical work – to present bodies and pleasures in vivid and vulgar vulviform verse,³ to focus on excessive bodily pleasures as a starting point for a reimagination of "eros as power" to transform subjectivity and community.⁴ The cunning linguistics in this text tongue and erode the limited possibilities for bodily pleasures dictated by "the straight mind" (see Wittig, 1992), reminding readers of lesbians' sexual movement that circle around the decomposition of women's bodies, the "unnatural" pleasures that lesbians enjoy, which result in the ecstatic expulsion of effluvia. Lapping at the juices of the body, Wittig's lesbians taste the possibility for pleasurable excretion to remind readers that we can come out of rigid definitions of gendered bodies, that we can come beyond limited reproductive nuclear family structures, that we can come to revel in the excremental self as proof of pleasures of other ways of being.

In the following analysis, I move through two aspects of *The Lesbian Body*: representations of excremental eros that awaken lesbians to other possible bodily schemata; and representations of ecstatic decomposition into the world. This first section of the essay shows why effluvia are so important for Wittig's play with queer sexuality, why Wittig defines the lesbian body by its

rejectamenta as we see in the epigraph: “juice, spittle, excrement, fluid” (1976, 26). Indeed, all bodies are excremental and thus we might wonder how the lesbian body is any different from others. In my analysis, I show that lesbian is not so much an identity in this text, but a way of moving in relationship to other bodies gendered as women, a way of stimulating female flesh that exceeds “compulsory heterosexuality” (see Rich, 1980). Thus, the appeal of a focus on *The Lesbian Body* for this special issue of *InterAlia* lies in the way that Wittig counters the “natural” and “biological” definitions of woman with the effluvia of lesbian bodies. As she famously states, lesbians are not women because they do not identify themselves by “natural” reproductive capabilities, their “natural” status as lack, or their “natural” passivity in sexual encounter (Wittig, 1981).⁵ Textual and actual lesbian sex acts rupture – or “destroy” – the subordination of fluid sexuality to reproductive biological imperatives or heterosexual positioning because they circle around all of the pleasures that bodies enjoy when they are not becoming women, not being penetrated by a phallus. While discourses of heterosexuality cork and cement women’s identity into penetrative productivity of offspring or gender (women are the holes from which babies emerge; women are the holes which penises fill),⁶ lesbian encounters liquidate these formative fictions of femininity.

For Wittig, lesbians *are* the lovers that linger upon libidinal leakage, delight in unproductive ecstasy and the fluidity of the body, the material proof of the body’s flow beyond the aforementioned definitions of women. Putting pressure on different possibilities for bodies and pleasures,⁷ these fictional lesbians locate eros not in the assumption of identity but in the decomposition of self, using the excremental drainage of the body as a sign that women’s flesh exceeds prescriptive cultural definition. Women, therefore, become lesbians when they enact sexuality attuned to the way in which the body drips past gendered demarcation and construction, in which the body flows beyond borders, denying through various pleasures the cultural constructions of “normal” sexuality. Her bodily subjects are lesbian because of how they delight in the excessive mess of the body, how they acknowledge and consume excreta and thereby discharge rigid gendered movement by revelling in the bodily fluidity that surpasses the “natural” mandates for women’s pleasure and bodily performance. If discourses of heterosexuality stop up women’s pleasure and plug the porous body, ignoring or cleaning away the fluid attestation of pleasure beyond sexualised gender roles, lesbianism in Wittig’s account is the practice of unfolding, eroding and transforming the full body. Through Wittig’s depictions of

excremental eros, readers are called to move past definitions of lesbians as women who love women and toward other ways of thinking of queer sexuality – namely, the movements of subjects who champion excreta as signs of the impossibility of stable identity formations. Each time the word lesbian is used in this essay, I point not to identity, but instead to subjects who delight in the pleasurable erosion of self and others.

With the conclusion of the essay, I turn to a focus on the lesbian corpse, the import of the self as soil in Wittig's erotic display of worldly unravelling in "tiny deaths". Thus, I extend the argument of the first section by showing how Wittig deploys the fluidity of the lesbian corpse not only to counter rigid discourses of heteronormativity, but also to challenge the imagined separation of human subjects from the ecosystems of which they are a part. While dykes are the drainage ditches that roar salty songs of the dissolution of self, of pleasurable rupture and porousness, they also see decay as the matter from which to fertilise (not birth) different ways of relating to the world. Thus, excremental eros in the text is not only about the transformation of women's bodies, but also about a celebration of intimate connection to the world around us, a celebration of the self as soil as way to connect with other matter, a way to give our fertilising bodies as gift to other life. In decomposition for Wittig, we lose our isolated subjectivity and spread out to touch and be touched in worldly enrapture. Thus, we might say through her text that while lesbians are not women, they also are not human in that they refuse to separate the subject from other matter. It is the pleasures of decomposition in sexual encounter that lead lesbians to a revision of the genesis of human subjectivity and a movement toward a desire for an earth lover – not mother.

