

UTOPIAN RELATIONALITY: INTERCORPOREAL SUBJECTIVITY
IN FRENCH FEMINIST FICTION

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Feminist fiction has always entertained a delicate relationship with the utopian literary genre since the traditional definition of “utopia” as a perfect but imaginary place runs contrary to feminist struggle for concrete change. My project builds upon the theoretical foundations of recent theorists of feminist utopias, Francis Bartkowski and Lucy Sargisson, by analyzing the novels of three French authors—Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, and Marie Darrieussecq, whose texts range from 1969-1985, 1975-1983, and 1996-2005 respectively. I read their fiction as positively and profoundly utopian, through the lens of “utopian relationality:” my own concept that I define and develop as an interpretive framework and methodological tool.

Utopian relationality describes a radical way of being-together in the world that acts as a core component of each writer’s feminism. It presents visions of utopia as revitalized intercorporeal relations with the self, the other(s), and the wider world. The connections these authors describe are equally as important as the textual acts of narrating them; my methodology proceeds through detailed close readings that are attentive to their poetic strategies and linguistic experimentation, or the ways they rework language within language. By locating and tracing utopian relationality in their novels, I argue for a reconceptualization of the content, form, and function of their fiction, along with a reinterpretation of the ways the label “utopian” has been applied negatively to Wittig’s and Cixous’ work. Since Darrieussecq has been widely described

as a dystopian writer, interpreting utopian moments in her fiction casts her writing in a nuanced light. It also provides an understanding of the ways utopia and dystopia intermingle in her contemporary fiction, as it is representative of a broader 21st century feminist consciousness. Utopian relationality thus enables productive comparative readings of these three different authors, and it lays a foundation for future explorations of feminist fiction.

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“It’s not yet the worst of times, but things are worse every day.” These opening words from Tom Moylan’s 2018 essay, “Further Reflections on Being a Utopian in These Times,” assumed an eerily poignant resonance for me during the past two years of composing this dissertation. I began drafting this project in March 2020, right at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the northwest United States. It is uncanny how this period of intense writing and thinking about utopia for me has coincided almost exactly with the past two years of living through actual dystopia. This strange tension has been my ever-present companion throughout the entirety of my dissertation. Moylan’s words reverberated in my mind while I (like everyone) endured the “unprecedented” series of catastrophes that this new decade kept pulling out of its seemingly bottomless bag of nightmares. I read utopian theory during summer 2020 when the sky in Eugene, Oregon was an otherworldly, orange-soaked smoky haze that had previously only existed in sci-fi films. I studied language that reimagined our interconnected existence as political and racial rhetoric became more polarized, and due to quarantines and lockdowns, we were physically isolated. We suffered in solitude and felt powerless as an unfathomable number of people died. It was a genuinely terrifying two years.

And yet, amidst all of the darkness, this dissertation has been a source of light and life for me. The reading, thinking, and writing have together been a profound pleasure. Paradoxically, this been the most enjoyable period of my graduate experience. Despite the pandemic, I was able to write everything I wanted to write and include all that I wanted to include. I was even able to travel to Paris during the height of the Omicron wave and interview the author Marie Darrieussecq in person in French at her home. I also met H el ene Cixous and thanked her for her writing. The process of composing this dissertation has underscored for me, in general, how

much we need hope and dreaming and utopianism now, more than ever, when it is all too easy to succumb to despair and nihilism. As the authors I include in this project believe and as I have argued through my interpretations of their work, imagining alternative realities has the potential and the ability to catalyze concrete real-world change. Dreaming is *necessary* for survival, and this has become ever clearer to me during the pandemic and during this dissertation.

Throughout all the social distancing and remote interactions of the past two years, my committee members have supported me and believed in my project. I'm grateful for their guidance along the way, willingness to read long drafts, and trust in my ability to do what I said I would do. Their confidence in my capability to complete an "ambitious" project, and their patience to give me the time and space I needed to write it has made all the difference. Nathalie Hester has provided clear and consistent guidance as my committee chair, enduring my grandiose language and helping me to revise descriptive topic sentences. She has acted as my main advisor during the entirety of my time at the University of Oregon, and my experience has been colored by her gracious guidance. Nathalie is a mentor and model for me of how to conduct a flourishing academic career, both in research and teaching, while navigating family life and being a well-liked colleague and kind person. I will always keep her example in mind, and I hope in my future to lead such a balanced, admirable life. Michael Allan has been an invaluable resource in my home department, guiding me through much of my coursework, exams, and dissertation preparation. He has helped me better understand the field of Comparative Literature, the realities of university professorship, and most recently, the process of navigating the academic job market. He has taught me to not take myself too seriously and to remember that one can live a deeply intellectual life and also enjoy non-academic pleasures. I've also been

privileged to work with both Fabienne Moore and Bonnie Mann. I am grateful for their important and informed perspectives on this project, and their investment in my work.

I have continually felt supported and encouraged in the Comparative Literature Department at UO. Cynthia Stockwell has always kept me (both gently and sternly) on track, and Leah Middlebrook and Ken Calhoon have advocated for me, helping to secure teaching positions, fellowships, and financial support. I'm thankful to the UO Center for the Study of Women in Society and their Dissertation Completion Fellowship for the 2021-22 academic year that enabled me to finish my writing and to travel to France. Outside the university, my community at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Eugene has sustained me through both the happy and hard times. Judy Allison and Megan Lintner have been like dear family, and Bingham Powell's unfailing enthusiasm for my writing has added much-appreciated wind to my sails.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their continual support. My parents, Tom and Becky Zimmerman have been my biggest fans and have been ready and able to support me. This project would never have existed if they hadn't first let me study literature instead of pushing me towards something more "useful." They encouraged me to pursue what I love, and their advice has never failed to bring me to the right place at the right time. Last and definitely not least, Gordon Okumu has been my closest companion and biggest champion through this project and through nearly all of my doctoral experience. I could not have finished my writing without the "Okumu Family Fellowship" that gave me precious undistracted time and space to work and allowed me to enjoy our own fleeting and humble utopia. His confidence in me and the example of his life has taught me that we can accomplish anything together. His love has made life sweeter and richer than I could have ever imagined, and he has helped me become resilient enough to complete this project during a pandemic.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Pre-history: A Preface

In the beginning, there was Dante. Before the creation of this dissertation—when it was as yet formless and void and before the populating of its pages with all manner of words—there was the spirit of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* moving over the abyss.¹ This spirit provided a first flicker of light as a single, unlikely spark strong enough to illuminate the path to a wholly different time and place. I begin here at the very beginning with the brief story of that spark in order to tell the genesis of this project and explain how I arrived at the three French authors I include in my study. This spark comes from Canto IX in Dante’s *Paradiso*. In this moment, *Dante* (the protagonist) speaks with the troubadour Folquet of Marseilles in an exchange that showcases Dante’s “en-verbed pronouns,” or rhetorical constructions that transform pronouns into verbs. *Dante* asks Folquet a question but then reflects before Folquet can answer: “Già non attendere io tua dimanda / s’io m’intuassi, come tu t’inmii” (lines 80-81).² The reflexive verbal constructions here are purposefully cumbersome and do not lend themselves to translation. Their awkwardness could be smoothed over in English to become something like, “if I could *enter* you as you *enter* me,”³ but such phrasing jettisons the specific relational dynamic that characterizes Dante’s conception of the blessed souls in heaven. More than a profession of poetic impotence or an expression of the inability of human language to describe the soul’s state in paradise, Dante’s

¹ I invoke this image both to commemorate the genesis of my present project and to acknowledge the impetus behind all of my academic formation in literary studies.

² “I would not wait for your response / if I could in-you-myself as you in-me-yourself” (my translation).

³ Allen Mandelbaum does exactly that in his translation of the above statement as: “I would not wait for your request / if I could enter you as you do me.” This unfortunately reduces the moment to sounding purely physical and almost crude in its simplicity. See *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum, 1982.

en-verbed pronouns attempt to reflect a relational state that only exists in heaven. The point here is not “entering” but *being* together in a mystical merging of souls that defies time and space. When Dante’s protagonist speaks to Folquet of his desire to “in-you-myself” as you “in-me-yourself,” he describes a relation of interpersonal permeability where two souls co-exist in one.

This moment in *Paradiso* presents three distinct aspects pertaining to the “what,” “how,” and “why” of the celestial relation that it describes. First, the “what” is an unimaginably intimate and pleasurable connection between two beings signaled by the use of the prefix “in” as part of the verbs—the proximity and spatial location of the souls are important here, as one *is* and one longs *to be* “in” the other. The idea of being *with* another to the point of being *in* them also expresses the timeless quality of this relation, or how it exists in an infinite, unbound temporality. Secondly, the “how” of Dante’s description revolves around neologistic verbs formed from pronouns. In their infinitive forms, the two verbs Dante includes would be *intuarsi* and *inmiarsi*. Each verb begins with the preposition *in*, referencing proximity and a relation of encapsulation. When the subsequent pronoun component of the verbs, *tu* (you) and *mi* (me), is added to the prefix “in,” this creates the meaning of “in-you-ing-oneself” and “in-me-ing-oneself.” By making linguistic components that mark the place of a subject (pronouns) into linguistic components that convey action (verbs), Dante puts the beings *into* the language. He makes the subjects into the action itself, which is to say that the subjects become the event that is happening. He transforms the souls *into the words* in a sort of reverse transubstantiation that is not the word-made-flesh, but the flesh-made-word. Such conceptual gymnastics necessitate accompanying linguistic gymnastics, which is why Dante creates new words. Since this blessed relational state does not exist in earthly life or language, it demands alternative linguistic solutions for articulations that fold and form language in unexpected ways.

The “why” or purpose behind Dante’s en-verbed pronouns is intimately tied to the content and form to paint a picture for the reader of desirable, celestial blessedness. In the context of the encounter with Folquet, *Dante* also refers to this relation in terms of what it would *do*, in that it would provide an answer to a question. Therefore, the utopian relation of *intuarsi* or *inmiarsi* contains an epistemological dimension as well; it provides immediate knowledge that precedes and supersedes language. This relation is a way of knowing in-the-other, with-the-other, and through-the-other. For Dante, paradise *is* being-with and being-in the other, and the articulation of such an extra-terrestrial, intercorporeal relation necessitates a new approach to language. Although this moment is a mere spark at the beginning of the trajectory of my project, it lays a foundation for the conceptual and linguistic theory of relationality in fiction that I trace through authors very distant and different from Dante. The concept Dante proposes through his en-verbed pronouns is a specifically spiritual one that envisions the soul’s eternal fulfillment in heaven as a reflection of the Christian Triune God. I am less interested in the religious content of this concept and more intrigued by the commentary it provides on the capabilities of language to describe a different experience of self in paradise imagined as a relational state. Dante’s emphasis on the linguistic novelty of this relation ripples through the authors I consider, and it asserts that a utopian vision of the self in relation to the other requires rethinking the textual relation of the self within language as well.

While *Dante* (led by Beatrice) encountered Folquet in *Paradiso*, I (led by Dante) encountered Monique Wittig in *Virgile, Non*, her 1985 restaging of the *Divine Comedy*. As I discuss in more detail later on, these two texts are not as disconnected as they might seem since Wittig’s vision of the afterlife journey actually occasions a “re-visionist” backward-looking

comparison with Dante's text.⁴ My reading of the relational state Dante describes in his paradise influences my reading of Wittig's paradise, and it reveals reverberations and transformations of a similar relational concept not only in *Virgile, Non* but throughout Wittig's novels. This discovery pushes me to investigate why this aspect is important to her and what purpose it serves in her fiction.

It appears, for example, in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) where Wittig describes two lovers who physically traverse and transform between, inside, and through one other in processes that seem equally as violent and grotesque as ecstatic and rapturous. In one scene, the couple holds a tight embrace as they descend into quicksand, all while one of them describes: "Tu parles de plus en plus vite m/ /étréignant m/oi t'étréignant nous étreignant avec une force merveilleuse, le sable entoure la taille, à un moment donné ta peau se fend de ta gorge à ton pubis, la m/ienne à son tour éclate de bas en haut, j/e m/e répands dans toi, tu te mélanges à m/oi m/a bouche à ta bouche liée" (52- 53). Concurrent with the act of descending into the sand, the lovers lose their corporeal contours as their bodies split and burst open. They transform and merge together, as the speaker describes with the statement: *j/e m/e répands dans toi*. Wittig's use of the reflexive verb *se répandre* here creates a difficult situation to imagine for the reader and a linguistically tricky one for the translator—David Le Vay renders this in English as "I spill m/yself into you." *Se répandre* could very well connote the fluidity of pouring liquid, as Le Vay chooses, but it could also convey diffusion, dispersion, or dissemination like the spreading of sound, smell, or light throughout a surrounding environment. Even more perplexing is that the "surrounding environment" or external space into which the protagonist *j/e* "spills" herself is *not* the natural

⁴ See the discussion in Chapter 1 about Wittig's *Virgile, Non*. I borrow the term "revisionist" from Adrienne Rich's definition in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision:" "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18).

world that the couple inhabits. Rather, it is the second protagonist, *tu*, who occupies the place or location into which *j/e* disseminates herself. This is to say, *tu* becomes the backdrop for the transformation that *j/e* undergoes. The preposition *dans*, meaning “in” or “into” situated between the verb and the pronoun *toi* in the phrase further signals that *tu* is the container or vessel into which *j/e* pours herself. *Tu* then reciprocates the transformation with a similarly constructed reflexive phrase, “tu te mélanges à moi,” whereby the two protagonists literally and figuratively become one.

This passage in *Le Corps lesbien* confronts the reader with an impossibly intimate relation that exemplifies a process similar to that of Dante’s *intuarsi* and *inmiarsi*. Of course, Wittig’s 1970s secular French context is vastly different from Dante’s 14th-century Catholic Italy; her theoretical concerns relate to the representation of the lesbian body and the female subject in language, and she specifically writes against many of the pillars of literary patriarchy that Dante upholds and perpetuates. Despite these differences, her text reveals a similar concern with language’s ability to express the inexpressible and to create a utopian relation between subjects and bodies. Her protagonists transform *into* one another, and it is this state of being-in-the-other that characterizes the height of their pleasure and their state of paradise. That this relation itself *is* paradise for Wittig’s protagonist-lovers is further evidenced by the way Wittig repeatedly describes their relations as “joy” and how the narrator refers to the other (*tu*) throughout the text as “m/a gloire” (49).⁵ The passage above highlights much of what characterizes Wittig’s vision of paradise in *Le Corps lesbien*, and it reflects (or refracts) the distant concept from Dante’s *Paradiso*. If the relation that Wittig describes between the lovers in

⁵ I address this in more detail in the part of Chapter 1 devoted to *Le Corps lesbien*, with attention to Wittig’s repetition of the word “glory,” as an invocation of religious language and a purposeful secularization of the Christian concept of God.

Le Corps lesbien represents the beginning of the story I tell in this project—a story or history of influences, ruptures, and reflections that begin with Wittig—then Dante’s en-verbed pronouns represent the pre-history of this project. This assertion does not claim a direct line of descendance, inheritance, or influence from Dante all the way to French feminist fiction from 1970’s and further into the 21st century. It is merely an acknowledgement of my debt to Dante’s relational conceptual and linguistic nuance with his en-verbed pronouns that helped me to begin to conceptualize and then to name the impossibly intimate relation that characterizes Wittig’s vision of paradise. The articulation of this state of being-in-relation as paradise requires innovative linguistic strategies and presents a provocative poetics; I call it “utopian relationality.”

2. Utopian Relationality: A Literary Poetics and Feminist Theory

Wittig’s passage in *Le Corps lesbien* contains a vision of utopian relationality in the way the lovers overflow both their physical bodies and linguistic containers (pronouns and verbs) as they become an intersubjective assemblage of *j/e* and *tu*. Their relation does not obscure each in the other but multiplies them, breaking open the spatial boundaries of inside and outside, finite and infinite. In this relation, *j/e* and *tu* do not lose their individual subjectivity even as they experience the transformation of their physical bodies. There is no loss but only gain. The relation is a paradoxical combinatory process of *both-and* where two remain two even as they transform into one. It is neither a self-shattering *jouissance* designed to fracture and disperse one’s experience of the self, nor an act wherein the self is subsumed by the other. The subjects become more than their individual selves, and it is this transmutation of the self with and into the other that characterizes the height of their pleasure. They spend the entire text of *Le Corps lesbien* repeatedly searching for, achieving, and enjoying this relational state, while also

expressing the pain of its loss when they are separated. The continual decomposition and recomposition of their relation that takes place throughout the text is the manifestation and expression of their desire to know, possess, inhabit, be-with, and *be* one another as intimately and as inseparably as possible.

This relational state is emblematic of and essential to Wittig's conception of paradise, which in turn is essential to her broader feminist agenda and her vision for a better reality. Her emphasis on relation does not just pertain to *Le Corps lesbien*; it appears throughout Wittig's fictional corpus as the distillation of her desire for a better, liberatory way of existing. In this dissertation, I explore and analyze Wittig's vision of relation-as-paradise in a selection of her fictional works with attention to the "what," or the content of the relation and its characteristics; the "how," meaning the formal, linguistic, and poetic strategies that she uses to express this state; and the "why," or the purpose and objective. I move from Monique Wittig to include her contemporary, Hélène Cixous, and then to Marie Darrieussecq, a novelist from the current generation who inherited the aftermath of the 1970s and '80s feminist debates in France (in which Wittig and Cixous both played prominent roles). This trio of authors allows me to trace utopian relationality in overlapping, divergent, and parallel directions that are not strictly linear or arboreal but rhizomatic (in a Deleuzian sense). Utopian relationality manifests in different ways in each author's writing, and even within their own oeuvres, yet there are discernable commonalities in form, content, and purpose that link them together. Throughout my study, I seek to answer: what characterizes utopian relationality in their writing? What does this concept *do* within their fiction and feminist agendas? What commonalities, connections, and through lines does it enable me to draw between them? Finally, the larger question that arises at the conclusion of my project is: what and how does utopian relationality as a literary practice and

theoretical position contribute to existing conceptions and discussions of subjectivity within feminist theory?

Although Monique Wittig lies at the center of this project, I have chosen the other two authors because I see a connection in their experimental and explorative textual styles. By employing utopian relationality as a unifying comparative thread, I connect them through what they *do* in their texts—through their poetics that seeks to express a new relation between subjectivities, bodies, and language. My comparison of their textual strategies, however, does not claim that they always use the *same* formal elements or use them in the same way for the same reasons. My point is, rather, that the ways they work within language upon language are defining characteristics of utopian relationality and connecting threads between their fictional texts. The authors purposefully draw attention to the defects and limitations of gendered language, and they search for possible alternatives and imagine different linguistic realities within their novels. Their poetics reveals the limitations and restrictions of language as it labors to articulate a subject that becomes, moves through, and *is* the other. They highlight the ways that the female subject is constrained within language and they consequently express the dream of a different relation and different ways of speaking about the self in that relation. Their fiction pushes us to think outside of existing descriptive possibilities. Their prose struggles against itself as it bends, breaks, and transforms language in order to push our conceptualization of ourselves into new territory.

My focus on the writing and thought of three French authors generally considered feminist within the late-20th century and early 21st century in France situates my project within the intellectual history of poststructuralist French feminism and materialist feminism, stretching from about the 1970s until the early 2000s. I understand these intellectual periods as ways of

theorizing female existence and writing—either based in psychoanalysis or in the social categorization of women, women’s labors, and female lived experience, broadly—that draw in varying degrees from Simone De Beauvoir’s phenomenological feminist thought, Derridian deconstruction, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Tracing a common thread through Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq does not necessitate that I downplay their differences or homogenize the important subtleties in their thought. All three have participated in, allied themselves with, and at times distanced themselves from academic disciplines, intellectual trends, and social movements in varying degrees and for specific reasons. Since these divergences have been well-documented and explored (especially concerning Cixous and Wittig), I consider their relationship from a different angle that privileges similar poetic concerns and shared theoretical objectives. My project therefore performs a nuanced way of reading these authors together without claiming a direct or linear chain of reference between them. In general, I do not engage with calcified debates about the values and defects of their theoretical positions in relation to one another. These debates revolve mainly around interpretations of Wittig’s and Cixous’ theoretical works (in translation) from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and so my study takes a markedly different approach by privileging their fiction in the original French.