By analysing passages from *The Lesbian Body* that rewrite and revise the creation stories found in Genesis, in the conclusion of the article I show Wittig's materialist feminist joke in which she trumps the "natural" order of heterosexual positioning with the natural erosion of flesh. In other words, Wittig makes the lesbian body a corpse to highlight how lesbian sexual practice revolves around a celebration of multiple forms of pleasurable bodily decay. Thus, Wittig challenges origin stories that refuse to allow women to leak past sexualised gender roles forwarded as natural expressions of human sexuality. Through excretion in sexual encounter, Wittig's lesbians come to understand death not as the terrible end to the subject – a return to cursed dust – but instead as another transformation into

decay, which allows for intimate union with soil in the excremental fertilisation of other life. Moreover, revisions of Genesis overturn the logic of humanity warring against the mortal flesh; *The Lesbian Body* suggests that a delight in sinking into the world marks a unique kind of intimacy – an excremental eros – that might just help us focus on the joy of being organic matter, rather than the horrors of decay and death.

In what follows, I tear apart *The Lesbian Body* and reconfigure it, moving through lesbian touch, lesbian tonguing and tasting, and lesbian eating and engulfment. Each of these various sexual actions of Wittig's fictional lesbians revolve around making the beloved excrete, bringing the body out of itself and riding tides of effluent to confirmation of the joys of unravelling. Because we are discussing lesbian sex acts, it seems appropriate to begin with some clitoral stimulation, some unproductive touching of female genitalia, which in Wittig's account is not mere foreplay, but incitement to effluvial revision of subjectivity. Still, as readers quickly learn, these lesbians are not fixated on genitalia as the only site of erotic pleasure, but explore the pleasurable possibilities of the full body. Wittig writes (1976, p.35),

M/y clitoris m/y labia are touched by your hands. Through m/y vagina and m/y uterus you insert yourself breaking the membrane up to m/y intestines. Round your neck you place m/y duodenum pale-pink well-veined blue. You unwind m/y yellow small intestine. So doing you speak of the odour of m/y damp organs, you speak of their consistence, you speak of their movements, you speak of their temperature. At this point you attempt to wrench out my kidneys. They resist you. You touch my green gallbladder. *I* have a deathly chill, *I* moan, *I* fall into an abyss, m/y head is awirl, m/y heart is in m/y mouth, it feels as if m/y blood is all congealed in my arteries. . . . *I* see my/self stretched out, all my entrails unwound. *I* open my mouth to sing a cantata to the goddess m/y mother. M/y heart fails in this effort. *I* open m/y mouth, *I* admit your lips, your tongue, your palate, *I* prepare to die by your side adored monster while you cry incessantly about m/y ears.

Other critics have focused on Wittig's usage of the split subject in passages like this one, highlighting her refusal of the unitary subject "I" as well as the possessive adjective "my". In the David Le Vay translation from the French, the "I" is italicised in order refer to "j/e," the "I" that is not unitary, but rent. As Karin Cope (1991) and Namascar Shaktini (2005) argue, Wittig plays with Emile Benveniste's insight into the "I" as a fiction produced through language to distinguish a (masculine) whole and stable self from others; when the word "I" is appropriated, the empty sign is filled by a subject who distinguishes himself from "you" (see also Shaktini, 1982). Still, Benveniste shows that because any speaker can appropriate the "I" for himself that the multiplicity and multivocality of the "I" is revealed. As the "I" can be reappropriated, "the sovereignty of anyone's use of language cannot be guaranteed" (Cope, 1991, p. 84). Following and queering Benveniste's work, what Wittig

exposes in her lesbianized or slashed I is not merely a split subject, one of a doubled or duplicitous nature, or the mark of a certain sexuality. She also lays bare the privitiveness of appropriation, the ways in which "I" can only ever be an insufficient shelter, a lean-to, which subjectivity borrows to call its (which is usually to say 'his') mansion (Cope, 1991, p. 85).

So, too, the possessive adjective "my" cannot hold in Wittig's text as through sexual encounter the subject does not experience the body as "her" own, but as open to a "you" who brings "her" outside of the self and into the ecstatic flow beyond the limits of constructions of the gendered body.⁸

Keeping these critics' important arguments in mind, I want to focus here on the slash as "a mark of a certain sexuality", or a sign of a certain kind of sexual practice of which excreta is the focus. Placing "j/e" in the context of a passage like this one, we might read Wittig's backslash as a way to point to a feminine "I" that leaks past gender when pressured by a lesbian body, when a lesbian "you" teases the subject past subjection to gendered norms. Splitting the labial folds, fingering the clitoris, the lesbian "you" rewrites the body of Woman beyond reproduction, beyond the uterus. The "you" breaks past the membrane wall at which discourses of heterosexuality end and toward the excretory system; pulling the duodenum out from the "I", the lesbian "you" wraps the tubing around her neck, the excremental necklace becoming sign of the desire to unwind previous mappings of women's bodies. Speaking of

the "odour of damp organs", the lesbian "you" "cries incessantly" about movements beyond limited understandings of self, bodily movement toward and transformation to excess. Beneath the hands of the lover, the "I" comes to experience the body unwound, the bowels loosened, the kidneys unleashed to gush out the excremental self. The celebratory speech of the lover calls the "I" to acknowledge the pleasure of erosion as a starting point for the creation of other songs of self where excess is not denied, but ecstatic proof of other ways of being. Death of the subject, at the conclusion of the passage, is not final, but a beginning for the "adored monster" and the beloved as they seek to live in the decomposition of the category of Woman, to thrive in the pungent wake of the body undone. Wittig makes a gash – in the "I" and in the body – to open up the subject to the excremental flow produced by lesbian touch, a touch that "shouldn't" produce pleasure in Woman "intelligently designed" for phallic penetration alone. The insistent lesbian touch, here and in other passages, pulls apart the rhetoric and the grammar of sexualised gender roles,⁹ showing through excremental bodily responses the possibilities for bodies and pleasures beyond those constructed in discourses of normative heterosexuality.

As the lesbian "you" touches the "I" beyond recognition in the text, the "you" also devours the fluid rejectamenta of the body, taking in excreta to fertilise different forms of relationality between beings. Rather than erecting gender through penetration – a masculine "I" who plows a feminine "you" – the lesbians penetrate each other to unleash the fluidity of the "I" and the "you" in order to come together in excremental production and consumption. Taking the excess of another into the body, the lesbians nourish a relational mode that allows for subjects to fold into each other in excremental eros that brings them outside of self and inside the body of the other, collapsing standard understandings of sexual positioning where an impenetrable masculine "top" invades a feminine "bottom". For example, Wittig writes of an encounter between lover and beloved:

You turn m/e inside out, / am a glove in your hands, gently firmly inexorably holding m/y throat in your palm, / struggle, / am frantic, / enjoy fear, you count the veins and the arteries, you retract them to one side, you reach the vital organs, you breathe into m/y lungs through m/y mouth, / stifle, you hold the long tubes of the viscera, you unfold them, you uncoil them, you slide them round your neck, slopping you let them go, you

cry out, you say delightful stink, you rave, you seek the green fluid of the bile, you plunge your fingers into the stomach, you cry out, you take the heart in your mouth, you lick it a long time, your tongue playing with the coronary arteries, you take it in your hands... you, your sovereign hair over m/y face, bent over you look, you, your eyes not quitting m/y eyes, covered with liquids acids chewed digested nourishment, you full of juices corroded in an odour of dung and urine crawl up to m/y carotid in order to sever it. Glory. (1976, p. 85)

This passage begins with a penetrative hand, turning the "I" inside out; penetration here leads to the expulsion of the fluid self rather than the implantation or creation of Woman. Indeed, the penetrator here does not leave ejaculate in or on a female body as the climatic end to sexual encounter, but instead invites the passive "I" to rupture, to release the body's juices onto the prying hands, into the waiting mouth, of the "you." As in the previous excerpt, the "I" experiences the full body undone as the vital organs are touched and impacted by the hands of the lover working toward the release of excreta. In other words, she is not reduced to a vaginal canal for the pleasure of an other, but feels the stomach become sexual organ in responsive contraction to the movement of the "you" as well as the heart pounding with each tongue stroke of the lover. The full body is alive with secretion in the "frantic" struggle before "glorious" orgasmic expulsion represented in the metaphor of exsanguination when the "I" is completely undone. Still, the focus here is on the lover who laps up the various juices produced by the beloved until that "you" is covered with and full of the vaginal secretion, blood, bile, urine and dung of the "I". It is the delight of the "you" in the "stinking" effluent of the body that confirms the excessive difference of lesbian sexual play. The "you" penetrates the "I" to bring the body beyond the limits of heterosexual comportment, to witness the pleasures of "unnatural" sex acts and to feed off the bodily excesses produced by such pleasures. Taking the excess of the body that is no longer woman in through the mouth, the "you" raves about the goodness of fertile excreta as s/he too becomes corroded, infiltrated by liquid remains of bodily ravishment. Intently watching the "I" come out of the self, the "you" also is transformed into an excremental body, a receptacle for the waste of another. The "you" does not gain gendered identity – the status of masculine penetrator – but instead is overtaken by the fluid tide of another, stained as a lesbian that delights in the unproductive ecstasy of others. Lesbian eros is born in touch and penetration that releases the "I" into excremental form so

that the body can flow outside itself and into another, rupturing and remaking the “you” who absorbs and therefore becomes excess.