I am also conscious of how Wittig’s, Cixous,’ and Darrieussecq’s work has “traveled,” or how and why their thought and textual production has been read, accepted, and/or rejected by feminist theorists within the American academy. My project operates with two culturally distinct types of feminist thought in mind—French and American—even as I crisscross the porous boundary between them. Just as neither is itself an internally unified monolith,⁶ their transatlantic

⁶ For a detailed explanation of the French Women’s Movement in the late 1960s and 70s, or *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF), and its many internal currents, see Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France: From May ’68 to Mitterand*.

and transnational interconnections have given rise to reciprocal cross-pollination. My position as a scholar is evidence of this, as I am influenced by these two types of feminist thought in a both-and relation that allows them to overlap and color my translingual approach to comparative literary studies. I am a product of American academia and a native English speaker who was introduced to Wittig and Cixous first in translation, but I am also a French speaker who sees value for both audiences in reading these authors' fiction closely in the original French. Admittedly, this type of focused study appeals to others who can understand the French texts as well, and elements of their linguistic experimentation and innovation get lost in translation (or are untranslatable). Utopian relationality as a literary theory and linguistic strategy is not exclusive to the French language though and could prove to be a useful tool for connecting other authors across languages, nationalities, and literary periods. Monique Wittig, more than the other two authors, exemplifies the tension between French and American feminisms in both a figurative and literal sense since she moved to the US in 1976 due to her break with the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (or MLF, of which she was one of the founding members). This move was the result of her break with her French feminist contemporaries over the MLF's internal politics and divisions, Wittig's challenging of its heterosexual assumptions, and her privileging of lesbian identity.⁷ She then continued to teach and write theoretical essays and fiction while in the US. The portrait of Wittig within American academia is still based almost exclusively on interpretations of her English-language essays in *The Straight Mind* (1992), which includes her infamous polemical statement "Lesbians are not women."⁸ This portrait understands

⁷ For an explanation of Wittig's role within the MLF, its many fractures, and the depth of Wittig's rupture with the movement see Iliana Eliot's "Monique Wittig: Icone lesbienne et théoricienne visionnaire."

⁸ This is final statement of the essay "The Straight Mind," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 21-32. That the publisher's website categorizes this as "philosophy" and lists a review quotation from Judith Butler is a lingering symptom of Wittig's treatment in the US as a theorist instead of (or in addition to) a novelist. Wittig also presented this essay at the 1978 Modern Language Association annual conference in New York

her more as a philosopher than a fiction writer. The picture of Cixous is based mostly on her essays, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), and “Sorties” in *The Newly Born Woman* (1986),⁹ and also understands her as a philosopher. Both of those essays made an impact on American academic feminism of the 70s and early 80s but were then quickly relegated to a specifically French context. Cixous has continued to produce fiction, dramatic works, and essays, and she still holds seminars at Université Paris VIII. Due to her continual intellectual exploration, she has ventured into different themes and has travelled a great distance from her work of the 1970s and 80s. Darrieussecq is still largely unknown in the United States outside of certain academic French literature circles, even though almost all of her novels have been translated into English. Although her novels are popular in France, her style and themes are less common in the US popular fiction marketplace and unfortunately continue to label her as a stereotypical “French writer.”¹⁰ My project brings together these disparate authors and asserts the value of rereading them and even more, of reading them together. Throughout, I demonstrate that utopian relationality as a fictional strategy and theoretical concept is not exclusive; it can pertain to authors who are admittedly different, and it can catalyze a productive comparative reading.

and then published it in French two years later as “La Pensée Straight,” in *Questions Féministes*, no. 7, 1980, pp. 45-53. A partial explanation for the American treatment of Wittig is the influential critical works discussing Wittig’s literary projects and diverting attention toward her essays and earlier fiction: Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking* (1989) and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) that both engage in order to dismiss Wittig. Rosi Braidotti writes that Butler contributes to “passing Wittig off for the philosopher she is not” (174, in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*). Linda M. Zerilli describes how Butler’s 1990’s critique of Wittig as essentialist and idealist—while not the sole factor—contributed to the relative silence surrounding Wittig: “Butler’s reading served for many American feminists as the definitive verdict on Wittig’s work, which is stunningly absent from 1990’s feminist debates” (91). See Linda M. G. Zerilli, “A new grammar of difference: Monique Wittig’s poetic revolution.”

⁹ I am referring to the English translations of her essays here. The French versions came earlier: “Le Rire de la Méduse” in 1975 and *La Jeune Née* in 1975.

¹⁰ By this I mean that general (non-academic) reviews of her books, starting with *Truismes*, find them overly concerned with language, essentially plotless and confusing, too sexual, graphic, or focused on the body, and even “depressing” in that her themes revolve around loss, absence, and trauma.

My project proceeds along formal and conceptual lines through close reading and engagement with the texts themselves. I aim to “really read” these fictional texts,¹¹ and in the case of Wittig and Cixous, to bring their fiction to light out of the long shadow cast by interest in their theoretical works. Since the emphasis of my project is primarily on fiction, I have chosen to exclude other prominent “French feminist” authors, like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, because they did not write fictional works in the way that Wittig and Cixous did. I differentiate fiction from theory here in terms of genre, intended audience, and form, though I do not draw an impermeable boundary between the two as mutually exclusive. I do however understand these as different ways of writing, often with slightly different objectives, that pertain to different reading publics. This is to say—broadly—that if theoretical essays are concerned with the explanation of concepts through logical, linear lines of argument, the fiction from the three authors I include distinguishes itself through its disregard for realism and verisimilitude and its focus on the mechanics of language itself. It eschews linear chronology and progression of time in favor of circular and repetitive experiences of reality; it often purposefully occludes clarity through fluid, porous boundaries between subjects, objects, emotions, and the wider environment. I have chosen the trio of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq even though each of them did not or do not *exclusively* write fiction because they share an interest in the formal and imaginative capabilities of fiction.

A brief word about my choice of texts: I recognize that all three authors wrote or have written far more than I have included in this project. In reading their fiction, my study privileges

¹¹ I borrow this phrase from Nancy Bauer’s “Must we read” (116). Bauer is specifically referring to the issue of re-reading or *really* reading Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* due to the 1953 English translation by H.M. Parshley that “deformed” the original version. The second English translation appeared only in 2011. My point is slightly different in that I am not advocating for re-readings of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq because of new English translations. I think that their fiction in French has not received the attention it deserves, and so I give it my in-depth attention in this project.

quality over quantity and aims for feasibility; I do not presume exhaustive claims about each author and their oeuvres or about French literature of the late 20th century. I include a small sampling of works from each other in order to offer a focused and detailed glimpse into their poetics but certainly not a totalizing picture. A more comprehensive study of utopian relationality in the works of each author could produce a multiple-volume study. I have chosen to present a more wide-ranging view of utopian relationality as a concept—to explain what it is and how it functions for each author and among all three. Tracing it through different authors demonstrates how the concept is not endemic to just one author. This process helps me to make larger claims about utopian relationality as a concept and not an isolated phenomenon, and perhaps lays groundwork for further explorations that could broaden to include other authors and bridge national and/or linguistic differences.

3. French Feminism in Context: 21st Century Reprise Despite a Troubled History

As I have done so far in this introduction, I group Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq under the label “French feminism,” in the knowledge that this category has become highly suspect and even been discounted as a misnomer. Claire Moses explains this in her aptly titled essay, “Made in America: French Feminism,” where she traces the creation of “made-in-America French feminism” through U.S academic publications of the 1970s and 80s. Moses criticizes American academia for a sort of “reverse colonialization” that exoticized and eroticized French feminist thought and then used it out of context (264). Christine Delphy, in “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move,” similarly argues that the category “French Feminism” is an invention by US scholars, “a biased and imperfect version of the reality of feminism in France” (169). In “Thinking with an Accent,” Rosi Braidotti writes that important differences among the French-speaking theorists and activists involved in the MLF seemed to “get lost in translation

and amalgamated into a falsely unified whole” (602). Bronwyn Winter, speaking of the similar Australian reception of “French feminism,” calls this category “reductionist, dangerous, and erroneous;” “an intellectual fiction;” and even “a massive con” (221). This sampling is representative of the way it has now been thoroughly documented and understood that during the 1970s and 80s, the American academy imported and codified the work of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray as representative of a homogenous, reductive, and artificial category called “French feminism.” This category misrepresented the reality and diversity of feminist activism and writing in France by privileging the views of the group *Psychanalyse et politique* (*Psych et po*)—which was just one of many subgroups within the French women’s movement—as the dominant theoretical and political position of the MLF and French feminists in general.¹² Apart from issues of this category’s creation and connection to reality, as it exists, it has been discounted by American academics for containing a lack of intersectionality, internal contradictions, intellectual elitism, and bourgeois abstraction.¹³ Despite ongoing scholarly work to the contrary, these three writers are still regarded as *the* French feminists, and the idea of “French feminism” as a biologically-based, essentialist theory that exalts heterosexual female difference persists. This oversight continues to downplay, or even worse, obscure other strains of political, social, and literary thought within the MLF in France.¹⁴

¹² Annabel Kim also provides a description of this process in *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions*, 166.

¹³ See Toril Moi’s discussion of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva in *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Routledge, 1985.

¹⁴ Even within the MLF there was resistance to *Psych et Po*, as the group condemned the label “feminism” itself, claiming that it would lead to a reification of masculine power and patriarchal hierarchies (Moses 249). *Psych et Po* was mysteriously well-financed and had a publishing house, *des femmes*, that may explain its visibility and popularity abroad. In 1979, *des femmes* legally registered and trademarked both the name “MLF/ Mouvement de libération des femmes” and the raised-fist logo, whereby denying other groups its use (Moses 251). Legal battles ensued and, as Judith Ezekiel recounts, “Never has the French movement been so united as when it opposed *Psych et po*’s legal registration of the logo and name ‘women’s liberation movement’—it brought together some 55 groups from more than 15 different cities” (quoted in Moses, 251).

Hélène Cixous' is a difficult figure when speaking of "French feminism" due to her participation with *Psych et Po* and her dislike of the label "feminist."¹⁵ Her essay, "Le Rire de la Meduse" (1975), translated and published in English in 1976, came to stand as a manifesto of essentialist French feminism. In the United States, she is still the most well-known of the three representative figures due to the popularity of this essay in translation. I include "Le Rire" in my discussion of Cixous in Chapter 2, but not in order to reopen old debates about its seeming claims of essentialism and heterosexual feminism or about the larger theoretical value of this essay for American feminism. As my focus is Cixous' fiction, I read this essay almost like a fictional text through its poetic evocations and figurative language that purposefully blur genre boundaries. I see it as a point of departure and a way to trace the evolution of Cixous' utopian relationality as it later develops, flourishes, and blossoms in *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d'Aracachon*.

Since I include Cixous, it might seem anathema to include Wittig and to refer to her as a "feminist" since her experience with the MLF in the 1970s was tumultuous and fraught with difficulty. By advocating for lesbian visibility within the MLF, Wittig came to be regarded by her French contemporaries as dangerously radical and separatist, and she was accused of betraying feminist sisterhood in favor of lesbian identity. She felt so stifled, ostracized, and vilified by the very movement she helped create that she immigrated to the US in 1976. Reflecting on her time with the MLF in Paris, Wittig describes those seven years (1968-1976) as "un séjour en enfer," adding that when she arrived in the US, "j'étais alors détruite."¹⁶ If Wittig

¹⁵ See Carolyn Greenstein Burke, "Report from Paris: Women's Writing and Women's Movement." Moses also discusses Cixous' relation to feminism in "Made-in-America."

¹⁶ Quoted in Iliana Eliot, p. 58, from a letter between Wittig and Adrienne Rich dated around 1981. The letter is kept in the Monique Wittig papers at Yale's Beinecke Library.

experienced inferno during her time with the MLF in Paris, it is all the more interesting that her fictional works produced before, and even after her move, contain a striking utopian impulse.¹⁷ Even though Wittig endured a troubled relationship with “feminism” and her literary production after her move to the US found somewhat of an affinity (that she did not search for specifically) with the field of queer studies,¹⁸ I think it is still legitimate to refer to her as a feminist because her fictional works contain female bodies and are concerned with the position of the female subject in language and literature. Although Cixous’ and Wittig’s theoretical and political positions have been deemed irreconcilable, I approach them from an angle that does not efface their differences but that carves out a way to read them together through similarities in their fiction at the level of style and even content. These similarities are all the more significant precisely because of their documented differences. They therefore beg the question: how can *Le Corps lesbien* and *Le Livre de Promethea* read so similarly at times if they come from antithetical theoretical positions? If their opposing positions find expression in similar poetics in fiction, what does this reveal about their writing and how it can work to cross the gaping abyss between them? Grouping these two authors broadly as “French feminists” allows me to search for answers to these questions.

¹⁷ Annabel Kim makes a different claim: that Wittig’s earlier works, *Les Guérillères*, *Le Corps lesbien*, and *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* showcase feminist utopias related to Wittig’s involvement with the MLF and its revolutionary, utopian spirit, but that her later works such as *Virgile, Non* “mark a dramatic shift in tone from heady utopianism to bitterness” (19). I argue to the contrary in my discussion of Wittig and especially *Virgile, Non* in Chapter 1 that her utopianism actually builds throughout her fictional works and comes to a triumphant climax at the conclusion of her final novel.

¹⁸ Judith Butler contributed to this in both negative and positive ways, criticizing Wittig’s construction of a lesbian subject position that relied on and therefore reinforced the very categories it sought to destruct, in *Gender Trouble*; Butler then retracts this somewhat in her article for the 2007 *GLQ* Special Issue on Wittig, writing that Wittig’s position was “clearly misunderstood” during her life (533). See also Teresa de Lauretis’ chapter “When lesbians were not women” in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, pp. 51-62; and Kevin Henderson, “Becoming lesbian: Monique Wittig’s queer-trans feminism.”

I then follow these stylistic similarities to contemporary novelist Marie Darrieussecq, who helps form my project’s alternative trio of “French feminists.” Darrieussecq is representative of the generation that inherited the contentious feminist debates and MLF battles of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s and has continued to think through lingering issues in her novels even as they target an ever evolving 21st century public. Although she is not yet well-known in the US, Darrieussecq has already produced a prolific corpus in a short time: she has written thirteen novels since her first book, *Truismes* (1996), along with translations, works for theater, essay collections, and books for children. *Truismes* was an astounding best-seller and launched Darrieussecq into the French literary scene “avec un grand éclat” (Lambeth 806): the small publishing house (P.O.L) decided to venture 4,000 copies of the book instead of their usual 2,000, with the optimistic hope of reaching 10,000. The book then sold 400,000 copies in its first year, appeared in forty countries, and has since been translated into over thirty languages (813). According to Faber (the UK-based publisher of the English translation), *Truismes* became the “most popular first novel in France since the 1950s.”¹⁹ After the success of *Truismes*, Darrieussecq was able to leave her job as a university lecturer and focus full time on writing, taking a less commercial route and pursuing her focus on language as a way to explore absence, loss, and sensation (Chadderton 4). Her subsequent novels were nowhere near as popular as *Truismes*, but she has nevertheless published consistently and maintained a public profile.

Being a novelist in this age of social media visibility and instant information access, Darrieussecq maintains a visible persona. She has given many interviews, appeared on podcasts,

¹⁹ This is from the Darrieussecq author bio on their website. Faber published English translations of five of Darrieussecq’s first six works. They skipped *Le Bébé* (2002), which was published instead by The Text Publishing Company out of Australia in 2019. This company has also published seven of Darrieussecq’s later novels in total, from *Tom is Dead* (2007) to *Crossed Lines* (2020), (from *Le mer à l’envers*, 2019). Their 2013 translation of Darrieussecq’s *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013) renders the title—which is a quote by Marguerite Duras—simply as *Men*. The New Press, a small US publisher, offers only Darrieussecq’s first three books.

television spots, spoken at conferences, and traveled widely for promotional tours. In interviews, she has referred to herself as a feminist because she writes and cares about female subjectivity, representations of the female body, and the subordination of the female subject in the French language. She subscribes to a somewhat popular culture brand of feminism, meaning a general left-leaning solidarity with advancing equality and equity for all along intersectional lines.²⁰ In a 2017 interview by Bibliobs titled, “Marie Darrieussecq: “J’adorerais être reprise par Beyoncé,” she summarizes her position on the use of the word “feminist,” stating that in the past when *Truismes* was first published, she was hesitant to refer to herself that way because it seemed reductive. She has since changed opinion as conceptions of what it means to be “feminist” have changed as well. She now uses the term freely, stating “Je n’ai aucun problème à me dire féministe...Si on lit mes romans comme des romans féministes, je suis très contente.” She adds that she sees herself as part of “une littérature engagée féministe,” where *féministe* connotes a wide range of overlapping and intersectional identitarian concerns.²¹ Her distrust of the label as it emerged, tarnished and war-torn from the late 20th century debates, along with her eventual adoption of it to speak of herself as a 21st century author in France reflect both the term’s troubled history and its current revival. As a self-proclaimed “feminist” author in France, she

²⁰ Interestingly, she was included in the 2017 Albertine Festival in New York, titled “Feminism has no boundaries” (the French Culture website is titled “Know your French Feminists” <https://frenchculture.org/books-and-ideas/6825-know-your-french-feminists>). Its description boasts a “selection of contemporary French titles (some mainstream, others more controversial) with a feminist streak or by a notable feminist writer...They address, in their own way, issues of domination, male-female and LGBTQI relationships, explore our identities as they pertain to gender issues, sexuality, religion, work and play, and give a voice to those silenced or forgotten by history.” The festival also included the Guerilla Girls and Anne Garréta.

²¹ Her idea of “feminist” literature also overlaps with environmentalism, pertains to both men and women, and allies itself with “celebrity” feminism, like that of Kim Kardashian or Beyoncé, which Darrieussecq sees as positive visibility and further consciousness-raising, hence the interview’s title.

brings a confident, self-aware perspective to my project that can reflect back upon Wittig and Cixous even as it forges ahead into the future.

In considering the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, my project recognizes the reductive effects of “Made-in-America” French feminism, although refocusing this category is not my main objective. By writing about Wittig and Cixous together, my project necessitates a reconsideration of the established definition of “French feminism” in as much as this definition forecloses the type of study I undertake through its claims that these authors are mutually incompatible. As Darrieussecq’s example shows, there is still a future for “engaged feminist literature” in France, and I choose to employ the still somewhat nebulous category “French feminism” to follow after Darrieussecq’s example. My project is not an attempt to reconcile or simply ignore past hostilities and misrepresentations between French and American feminisms, and I do not offer an all-encompassing definition of “French feminism.” My study traces one as-yet unexplored shared conceptual and formal thread through the three authors, and I offer a way to read them that purposefully brackets the discussions of their differences.²² I use the label “French feminists” not to align them with the brand of essentializing feminist thought imported and fashioned during the 1970s and 80s in the US, but to group them together because of their interest in exploring similar issues in the French language. They all seek to find and, if necessary, create a literary language that is not only capable of speaking *about* and *for* the female subject but that could more precisely create space to let the female subject speak for herself. Since their fiction privileges female protagonists and acting subjects, along with concerns related to the experience of the

²² Annabel Kim in *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions* (2018) traces a connecting thread through a different trio of authors: Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Anne Garréta, in order to articulate a strain of “anti-difference feminist thought.” Kim argues convincingly that this strain has been overshadowed by the dominant “made-in-America” essentialist version, but her analysis still operates on this binary division. She places Cixous on the essentialist or “differentialist” side vs. Wittig on the anti-difference side.

female body, I see these shared interests as worthy of the label “feminist” without verging into over-simplifications or exaggerations.