Turning to Wittig’s theoretical work, we can see with greater clarity the motivation for fictional depictions of violent transformative lesbian sex: Wittig seeks to challenge the idea of a “natural woman” not by “dragging” out exaggerated performances of idealised gender, but instead by turning toward the bodily movements of lesbians whose sexual performance revels in the excess of the category of “Woman.” In other words, Wittig is not interested in all the ways that we can show how women are made, but rather in how lesbian sex acts demolish and push past culturally constructed limitations for women’s pleasure. She writes in “One is Not Born a Woman”,

A materialist feminist approach to women’s oppression destroys the idea that women are a ‘natural group’... a group perceived as natural. ... What the analysis accomplishes on the level of ideas, practice makes actual at the level of facts: by its very existence, lesbian society destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a ‘natural group.’ A lesbian society pragmatically reveals that the division from men of which women have been the object is a political one and shows that we have been ideologically rebuilt into a ‘natural group.’ In the case of women, ideology goes far since our bodies as well as our minds are the product of this manipulation. We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us. (1981, p. 103)

Through depictions of sexual encounter in *The Lesbian Body* like those presented above, Wittig fleshes out this theoretical argument. As a “natural group”, women are defined by their difference from masculine bodies: their lack of penetrative power, their vaginal holes that signal this lack. The “myth” of woman returns again and again to bodily difference in order to assert the “naturalness” of divisive gender; the vaginal canal is “proof” that women are designed for penetration and the phallus “proof” that men are made to fill this hole (Wittig, 1981, p.103). Bodies and minds in Wittig’s account are manipulated to work according to this myth as the full possibility for erotic pleasure is reduced in both “men” and “women” to their genital difference. Because lesbians deny this reduction, refuse this

limitation, they reveal in sexual practice the ways that the body exceeds culturally constructed and sanctioned performance of sexualised gender roles. As I have shown in the previous analysis, Wittig's lesbians come together to celebrate the body's multiple forms of excretion – from mouth, vagina, excretory system – and therefore, disrupt the established governing myth by unravelling the body "feature by feature". Thus, the violence of lesbian sexual encounter that has turned some critics off shows how lesbian sex acts dismantle the limited possibilities for gendered bodies. As they seek pleasures beyond the "natural" positioning of men and women, they come to see heterosexual composition as a "distortion" of potential bodily pleasure; by awakening the body to its multiple delights in the expulsion of self beyond gendered comportment, lesbians exult in the ruptured feminine "I" who leaks past myth of woman, who oozes out to fill "you" with excess.¹⁰

By posing this argument, I critique a strain of criticism that claims that Wittig essentialises the heterosexual and homosexual divide and further disavows the various identities that lesbians claim, such as butch and femme, which destabilise gender. Judith Butler's work on Wittig exemplifies this type of criticism and thus is worth quoting at length. She writes:

Clearly, the norm of compulsory heterosexuality does operate with the force and violence that Wittig describes, but my own position is that this is not the only way that it operates. For Wittig, the strategies for political resistance to normative heterosexuality are fairly direct. Only the array of embodied persons who are not engaged in a heterosexual relationship within the confines of the family which takes reproduction to be the end or telos of sexuality are, in effect, actively contesting the categories of sex, or at least, not in compliance with the normative presuppositions and purposes of that set of categories. To be lesbian or gay is, for Wittig, no longer to know one's sex, to be engaged in a confusion and proliferation of categories that make sex an impossible category of identity. As emancipatory as this sounds, Wittig's proposal overrides those discourses within gay and lesbian culture that proliferate specifically gay sexual identities by appropriating and redeploying the categories of sex. The terms *queens*, *butches*, *femmes*, *girls*, even parodic reappropriation of *dyke*, *queer* and *fag* redeploy

and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity. (1999, p. 156)

Here, Butler counters Wittig's excremental bodies with non-normative identity, the creative power of lesbian and gay people to "redeploy" categories of sex and to "proliferate" sexual identities. Indeed, she is right to point to all the ways that GLBT community members have engaged and continue to engage in disruptive identity building. A femme top, an identity that I claim on occasion, does disrupt normative understandings of gender for she wields a femininity that promises penetrative power and deploys signs of femininity to signal a sexual subject who may choose to bend a willing other to her desire. Butler also is right to claim that Wittig "overrides those discourses" that with pride reappropriate or redeploy sexual identity.

Still, in Wittig's theoretical work and poetics, readers encounter the pleasures of avoiding a redeployment of sexual identity, the ways in which a focus on bodies and pleasures – rather than the celebration of identity – avoids the limitations that we might impose on ourselves and each other. By showing the ways that "women's" full sexual pleasure has been distorted through discourses of normative sexuality, Wittig warns against non-normative celebrations of sexual identity that might repeat, albeit in new ways, restrictions for pleasurable contact. Indeed, Wittig is interested in the possibility of sexual encounter to disrupt both normative and non-normative sexual identity, to topple the ways in which subjects understand self before sharing excreta with others. Perhaps more so in her poetics than in the theory, Wittig loosens the link between sex acts and identity formation by highlighting the ways in which bodies ooze past whatever limitations our discourses of subjectivity impose. Wittig offers a challenge to queer community members to live in the excess of identity, to celebrate the fluidity of multiple bodily pleasures that refuse the rigidity of discourses of any sexual subjectivity. In *The Lesbian Body*, it is difficult to define what or who lesbians are: they are not butch or femme, nor are they man or woman, but instead bodies sharing in their goodness of excremental selves, the pleasures of becoming wasted subjects through encounters with lovers. Thus, Wittig's lesbians don't come together to create, to proliferate and to enforce categories by which we might identify self and each other, but to celebrate the body's excessive leakage past categorisation in sexual encounters.

Critiques of Wittig's work such as Butler's are caught up on the usage of the word lesbian, assuming that this term refers to women who love women. In close analysis of the text of *The Lesbian Body*, readers encounter something radically different from this definition: "you" and "I" rolling in the excess of the body, seeking the excreta of each other. Thus, arguments like Butler's and Jacob Hale's are correct to forward the claim that "Wittig's analysis of the categories of sex obscures the specificities of the ways in which human beings are gendered through sexuality and the ways in which human beings gender themselves through sexuality" (Hale, 1996, p.101). Indeed, citing Halberstam, Hale forwards a variety of sexual identities that would be *obscured* in a text like *The Lesbian Body* – "guys with pussies, gender queens, F2Ms, lesbians who like men, daddy boys, ... women who fuck boys, women who fuck like boys, dyke mommies, transsexual lesbians, male lesbians" – and argues that problem for Wittig is that her

analysis is too simplistic to handle the variety of ways in which people, including lesbians, are gendered. Since Wittig's view is that the concepts man, woman, and lesbian each rest on a single defining characteristic, her view does not have conceptual room for the multiplicity of genderings present even only among contemporary U.S. lesbians (Hale, 1996, p. 101).

Although I am persuaded by these theorists' important celebration of various sexual identities and queer positionings, I argue that we don't have to throw out Wittig's excremental bodies because they avoid presentation of these various gendered identities. Instead, we might see a text like *The Lesbian Body* operating in a different mode in which subjects come together not to affirm identity, but to lose it. Presenting the slashed "I" as a wasted subject engaged in sexual encounters, Wittig gives us room to explore sexual encounters that makes a mess of ourselves, pushing us past even the non-normative identities that we form. Part of the power of sexual subculture is this ability to experience ecstasy without giving it a name, without solidifying identity. Indeed, sex-positive community spaces frequently allow for a play with excess even as they also proliferate sexual identities; while some participants may choose to form and to repeat rather stable sexual positioning, others may move around, shifting from top to bottom to voyeur or toward an engagement with participants who claim multiple sexual identities. Wittig's focus on the fluidity of "you" and "I" – the excreta of lovers – need

not refer to women who love women, but instead to subjects who seek rupture, who see in the excess of the body the possibility to embrace pleasure in many different forms. Thus, “you” or “I” can be appropriated by any reader despite the sexual identity that they might claim for Wittig is more interested in queer subjects who excrete past identities that they have formed. Let me put this another way: when we excrete together, the excess of our bodies challenges whoever “you” or “I” are before we encounter each other for this leakage makes “me” and “you” nothing but waste. As I mentioned above, every body is excremental, but Wittig’s queer “you” and “I” are the subjects who revel in this physical wreckage of self without erecting identity from the ways in which we excrete together. To read “lesbian” as seeker of the excremental self is not to affirm a heterosexual/homosexual binary, but instead to move past this binary as well as past a proliferation of sexual identities in order to celebrate the fluidity of subjectivity and body.

Returning to *The Lesbian Body* with this argument in mind, we can read the text as a challenge to heteronormative discourses of sexuality as well as a call to embrace the pleasures of the erosion of sexual identity found in queer sexual subculture. Because the emphasis in the text is on the decomposition of the “I” and the “you” “feature by feature”, it disrupts rigid sexual positioning where a masculine body penetrates a feminine body, but it also forwards the porousness of every body, the potential for each body to be entered, for each body to become fluid despite even non-normative sexual identity formation. Readers encounter this fluidity as the penetrator and the penetrated reverse multiple times in the text, defying the maintenance of stable sexual roles. Indeed, the lovers enjoy a fluidity of sexual performance, touching and being touched, eating and being eaten, to effluvial release. Further, Wittig’s lesbians move past a focus on genitalia as the only site of sexual pleasure and discover other sites for bodily stimulation; while the lesbians “confuse” sexual roles, they also create sexual “organs” from stomach, heart and excretory system as in the previous quotations, but also from tongue, bone, muscle and, in the following passage, the ear:

M/y most delectable one / set about eating you, m/y tongue moistens the helix of your ear delicately gliding around, m/y tongue inserts itself in the auricle, it touches the antihelix, m/y teeth seek the lobe, they begin to gnaw on it, m/y tongue gets into your ear canal. / spit, / fill you with saliva. Having absorbed the external part of your ear /

burst the tympanum, / feel the rounded hammer-bone rolling between m/y lips, m/y teeth crush it, / find the anvil and the stirrup bone, / crunch them, / forage with my fingers, / wrench away bone, / fall on the superb cochlea bone and membrane all wrapped round together, / devour them, / burst the semicircular canals, / ignore the mastoid, / make an opening in the maxilla, / study the interior of your cheek, / look at you from inside yourself, / lose my/self, / go astray, / am poisoned by you who nourish m/e, / shrivel, / become quite small, now / am a fly, / block the working of your tongue, vainly you try to spit m/e out, you choke, / am a prisoner, / adhere to your pink and sticky palate, / apply m/y suckers to your uvula. (1976, p. 22)

Here, the "I" orally stimulates the external ear, licking the lobe and spiraling the tongue from helix to antihelix, taking an active role in unraveling the "you." The "delectable you" inspires the "I" to salivate with desire; the excremental response of the "I" in the form of glandular release at the sight and then taste of the beloved becomes oral ejaculate, filling and then bursting the beloved with juicy excess. If we read this passage as metaphor, we might argue that the "I" enters the ear of the "you" so that the sound of excessive desire might work its way into the flesh, inviting the "you" to hear eros differently, to feel reverberating sound as corrosive excreta, not implanting identity or dictating movement but rather calling for rupture. While the "I" studies the "you" from inside the body, the aural penetration – sound and saliva – sticks to the palate and uvula of the "you". Thus, the ecstatic speech of the "you" is marred and made inarticulate, coherent language blocked as the "you" is sucked into sexual encounter that cannot be named. Still, as the "I" fills the "you" with salivary excreta, the penetrating self is "lost" and "goes astray"; feeling the beloved burst, feeding as a fly on the decay of the "you", the "I" experiences the self as willing "prisoner" caught in the explosive unravelling of the beloved. Eating the "you" – taking in the choking groans of pleasure – the "I" adheres to the mouth of the "you", leaking out, singing out, to penetrate the "I" with saliva and sound. "I" eat "you" to excess so that "you" wash "me" away in an excremental flow. Through the rupture of the "you", the "I" comes to hear the pleasures of the self as decay, but also to mingle or to unite with the excreta of another. This is not a union of gendered bodies interlocking, but bodies flowing to meet in an excremental puddle, dissolving into waste together.

This is most clear in passages where the “I” and the “you” are both perforated, where penetrator and penetrated collapse as the two decompose into each other:

Perforations occur in your body and in m/y body joined together, our homologously linked muscles separate, the first current of air that infiltrates into the breach spreads at a crazy speed, creating a squall within you and within m/e simultaneously. ... The orifices multiply over our two bodies causing m/y skin and your skin to burst alike. They are prolonged by tunnels whence the blood does not spurt. The wind enters everywhere, in every hole.... It becomes so violent that it precipitates us one against each other, it brings us down, it flattens us. Under its pressure there is nothing else to do but to attempt to insinuate ourselves one into the other. ... In the end a tempest arrives, it rushes right through us, scattering the muscles. First I hear your cries, then I hear m/yself cry out as you do, there is a bellowing of sirens, they reverberate within the gaping tunnels on either side of our two bodies which now constitute a single organism pervaded by vibrations quivering full of its own current, is it not so m/y dearest? (1976, p. 108)

While the previous quotations display a penetrator bringing the beloved outside of the self, this passage highlights the “holey-ness” of both bodies, the openness of both bodies to infiltration and dispersal. Though the bodies of “you” and “I” join together, they both reveal gaping pores through which worldly breath passes. Thus, their sexual squall uncovers multiple orifices in skin, stomach, loins, neck and cranium, awakening the lovers to the possibility of ecstatic stimulus beyond the vaginal culvert inspired by the wind’s violent speed. They are not simply holes to be filled, but come to feel their bodies as “tunnels” into which others burrow and through which others may pass. Indeed, it is the wind that teaches the lesbians of their porousness and reminds them of their homologous structure as each body can be – will be – opened, consumed and engulfed as fertile matter. Traversed by air, the lesbians burst from their distinct identities and become liquid, precipitating against each other, leaking into each other and out into the world. Flattened into each other, they cry out in pleasure at worldly stimulus of every body part as the tempest pulls them beyond previous understandings of bodily pleasure by making them excrete from multiple orifices. Through excretion they fold into each other,

“constituting a single organism” that is still porous and shot through with vibration. The wind takes them as homos, similarly structured bodies that can be penetrated and passed through, that can be touched to release out into worldly union. Taking their cue from unproductive pleasures discovered in worldly frottage, the lesbians embrace this fluidity where “you” and “I” cease to be distinct, where “you” and “I” share our porousness, where “you” and “I” mingle and converge in the “current” of excremental eros, the flow beyond ourselves out into each other and the world.