4. Terminological Frameworks: Feminist Utopia and Relationality

As the first piece of the conceptual foundation for my project that reverberates throughout the coming chapters, I use the adjective “utopian” as it is derived from the noun “utopia” meaning a “non-existent good place.”²³ As Lyman Tower Sargent explains, the noun was coined by Thomas More as the name of the imaginary country in More’s novel, which is now simply referred to as *Utopia* (1516).²⁴ In More’s conception, the term derives from the Greek *topos* meaning “place or where,” and plays on the paradox of both “good place” (*eu-topos*) and “non-place” (*ou-topos*). This definition coincides with the enduring popular culture conception of the term as an ideal but imaginary place, a paradise-like perfect society that only exists in fiction and fantasy. Throughout this project, I use the nouns “utopia” and “paradise” interchangeably to refer to this idea of a static, perfect place. I also employ a broader idea of utopia, supported by multiple contemporary utopian studies scholars, like Ruth Levitas, Frances Bartkowski, and Lucy Sargisson, as way of living and being with others instead of a specific destination that one can enter and exist.²⁵ In this sense, “utopia” still describes an ideal state but is not confined to a specific geographical site and not defined by physical or linear closure (as in

²³ For more description of the term’s evolution, see Sargent, “Introduction,” in *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, 1-9; Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*.

²⁴ More wrote the work in Latin and published it as *Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia* (*Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial than Entertaining*). The work was only translated into English in 1551 by More’s son-in-law (Sargent, 2).

²⁵ See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*; Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias*; Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*.

being a final destination). Utopia then can be understood not as a place to reach but as an ongoing process; a state to create and maintain through desire and choice.²⁶

The adjective “utopian” is more complex and nuanced than the noun, for although it can refer to the idea of utopia as perfect place and therefore act as a modifier to communicate a quality of belonging or pertaining to utopia, it can also describe a “spirit” or “impulse” that aspires *for* utopia. The philosopher Leszek Kolakowski describes this definitional shift, writing that the word utopia “emerged as an artificially concocted proper name,” but has, in the latter half of the twentieth century, acquired a much more diffuse meaning: “a sense so extended that it refers not only to a literary genre but to a way of thinking, to a mentality, to a philosophical attitude” (quoted in Sargent, 5). This extended meaning is a “philosophy of hope” and can often refer to a person in the positive sense of “dreamer” or “visionary” (8). By referring to the literary production of the three authors I analyze as utopian, I do not mean that they offer simple visions of perfect societies or that they themselves are dreamers in a superficial or quaint sense. I do however believe that their writing participates in a committed philosophy of hope, which upholds and enacts their belief in the transformative power and potential of language and literature to ignite real-world change.

The label “utopian” becomes more complicated still when paired with feminism and feminist authors. As scholars of utopia have noted, the traditional model that More offers is rooted in patriarchal and hierarchical ideology. In theory, More’s utopia presents an ideal community based on equality, but the societal reality in the novel is governed by the authority of wise, elderly men and structured with strict laws and harsh punishments, all of which verge

²⁶ Oscar Wilde says as much in an oft-quoted statement about utopia: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.” (quoted in Levitas 5, Sargent 1, and Moylan 29).

dangerously close to the realm of totalitarianism.²⁷ While this model was More's solution for how to create a better society in light of the one available to citizens of England at the time, it offers little of use to contemporary feminist readers. Perhaps even more than the structure of governance, the static model of the envisioned society that forecloses any possibility of change runs contrary to real-life feminist struggle. This model presents a stark dead-end, as Ruth Levitas describes, earning for the label "utopian" the negative connotations of "escapist fantasy" and "pointless entertainment" (1). Levitas notes that there is an elision between perfection and impossibility and an all-too-quick dismissal of what seems impossible in favor of practical, useful, and "realistic" solutions. In this sense, "utopian" can be wielded as a derogatory label for feminist writers. Toril Moi provides an example of this when she criticizes Hélène Cixous' writing as escapist fantasy that disregards women's social and political reality, "marred as much by its lack of reference to recognizable social structures as by its biologism" (126). Moi's main criticism revolves around Cixous' reliance on the Lacanian psychoanalytical structure and her "preoccupation" with the Imaginary as a space of closure and resolution of all conflict (120).²⁸ For all of these reasons, feminist fiction entertains a delicate relationship with the utopian literary genre. I employ the term "utopian" in my interpretations of Wittig's, Cixous,' and Darrieussecq's writing in the knowledge of the term's history and ongoing definitional struggles. Along with scholars of feminist utopianism (as a subgenre of the broader, interdisciplinary field of utopian studies), I still find the term "utopian" useful for literary analysis.

²⁷ See Sargent 2; Moylan 8.

²⁸ See Moi, "Hélène Cixous: an imaginary utopia," in *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, pp. 102-126.

At the level of literary and cultural studies, the label “feminist utopia” is often given to popular types of writing like fantasy and science fiction. Popular culture conceptions of “feminist utopias” are usually imagined societies run by women or absent of gender altogether.²⁹ As Sargent has noted, definitions of literary utopias continue to evolve, and any definition that can or could appeal to a contemporary public must be more complex and have “somewhat porous boundaries” (6). To put it bluntly, he states that “contemporary utopias do not all look like what we previously called a utopia. In particular, they are more complex, less certain of their proposals, and intended for flawed humanity” (6). I investigate these types of contemporary utopias in the writing of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq, which propose innovative and complex solutions for a very-flawed humanity, all while retaining their porous formal and conceptual boundaries. The utopian situations they propose are not simply all-female communities or women-only cities. They are complex figurations that have much more to say about subjectivity and ways of being-in-the-world than who is and who is not allowed within a city. I find Ruth Levitas’ concept of utopia and the “utopian” particularly helpful for my analysis, as she suggests that we think of utopia as the expression of *desire*, “the desire for a better way of being and living” (7-8). This definition makes room for expressions of desire that can vary as much in form and function as they do in content, and it aligns with a general feminist desire for change. Employing Levitas’ definition of utopian literature as writing that expresses desire enables me to bypass the broad label of “utopian” and instead bring the works of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq together under the more focused category of “desire.” Throughout my

²⁹ See for example a 2013 article in *The Atlantic* by Noah Berlatsky titled, “Imagine There’s no Gender: The Long History of Feminist Utopian Literature.” Berlatsky includes DC Comic’s Wonder Woman and various works by Ursula K. Le Guin as examples. Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* is often referenced as being a feminist utopia in that it depicts a “women-only man-hating” community as well, which I address in my Wittig chapter as being a superficial reading of the text.

project, I trace how all three authors express the desire for a better way of living and being in their writing, even though their visions look different.

My readings are further informed by the work of Lucy Sargisson who argues that utopian thinking is crucial to and characteristic of late-twentieth century feminist thought, that it is both necessary, empowering, and valuable. In order to speak of complicated utopias in the context of French feminist literature, I borrow Sargisson's differentiation in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996) between the traditional definition of utopia as a "blueprint for perfect polity" and what she defines as "transgressive utopian thought:" a mode of thinking that creates "spaces in which conceptualization of alternative relations can be undertaken" (145). Sargisson advocates this transgressive form of thought as a "paradigm shift in consciousness" (52) that purposefully blurs generic and conceptual boundaries to change the way we theorize our relation to the world (58-59). Sargisson's conceptualizations of transgressive utopian thought provide a productive and agile way to frame Wittig's, Cixous,' and Darrieussecq's fiction as utopian.

The subsequent term to define and clarify, as the second component of my central concept, is "relationality."³⁰ This term derives from the adjective "relational" that in turn comes from the noun "relation," commonly understood as a connection between objects, concepts, or beings. I use relationality in this general sense to mean the state of being in a relationship with or

³⁰ My use of the term is not to be confused with Karen Offen's definition of what she labels "relational feminism." For Offen, this is a historically dominant version of feminist argument prior to the 20th century, which is basically an "equality in difference" concept that "emphasized women's rights as *women* (defined principally by their childbearing and/or nurturing capacities) in relation to men" (136, her emphasis). She opposes this to "individualistic" feminism that exalted single women's independence and grew in popularity and influence during the 20th century. I find her dichotomy simplistic and I do not engage with it, as there are newer and more complex ways of thinking about the history of feminism and its 20th century trajectory. For her full study, see Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach." I also do not make reference to "relational-cultural theory" from the field of psychoanalysis. This concept considers how the self develops in relationship to other selves and works to understand individuals' happiness and well-being in direct proportion to the quality of those relationships. While this has an interesting overlap with utopian relationality, it pertains to a very different context and itself contains a multitude of subcategories.

being connected to—notably, these definitional attempts rely on open-ended prepositions that imply the presence of an other *with whom* one has or is in relation. Relationality therefore necessitates the presence of a second party, entity, or being. Throughout my project, I explore how the three authors envision this third person “other” at times as people or subjectivities outside of the primary speaking subject, as the self (seen as other), and as the external natural world and its phenomena that occupy the position of other.

“Relation” has a deeper etymological valence that offers additional shades of meaning for my project. Despite the prevailing popular definition, the first entry for “relation” in the Oxford English Dictionary is actually: “the act of giving an account of something; a narration.” This is where we derive the current English usage of “relate,” meaning to recount a story or report information. Just as relation can convey a physical state of being-with, it can then also imply a verbal or figurative state of “being-with” that happens through language and the act of storytelling. Further etymological excavation of the term produces a kaleidoscopic multiplication of meaning due to the fact that “relation” originates in part from the Latin *referre*, meaning to bring back, return, or restore. The phrasal verb “to bring back” contains subtle interpretive possibilities: it can connote a physical sense of carrying or returning an object to someone; a remunerative sense like restitution or paying back what is due; an aural sense of returning sound in the form of a verbal answer or an echo; a memorial sense where the act of remembering is calling back to mind; and finally, an existential sense of reviving or restoring life to what was dead. All of these possibilities reverberate through the idea of relation as “bringing back,” and I shift between them throughout my project as they appear in various moments and ways in the texts. It is also worth noting these many shades of meaning share a shadow of loss as the inverse

of restoration and revival; something cannot “come back” physically or metaphorically if it was not first taken or lost.

The interpretive wealth contained within the term “relation” reflects through the tripart structure of my project and the way I proceed along the lines of content, form, and function. Relation as connection between the self and others, the self and itself, and the self and the world pertains to content; this is the specific relational state that the authors create and describe in their fiction. Relation as narration and storytelling, or relation with language, pertains to form and to the *way* they tell the stories. In their novels, the connection they imagine is equally as important as the textual act of narrating it. Relation as “bringing back,” in the sense of restoration, return, and remembrance, reflects through function—it is the reason they tell their stories of relation. All three authors include resonances of “bringing back” at the levels of content and form, for example through their repetition of images and phrases, and their emphasis on the echo, on remembrance, and on restoring what was lost. I see these instances as microcosmic glimpses of the larger objective to re-conceptualize the female self through, with, and for others in their fiction. Utopian relationality as the combination of terms then is a process of bringing back or returning the female subject to herself, restoring her distorted, alienated, and negated selfhood, and reconnecting her figuratively and physically to her own body. This concept is transgressive and mobile; it refuses isolated individuality and instead produces a capacious, permeable self that is inexorably connected to, shaped by, and coexistent with others.

5. Intercorporeal Subjectivity: Or where is the Body and where is the Self?

In addition to the aforementioned terms, I use the conceptually dense phrase “intercorporeal subjectivity” throughout my project. I borrow the adjective “intercorporeal” from the field of phenomenology in the awareness that it brings a complex philosophical history. It

runs through many of the central figures of 20th century continental philosophy, like Heidegger, Husserl, Levinas, and Sartre. It is most associated with Merleau-Ponty, who uses the concept of *intercorporeité* in his later works of the 1960s to refer to the interconnection between bodies embedded in a shared world as a constitutive part of subjectivity.³¹ I rely on Gail Weiss' elaboration of the concept of intercorporeality in her work, *Body Images*, as a way to describe the interconnectedness of embodied experience. Weiss expressly points to the myriad "corporeal exchanges" that take place in our everyday lives and that constantly contribute to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of our perception and utilization of our bodies. She emphasizes the "inter" relational aspect of these exchanges, both with other bodies and with the wider world: "to describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair but is always already mediated by our continual interaction with both human and non-human bodies" (5). As Weiss points out, due to the nature of our relational existence, the experience of the self is constantly shifting based on interactions with others.

There is a certainly a philosophical shade to my analysis of Wittig's, Cixous,' and Darrieussecq's texts due to the way the authors themselves reflect in their writing upon large concepts like knowledge of the self and embodied experience. However, my objective is not to offer a nuanced philosophical reconceptualization of "intercorporeality." My project is one of literary analysis that proceeds deductively from close readings of the texts' formal attributes to then draw conclusions about the authors' objectives and how they work towards these objectives

³¹ For more see Ann J. Cahill, *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics*, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010, pp. 148-154. Also Scott L. Marratto, "The intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity;" Thomas Fuchs, "Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity;" *Body/Self/Other: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters*, edited by Luna Dolezal and Danielle Petherbridge; Dermot Moran, "Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Embodiment."

in their writing practices. I use the philosophical terms to help name the tendencies, phenomena, and processes that I see unfolding in the texts. I use the concept of intercorporeality in as much as it helps me to understand what happens within the process of utopian relationality. I pair this with “subjectivity” in a broad sense—as consciousness of the self and perception of lived experience—to make the compound phrase “intercorporeal subjectivity.” This refers to a relation between bodies (broadly understood) that influences and facilitates an understanding and experience of the self.³² I emphasize that this experience is “intercorporeal” instead of “intersubjective” because it proceeds from the conviction that subjectivity is inherently tied to the lived reality of the physical body.³³

The concept of intercorporeality also carves out a way for thinking of bodies and embodied subjectivity as porous, flexible, and fluid, as Lisa Folkmarson Kall writes:

An intercorporeal conception of bodies shifts focus from individual bodies to the constitutive relations between them. This notion challenges ideas of the body as a self-enclosed discrete entity with distinct boundaries and instead draws attention to the continuous becoming of bodies and bodily boundaries, stressing a corporeal interconnectedness as the very ground for the individuation of bodies. (364)³⁴

³² Subjectivity as a term has its own long and laden philosophical history. I am not engaging here with *assujettissement* or subjection, in the sense Foucault uses it to mean the process by which one is made a subject within structures of power. Neither do I focus on *subjectivation* or subjectification, as the process by which one becomes a subject. I am more interested in transformations of subjectivity, when one acts as the subject throughout the texts. Annabel Kim offers a distinction between “subjectivity” and “subjecthood” in *Unbecoming Language* to support her argument that Sarraute, Wittig, and Garréta create subjectivity without subjecthood in their writing, through language that “unbecomes” or side-steps the containers of subjecthood.

³³ Without getting lost in weedy wordplay here, what I mean to address in this line of thought is that I purposefully use “intercorporeal subjectivity” instead of something like “intersubjective corporeality.” I see these two phrases as presenting different conceptions that basically revolve around the emphasis either on corporeality *or* subjectivity as the adjective or noun in the phrase. The first configuration alludes to subjectivity that is formed through corporeal relations while the second points to corporeality or physical, bodily experience that is formed through relations between subjectivities. I choose the former phrase because I am concerned in my project with a type of subjectivity as the end goal and with the process of reaching it (or reaching and then maintaining) as something that happens through the body and bodily experience.

³⁴ See Kall, “Intercorporeal Expression and the Subjectivity of Dementia,” in *Body/Self/Other: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters*.

Intercorporeality in this description points to the relations between bodies instead of the bodies themselves as isolated, autonomous, and enclosed objects. Bodies are “continuously becoming” through interactions with others and with the wider world, and it is these interactions that help fashion and shape the self. Kall is careful also to note that an “intercorporeal understanding of bodies” does not simply mean blending two bodies into one, which “in no way completely collapses the boundaries or differences between them so that they become one body” (364). Intercorporeality, though it is a shared and shifting experience of being, actually serves to differentiate one’s individual boundaries, where “singular lived bodies come into being as boundaries between them are established, reinforced, challenged and continuously altered” (364). This intercorporeal process works to delineate the self even as the self is influenced through relation with others. This is the process that I trace through the fictional texts of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq, where subjectivities interrelate without ever losing their individuality. Utopian relationality is a type of intercorporeal exchange that does not lead to effacement or loss but gain, expansion, and multiplication of the self in the other.

Speaking of corporeal exchanges and interrelations between bodies begs the clarification questions of what exactly I understand by “the body,” and where “the body” is located in the texts I examine. First, as many theorists have noted, there is no *one* body and there is no such thing as *the* body or even the *Body*.³⁵ As Weiss describes, whenever we speak of the body it is always a body-in-relation, always already modified and classified, “responded to in a particular fashion, that is as a woman’s body, a Latina’s body, a mother’s body, a daughter’s body, a friend’s body, an attractive body, an ageing body, a Jewish body” (1). These ideas of and

³⁵ See Weiss 1, also Kim 169-170 for a discussion of how the concept of *body* changes when it takes the definite article *the* body; Judith Butler also provides a discussion of the body as discursive site vs the body as materiality in *Bodies that Matter*.

references to certain types of bodies also necessarily exist at the intersection of overlapping identities, meaning that one does not possess *only* a woman's body, but one can be a woman *and* a Latina *and* a mother *and* a friend, etc. The intersectional nature of bodily identity further highlights the intercorporeal relations that structure lived experience, for one's body becomes a "daughter's body" only when considered in relation to the bodies of parents or those that created and raised the body of the daughter.

When I speak of "the body" to discuss intercorporeal relations between subjectivities, I understand this term broadly both as a physical entity with specific defining features, and like Weiss describes, as the site of intersecting identities formed from various social, political, and familial relations. The texts I analyze primarily (but not exclusively) include anatomically female bodies. The authors pay close attention to the materiality of the female body and how these material experiences impact one's conception of self and navigation of the world. They place distinct emphasis on the experiences of the female body to acknowledge that a biologically female and female-gendered experience is governed by intimate consciousness of and connection to one's physical body. This awareness is not an essentializing move though or a way of falling back into the false mind/body dichotomy that would imprison women in bodily immanence and foreclose their capacity for intellectual transcendence. I interpret the importance of the physical body in the authors' fiction as an effort to acknowledge how much it factors into the construction of subjectivity without making it the exclusive factor. One's subjectivity does not arise in a void; hence their emphasis on relationality and intercorporeality. Utopian relationality—with its paradoxical nature of *both-and*—includes the physical body and its role in fashioning subjectivity. In this way, the authors concentrate on the relations, interactions, and interconnections between bodies as they are fluid and adaptive, between embodied subjectivities,

and even between subjectivities and the inanimate or animate world.³⁶ In the texts, subjects retain their subjectivity even when the form of the body physical shifts, like in Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*, Cixous' *Le Livre de Promethea*, and Darrieussecq's *Truismes*. This renders their writing even more capacious, for subjectivity transforms as the physical body transforms. The visions the authors create in their fiction of subjectivity are therefore conscious of the physical body and the importance of intercorporeal experience, but they also allow the body to be flexible and adaptable.

As I trace intercorporeal subjectivity in the texts, my readings of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq unfold upon the backdrop of Rosi Braidotti's and Elizabeth Grosz' theorizations of corporeality and sexual difference. In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti writes that we must think differently about ourselves, the processes of our transformations and becomings, and the way our embodied existence is continually contaminated through inter-connectedness (35). Elizabeth Grosz similarly theorizes a corporeal feminism that proceeds from sexual difference, and like Braidotti, she considers the useful aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's notions of corporeality and materiality from their work, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Grosz notes that Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the body "as a discontinuous, non-totalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations" and that all of these aspects may be of value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the dominant binary oppositions imposed by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior dualities (*Volatile Bodies* 164). Grosz also addresses the problematic aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's thought for feminist analysis—most notably their use of the phrase "becoming-woman" that could be seen as a way of neutralizing or even effacing women's sexual specificity

³⁶ This overlaps with Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, Merleau-Ponty's idea of "interanimality," and Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal," which I address in my chapters.

through a male appropriation of women's politics, struggles, and lived experience (163).

Nevertheless, she writes that Deleuze and Guattari's thought can still provide powerful tools of analysis, critique, transgression and transformation (165), but she concludes that one must "tread warily" (180).

In the knowledge of these advantages and risks, I uphold Grosz's positive interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's usefulness for analysis, critique, transgression, and transformation. I proceed through my readings of the fictional texts with Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming as a constant, underlying theoretical foundation. Somewhat like Dante's en-verbed pronouns, Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations of becoming as liberatory and deeply relational acts of resistance have contributed to the very genesis of this project and its conceptual foundations. In this way, I actually do not "tread warily" around Deleuze and Guattari's theories but engage with them deeply as they equip me with ways to describe the transformations and becomings within the French feminist fictions. Especially when paired with interpretations of feminist utopian theory as already transgressive and transformative (especially that of Lucy Sargisson), Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming enable provocative and profound readings of the fictional texts. Since my project seeks to analyze certain expressions of relationality, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of the body without organs and rhizomatic types of becoming (becoming-woman, -animal, -minoritarian) prove to be useful tools and vocabularies for articulating the processes with which one achieves or strives for utopian relationality. Since their work already has an abstract utopian dimension to it (notably in their theorization of the body without organs), it lends itself as an interpretive framework for the fictional works of Cixous, Wittig, and Darrieussecq. More precisely, Deleuze and Guattari's description of the haecceity (*heccéité*)—a mode of becoming where the individual enters into a constantly shifting

collectivity or assemblage—cuts to the heart of my project in as much as it describes an alternative and aspirational relational state. Deleuze and Guattari explain in *Mille Plateaux* (1980) that in the process of becoming (*le devenir*), one moves closer to the molecular being of something else in order to enter into a multifaceted relation that does not differentiate between particulars like subject, animal, atmosphere, and time of day but instead understands each moment as a happening or event. This assemblage created through the combination of factors that enter into composition with each other is what they call a *haecceity*. Haecceities do not progress towards destinations or settled states, and to understand oneself as moving from haecceity to haecceity is to understand being in a state of becoming.

While Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the haecceity lends itself to environmentally-oriented theories like Stacy Alaimo’s “trans-corporeality” and is apparent in moments of the subjects’ interaction with the environment in Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq,³⁷ I argue that the haecceity can work in another way in Cixous, Wittig, and Darrieussecq through collapsing the protagonist/background separation (as Deleuze and Guattari themselves encourage) and through reading the way subjects enter into an intercorporeal relation with others as a haecceitic process. In this way, entering into a relation with the other is to become a haecceity with the other protagonist who functions *as* a spatiotemporal background; this is to say that an other can *be* the event into which one enters and becomes (as in the opening passage from *Le Corps lesbien* when

³⁷ While it seems like “trans-corporeality” would be a fitting description of Wittig’s work, Alaimo states instead that Wittig perpetuated the woman/nature divide, whereby further emphasizing those binary categories. I find this perplexing, and my reading of *Le Corps lesbien* differs greatly, but the text certainly opens itself to conflicting interpretations. This further shows how easy it is to find oneself in deep, murky waters while trying to differentiate intercorporeality and transcorporeality. I would argue that Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien* is evidence of overcoming binary distinctions. The way that Wittig’s protagonists transform not just each other but also into trees, flowers, rivers, insects, oceans, mud, sand, birds, horses, snakes, and undefinable creatures shows how she does not distinguish between the “human” and the natural world, nor does she prioritize or elevate the human body over other types of bodies or “more-than-human” bodies. I address this more in my discussion of *Le Corps lesbien* in Chapter 1, but I do not specifically use Alaimo’s concept due to the way she herself distances it from Wittig’s work.

they lovers embrace in the quicksand). This line of thought is already somewhat utopian in the abstract way it imagines a union that is not entirely physical but that exists at the imperceptible level of intensities and flows, and it helps to draw out the utopian aspects in form and content that connect Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq.

In addition to Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming and the hecceity, to help further navigate the conceptions of what the body is and what it can do, I return to Gail Weiss' for her explanation of "body images" and their role in constructing the "bodily imaginary." Instead of referring to the specific shape of bodies and their relations, along with their contours and boundaries that constantly shift and reconfigure themselves, "body images" refer to one's set of beliefs about one's own body, or the system of perceptions and attitudes with which one "thinks the body" (66).³⁸ Body images are in turn influenced by one's cultural imaginary, or the set of commonly held beliefs, fantasies, and expectations about bodies that belong to specific cultures and attempt to ground our identities accordingly. As Weiss states, a given culture's imaginary prescribes and proscribes certain bodily behaviors along multiple intersecting lines of gender, race, ability, age, social class, etc. Exploring alternative possibilities poses the potential to change the bodily imaginary and supply other, more open-minded body images, whereby expanding the "horizon of possible significances" (67). She describes this process: "To change the imaginary, we must in turn create new images of the body, dynamic images of non-docile bodies that resist the readily available techniques of corporeal inscription and normalization that currently define 'human reality'" (67). So then, to change collectively held ways of thinking about bodies and to work towards greater freedom and possibility, it is necessary to first create different body images that disrupt existing norms and refuse oppressive corporeal conceptions.

³⁸ Weiss quoting Michèle LeDoeff.

Utopian relationality in the texts of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq has the potential to reconceptualize the female body and the self in their fiction. These authors offer radical new conceptions and configurations of the body-in-relation, whereby destabilizing existing conceptions of its givenness and its submission to confinement and control. They question binary logic and break ideological and figurative boundaries of what the female body can and cannot do; how it must and must not live. They upset prohibitions about self-policing, effacement, confinement, conformity, silence, and submission in order to remake the self in their utopian visions. Above all, their alternative body images created through intercorporeal relations are liberatory—they are expressions of freedom. Utopian relationality is also intimately tied to form and cannot be reduced to a mere intellectual exercise or an abstract theory. In addition to positing theoretical possibilities, the visions the authors create in their fiction reimagine language. All three authors work with language from within language and perform alternative ways of articulating and expressing subjects in relation. Their visions are not entirely didactic, and while they do not offer neatly packaged solutions or models to follow, they all inherently believe in the transformative power of stories. For when their stories imagine alternative ways of being, they invite the reader to imagine as well and to consider their established patterns of existence. These authors show that rethinking bodies and subjects through stories necessitates the related refashioning of the very language used to tell those stories. In this way, at both the level of content and form, they work towards a “paradigm shift in consciousness” (Sargisson) and prove that making the “unimaginable” imaginable is a deeply feminist act.

6. Overview

The first chapter focuses on Monique Wittig to show how utopian relationality is an integral aspect of her work and her thought as a distinctly utopian writer. Of the six novels that

Wittig wrote during her lifetime (and even labeling them as “novels” is pushing genre boundaries), I analyze three of them: *Les Guérillères* (1969), *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), and *Virgile, Non* (1985), because they span her literary career and show a progression in her thought. I begin with *Les Guérillères* because of all of Wittig’s novels, it is the one most often labeled a “feminist utopia” because it includes a seemingly all-female community.³⁹ I address both the value and slight oversight in this interpretation because the community does include men and that is part of the point. I then expand upon Francis Bartkowski’s and Lucy Sargisson’s previous studies of feminist utopias that include *Les Guérillères* as one work among many by considering how the text presents relationality as a core aspect of its utopian vision. I locate this vision in the three-part relational structure that the guérillères propose for their new world: they first remake the relation between themselves and language so that the words they use do not negate their subjectivity; second, they remake the relation between themselves and their own bodies. They systematically recreate the imaginary of the female body comprised of images, symbols, and metaphors that previously dictated the way they conceived of and lived through their embodied selves; third, they create a new communitarian consciousness, or a way of living with the self as other and other as self through Wittig’s use of the gendered third-person plural pronoun, *elles*.

In my analysis of *Le Corps lesbien*, I explore how the many bodily transformations that the two lovers (or many sets of two lovers) undergo illustrates utopian relationality, both through

³⁹ I purposefully do not begin with her debut novel, *L’Opoanax* (1964) to instead focus on *Les Guérillères* (1969) since it has been widely read as a feminist utopia, as already stated. While a reading of Wittig’s use of the pronoun “on” in *L’Opoanax* as an aspect of utopian relationality could provide a fruitful analysis, I leave that for another time. Annabel Kim provides an insightful reading of *L’Opoanax* that could also lay a foundation for such a study. In particular, Kim considers the final statement of the novel, where after nearly 300 pages of *on* and *elle*, Wittig transforms *on* into *je*: “On dit, tant je l’aimais qu’en elle encore je vis,” which is itself a quotation from the sixteenth-century French poet Maurice Scève. See *Unbecoming Language* “The Demands of *L’Opoanax*,” pp. 104-116. I have not included Wittig’s other works, *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976) and *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* (1999) since these two works are even less like novels: *Brouillon* consists of a series of dictionary entries and *Paris-la-politique* is a collection of short stories.

its impossible intimacy and through its positioning in an unspecified utopian present. The text describes a utopian union of the two protagonists at the levels of both content and form, notably through the way Wittig splits the first-person pronouns and possessives in *Le Corps lesbien* just as she splits open the textual body with the anatomical lists of body parts. Through the myriad inter-penetrations that occur in the text, Wittig imagines her protagonists as events and becomings that are not bound by specific bodies or temporalities. The protagonists enact a becoming-other that is a becoming-self. To expand upon this description of becoming, I then provide a reading of *Le Corps lesbien* through Deleuze and Guattari's theories of the "body without organs," "becoming-woman," and "becoming-animal." I trace the many moments of "becoming-animal" in *Le Corps lesbien* to better understand how this type of becoming exemplifies the lovers' existence in haecceities and leads to bodily freedom.

I then analyze how Wittig's final novel, *Virgile, Non*, includes a similar concept of utopian relationality in the way the protagonist *Wittig* appeals to the damned souls on the basis of their shared humanity in the "Laundromat" scene, and the way she speaks to her beloved as "mon beau paradis." Throughout her journey through the afterlife realms, the protagonist *Wittig* envisions paradise as a relational state and a way of being-with and being-in the other. *Wittig* experiences paradise as a realm of overlapping and mixing sensations where language itself is free, as she reveals with her recurring metaphor of the vision of heaven vanishing like "a hemorrhage in reverse." The last chapter of *Virgile, Non* presents paradise as a relationship with other people that is characterized by "la passion active" and by the exuberant experience of a freely flowing hemorrhage of language. Comparing and connecting Wittig's three texts through the theme of utopian relationality illuminates how it plays a defining role in the trajectory and development of Wittig's thought and experimentation throughout her literary career.

Chapter 2 shifts focus to a selection of Hélène Cixous' works in order to see her theoretical-poetic conception of *écriture féminine* as a utopian strategy that she herself performs in *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983) and *La Bataille d'Arcachon* (1985). The selections I have chosen from Cixous begin with her most well-known work in the US academic context, the essay "Le rire de la Méduse" (1975).⁴⁰ I consider Cixous' vision of plural subjectivity expressed through the specific type of writing that she describes in the essay, and I analyze her conception of woman's "vatic bisexuality" as a state of non-exclusion and openness of the self. Cixous' concept posits the multiplication of differences within each person. This is not simply a conception of the self that is endlessly fragmented but that can be known and experienced through others. By including such a well-studied essay, my aim is not to summarize the discussions surrounding the value or usefulness of Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*, or to posit a re-theorization of this concept. I use this essay as an interpretive lens to read her lesser-known essay, "Tancredi continue" (1983) and her two novels about the figure of and relationship with Promethea. In "Tancredi continue," Cixous describes a utopian union between the two protagonists of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (Tancredi and Clorinde), who also appear as Tancredi and Aménaiide in Gioachino Rossini's 1813 operatic version of the story (*Tancredi*), which is based on Voltaire's 1760 *Tancredi* (although Voltaire's version of the story differs from Tasso's). Cixous uses the metaphor of "pure turquoise" to describe the union of the protagonist-couple along with the desire to achieve it and the struggle to express that union in language. This state of turquoise as she describes it is a combination of the royal blue of

⁴⁰ The prevalence of the English translation of this essay coupled with the difficulty of finding the original French version contribute to interpretations based on the translation. Cixous is known for this essay in the US, which means that she is known for its English translation and much of her wordplay is lost or only partially approximated. I refer to the French version, as I do for all the texts I include in my analysis, since in-depth original-language analysis is a core aspect of my methodology.

Tancredi and the pure white of Aménaïde, but though it is a combination, it is still a both-and relation where each is itself even as it is the other.

In *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d’Arcachon*, Cixous creates centrifugal, plot-less descriptions of a writer (the speaking narrator *je*), trying to write about her protagonist (Promethea), with interjections from another self, simply named *H*. This trio of characters who are also parts of *one* self illustrates Cixous’ concept of plural and permeable selfhood. In describing their relations, Cixous paints a picture of utopian relationality as a process of becoming that opens the self to the other(s) and to the world—it is as much a desired goal as an intermittent fleeting experience. I include a Deleuzoguattarian reading of pieces of *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d’Arcachon* that enables me to see its similarities with Wittig’s fiction in terms of becoming-animal. I extend this reading to also include Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-imperceptible” as an expansion of becoming into a cosmic utopian relation, or a “becoming-world” in *La Bataille d’Arcachon*. In Cixous’ two novels, the protagonists endlessly pursue both how to live this type of relation, sustain and maintain it, and how to express it in language. Their way of writing and living is a way of becoming, in a state of permeability and non-exclusion that exists in-between, that *is* and exists *in* the other.

Compared to the selection of texts from Wittig that span an entire literary career, the selection from Cixous is significantly more focused in time and only covers about a decade. The explanation for this difference is simply reflective of the two authors’ biographies, since *Virgile*, *Non* was Wittig’s last novel and her literary production was undoubtedly cut short by her death in 2003. Cixous continues to be a prolific author and has published more than forty novels, in addition to theatrical works and others that mix the genres of historical fiction, autobiography, and literary criticism. Since Cixous’ literary production is legion and her thought has shifted over

the decades, I choose to focus on a small period of her writing in order to capture, more clearly, one thread of her thought at a certain point in time. Additionally, the mid-1980s publication dates of Cixous' two Promethea novels coincides with the publication date of *Virgile, Non* in 1985, and therefore this allows me to reflect upon this historical moment after the 1970s ruptures in the MLF.

Chapter 3 jumps forward in time to the 21st century to consider the works of Marie Darrieussecq. Writing more than two decades later than the period I focus on for the other two authors, Darrieussecq represents an exciting, experimental voice in the contemporary generation of women writers in France. This temporal shift allows me to trace echoes and reflections of Wittig and Cixous in Darrieussecq's popular, contemporary fiction. Darrieussecq is a prolific writer, and I have chosen a selection of Darrieussecq's novels that traverses her literary career but does not stretch beyond 2005. Although this selection only spans about two-thirds of her literary production, it gives a full-enough picture of her formal and conceptual trajectory without becoming unwieldy, and I have chosen novels that help me to best focus on utopian relationality. I begin with her debut novel *Truismes* (1996), even though it is widely labeled as a "dystopia" and could seem out of place in a study of utopian fiction. My interpretation does not downplay its dystopian aspects, but I analyze instead its vision of utopia that erupts through lyrical descriptions of the narrator's sensations when she is alone in nature. These moments act as liberating experiences that contrast with the protagonist's reality among people in the city, her extremely limited, naïve vocabulary, and the text's biting irony. While these utopian moments are exceptions, their contrast is so significant and powerful that they merit a detailed analysis. They also introduce conceptual themes and stylistic features that endure throughout her later novels, like the blurring of boundaries between the human and animal world; the focus on

embodied sensation and haptic knowledge; and the widening of the first-person narrative perspective to express a “becoming-world” through linguistic innovation. While *Truismes* describes Deleuze and Guattari’s process of “becoming-animal”—not merely because the protagonist physically transforms into an animal but in the sense that this transformation leads to deeper conceptual transformation—I focus my Deleuzian reading of the text on the narrator’s achievement of a utopian, hecceity-filled existence at the conclusion of the novel. This description expresses her new and different relation to her own body and the natural world, along with her relation to language, or the ability to finally understand and articulate her experience in writing.

Next, I discuss Darrieussecq’s novel, *White* (2003), which tells the story of the unlikely relationship between its two protagonists, as it develops against the backdrop of extreme isolation, silence, and stillness that surrounds their Antarctic research base. Like *Truismes*, I analyze moments of utopia in *White*, where brief descriptions of the protagonists’ physical relations express an ideal, intercorporeal becoming. These moments break with *White*’s fragmented narration through their lyricism, warmth, and color. They ultimately describe the protagonists’ relationship as the answer to deep questions about existence and as the way to rid themselves of the ghosts of their past trauma. Since Deleuze and Guattari position the Antarctic (along with the ocean and the desert) landscapes as geographical spaces that allow and catalyze becoming, *White*’s setting lends itself to a reading of its utopian relationality through their opposition of smooth versus striated space, or *le lisse et le strié*. I use Deleuze and Guattari’s dichotomy as a way to describe *White*’s layered vision of utopian relationality. Although the Antarctic setting is already a smooth space, the protagonists struggle to overcome the desire for striation within themselves and to create a smooth space of becoming through their

intercorporeal relation. They achieve this near the end of the text, and the fleeting experience of utopia leaves them permanently changed.

The last text I include is *Le Pays* (2005), Darrieussecq's autofictional story about a writer named Marie Rivière who returns to the Basque Country with her family after having lived in Paris. This text echoes many aspects of Wittig's and Cixous' texts by playing with subject-verb agreement, alternating first and third-person narrative perspectives, and including an echo of Wittig's "j/e clivé." Darrieussecq includes retellings and repetitions of previous pieces of the narrative that break with linear chronology through formal changes in font style and color, creating an internal resonance in the text between the acts of living and telling the same story. The picture of utopian relationality that she presents in this text is that of an expansive self moving from haecceity to haecceity as a way of existing in relation with others and with the surrounding natural world. It is a way of both seeing the self as other and welcoming the other as part of the self, in an expression of the desire to overflow and transform in an interconnected state of being-together. With these three novels by Darrieussecq, I argue that she envisions a type of becoming in her writing that builds upon the work of Cixous and Wittig. She does not exactly recycle Wittig's and Cixous' fictional strategies in her novels but expands and carries on their legacy of transformative and innovative writing.

I have organized the project's structure in this way to proceed chronologically beginning with Wittig, through Cixous, to Darrieussecq. This trajectory aims to broaden existing interpretations of these three authors, loosen reified categorizations of their fiction, and present an invigorated reading of their texts together. While it may seem out of place to include Deleuze and Guattari's theories alongside the three writers, I continually mention Deleuze and Guattari because their multifaceted conception of becoming has already shaped my readings of the texts

and I have adopted their terminology. I see their theories as illuminating connective tissues that stretch between all the texts in a rhizomatic way, and these connections are vital to my project. They do not trace a linear evolution from Wittig to Cixous to Darrieussecq but rather provide additional ways to understand the similarities between the content, form, and function of the fictional texts. While Deleuze and Guattari provide integral terminology and conceptual frames within which to speak about utopian relationality in the authors I analyse, I provide a specific interlude in each chapter where I demonstrate what a Deleuzoguattarian reading could look like within my framework. Through this methodology, I argue for the continued usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari for feminist analysis and more precisely for readings of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq. Utopian relationality as I describe and analyze it in Wittig's, Cixous,' and Darrieussecq's writing expresses a distilled desire for freedom, both in new ways of using language and in its imaginative ways of reconceptualizing the self. This aspect of their writing refuses to perpetuate a female subject that has been oppressed, objectified, and confined but instead allows her to surpass confines and find a fuller sense of existence through new and renewed relations with the self, other (s), and the world. The three authors believe above all in the power of writing, and they succeed at creating original visions of relationality in their fiction. Their work of imagining and describing through fiction what seems impossible, improbable, and illogical is a way to expand our consciousness of ourselves along with our understanding of the transformative power of language to shape reality.

II. MONIQUE WITTIG

For once the dimension of the person, around which all others are organized, is brought into play, nothing is left intact. Words, their disposition, their arrangement, their relation to each other, the whole nebula of their constellations shift, are displaced, engulfed, or reoriented, put sideways. And when they reappear, the structural change in language makes them look different. They are hit in their meaning and also in their form. Their music sounds different, their coloration is affected. For what is really in question here is a structural change in language, in its nerves, its framing.