Through passages like these, Wittig disrupts the Genesis narrative of subjectivity, revising this Judeo-Christian origin story by countering the mythic separation of human being from other matter.¹¹ Like feminist theologians such as Phyllis Trible (1978, especially pp. 1–30) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993), Wittig puts pressure on the ways in which this particular origin story establishes or is deployed to establish binary distinctions between man and woman as well as an antagonism between humanity and earth. Indeed, worldly “breath” does not animate a distinct subject who comes to life to exhale linguistic categorisation of self and other beings – to name and to identify different qualities of being as in the story of Genesis – but instead unravels the separation of human from environment. In this way, Wittig critiques an origin myth that asserts the distinction of man from woman and man from soil (Ha-adamah). Wittig constructs an alternate Genesis myth where lesbians fold themselves back into soil through ecstatic death:

The soil of the garden slides between your teeth, your saliva moistens it, you feed m/e with it your tongue in m/y mouth your hands on m/y cheeks holding m/e still, I am transformed into mud m/y legs m/y sex m/y thighs m/y belly standing between your legs glutted with the smell of the vaginal secretion rising from your middle, I liquefy within and without. ... The mud reaches the muscles of m/y thighs, it touches m/y sex, it coats m/e cold and slippery, m/y labia retracting it spreads to m/y abdomen m/y kidneys m/y shoulderblades the nape of m/y neck which is circumvented in its turn, m/y neck bows, you still holding m/y cheeks in your hands filling m/e with saliva and earth your tongue against m/y gums. M/y muscles separate from each other in sodden masses. M/y entire body is overwhelmed. A very strong smell of moist earth spreads around. I see plants rooted in the fibres of m/y muscles. (1976, p. 70)

Wittig returns readers to a Garden of Eden transformed as the beloved "you" shows the "I" the pleasures of erosion, the pleasures of returning home to an earth lover. The "you" secretes saliva and vaginal fluid, mixing the excreta of the body with the soil of the earth and pushing this mixture into the mouth of the "I," soiling the distinction between lover and beloved, subject and earth. As the "you" liquefies with the touch of soil, so, too, the body of the "I" drips out into the world inspired by the "smell of vaginal secretion" and the pressure of mud filling the holes of the body and wrapping around the flesh. The "I" feels the self "retracting" to let the lover and the soil of the world inside the folds of the labia; further, the "I" "bows" and then separates, falling away from distinct subjectivity and into worldly enrapture. The unraveling of this creation story revolves around unwinding narratives of gendered distinction where bodies unite in waste. No Adam and no Eve emerge from soil animated by divine breath with the knowledge of their separation from each other or from other beings. Indeed, sexual encounter marks the unmaking of humanity.

By lesbianising Genesis in this passage, Wittig highlights the distortion of women's sexuality in creation stories, but also in depictions of the "fall" where God designs women to "cleave" to their husbands, to undergo suffering in childbirth as punishment and ultimately to experience death as a continuation of this punishment in which human distinction is erased in a return to cursed dust. Rather than accepting the limitation of women's sexuality to suffering and pain, the revised Genesis myth asserts the pleasures of decomposing this divine mandate and shows how lesbian sex acts initiate bodies into different understandings of corporeal existence. As shown above, Wittig's lesbians acknowledge excretion as an important sign of bodily pleasure that exceeds a divine or "natural" mandate for gendered sexual performance. However, in this passage and others, the representation of the fluidity of the body also signals a revision of a mythic despair in our connection to earth. Rather than experiencing horror in bodily decay that brings subjects into union with soil, lesbians delight in pleasurable decomposition because they already have shared of each other's excreta and found it to be good. Thus, death becomes another transformation into the excremental self, another spreading of self into "moist earth" in unraveling of isolated subjectivity through "overwhelming" worldly engulfment. Lesbians are corpses in this text because they live in the ecstatic decay of their bodies – and the ecstatic decay of gender – but also because they refuse to understand the wasted body as terrible reminder of mortality. Instead, the delights of libidinal leakage, the splendour of secretion, are

reminders of the pleasures of mortal bodies, which transform understandings of loathsome death into an embrace with a loamy beloved who does not extinguish life, but unravels the flesh to fertilise other ways of being. What the reader finds here is not longing for the transcendence from the body, but instead a lesbian desire for the spreading out of excremental selves into other worldly bodies, a glorious union with and dissolution into the world. Lesbians do not die in the text; rather, they decay and transform, descending into soil and fertilising other forms of relationality and life. Thus, the “fall” into soil is not punishment and death is not seen as a horrid end to subjective difference, but instead, orgasmic excremental expulsion comes to symbolise the movement beyond the isolated self into union with the lover and the world. Indeed, erosion allows for the fertilisation of other life, the continuation of the transformed excremental self in the moistened soil that supports and feeds vegetation. Death, therefore, is not a terrible end, but a continuation for the fragmented “I” who comes apart to fertilise life, to fertilise other ways of imagining being.

In close, this piece is a provocation – some dribble – from a mass made sodden in meanderings through *The Lesbian Body*. Rereading it now, I find clefts in the argument, places to which “I” or “you” might return – spots that we might open and erode. I wonder, for example, how the text might be read with and against the work of feminist theologians from the 1970s and 1980s with greater force. Indeed, the text is part of an historical period in which feminists were engaged in some heavy palpitation of mythic structures that are or were animated to naturalise gender. It would be intriguing to go much further than I do here in bringing Wittig into conversation with scholars like Ruether, whose *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* continued to come to mind as I wrote the final section of the essay. I also wonder if the text might be brought into conversation with ecofeminists – the “power and promise of ecological feminism” as Karen Warren puts it – who “[provide] a distinctive framework both for reconceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethic which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature” (1996, p. 19). Because *The Lesbian Body* offers vivid imagery of an earth lover who erodes human distinction from soil and from ecosystem, there is fertile ground here for future examination of how Wittig’s work might be brought to bear in discussions of queer environmentalism. These are just two final groans of an author exhausted with her most recent play with *The Lesbian Body*, two contented sighs meant as invitation for future play.

There is much more to do with *The Lesbian Body*, a text that I have wandered through many times over the years since I first came out. I recall my younger self who first stumbled upon this book, searching for some clue to my identity. How queer it was to find these fragments that do not speak to the formation of self, but instead to wreckage. To be lesbian would be much stranger than I originally had thought it would be. Now, in the middle of life, I still come out and come undone in this fragmented textual body, still revel in these letters of liquidity that disassemble me. And it is good to share this fluid self, *inter alia*, with theorists whose work, like Wittig's, continues to inspire the pleasurable erosion of my thinking. This piece is just a sweet nothing for those who have made me, and continue to make me through various types of intercourse, sweetly nothing.

Notes

¹ This essay is dedicated to Tatiana de la Tierra, a poet and friend to whose collection of poetry – *Para Las Duras* – I refer in the dedication. I also want to thank Tim Dean for encouraging me to submit an article for this special issue as well as Suzanne Edwards, Jenna Lay, Christopher Madson, Danielle Del Priore and Edurne Portela for suggestions on the development of the piece.

² For critiques of a political focus on "gay marriage", see Warner (1999), especially, 81–147. For a discussion of feminism and "gay marriage", see Ferguson (2007). Also, see *Against Equality: Queer Challenges to the Politics of Inclusion* (<http://www.againstequality.org/>).

³ For more on the form of the text, see Wittig (2005). She writes: "The book is formed in two parts. It opens and falls back upon itself. One can compare its form to a cashew, to an almond, to a vulva" (p. 48).

⁴ I refer here to Audre Lorde's essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1984, pp. 53–59).

⁵ Wittig writes: "Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ("forced residence", domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become of to stay heterosexual" (1981, p. 108).

For discussions of responses to this claim that lesbians are not women, see de Lauretis (2005) and Epps and Katz (2007).

- ⁶ For an explanation of Wittig's philosophical understanding of naturalised sex and gender, see Crowder (2005). She writes: "For a materialist like Wittig, gender is not at all an arbitrary set of roles or expectations superimposed on biological sex. Rather, these roles and expectations follow logically and inevitably from a material exploitation of the class of "women" by the class of "men." That exploitation, and the material benefits men derive from it, determines both sex and gender, the former being used... as a convenient "naturalizing" excuse for imposing the latter" (2005, p. 65). Also see Butler: "there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality. Hence, 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 (1999, p.143).
- ⁷ I refer here to the final chapter of Foucault's *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*: "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures" (1990, p.157).
- ⁸ Cope and Shaktini's arguments about Wittig's usage of "j/e" counter Judith Butler's assertion about Wittig's linguistic play: "The j/e of *The Lesbian Body* is supposed to establish the lesbian, not as a split subject, but as the sovereign subject who can wage war linguistically against a 'world' that has constituted a semantic and syntactic assault against the lesbian" (1999, p. 153). My argument follows Shaktini and Cope's analyses of Wittig's poetic formal experimentation that reveal the unravelling of "you" and "I", not the assumption of "an absolute perspective that imposes its categories on the entire linguistic field," as Butler states (p. 153).
- ⁹ See Butler (1999) for a discussion of fragmentation in Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*: "As 'sex' fragments the body, so the lesbian overthrow of 'sex' targets as models of domination those sexually differentiated norms of bodily integrity that dictate what 'unifies' and renders coherent the body as a sexed body. In her theory and fiction, Wittig shows that the 'integrity' and 'unity' of the body, often thought to be positive ideals, serve the purposes of fragmentation, restriction, and domination" (p. 146).
- ¹⁰ See Wittig (1981). She writes that understandings of women's bodies are
- [d]istorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call "natural," what is supposed to exist as such before oppression. Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this "nature" within ourselves (a nature which is only an *idea*). What a materialist analysis does by reasoning, a lesbian society accomplishes practically: not only is there no natural group "women" (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question "woman," which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth (p.103).

¹¹ For discussion of other mythic revisions in this text, including the rewriting of the Eurydice and Orpheus story in *The Lesbian Body*, see Shaktini (1982).

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