- Monique Wittig “The Mark of Gender” (82)

Monique Wittig describes her efforts in the above citation to transform the category of the pronoun as a representation of gender in language and “the dimension of the person.”⁴¹ This statement introduces the relational and intersubjective focus of her writing as a way to rethink the self in connection with others and with language. She emphasizes how this relational dynamic does not just occur at the level of content but also of form—for rethinking the subject necessitates a consequent reorganization and reformation of the aesthetic and poetic qualities of language. As Wittig develops and explores new concepts in her fiction, she demonstrates the accompanying structural change in language that shifts, displaces, engulfs, and reorients words in both meaning and form. She even mentions the aural and visual properties of words, for in her writing, “their music sounds different” and “their coloration is affected.” Her fictional works exemplify this structural change in language through the ways they present new conceptions of the self with and through others along with new articulations of that self. Wittig’s fiction is powerful for both her philosophical views and political urgency that pulses underneath her attention to the materiality of language and the relations between words themselves. She understands that linguistic transformation has the potential for explosive real-world change, where “nothing is left intact.” Her literary production is deeply invested in this transformative

⁴¹ “The Mark of Gender” is included in Wittig’s collection of essays, *The Straight Mind*. It was written in English and first published in *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1, (Summer 1980).

work of imagining alternative realities in both content and form as a way to enact real change upon current reality.

In this chapter, I read three of Wittig's novels for the ways they engage with "the dimension of the person" by envisioning renewed and deeper relations between the self and others, the self and the wider world, and the self with (and within) language. I label these relations as utopian because they function in Wittig's novels as an experience of paradise—where paradise is not specifically a place but a liberatory and relational way of existing. *Les Guérillères* is Wittig's work that has most often been interpreted as a feminist utopia, and I add to these interpretations by analyzing the specific relational aspects that underpin its vision. More than the type of community it creates (or its content), I argue that the form of the novel also reimagines the guérillères' relation to language, and it shows how they use language in a communal way that both emphasizes their collective existence and does not negate their selfhood. I interpret *Le Corps lesbien* as a depiction of a utopian relation between one couple (or many sets of couples) that shifts the larger focus of *Les Guérillères*' community to a smaller one of meticulous intimacy between two beings and the ways they enjoy each other with deliberate reverence and attention to all parts of their bodies. The lovers in *Le Corps lesbien* exemplify a utopian way of being that is a continual process of becoming. Through their desire and pleasure, they show how the experience of being with the lover *is* paradise. Since *Le Corps lesbien*'s fictional descriptions of dismantling and remaking the body run parallel to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "the body without organs" and their descriptions of how this state leads to different types of becoming, I use their theoretical framework to read many of *Le Corps lesbien*'s moments. Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal helps to illuminate the lovers' many transformations into various creatures, plants, and even water. *Virgile, Non*

continues Wittig's emphasis on becoming as it borrows certain elements of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in its journey through the three realms of the afterlife. The text contains flashes of paradise along the journey and in the protagonist's eventual arrival in the realm of heaven that are very far from Dante's theologically ordered Christian heaven. Wittig's heaven in *Virgile, Non* is both a place and a state of being. Even more, Wittig designs heaven as an intercorporeal experience—it is a way of being together, like in *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*, that understands the self as interconnected with others and with language.

Since my methodology in this chapter (and the subsequent ones) is based on close reading and careful attention to the formal properties of the texts, it makes for purposefully long analyses. Throughout, I privilege less-studied passages of text and passages that have only been briefly mentioned or noted in scholarly works (as far as I have seen). My aim is to know the texts deeply from the inside and to trace the unfolding of utopian relationality over the entirety of each text. I cite frequently and widely from the novels to give them space to speak and to show *how* they build their visions and accomplish their objectives, piece by piece and step by step, even at the level of seemingly simple minutiae like pronouns and punctuation. These building blocks of language are not simple at all, for as Wittig states in “The Trojan Horse,” “with writing, words are everything.” I therefore pay close attention to her words and the way she reworks the world through words. The novels' utopian visions and utopian experiences radiate through Wittig's emphasis on form and the ways she reimagines relations in language. She creates a powerful vision of utopian relationality through the ensemble of these three novels, and when read together, they reveal that this is a defining feature of her fiction and of her desire for a better way of being.

1. Paradise Exists in the Shadow of the Sword: Unmaking and Remaking in *Les Guérillères*

In an essay for *Esprit Créateur's* 1994 special issue “L’Imaginaire utopique,” Monique Wittig speculates about whether *Les Guérillères* (1969) can be both an epic and a utopia. While she implies that her work *is* both because she sees no “essential contradiction” between the two genres, she defers a definitive conclusion to specialists of utopia: “Mais je ne vois pas de contradiction essentielle. Je ne suis pas en mesure de dire si une épopée peut être en même temps une utopie. Mais étant donné que le livre ne se passe nulle part et que l'action décrite n'a jamais eu lieu, la question se pose. Je la laisse posée pour les spécialistes de l'utopie” (“Quelques remarques sur *Les Guérillères*,” 122). By positioning the novel as an unlikely combination of the two literary genres, Wittig mirrors the paradoxical, oppositional dynamic that infuses the *guérillères'* way of existing in the narrative.⁴² As evidence of its utopian nature, Wittig refers to aspects of *Les Guérillères* that pertain to the traditional idea of utopian literature: that it describes a fantastical place, “l'action décrite n'a jamais eu lieu,” and that it exists nowhere, “le livre ne se passe nulle part.” While these characteristics are true in the work, they paint an incomplete picture of *Les Guérillères'* utopian vision. In the analysis that follows, I argue that *Les Guérillères* is a profoundly utopian text not only because of the way it reimagines generic conventions with its epic narrative and imaginary community, but more specifically through the ways it reimagines the *guérillères'* relations with language, with the female body, and with each other. In this way, Wittig structures the total transformation of reality that the *guérillères* fight for (and achieve) through reimagined relations. The *guérillères'* new way of existing is one of utopian relationality where they understand the self through others and live as a communal *elles*.

⁴² I used the non-italicized, untranslated title term to refer to the community as a purposeful way to avoid the English translation's “the women.”

Wittig builds this vision first and foremost in the text at the level of language in a wholesale transformation of the way the guérillères use language to speak of themselves and the way Wittig as the author uses it to describe them. She highlights the ways gendered language excludes the “female subject,”⁴³ and then she enables the guérillères to remake language by screening, emptying, and assigning new meaning to words. By so doing, the guérillères establish a new relation between themselves and language in which the language they use does not negate their subjectivity. Secondly, Wittig’s text establishes a relation of restoration between the guérillères and their own bodies. The guérillères systematically remake the imaginary of the female body comprised of images, symbols, and metaphors that dictate the way they conceive of and live through their embodied selves. Finally, Wittig expresses a utopian desire for connection and community (instead of confinement and isolation) in *Les Guérillères* through her use of the feminine plural pronoun *elles*, which refers to the guérillères as both a singular and plural protagonist. While the guérillères possess individual agency and bodily freedom, they live and act together in a community that defies hetero-patriarchy’s enforced coupling and subsequent societal separation. They construct their community instead on intercorporeal relations of self and other that allow them to live sovereignly and freely.

⁴³ I put this biologicistic term in quotation marks to signal a contradiction inherent in Wittig’s works, which my analysis recognizes but does not seek to resolve. For, on the one hand, Wittig clearly calls for the destruction of gender in language in her essays, but on the other hand, she employs gendered language in her fictional works. She describes her lesbian subjects (who exist in realities that surpass gendered categories) with the same female-gendered adjectives in French that she uses to describe women (as a social class, created and enslaved through heteropatriarchal relations with men). Women and lesbians are both still actually gendered female in French, and Wittig does not imagine or create a linguistic way out of this issue—by inventing entirely new pronouns or other ways of speaking about the subjects, for example. It is easier to avoid gendered categories when speaking of Wittig’s *theorization* of the lesbian as a liberatory subject position than it is when reading her fiction. My use of the word “female” throughout is not meant to be synonymous with “woman” as Wittig uses it, but it does recognize that Wittig’s lesbian subjects in the three novels I discuss in this chapter have anatomically specific bodies with features that are female (vulvas, vaginas, breasts, etc.). Wittig even draws attention to these features to emphasize that these bodies are certain bodies, and even more, to show that “the lesbian body” can be a female body—only one that is liberated from enforced servitude to “womanhood,” reproduction, and heterosexual relations.

The narrative of *Les Guérillères* describes a community of guerilla warriors who fight against hetero-patriarchal society and all those who ascribe to its principles in order to remake the world. They systematically dismantle and destroy the existing linguistic structure that shapes reality with its exclusive conceptions of what it means to be female and images of the female body that erase the female subject (and force it into the reductive and oppressive category of “woman”). They then erect a new reality in its place through their own language, which is built upon restoration and reciprocity. *Les Guérillères* recounts this battle for utopia in three parts, where the first part in the text is chronologically the last, as it describes the guérillères’ harmonious life after the war. Because this section describes their utopian life more than the other two sections—which concentrate on describing the problems, the desired solutions, and the battle to achieve them—I mainly focus my analysis on the first section. After the violence of war, the descriptions of the community at peace show the distinct features of the utopian life they worked so hard to realize. My interpretation also builds upon others that read the entire text as a utopian vision, but I diverge by asserting that the utopian aspect of the text does not lie merely in the type of community it proposes (as an “all-female” one, which is actually a reductive but popular misreading of the text); rather the utopian aspect exists in the guérillères’ reimagined relational dynamics. In this sense, *Les Guérillères* does not just tell the story of a war but details and describes how the guérillères’ warfare purposefully targets the relational structure that underpins hetero-patriarchy and then how they work to recreate a structure for themselves in its place.

a. Background: *Les Guérillères* as Feminist Utopia

In addition to its fantastic tone and its setting in an unspecified present, *Les Guérillères* has been labeled as Wittig’s most “utopian” work due to type of community it describes.

Kristine J. Anderson refers to *Les Guérillères* as the beginning of the utopian trend in Wittig's oeuvre, or her "meta-utopian" style of writing. Anderson labels *Les Guérillères* "Wittig's first recognized utopian work" (90). In an article tellingly titled, "Language and the Vision of a Lesbian-Feminist Utopia in Wittig's *Les Guérillères*," Marthe Rosenfeld describes *Les Guérillères* as an "all-female world" (7) and an "imaginary woman's community," as part of a description that verges on sentimentalism, where "the enjoyment of the senses fosters self-knowledge, harmony with others, and closeness to nature" (8).⁴⁴ Lawrence Porter concentrates his analysis on how Wittig merges the genres of myth, epic, and utopia in *Les Guérillères*. He states that Wittig creates a "mythic utopian epic, a new form, as the vehicle for her message" (93). He claims that Wittig's work is utopian in a traditional sense because it details the rules of operation in this new, hypothetical, "monosexual society of women" (93). Angelika Bammer even calls *Les Guérillères* "the quintessential feminist utopia of our times" (125). It has even been cast as an exemplar for later feminist utopias of the 1970's and 80's.⁴⁵ Even more than being a specific community, the guérillères are fierce warriors, and this aspect leads to comparisons with the Amazons of Greek mythology.⁴⁶

While these interpretations seek to specify what it is exactly that makes *Les Guérillères* utopian, they run the risk of oversimplification. Labeling *Les Guérillères* as a feminist utopia

⁴⁴ The two citations from Rosenfeld here are evidence of the unfortunate trend in writing and in interpretations of *Les Guérillères* that conflate the concepts of "female" and "woman," when they are certainly not the same for Wittig. Calling the guérillères a "woman's community" is a misnomer because, precisely through the act of refusing heteropatriarchy and escaping, fighting, and becoming guérillères, the subjects cease to be women.

⁴⁵ Anderson writes that *Les Guérillères* was "embraced by feminists internationally as an expression of their own revolution," and that "it has influenced later feminist writers of utopias like Joanna Russ and Sally Miller Gearheart" (90).

⁴⁶ Wittig's capitalized lists of names emphasize this aspect as well, for she includes Hippolyta (129) along with other mythical women warriors and huntresses, like Atalanta and Diana.

purely because it presents an “all-female” or “women-only” community overlooks the important fact that Wittig’s imagined community does actually include men.⁴⁷ Labelling *Les Guérillères* as a feminist utopia because it is a “community of women” is problematic on a semantic level as well, due to Wittig’s purposeful privileging of *elles*, the feminine plural “they” in French. Wittig uses this throughout the text to refer to the community and to universalize the female subject’s point of view. Wittig explains her objective broadly in her essay, “The Mark of Gender,” stating that since personal pronouns “engineer gender through language,” she takes them as the focus of her books in order to rewrite gender (82). She then speaks specifically of *elles* and *Les Guérillères*: “I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. 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” (85). Asserting *elles* as the “absolute subject” simultaneously draws attention to the universalization of the male point of view inherent in *ils* or “they” along with the way it erases and subsumes the female subject in mixed groups. Since Wittig’s objective with *elles* is much larger than just using the gendered pronoun to create a “monosexual society,” to understand the work as a feminist utopia only in that light is to do it a reductive disservice.

It is worth acknowledging as well that David Le Vay’s translation of *elles* in the English version of *Les Guérillères* as “the women” is in large part responsible for interpretations of the

⁴⁷ It is true that *Les Guérillères* focuses mostly on the guérillères and their war against men, but there are certain “young men” who join in the fight and remain as valued members. There are many examples of this in the third part of the text. This shows that these members (once they become part of the community and the *elles*) *used to be* men but are no longer, just as the guérillères *used to be* women. The first instance occurs on pp. 202-203 when the guérillères discover a young man eavesdropping behind a tree, and they joyously invite him into their group. At a later moment after other men have joined the battle, the guérillères clearly state that the war is not exclusively for women; it is for everyone, for the total transformation of the world, and for the ultimate goal of peace for all (184). Such glimpses into their relations show that the guérillères are not “men-hating women.” They hate patriarchy, but they accept men who freely choose to renounce their allegiance to that culture and its ways.

text that emphasize its “all-female community.” In this translation, the important distinction between “women” and “guérillères” that Wittig makes in the French is lost in English, and this consequently diffuses Wittig’s revolutionary community by placing it within the comfortable confines of the very gender binary that “guérillères” succeeds in surpassing. For readers who are familiar with Wittig’s work and theory, “the women” grates within the text like nails on a chalkboard since Wittig adamantly opposed the category “women” as a social construct and a position of subordination. As Wittig writes in “The Straight Mind, “woman” is defined by and dependent on the relationship established by the heterosexual binary: “for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems” (32). This is also where Wittig’s famously polemical statement “Lesbians are not women” comes from, for only lesbians can escape the system and the category “woman” through refusing heterosexuality and its consequent social and political demands. She writes in “One is not born a woman” that “lesbian” exists as a third category beyond the other two: “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 social relation to a man” (20). Given Wittig’s conceptual opposition to the term “woman,” we must remember that her community in *Les Guérillères* is not a community of “women” at all but specifically a lesbian community, which does not refer to a sexual preference or gender identity, but to a state of existence outside of hetero-patriarchy’s social, political, and ideological categories. By becoming guérillères, the lesbian subjects within the novel refuse to become or continue being women. The guérillères are *not* women since they are not defined in relation to men. Therefore the utopia they create is not feminist *because* it only exalts women or creates an isolated women’s-world; their utopia is much larger than that and also runs deeper to

imagine a completely different existence and a new identity for themselves outside of the existent system.

As theorists of feminist utopias and utopianism, Francis Bartkowski and Lucy Sargisson both avoid labeling *Les Guérillères* as an all-woman community while still providing useful analyses of the text as a feminist utopia. Bartkowski devotes the first chapter of her book, *Feminist Utopias* (1989) to a comparative study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and *Les Guérillères*. While *Herland* actually does describe an all-female community,⁴⁸ Bartkowski does not read *Les Guérillères* for its similarities with *Herland*, but instead she contrasts *how* the two novels construct their utopias. She labels the former “the static utopia” and the latter “the dynamic utopia” because it manipulates convention and presents an active process of rejecting dominant ideology (16). This is evident in the way the guérillères burn the feminaries (ancient, outdated texts and stories about women), rewrite their own dictionaries, and remake the conceptions and processes of “war, language, body, and history in the formation of new collectivities” (44). In this description, although Wittig's work does present an imagined and ideal community, it also describes the difficult processes of establishing that community and the on-going process of maintaining it.

Lucy Sargisson builds upon Bartkowski's description and analyzes *Les Guérillères* as a utopian text by grouping it with similar visions of the 1970s: Joanna Russ' *Whileaway*, Sally Miller Gearheart's *Hill Women*, and Suzy McKee Charnas' *Riding Women*. Sargisson categorizes these as “major texts within contemporary feminist utopianism” that present

⁴⁸ The basic plot of *Herland* is that three male explorers stumble upon an all-female community that has been cut-off from the wider world for 2000 years. The knowledge of men has faded so much over the years that the women are completely self-sufficient and have no need of men. The story reads as heavy-handed at times and attempts to explain obviously fantastic elements in realistic ways, with limited success. For example, the women reproduce by miraculous parthenogenesis (virgin birth), and they have eliminated every vice and deadly sin from their society—there is no violence, greed, wrath, pride, sloth, or lack. There is also an absolutely shocking (to the male explorers) absence of sexual desire and need for sexual expression.

cohesive and autonomous self-defining cultures as separatist to a varying degree (206).

Sargisson is more interested in the function of utopian texts than their form and content, and so she focuses on how *Les Guérillères* challenges the ideas of historical progress and tradition as continuity (208). She notes how the text also opposes dominant cultural symbolism that fetishizes, fragments, and idolizes the female body. *Les Guérillères* is ripe with “alternative symbolism” that positively represents the female body, as evidenced by the myriad manifestations and connotations of the “O” (208). Above all, Sargisson concludes that the function of this utopian society is to dislodge power from the hands of men using all means necessary, but not—and here Sargisson echoes Wittig’s own words from “The Mark of Gender”—to “erect a new totem of femininity” (209). Borrowing Bartkowski’s distinction of *power over vs power to* (5) as characteristic of feminist utopian fiction—where the texts actively work to expose and rewrite abuses of power *over* women even as they imagine new realities, structures, and communities that endow their characters with power *to*—Sargisson states that *Les Guérillères* renders the concept of power *over* defunct because the text destroys the “space of domination” (209). Sargisson thus labels *Les Guérillères* a “transgressive utopian text” for the ways it negates binaries and rejects dualistic conceptualizations of “woman” and “femininity” (209). Echoing Bartkowski, Sargisson notes how *Les Guérillères* celebrates process, “representing a dynamic and ever-changing society which conceives of itself in new ways that do not rest on old universalisms” (209). In my reading of *Les Guérillères* that follows, I build upon Bartkowski’s and Sargisson’s analyses of *Les Guérillères* as a feminist utopia. Their interpretations serve as a foundation through the ways they carefully avoid oversimplification and position *Les Guérillères* as a “transgressive feminist utopia” through the text’s emphasis on process and on the restoration of *power to* for its female subjects.

b. Paradoxical Proximity and Coexistence: The Guérillères' Reimagined Relation to Language

Throughout *Les Guérillères*, Wittig recounts the process of unmaking and remaking language in order to endow her guérillères with power to use language as they see fit and to coexist with language in a way that brings life instead of death. This process is both vital and complex within the text because language is not just a *thing* to be destroyed and rebuilt, like a building to be seized or a house to be burned. Since there is no way to exist outside of language, the guérillères must work upon it from within it. They acknowledge the totalizing role language plays in shaping reality: “Elles disent qu’il n’y a pas de réalité avant que les mots les régles les réglemens lui aient donné forme” (192). Before the guérillères can establish a new relation to language and to reality, they must thoroughly understand how language functions. They describe this existent language as poisonous and deadly to both the female body and the mind: “Elles disent, le langage que tu parles t’empoisonne la glotte la langue le palais les lèvres. Elles disent le langage que tu parles est fait de mots qui te tuent. Elles disent, le langage que tu parles est fait de signes qui à proprement parler désignent ce qu’ils se sont appropriés” (162). In this description, language is a closed system that excludes the female subject. When she participates in its discourse by using its words, she perpetually negates herself because the words signal all the ways she has already been appropriated. Wittig also emphasizes the material danger of language, meaning that it actually poisons the female speaker through the act of speaking. So then, in both a physical and a conceptual way, words destroy the speaking apparatus (the glottis, tongue, palate, lips) and the self. This terrible paradox—where speaking to assert subjectivity consequently negates that subjectivity—presents a gordian knot for Wittig’s guérillères. Since the problem cannot be undone, it must instead be destroyed and replaced.

Wittig showcases both the guérillères' understanding of the artificial nature of language and the way they defy that nature in a moment that comes amidst her description of the community enjoying peaceful life after the war. Through the metaphor of the echo, the guérillères show how they are no longer subject to a language that imprisons them. In the scene, a guérillère named Lucie Maure stands on the shore of a lake and utters phrases that overlap in the reverberating echo: "Au double écho, Lucie Maure crie la phrase de Phénarète, je dis que ce qui est, est. Je dis que ce qui n'est pas, est également. Quand elle reprend plusieurs fois la phrase, la voix dédoublée, puis triple, superpose sans cesse ce qui est et ce qui n'est pas" (17). When Lucie Maure recites this phrase attributed to Phénarète—the mother of Socrates, who was considered a medicinal practitioner and not a philosopher—she invokes the wisdom of this classical female figure. This gesture positions the scene outside of traditional "masculine wisdom," which as the guérillères say, considers language an assertion of authority and domination. Here, the speaker makes the power of language her own, not in order to dominate but to allow for alternative possibilities. By offering her statements into the overlapping echoes, she relinquishes any power over and instead gives language power to expand and superimpose upon itself, whereby creating new combinations of sound and meaning.

Lucie Maure's statement that claims both "that which is, is" and "that which is not, also is" reveals the paradoxical way the guérillères relate to language. Her utterance functions performatively in that it bestows being on what she says "is" and also on what she says "is not." By affirming the logical contradiction, she positions herself (and the guérillères in general) outside of binary logic and meaning. When she says that something that *is not* also *is*, she negates traditional reason based on the dichotomy of being or non-being, either/or

existence. She creates instead a relationship of both/and, where the two states exist concurrently. Wittig further emphasizes this “illogical” relationship to language through the description of the sound of the overlapping echoes. When Lucie Maure quickly repeats the phrases, the echo delay performs the logic of her phrase and illustrates the guérillères’ refusal of traditional language’s logical boundaries and rules of grammar and syntax. The sonorous blending that Lucie Maure creates by repeating “that which is” and “that which is not” allows both states to exist simultaneously; they both *are*. When the words and sounds blend together, they become indistinguishable, breaking syntactical boundaries and collapsing the relations between the words and their meaning.

Wittig concludes the scene by describing how the effect of the repeated phrases builds to become an even more formidable sound: “Les ombres couchées sur le lac bougent et se mettent à trembler à cause des vibrations de la voix” (17). Here the mixing, doubling, and tripling of the echoes does not just challenge language on an ideological level, but it actually impacts the physical surroundings. The reverberations of Lucie Maure’s voice shake the water, which in turn “makes the shadows tremble.” This image expresses the strength behind the guérillères’ approach to language and community; although only one figure speaks in this scene, her voice magnifies and multiplies to become stronger than itself alone. Her speech forces language to collapse in on itself through the conflation of that which is and that which is not, and then she makes the natural world tremble before her. This vision expresses in a microcosmic way the utopian impulse underlying all of *Les Guérillères*, for it illustrates how the place of paradox that challenges and undoes language is a place of power for the guérillères. Though this moment could seem like a description of a mere pastime, it encapsulates the guérillères’ lived experience, for they exist in a paradoxical way that could

never have been included or accepted within patriarchal logic. Their way of living runs contrary to traditionally held ideas of what is right and wrong, possible and impossible for the female subject, since they live both what the female subject *is* and what she *is not* (according to patriarchal logic).

Another way that Wittig reimagines the guérillères' relation to language is through her use of descriptive "series" of words to describe their activities in the first section of text. This stylistic choice appears throughout *Les Guérillères* and becomes a hallmark of Wittig's later works, gaining momentum until its glorious eruption in paradise at the conclusion of *Virgile, Non*.⁴⁹ Both Laura G. Durand in her 1974 review of *Les Guérillères* and Marthe Rosenfeld in her 1984 analysis of "the linguistic aspect" of *Le Corps lesbien* note this feature in Wittig's writing. Durand defines Wittig's "series" as lists of adjectives, nouns, and phrases without commas, which vary "the pitch and rhythm" of the narrative (74). Similarly, Rosenfeld notes the rhythmic effect of Wittig's "verbal stream" of writing, stating that the enumeration of terms imitates the "beat of poetry...as if to restore the original magic to words and to extend their evocative power" (239). While Wittig's style does create a poetic rhythm, it serves a deeper conceptual purpose in addition to a formal one. By collapsing the relation of words within sentences and paragraphs, Wittig demonstrates the guérillères' new relation to language in a syntactic way just as she did through the image of Lucie Maure's echoes. This is to say that the way Wittig writes of their existence is emblematic of the existence itself.

The first instance of this appears in the second fragment of *Les Guérillères* that describes how the guérillères amuse themselves by playing hide and seek in the darkness. They search blindly by identifying and following the scent of each other's perfumes: "Ou bien on cherche, à

⁴⁹ I discuss this stylistic feature more when it occurs in both *Le Corps lesbien* and *Virgile, Non*.

tâtons en reniflant celle dont la parfum est honoré. L'amome l'anis le bétel la cannelle le cubèbe la menthe la réglisse le musc le gingembre le girofle la muscade le poivre le safran la sauge la vanille peuvent être honorés successivement" (9-10). The lack of separation between words in this series of perfumes imitates the sensation of scents mixing together in the darkness. The series celebrates both the individual specificity of scents with distinct parts that can be pinpointed by their appropriate definite article, and it allows the perfumes to merge into one comingled scent through Wittig's lack of commas. Through this style, Wittig dismantles established grammar in a guerilla way, piece by piece and mark by mark. It is unassuming and does not at first seem revolutionary or shocking; yet this style persists throughout the *guérillères'* free existence. This creates the effect of an "écriture lacunaire," a writing that leaves purposeful space and to slowly destabilize language, as Wittig writes in her remarks about *Les Guérillères*: "appliquée à l'écriture littéraire, cette désignation à pour moi le fait de créer des intervalles, de trous la phrase au niveau grammatical, de déstabiliser l'ordre convenu du discours" (117).⁵⁰ Paradoxically, by leaving out commas, Wittig creates an absence that brings the words closer together. The series of scents exemplifies the utopian relation of both-and, simultaneous multiplicity and singularity. The way that Wittig's words relate within the description functions metonymically as a reflection of the relation that defines the *guérillères'* existence after their victory: though they are many, they are also one.

In a moment that depicts the *guérillères* on a routine trip to the market, Wittig presents another comma-less description that emphasizes their paradoxical relation to language and their way of being in the world. Similar to how Wittig listed the perfumes in the darkness, so she lists the various fruits and vegetables in the market scene:

⁵⁰ Wittig adapts the phrase "écriture lacunaire" from the filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub's use of "corps lacunaire" to refer to a type of cinematic writing (116).

On va au marché pour se procurer les provisions. On passe devant les étals de fruits de légumes de bouteilles de verre roses bleues rouges vertes. Il y a des entassements d'oranges orange d'ananas ocres de mandarins de noix de mangues vertes et roses de brugnons bleus de pêches vertes et roses d'abricots jaune orange. Il y a des pastèques des papayes des avocats des melons d'eau des amandes vertes des nèfles. Il y a des concombres des aubergines des choux des asperges du manioc blanc des piments rouges des citrouilles. (13)

Just as the description includes *entassements* or piles of fruits and vegetables, so the passage creates a formal stockpiling of words that passes seamlessly from types of fruits to vegetables to colors. Although there are periods to mark sentence breaks, the lack of boundary markers within the phrases creates a blurring of objects with other objects that in turn creates a difficulty for the reader to clearly envision them. This occurs in the phrase: “Il y a des entassements d'oranges orange d'ananas ocres de mandarins de noix de mangues vertes et roses de brugnons bleus,” even as it begins like a list of fruits followed by their colors (d'oranges orange d'ananas ocres). Initially, the reader can mentally pair the fruits with their colors as modifying adjectives, whereby imposing the missing formal separation in the phrase. Then, however, the phrase changes and includes a pair of objects without accompanying colors that causes them (the noun objects) to read like adjectives of the objects that precede them: “d'ananas ocres de mandarins de noix de mangues.” Since “de mandarins” and “de noix” don't have colors or other adjectives, they instead read as if they could belong with the preceding color; “ocres de mandarins” could read as “mandarin ochres,” meaning ochre the color of mandarins. Similarly, one could read “de mandarins de noix” with “de noix” as a modifying phrase since French signals descriptive phrases with the preposition “de.”

Something like “mandarins de noix” would admittedly be strange and even non-sensical—mandarins made of nuts or mandarins that come from nuts—but Wittig's imagery of the market's bounty is already unrealistic with things like “brugnons bleus” (blue nectarines). All

of these elements work together in the description to defy the rules of traditional language and to present a description where boundaries between words and the objects they represent bleed together. Wittig's description challenges the way language signifies and forces the reader to grapple with conflicting interpretive possibilities. This stylistic feature is a prominent aspect of Wittig's rewriting of language in *Les Guérillères*, for it reveals how their society is profoundly different, even down to the most mundane of things like obtaining fruit from the market. In this new community, everything has been transformed; language's grammatical and syntactical boundaries are permeable; ideological contours merge just as sounds mix in overlapping echoes; and fruits, vegetables, and colors can be both similar and plural, part of one another and part of a whole *entassement*. As exemplified in these passages, the way the guérillères exist differently with language is their new, utopian way of being-in-the world.

c. Literal Wholeness: Remaking the Relation to the Body

In addition to unmaking and remaking the guérillères' relation to language, Wittig places great emphasis in her text on remaking the lesbian subject's relation to her body through language, since this is the means by which she speaks about herself and understands herself. Given that—according to Wittig—the female subject's experience in patriarchal reality is one of fragmentation, objectification, and self-alienation, the guérillères reject these processes and seek to bring themselves back into a self-affirming corporeal relation. They approach this through language because it is the means by which they perceive their embodied subjectivity. The guérillères begin by refusing to perceive themselves metaphorically, or to replace themselves with symbols and images:

Elles n'utilisent pas pour parler de leurs sexes des hyperboles des métaphores, elles ne procèdent pas par accumulations ou par gradations. Elles ne récitent par les longues litanies, dont le moteur est une imprécation sans fin. Elles ne s'efforcent pas de multiplier les lacunes de façon que dans leur ensemble elles signifient un lapsus volontaire. Elles

disent que toutes ces formes désignent une langue surannée. Elles disent qu'il faut tout recommencer. (94)

Here the goal is not to speak of the body in figural terms or to accumulate multiple terms as a way of re-assembling a fragmented whole. The guérillères see those ways of perceiving the body as insulting and degrading, outdated and impractical, “une imprécation sans fin.” Furthermore, metaphors and hyperboles as means to describe the female sex actually reveal the misogyny buried within these oblique patterns of speech and thought. For speaking through such comparison avoids speaking of the object directly, either through a lack of understanding (hence reliance on known images), or through fear of or dissatisfaction with the object itself. Instead of avoiding speaking of their bodies or simply speaking about them figuratively, the guérillères speak directly even as they signal the absence and offense that metaphorical ways of speaking bring. They know that in order to create a new bodily imaginary, they must start over and remake the ways of speaking about their bodies. Through their efforts, the guérillères establish a radically different relation to both the body in language and the physical body in reality. It represents an intercorporeal awareness that their bodies are expansive and diverse; they are more than what they can be compared to, reduced to, or the images they can be neatly contained within.

The guérillères continue to explain why such figural ways of speaking are harmful since they have been chosen by men as ways of understanding the female body. In so doing, these conceptions have constrained the female body to repetitive and dualistic forms of thought:

Elles disent qu'on leur a donné pour équivalents la terre la mer les larmes ce qui est humide ce qui est noir ce qui ne brule pas ce qui est négatif celles qui se rendent sans combattre. Elles disent que c'est là une conception qui relève d'un raisonnement mécaniste. Il met en jeu une série de termes qui sont systématiquement mis en rapport avec des termes opposés. Ses schémas sont si grossiers qu'à ce souvenir elles se mettent à rire avec violence. (111-112)

Here the *guérillères* reject the mechanical and stilted process of linking the female body with whatever is *opposite* of stereotypical images of the male body, masculinity, and virility (like images of transcendence, strength, power, heat, fire, that which fills). The very act of “giving as equivalents the earth the sea tears that which is humid...” reveals another problem that the female subject suffers within patriarchal thought: she “is given” other objects to signify her body for her, which means that she is not allowed to speak for herself and to decide what she truly is or can be. She cannot become an “absolute subject” if her body can never rightfully signify itself but only point to other things that describe (and replace) her. The *guérillères* defy this relation of endlessly deferred signification so much so that they find it laughable.

In addition to metaphorical language that displaces the actual body, the *guérillères* refuse to speak about their bodies in a fetishistic and fragmentary way. They rebuild their own reality by perceiving their bodies in their entirety and embracing parts and practices that were previously forbidden: “Elles disent qu’elles appréhendent leurs corps dans leurs totalité. Elles disent qu’elles ne privilégient pas telle de ses parties sous prétexte qu’elle a été l’objet d’un interdit. Elles disent qu’elles ne veulent pas être prisonnières de leur propre idéologie” (80). The importance for the *guérillères* is to perceive their bodies in their totality. They do not privilege one part over another as more desirable or hide any parts as shameful. They do not replace one ideology of the body with another but instead embrace all of their physical selves. They understand that to deny themselves the full range of corporeal expression is to fall into dangerous, restrictive ideology.

The *guérillères* understand fully the way their body is perceived in the old culture, and they then undo this way of thinking to establish their own in its place. They state that they see the old ways of perceiving as the last harmful link to dying patriarchal culture: “Elles disent qu’elles

doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître. Jadis il en a été ainsi” (102).

Instead of valuing themselves as a synecdochic collection of parts, they hold the integrity of their bodies as their first principle. The continuation of the passage describes how, when each individual first perceives herself as a whole being, they can then march together as one “body,” as a unified and unbroken collectivity: “Elles, corps intègres premiers principaux, s’avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde” (102). The syntax of the phrase draws attention to their unity through the rhythm it creates by separating the subject and verb, “elles s’avancent” with the interjection, “corps intègres premiers principaux.” The interjection reads as a description of “elles” as a plural, collective subject, and the four words in rapid succession without articles or pronouns anticipate the image of marching together that immediately follows. Their collective strength comes from their individual bodily unity and then magnifies into a more powerful collective, just as Lucie Maure’s single voice multiplies in the overlapping echoes. Through the ways that the guérillères refuse metaphorical language to evoke the female body, along with all of the ways the “culture morte” forbids perceiving the body in its totality, they enact a process of “bringing back” the body for the female subject. They return her stolen, effaced sense of self by establishing a new way to relate to language as the means to shape reality and to the body as the vehicle for interaction and sensation. They reverse the way patriarchal language and thought has appropriated the female subject by giving her back the right to her own body—to the way she speaks of her body and the way she uses it.

d. Unity in Community: Creating a New Relation to Others

As previously mentioned, Wittig’s use of the collective subject *elles* throughout *Les Guérillères* is a key element of her utopian vision and a defining feature of utopian relationality

in the work. While *elles* works within Wittig's recreation of language and the bodily imaginary, it brings an additional layer to her vision by creating a different way-of-being for the guérillères, which is a way of living and understanding the self through others. Wittig explains in her *remarques* how *elles*, though it is a mere pronoun, is the driving force behind the entire work: "L'élément constitutif est un pronom, le pronom personnel pluriel de la troisième personne, elle. Il est utilisé ici comme un personnage. D'ordinaire un personnage de roman représente une entité singulière. Mais ici d'emblée une entité collective s'est développée dans le chantier littéraire et a pris toute la place du récit." (118). Here Wittig notes that *elles*, while usually being a plural pronoun, acts as the singular protagonist of the novel. While a pronoun usually replaces a subject, in Wittig's usage, the pronoun itself becomes the subject. Wittig also refers to *elles* as "un personnage collectif héroïque," and as the "le héros" of the work. In the interpretation of *Les Guérillères* as an epic, *elles* is its conquering hero; however, Wittig subverts this convention by making the traditional (singular male) epic hero into a plural female heroine. This contradiction in terms—*elles* as *le héros*—destabilizes the idea of the male hero and forces the reader to ask: how can a plural, female subject be *le héros*? Wittig's answer is just like Lucie Maure's: that which is also is, and that which *is not*—the logical contradiction—*also is*. Both can exist simultaneously as they do within the text and world of *Les Guérillères*.

Wittig further describes in her essay "The Mark of Gender" how *elles* as a collective subject that is both singular and plural gains momentum and prominence throughout *Les Guérillères*: "Although the theme of the text was total war, led by *elles* on *ils*, in order for this new person to take effect, two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*. Word by word, *elles* establishes itself as a sovereign subject" (85). In Wittig's description, *elles*, this "new subject," is the protagonist that haunts the text in order to position itself as

“sovereign,” or as a subject that defines itself and determines its interaction with the world. This sovereign relation that *elles* establishes between itself and the world expresses the guérillères’ desire for restored connection to language, to their bodies, and to each other. Wittig’s choice to make *elles* the subject and entire focus of the book is a quintessential utopian act; she doesn’t just imagine an ideal community but goes further to validate and honor the guérillères’ existence to such a level that their existence itself becomes the subject of the story. It is their *being* that is the collective protagonist and that incarnates the utopian vision of the work.

Wittig insists upon the novelty of *elles* and her utopian vision when she describes how *elles* should initially shock the reader with its unfamiliarity: “Le lecteur entre dans un livre et se trouve confronté avec un **elles** qui n’est pas familier, pas ordinaire et qui est nouveau et héroïque” (121, Wittig’s emphasis). Here Wittig emphasizes that *elles* confronts the reader with a new subject position, as something they have never encountered or experienced before. Wittig then expresses, in explicitly utopian terms, her desire that *elles* would lead the reader to a new space, free from the categories of sex: “En tout cas c’est ce qui m’a guidée et l’espoir que ce **elles** pourrait situer le lecteur dans un espace au-delà des catégories de sexe pour la durée du livre. (C’est peut-être ici que réside l’utopie)” (121, Wittig’s emphasis). Wittig affirms here that the world of *elles* in *Les Guérillères* is the world of utopia. Although Wittig refers to “a space” outside of the categories of sex, this is not a physical place but a space of identity where the guérillères are free to exist outside of patriarchy’s categories. In this way, *elles* as the pronoun-protagonist of *Les Guérillères* is the incarnation of Wittig’s utopian vision. When Wittig writes, “c’est peut-être ici que réside l’utopie,” the “ici” that she refers to is the collective, heroic subject *elles*. This *elles* creates utopia through its existence. It destabilizes the categories of gender and establishes an alternative, liberated subject position.

Wittig emphasizes the connection between *elles* as sovereign subject and the guérillères' restored connection to language with the way she pairs *elles* with the verb *dire* more than with any other verb throughout the text. The phrase "elles disent" (along with its negation "elles ne disent pas") is so ubiquitous that it creates an overwhelming sense of the guérillères speaking as one with a single, irrefutable voice. This occurs, for example, in a fragment near the end of the text, when the guérillères have nearly reached the conclusion of their war but they must encourage themselves to keep fighting to the end:

Elles disent, si je me laisse aller après ces grands travaux, je vais rouler ivre de sommeil et de fatigue. Elles disent, non, il ne faut pas s'arrêter un seul instant. Elles disent, comparez-vous au feu subtil. Elles disent, que votre poitrine soit une fournaise, que votre sang se réchauffe comme un métal qui s'apprête à fondre. Elles disent, que votre œil soit ardent, votre halène brulante. Elles disent, votre force, vous la connaîtrez les armes à la main. Elles disent, éprouvez au combat votre résistance légendaire. Elles disent, vous qui êtes invincibles, soyez invincibles. Elles disent, allez, répandez-vous sur toute la surface de la terre. Elles disent, existe-t-il une arme qui peut prévaloir contre vous ? (197)

In this fragment cited in its entirety, every one of its ten sentences begins with "elles disent" followed by a comma. The fragment initially reads like an interior reflection because the first phrase begins with "elles" but then quickly moves to "je" and frames this as a singular, individual thought. The move from "elles disent" to "si je me laisse aller" creates another moment of difficulty for the reader to understand exactly who is speaking (or thinking). Since "they" speak of themselves as "I," the speaking subject is both singular and plural at once. This conflation continues in the phrases that follow, for the second statement uses an impersonal expression, "il ne faut pas s'arreter," and then the third statement, along with the remainder of the fragment, addresses the second-person plural subject "vous" and uses the possessive adjective "votre." Therefore, this passage that includes "je" and "vous" after the repeated "elles disent" conflates these three subject positions so that they all become aspects of one another. The use of the subjunctive in this passage (que votre poitrine **soit** une fournaise) reinforces the sense

that *elles* is a utopian subject and that the conflation between subjects or collapsing of distinction between singular and plural subjects happens in a utopian space.⁵¹ *Elles* express their desires for the community, or for the *vous* they speak to, with their phrases like, “que votre œil soit ardent,” and they also give commands like, “allez, répandez-vous sur toute la surface de la terre.” This fragment’s mixing of *je*, *vous*, and *elles* shows that even though each guérillère is an individual, she is also a collective subject; she is both *elle* and *elles*, *je* and *vous*. This both-and relationship that Wittig creates expresses the reality of the guérillères’ existence as sovereign subject. It shows that one can exist as an individual and as part of a community, and it opens female subjectivity to a realm of possibilities that exist beyond those offered by patriarchal ideology.

Within the text of *Les Guérillères*, Wittig emphasizes the connection between *elles* as the main character and the importance of unity through community in a fragment that compares the guérillères to leaves falling from trees. One of the guérillères named Tébaire Jade collects the leaves and scatters them before her gathered “amies,” saying: “Comme les feuilles au moindre souffle vous vous envolent, si belles que vous soyez, si fortes, si légères, d’un entendement si subtil si prompt. Redoutez la dispersion. Restez jointes comme les caractères d’un livre. Ne quittez pas le recueil” (82). Tébaire Jade’s exhortation here plays on the double meaning of “recueil” as a collection of objects—for example a bunch of leaves—and a collection of stories or poems, like the actual text of *Les Guérillères* with its many fragments and lists of all-capitalized names. When she tells the others “restez jointes comme les caractères d’un livre,” she makes this connection explicit, for the guérillères *are* the individual characters in the writing that makes up the book and the pieces of the collective subject *elles*. The instruction “restez

⁵¹ Bartkowski also claims, broadly, that feminist utopian literature mainly employs the subjunctive and conditional moods to ask the “questions of desire cast in a mood of ‘as if,’ ‘what if,’ and ‘if only’” (4). *Les Guérillères* mainly uses the present tense though, along with a sprinkling of the *futur proche*, which makes the appearance in the quoted passage all the more striking.

jointes,” or stay joined and connected underscores the importance of the collectivity to the guérillères’ way of living. The metaphor of letters that form words expresses the reality that they have their own subjectivity, yet they share one existence through the plural subject *elles*. Their subjectivity is thus fluid and flexible, which also makes it light and mobile, as Tébaire Jade says.

Tébaire Jade’s statement plays with the other implied double meaning of “leaves” as pages in a book. When she gathers up the leaves, she performs the role of Wittig as author, gathering up the fragments and arranging them into the text of *Les Guérillères*. Wittig describes this very process in her “remarques:” “Avant que le livre prenne l’aspect qu’il a maintenant, j’ai dû littéralement étaler sur le sol tous les fragments de texte découpés et me livrer à un montage impitoyable durant lequel j’ai bien failli, une fois de plus, le perdre” (122). Just as the community of the guérillères within the novel must resist dispersion, so Wittig risked losing the work during her own composition. The importance that she places here on the “recueil” shows that the integrity of *elles* is essential to the guérillères’ continued existence. The stakes are high, and in order to maintain their community, they must actively work for it. Tébaire Jade’s exhortation that includes “comme les feuilles” and “comme les caractères d’un livre” poses an initially confusing contradiction since the guérillères repeatedly say that they refuse to speak of themselves metaphorically. The purpose of her comparison though is not to offer a way to understand the female body but rather an understanding of the community as a whole. The striking appearance of this image along with its metatextual resonance signals to the reader that this is no mere reappropriation of metaphorical language. Instead, Wittig offers the image of the leaves like “pages in a book” as yet another way to understand utopian relationality: it is like the layering of many echoes that shakes the shadows; like multiple perfumes mixing in the darkness;

like the series of words and whole paragraphs without commas; and finally like words, names, and fragments that compose an entire book.

In the final fragment of the text, Wittig establishes the existence that chronologically becomes the subject of the first section in the book, and she leaves the reader with one last glimpse of *elles*' utopian existence in *Les Guérillères* with the appearance of *nous*. This fragment describes the celebration after the guérillères' victory in the war, and it shows how the third person *elles* transitions to the first-person plural *nous* for the first time. The opening line of the fragment sets the scene where the guérillères commemorate their triumph: "Mues par une impulsion commune, nous étions toutes debout pour retrouver comme à tâtons le cours égal, l'unisson exaltant de l'Internationale" (207-8). Just as Wittig positions *elles* to shock the reader throughout the text, this sudden appearance of *nous* creates a similar surprise. After the haunting, overwhelming presence of *elles* had become familiar, it is now this *nous* that seems unfamiliar. The speaker here is unnamed and unknown specifically, yet she refers to herself as one of the group with "nous étions tous debout." The fact that this transformation occurs after victory shows that the goal of the entire battle was to achieve this *nous*, this state of togetherness and articulation of inclusion. Victory opens the way for entrance into this utopian consciousness, or the passage from observing on the outside to speaking from the inside. This group now belongs to the speaker and she belongs to the group; they are one and the same. The fact that the speaker and the guérillères have gathered together to sing as an expression of their victory is a fitting final image. Both the guérillères as a community and *Les Guérillères* as a text function like song, for in a song separate voices come together to blend into one. It is the combination of the many

voices that creates harmony, just as the individual persons in the text become one subject through *elles* and finally through *nous*.⁵²

The feminist utopian vision that Wittig creates in *Les Guérillères* goes beyond imagining an all-female community or an exclusive race of women or amazons to instead imagine a way of being that creates utopia. The core of her vision lies in the rebuilt connections that the guérillères establish with language, or the ways they speak about and for themselves; the ways they conceive and embody their subjectivity; and the ways they create unity through community. Wittig's vision imagines what female existence *could be* if it were determined by different relations than those of patriarchal logic. *Les Guérillères* asks and then answers the deeply relational questions: what if the female subject could be returned to herself? What if her selfhood could be restored? What if she could be reconnected linguistically and physically to her body and the bodies of others in an existence that is both individual and intercorporeal? *Les Guérillères* presents answers to all of these questions, and its combined response proudly claims that paradise *could* exist in the shadow of the sword. It takes a war to unmake and remake reality for the guérillères, but after victory in their epic battle, they are free to fully embody utopia. As Wittig herself writes, language is what gives shape to reality and “words are everything.” Therefore, her act of reimagining the world in *Les Guérillères* both draws attention to existing problems and then poses solutions. It presents a compelling utopian vision that is not an escapist exercise of imagination but that believes in languages potential to effect real-world transformation, if it can first be imagined and articulated.

⁵² The fact that the guérillères sing “L’Internationale,” a socialist anthem celebrating victory for the oppressed, reveals Wittig’s belief in women as a social class. She discusses this in her essays in *The Straight Mind*, specifically “The Category of Sex,” and “One is not Born a Woman.” There is much overlap between the lyrics of the song and the guérillères’ struggle for freedom.

2. Paradise as Continual Becoming: Utopian Existence in *Le Corps lesbien*

While *Les Guérillères* presents both a vision of utopia as the result of war and a description of the war itself, Wittig's next fictional work, *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), does not concentrate in the same way on the process of achieving utopia through total transformation of society and language. Instead, this work takes place in the unspecified present tense of an already existent utopian space, with no clear passage of time and no linear progression towards an ultimate end goal. Although this work is not "dynamic" in the way that Bartkowski and Sargisson apply that label to *Les Guérillères*, neither is it simply static. Its action is instead contained in a cyclical present that offers fragmentary glimpses into the two lovers' continuous interactions. The ensemble of these becomings and un-becomings creates a vision of an intimate experience of utopia based in the body and being of the other. *Le Corps lesbien* presents its version of utopian relationality as a fantastic interpersonal co-mingling that shifts the macrocosmic perspective of *Les Guérillères* to a microscopic exploration of two lovers' absolute desire for and devotion to one another. Although this is a different vision than that of *Les Guérillères*, it adds another layer to Wittig's creation of utopian relationality within her oeuvre as both an original poetics and a theory of subjectivity outside of heteronormative frameworks.

The relational state that characterizes utopia throughout *Le Corps lesbien* is a repeated process of intercorporeal becoming between the textual body, the body of the narrating self, and the body of the other. This state expresses a utopian longing for union and reunion at the most intimate levels imaginable—it reaches to the deepest interior recesses of the physical body past organs and fluids to the level of molecules, cells, and intensities. As the lovers travel inside and through their bodies, cataloging and enjoying all facets of themselves, they constantly become, unbecome, and combine without ever relinquishing their subjectivity. Their interactions

exemplify an intercorporeal existence that produces a deeper understanding of the self with and through the other. This relation is what characterizes their utopia. The overwhelming variety of inter-penetrations that occur throughout the text shows how the protagonists are not distinct bodies but rather exist as events or haecceities (in the Deleuzian sense). The range of their transformations even comprises various creature-like attributes and natural features like trees, mud, rain, and air itself, all to demonstrate their radically different conception of self. On a formal level, the way that Wittig intersperses lists of all the “lesbian” body parts in capital letters shows how the text itself *is* the body and the body (more than just the ensemble of story pieces it contains) *is* the event. Even though the work is graphic and violent at times, the ways the protagonists create and recreate utopia for each other and in each other present a vision of their relational way of understanding the self as porous and flexible.

a. A Paradox but not Really: Reimagining the Body in the Text

In *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig’s two unnamed protagonists express their desire to know and experience each other by exploring every part of their physical bodies in a mixture of violence and reverence that is at once shocking and stunning. Wittig makes clear right from the work’s title—*Le Corps lesbien*—that she is going to present a different vision of the body and the self in relation to that body, for “the lesbian body” is inherently paradoxical within the confines of gendered language. In French, the “body” is gendered masculine: it is *le corps*. Wittig explains in her “Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*” (2001)⁵³ that adding the word “lesbian,” with its implication of the anatomically female body, creates such a contradiction in terms through its proximity to *le corps* that it “destabilizes the general notion of the body” (46). This contradiction

⁵³ Namascar Shaktini notes in her preface to the volume that includes this essay that Wittig began composing it in 1997 at Shaktini’s request. Wittig then sent it in 2001 to be included in the volume, and I have chosen to reference this date since it was when Wittig completed the essay. Wittig did not live to see it come out in print in 2005.

then works to express an identity separated from and existing outside of the patriarchal categories of “male” and “female” (46). She describes this move as “a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really” (46). Just as the *guérillères* created a paradoxical existence for themselves by defying traditional logic and the subject position of “women,” so “the lesbian body” refuses to conform to gendered linguistic binaries. Within the content of *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig does not cast her lesbians as imitations or identifications with anything available in heteronormative society; rather, they occupy a fugitive position that is not a regression, descendance, evolution, or devolution. This is not a fixed subject position but instead a becoming: an impossible identity, but not really.

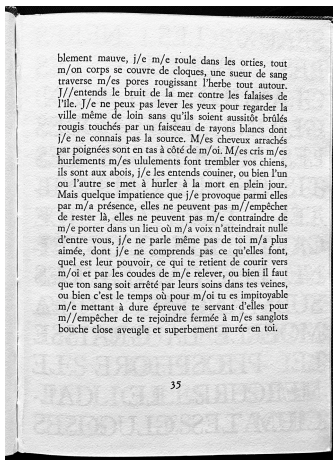
Wittig further draws attention to the ways heterosexual language effaces female subjectivity by splitting all of the first-person pronouns and possessives within the text of *Le Corps lesbien*, employing a “je clivé” or “je scindé.”⁵⁴ Like the title, this cleaved first-person subjectivity represents an impossible position but not really. Wittig describes the bar in her *j/e* as a “sign of excess” (47), a visible demonstration of an “I” that does not exist within language and overflows the linguistic container available to it. This textual violence of the split subject marks the rending of the female subject that occurs in patriarchal language, and it seeks to liberate the female body (and the lesbian subject) subsumed within gendered language. Wittig writes of this desire in her preface to the English edition:

The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book (everything that is written exists), the desire to do violence by writing to the language which *I* (*j/e*) can enter only by force. ‘I’ (*Je*) as a generic feminine subject can *only* enter by force into a language which is foreign to it, for all that is human (masculine) is foreign to it, the human not being feminine grammatically speaking but he (*il*) or they (*ils*). (10)

⁵⁴ I borrow these terms from Patrick Kéchichian in “Le Pays”: le “lieu commun des évanouis,” and Helena Chadderton in “Experience and experiment in the work of Marie Darrieussecq,” respectively, both in reference to Marie Darrieussecq’s use of a similar structure. I discuss this more in my chapter about Darrieussecq.

She states here that her objective is “to do violence by writing to language,” meaning that the slash is a visual representation of the cutting and cleaving that gendered language forces the female subject to inflict upon herself. The *j/e clivé* also represents the force with which the female subject enters into language to articulate subjectivity, to use “I,” but in a way that is not to perpetuate the standard usage or merely ventriloquize the dominant male voice through the female speaking subject. With her use of the *j/e clivé*, Wittig refuses to “assume indifferently the masculine language” (10). She further describes how the female subject who understands her position in language is physically incapable of writing “I:” “The ‘I’ (Je) who writes is alien to her own writing at every word because this ‘I’ (Je) uses a language alien to her...*J/e* is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute me as subject” (10-11). With the *j/e clivé*, Wittig visually displays the female subject’s experience of using a language that is “alien to her,” that cuts her in two and does not recognize her as subject. The bar in the *j/e clivé* represents a subject that exists outside of available categories. This “I” is faced with the choice of either folding herself into and masking her specificity within the masculine “I,” or refusing to concede and contain herself, allowing herself to overflow. Wittig chooses the latter position in *Le Corps lesbien* and creates a militant “I” with *j/e* that is capable of attacking the gendered world and transforming its symbols, stories, and stereotypes.

In addition to the *j/e clivé* that splits the female speaking subject on a grammatical level, Wittig also cuts open the body in a visual way by spreading the anatomical vocabulary of the body across the pages of the text. She includes capitalized lists of words that pertain to “the lesbian body:” proper names of body parts (or what the body *is*) along with verbs that describe what the body *does*. These blocks of text interrupt the prose poems and interject themselves



LE CORPS LESBIEN LA
 CYPRINE LA BAVE LA
 SALIVE LA MORVE
 LA SUEUR LES LAR-
 MES LE CERUMEN
 L'URINE LES FÈCES
 LES EXCRÉMENTS LE
 SANG LA LYMPHE LA
 GÉLATINE L'EAU LE
 CHYLE LE CHYME
 LES HUMEURS LES
 SÉCRÉTIONS LE PUS
 LES SANIES LES SUP-
 PURATIONS LA BILE
 LES SUCS LES ACIDES
 LES FLUIDES LES
 JUS LES COULÉES
 L'ÉCUME LE SOUFRE
 L'URÉE LE LAIT L'AL-
 BUMINE L'OXYGÈNE
 LES FLATULENCES
 LES POCHES LES PA-
 ROIS LES MEMBRA-
 NES LE PÉRITOINE,
 L'ÉPIPLOON, LA PLÈ-
 VRE LE VAGIN LES
 VEINES LES ARTÈ-
 RES LES VAIS-

loudly into the reading process, creating the effect that when one reads the book, one sees the entire textual body laid out as on an operating table (see the English version on the left above and the French on the right). Wittig describes in the preface how the “body of text” then becomes the “female body:” “The body of the text subsumes all the words of the female body. *Le Corps Lesbien* attempts to achieve the affirmation of its reality. The lists of names contribute to this activity. To recite one’s own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up” (10). In the original French, each listing of words comprises two full pages (as shown above) and often words are cut-off and continue in the next listing.⁵⁵ The spread from pages 22-23 that begins with “LE CORPS LESBIEN” is the first one that occurs in the text. The words stretch almost all the way to the edges of the page—there are only a few millimeters of space around—creating the sensation of words appearing without distinct beginning and flowing without end to consume the available space. The last word in the list is even cut off (LES VAIS-) and begins the next list on pages 36-37 (SEAUX LES NERFS...). Since the large blocks of text fill the entire two-pages whenever they appear, they are visible through the unoccupied space on the pages that precede them, for example on page 35 before the 36-37 spread. This creates the

⁵⁵ There are 11 two-page lists in total throughout the book. In the English translation, the two-page spreads are each condensed into one left-justified page, followed by the continuation of the prose on the opposite page. The pages retain margins all around and this does not have the same interrupting effect as in the French.

effect that when one reads the text, one sees the black type of the body showing through the reverse side of the thin pages, just as one can see the blue of blood veins running under pale skin. The interior of one's body is at times visible beneath the skin, and so the lesbian body is visible underneath the text. To have the physical book of *Le Corps lesbien* in one's hands is then to hold the body contained within, pulsating underneath and between its pages.

In addition to violence on a formal level through the *j/e clivé* and the dispersed anatomical body parts, Wittig creates a violent representation of love in the content of the work. The way the text collapses all corporeal boundaries through graphic imagery can indeed be off-putting, but this violence is necessary in order to equip the work as a war machine to attack the order of hetero-patriarchy and lesbianize the oppressed female body. Wittig explains as much in her "Remarks;" stating that the text is doubly violent because it creates a new form of writing and represents "the violence of passion" that had no existence until then (45). She describes how her intention in *Le Corps lesbien* is explicitly to shock the reader: "You do it with words that must bring a shock to the readers. If the readers don't feel the shock of words, then your work is not done. That is true for any work of literature you are producing. So from the start there is a violence for the reader. And a good reader could be blasted in the process" (45). Language that seeks to speak into existence the unspeakable, to name the previously unnamed, and to transform existing literary and ideological structures must and will be shocking for the reader—this is the type of language that what Wittig employs in *Le Corps lesbien*.

The experience of reading *Le Corps lesbien* is initially unsettling, as it "blasts" the reader with the disgusting and at times grotesque physicality of the body, but this is entirely Wittig's point. Right from the first fragment, Wittig gestures to the text's "unbearable" nature, like a wink

toward the reader or a glance straight at the camera.⁵⁶ The opening line sets the tone, when the narrator entreats her lover to “say farewell” (*fais tes adieux*) to traditional love stories, “à ce qu’elles nomment l’affection la tendresse le gracieux abandon” (7). With this statement, the narrator signals that this is not going to be a familiar depiction of romance or literary female abandon. Although Wittig herself refers to her protagonists as “lovers” (*amantes*), the implied “love” should not be understood as romantic love, for that too is a political construct of the heteronormative regime, according to Wittig. She writes that her work is not a depiction of “reassuring love that can lead the reader to a ‘being-happy-forever’” (47). *Le Corps lesbien* does not imitate this sort of romantic coupling or the idea of love rooted in stability and possession. Instead, it presents another type of “love” that is completely outside of those structures. Teresa de Lauretis mentions this in admitting her initial misunderstanding of *Le Corps lesbien* as a “love poem:” “*Le Corps lesbien*, I thought, might be called the longest love poem in modern literature. But what has become clear to me only lately is that *Le Corps lesbien* is not above love. It is an extended poetic image of *sexuality*, a canto or a vast fresco, brutal and thrilling, seductive and awe-inspiring” (59). In the way that Teresa de Lauretis initially did, it is tempting to approach the work through a heteropatriarchal interpretive framework and to search for the familiar structures and patterns within the text. They are not there though, because through her writing Wittig creates a vision of desire, passion, and utopia unlike anything ever imagined.

The narrator continues to speak to her beloved in the opening fragment, acknowledging that “no one will be able to bear” the sight of the body that is to come: “Mais tu le sais, pas une ne pourra y tenir à te voir les yeux révulsés les paupières découpées tes intestins jaunes fumant étalés dans les creux de tes mains ta langue crachée hors de ta bouche les longs filets verts de ta

⁵⁶ This comparison seems appropriate because Wittig often describes her writing in cinematic terms and compares it to film.

bile coulant sur tes seins, pas une ne pourra soutenir l'ouïe de ton rire bas frénétique insistant”

(7). This description positions the narrator and her lover as co-conspirators in a complete inversion and refusal of all familiar sensory experience, for *tu* here has her sight impeded and her eyelids cut; she holds her own smoking intestines; her tongue is detached from her mouth; and yet throughout all of this, she laughs. Wittig then pushes this description even further, mixing physical traits with contradictions like joy and sorrow, life and death: “L'éclat de tes dents ta joie ta douleur la vie secrète de tes viscères ton sang tes artères tes veines tes habitacles caves tes organes tes nerfs leur éclatement leur jaillissement la mort la lente décomposition la puanteur la dévoration par les vers ton crâne ouvert, tout lui sera également insupportable” (7).

Unexpectedly—in this passage that could read like a harrowing description of decomposition with phrases like, “la dévoration par les vers”—Wittig places “la mort” in the middle instead of at the end, signaling that it is just another step in this process of transformation. Wittig resumes her series-style syntax in this passage as well, listing objects, emotions, and processes in rapid succession. This creates dissonance for the reader who seeks to imagine the scene, and the proximity of contradictory terms that bleed into one another works to unsettle the existing categories of “life” and “death,” “pleasure” and “pain.”

The rending of the body that the narrator previews in the opening passage could seem antithetical to an exploration of utopia since it seems to express destruction and death instead of wholeness and life. Admittedly, the descriptions throughout the text of the lovers ingesting, burning, exploding, eviscerating, exsanguinating, and disembowelling each other read at times like an infernal nightmare rather than a dream of a better way of living together. However, as Wittig explains, the descriptions of the two lovers' relations and the shocking ways they explore their bodies actually express the ecstasy of passion and the repeated *jouissance* of recomposition

and restoration: “For what is total ecstasy between two lovers but an exquisite death? A violent act (here in words) that can only be redeemed by an immediate resuscitation...when the lovers of *Le Corps lesbien* kill, they resuscitate. Thus illustrating the poetical sentence from the Bible that love is stronger than death” (47).⁵⁷ Wittig states here that her objective with the work is “total ecstasy,” and her defiance of death through the lovers’ perpetual re-couplings presents a profoundly utopian vision of ever-lasting communion. Just as she places *la mort* as one step among many in their cyclical processes of becoming, her depiction of the lovers’ deaths and consequent, always-assured resurrections creates a vision of utopia so powerful that it overcomes death. In keeping with her vision of a different type of love and a different body and self within the text, Wittig takes commonplace notions about love to wild extremes (like the idea that *jouissance* is a kind of death). In this sense, one could argue that Wittig is painfully literal in her depiction of the lovers’ relations and that she focuses on the physical “death” of the body instead of on the ecstatic experience implied in the metaphor. Wittig is not interested in metaphors though, and above all, she shows that “love is stronger than death” within the world of *Le Corps lesbien*, no matter how and when that death comes. She asks readers of *Le Corps lesbien* to interrogate their own visceral responses to the text and to recognize that much of what they find “disgusting” or “taboo” is only so because of binary social and cultural conditioning created by the male gaze and patriarchal ideology surrounding the female body—what can be shown, what must be hidden, what is sexually attractive, or repulsive, impossible, etc. The text’s necessarily violent descriptions and refusal of the finality of death are both vital pieces of its vision of

⁵⁷ The Bible verse Wittig paraphrases is from Song of Solomon 8:6, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.” Interestingly, Wittig changes the verse in her paraphrase from “love is strong as death” to “love is stronger than death,” which perhaps is another purposeful way her lesbian lovers defy the conventions of romantic love, even that of the Bible.

utopian relations between the two lovers. This vision works to invert expectations of how the self is supposed to exist in language and what “love” is supposed to look like.

b. *J/e te suis tu m/ /es irréversiblement: Becoming-other as Becoming-self*

Throughout the text, Wittig’s protagonist-lovers explore and experience their bodies in astonishing ways that move ever toward their utopian relational state. *J/e* speaks to *tu* in each fragment, and often she is the acting subject, as in a moment where *j/e* describes how she lifts the skin off of *tu*: “*J/e découvre que ta peau peut être enlevée délicatement pellicule par pellicule, j/e tire, elle se relève, elle s’enroule par-dessus tes genoux*” (9). Conversely, *j/e* is sometimes the passive recipient, speaking from the position of a spectator observing herself from the outside, like when she tells how *tu* turns her inside-out like a glove: “*Tu m/e retournes, j/e dans tes mains suis un gant, doucement fermement inexorablement tenant m/a gorge dans ta paume, j/e bats j/e m/ /affole, j’ai plaisir de peur, tu dénombre les veines et les artères, tu les écarter, tu touches les organes essentiels*” (94).⁵⁸ Throughout the text, Wittig deliberately positions her *j/e* and *tu* as interchangeable subjects; it is unclear if they are the same two lovers in every fragment. Wittig explains that this ambiguity is purposeful: “This ‘I’ and this you are interchangeable. There is no hierarchy from ‘I’ to ‘you’ which is its same. Also the ‘I’ and ‘you’ are multiple. One could consider that in every fragment they are different protagonists” (47). In this way, the lovers do not have clear individual boundaries but are instead recognizable through their relations with each other. They become one another and *are each other*—they are both “I” and “you” simultaneously. Wittig describes the power of this “I” in “The Mark of Gender,” reiterating that

⁵⁸ Wittig’s image of the self like a glove creates an uncanny connection with Merleau-Ponty’s reflection on the “la chair” and its “reversibility.” He writes, “Réversibilité : le doigt de gant qui se retourne” (317). This “double-sense” of the flesh, or its ability to feel and be felt, passively and activity on the inside and outside, could produce a fascinating reading of *Le Corps lesbien* for another time. See Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*.

“I” and “you” are one and the same:” “This ‘I’ can be destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated. Nothing resists the ‘I’ (or this *tu*, which is its same, its love), which spreads itself in the whole world of the book, like a lava flow that nothing can stop” (87). This both I-and-you, self-other, becomes the absolute subject of *Le Corps lesbien*, dominating the text like an unstoppable force, pouring itself out like lava and destroying anything in its path.

Wittig emphasizes the fluctuation and combination of *j/e* and *tu* with instances in the text where *j/e* exclaims that she is *tu* and vice versa. In a fragment that begins with a description of how *tu* pursues *j/e* like wind blowing through “her tunnels,” *j/e* implores the goddess Sappho for help: “Tu es m/a gloire de cyprine m/a fauve m/on lilas m/a pourpre, tu m/e chasses le long de m/es tunnels, tu t’engouffres faite de vent, tu souffles dan m/es oreilles, tu mugis, une roseur te vient sur tes joues, tu m/ /es tu m/ /es (à l’aide m/a Sappho) tu m/ / es” (49). Here *j/e* refers to her lover possessively in the first phrase separated by a single comma as “m/y glory of cyprine.”⁵⁹ She then describes how her lover “rushes in” in the form of a whispering and howling wind. The exclamation “tu m/ /es” (which the English translation renders as “you are m/yself”) is paradoxical in that the double slash seems to create and emphasize more separation. However, by pushing the words *me* and *es* apart and opening a white void in-between, it pushes *tu* and the “m” of *me* closer together. In this way, *tu* and *me* together are equivalent to the *es*, as the conjugated expression of their combined being. The meaning of the statement further reflects their radical similitude by stating “you are me.” The threefold repetition in the passage of “tu m/ /es” adds force to this declaration and the invocation of the goddess signals that this is a difficult but

⁵⁹ “Cyprine” as Wittig uses it in *Le Corps lesbien* is the vaginal lubricating fluid produced and secreted during female arousal and sexual relations.

desired position to be in, so much so that it requires divine aid.⁶⁰ “Tu m/ / es” as both declaration and yearning is an articulation of the utopian relation that the lovers experience and continually strive for throughout the text; it is the expression of their desire to be with the other and be the other.

Martha Rosenfeld refers to pronouncements like the one above involving the copulative verb, *être*, as examples of Wittig’s “lesbian syntax,” which “facilitates the expression of relatedness between the self, the other, and the cosmos” (237).⁶¹ Rosenfeld perceptively argues that the force of the statement comes from the way Wittig employs *être* transitively instead of intransitively. I would add that one could read the phrase *both* transitively and intransitively, as Wittig purposefully plays with the simultaneous double meaning that positions *me* both as the descriptive complement of the subject *tu* and as a direct object, receiving the action of *tu*’s verb. This creates both an intransitive grammatical relation of equation ($tu = j/e$) and a transitive relation where *tu* acts upon *j/e* as the direct object. As Rosenfeld concludes, Wittig’s deliberate collapsing of grammatical and syntactical boundaries conveys “the sensation of unlimited exchanges of female subjects with the body of another self” (237). Wittig’s formal positioning of her subjects works in this way along with the content of her vision to express the “unlimited” intercorporeal exchanges” that her lovers experience.

⁶⁰ We could also interpret the threefold repetition as an echo or reference to the similarly paradoxical relation in Christian Trinity, or Triune God, meaning three persons in one being or three manifestations of the same being.

⁶¹ Interestingly, Rosenfeld also analyses the way Wittig changes intransitive verbs into transitive ones, writing “In the language of the ruling culture, the intransitive verb expresses an action which adheres to the subject, locked within it and unable to flow toward the object. But in the Amazon world of *Le Corps lesbien* where the lovers *j/e* and *tu* look for each other, are entranced by each other and strive for complete identification with one another, the action of the intransitive verb passes instantly from the subject to the desired object” (237). Rosenfeld focuses on the verb “venir,” as it is used in the passage: “*j/e te cherche dans la gloire sanglante du soleil, j/e viens m/on adorée j/e te suis j/e te viens j/e t’approche*” (my emphasis, 100).

Wittig emphasizes both the pleasure that *j/e* and *tu* experience and the way their relation expands them beyond themselves in another fragment where *tu* operates upon *j/e* like a surgeon enacting a vivisection. *Tu* meticulously applies a “new procedure” that dilates the veins and arteries and then burns them slowly with small mirrors that reflect sunlight. Soon the fire spreads to *tu* as well and the two lovers embrace as they burn:

Le feu de soleil tu m/e répands, tu m/e l'imposes sans discontinuer, éparpillé à partir de m/es circuits sanguins il prend à m/on foi à m/es poumons à m/a rate. Une odeur de chair brulée monte, tu m/e tiens à bras-le-corps à présent, la calcination te gagne, une fumée fait écran tout au-devant de tes yeux, les muscles grésillent disparaissent autour de nos pommettes. Nos crânes noircis se heurtent enfin, enfin désossées enfin avec des trous noirs pour te regarder sans mains pour te toucher j/e te suis tu m/ /es irréversiblement m/a plus aimée. (134-35)

What begins as *tu* operating on *j/e* with “supple mirrors” and “subtle warmth” then becomes an all-encompassing fire. The flesh on *tu* and *j/e* burns until all that is left is their “blackened skulls,” and they take pleasure in this destruction. The repetition in the last phrase of “enfin,” as “at last” or “finally,” three times in rapid succession echoes the earlier repetition of “tu m/ /es,” and it gives a sense that the two lovers have been awaiting this end. The way the narrating voice surrounds “désossées” (de-boned, boneless, or taken apart) with “enfin” emphasizes the sense of joy and relief, as if being confined and contained within the physical body was an obstacle to the desired communion with the beloved. The ruination of their flesh and muscles, along with the disappearance of their organs and bones thus brings them freedom. The paradox in the last sentence— “avec des trous noirs pour te regarder sans mains pour te toucher”—also emphasizes the fantastic nature of this union, for to see without eyes and touch without hands attributes different meaning to these verbs that connote specific bodily processes. It implies instead that the couple interacts in a way that surpasses physical senses and somehow does not require the material body. Although they experience each other through their physical senses, their relation

surpasses these ways of knowing and exists beyond their bodies. The final exclamation of the fragment expresses the ideal union of the lovers: “j/e te suis tu m/ /es irrévérablement m/a plus aimée.” This goes further than the previously cited statement, “tu m/ /es,” by including both lovers in a reciprocal, punctuation-less relation, which also implies that it is a supra-physical union. The English translation of this phrase visibly emphasizes the chiasmic structure of the statement with its proximity and repetition of “you,” in “I am you you are m/e.” This moment shows that paradise for the lovers exists in being-with and being the other; their “impossible” intercorporeal relations lead them to a reciprocal subjective position that expands the boundaries of their selves—for “j/e” and “tu” are doubled within the phrase—even as they remain distinct grammatical entities. The statement “j/e te suis tu m/ /es” opens the self so that it contains the other and vice versa: “te” and “tu” are formally bracketed within “j/e” and m/ /” so that j/e contains tu in this way even as the meaning of the statement is that the beings are one and the same.

c. *Le Devenir: A Deleuzian Reading of the Lovers’ Utopian Relations*

As another way of understanding how the relations between the lovers in *Le Corps lesbien* characterize a type of relational utopia, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of becoming in *Mille Plateaux* (1980).⁶² A Deleuzoguattarian interpretation of *Le Corps lesbien*

⁶² Although neither Deleuze and Guattari nor Monique Wittig mention each other in their respective works, scholars have noted similarities between their ideas, though mainly in regard to Wittig’s theoretical essays and not her fiction. In particular, Rosi Braidotti singles out Wittig’s essay “Paradigm” where the latter writes (in what can only be described as an unattributed citation of Deleuze and Guattari) that “there are not one or two but many sexes.” However, Braidotti concludes that Wittig lacks direct engagement with Deleuze and Guattari and refers to this instance as “Wittig’s flirt with a thousand little sexes” see Braidotti (2003). Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, do not engage directly with female authors, who are conspicuously absent in *Mille Plateaux* save for Virginia Woolf and Nathalie Sarraute. While Deleuze and Guattari do include miniscule analyses of Woolf’s works (notably *The Waves*), they do not directly refer to Sarraute’s work. They mention Sarraute twice, in the context of the chapters “1874: Three Novellas, or “What happened?”” and “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible.” Both references include footnotes citing Sarraute’s work, *The Age of Suspicion*, and expanding on Sarraute’s analysis of Proust. Therefore, the inclusion of Sarraute has little (or nearly nothing) to do with her work but more with her analysis of Proust that fits into Deleuze and Guattari’s thought in these chapters.

does not claim a direct chain of influence but rather a rhizomatic relationship between two lines of thought that elaborate strategies of resistance.⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari's theories supply additional vocabularies for understanding and speaking about both the content of the lovers' relations (or what happens in the scenes) and the function or the ultimate objective that Wittig moves towards.⁶⁴ In Deleuzoguattarian terms, *Le Corps lesbien* is a collection of prose poems that each describe a different becoming-lesbian that is the result of *devenir-femme* (becoming-woman) and *devenir-animal* (becoming-animal) as Deleuze and Guattari theorize these metamorphoses. These becomings seek to deterritorialize and liberate lines of flight away from dominant, imprisoning ideology, and they continually approach the liberated, radical state of *le corps sans organes* (the body-without organs).⁶⁵ Wittig's dismembered and dismember-*ing* lovers transform within and through various physical bodies in celebrations of dispersed, multiplicitous identity that exists in "haecceities," or spatiotemporal assemblages that acknowledge the subject's physical interconnectedness. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the haecceity serves as a fitting framework within which to understand utopian relationality, as the *both-and* relation of the haecceity runs throughout Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*.

Deleuze and Guattari explain their concept of *le devenir* in their chapter (or plateau) from *Mille Plateaux*, entitled, "1730 - Devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible...".

⁶³ I will discuss Deleuze and Guattari's theories in both the later chapters as well in regard to Cixous' and Darrieu's novels.

⁶⁴ I use Deleuze in the non-possessive form here when referring to both theorists and their shared work because it is less cumbersome.

⁶⁵ I discuss their concept of "the body without organs" in much greater detail in my article in *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*. I trace its origin in Antonin Artaud's 1947 radio play, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (which is where Deleuze and Guattari draw the phrase "corps sans organes" from). I then explain both how Deleuze and Guattari theorize it in *Mille Plateaux* and how we can understand it in Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*. See Okumu, "1973: Memories of a Lesbian Body – Reading Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* through Deleuze and Guattari's *le corps sans organes*."

They define the concept through what it is not and through opposing it to arborescent, genealogical, and linear ways of being: “Devenir est un rhizome; ce n’est pas un arbre classificatoire ni généalogique. Devenir n’est certainement pas imiter, ni s’identifier ; ce n’est pas non plus régresser-progresser ; ce n’est pas non plus correspondre, instaurer des rapports correspondants : ce n’est pas non plus produire, produire une filiation, produire par filiation” (292). Becoming, in this definition, is an act ripe with potential and possibility. It functions like a “rhizome” that can grow and expand in multiple directions instead of only in a linear way. To become is not merely to imitate or identify with something but to undergo fundamental transformation. Deleuze and Guattari further describe how becoming takes place at the molecular level, and they reemphasize how becoming is not simply imitation or identification: “Tous les devenirs sont déjà moléculaires. C’est que devenir, ce n’est pas imiter quelque chose ou quelqu’un, ce n’est pas s’identifier à lui” (334). All becoming is molecular because the transformation is not simply turning into another entity; it does not take place merely on the level of appearances but is deeper, residing within the very molecular make-up of the subject.

The process of becoming is also inherently relational and dynamic, composed of connections between entities of movement and rest, speed and slowness: “Devenir, c’est, à partir des formes qu’on a, du sujet qu’on est, des organes qu’on possède ou des fonctions qu’on remplit, extraire des particules, entre lesquelles on instaure des rapports de mouvement et de repos, de vitesse et de lenteur, les plus *proches* de ce qu’on est en train de devenir, et par lesquels on devient” (334). As Deleuze and Guattari explain, in the process of *le devenir*, one moves closer to the molecular being of something else in order to enter into a relation, a collectivity, or an assemblage with the person, animal, or object. It is a process of ever-increasing proximity in order to affect and be affected. In *Le Corps lesbien*, the lovers’ process of becoming is often

molecular as they travel through each other's cells and nuclei. In one scene, *j/e* tells how she is traversed by *tu* at this level, and she sees her cells move and change: "M/es cellules sous tes doigts m/a plus atroce s'élargissent...j/e vois des quantités énormes de nucléoles brillants sauter tout autour de m/oi...tandis que toi m/a très féroce m/a frénétique tu es d'une vitesse incomparable, tu vas et viens dans m/es pores élargis" (176). Just as Deleuze and Guattari describe becoming as relations of relations of speed and slowness, so Wittig describes the lovers' molecular relations in terms of frenetic energy, velocity, comings, and goings.

Deleuze and Guattari continue their description by writing of the powerful role sexuality plays in the process of becoming and how it in turn leads to myriad other becomings:

La sexualité met en jeu des devenirs conjugués trop divers qui sont comme *n* sexes, toute une machine de guerre par quoi l'amour passe...Mais ce qui compte est que l'amour lui-même est une machine de guerre douée de pouvoirs étranges et quasi terrifiants. La sexualité est une production de mille sexes, qui sont autant de devenirs incontrôlables. *La sexualité passe par le devenir-femme de l'homme et le devenir-animal de l'humain* : émission de particules. (341, their emphasis)

In this conceptualization, they describe how the multiplicity of becomings is tied to sexuality, for sexuality has the power to produce "mille sexes," which are in turn other becomings. In *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig sets into motion endless becomings, conjugated through alternative sexual relations that pass through "love" as a war machine. As already stated, Wittig is not interested in romantic love, but instead she creates a depiction of desire as an absolute, sovereign subject endowed with "strange and terrifying powers." These becomings are key to the realization of her vision of alternative sexuality and identity.

As Deleuze and Guattari assert, sexuality passes through *devenir-femme* and *devenir-animal*, which is to say that in order to move towards liberation of the body and the self, one must first enact a process of becoming-woman and becoming-animal. Deleuze and Guattari state that becoming-woman is the key to all other becomings: "Il faut dire que tous les devenirs

commencent et passent par le devenir-femme. C'est la clef des autres devenirs" (340). In this conception, becoming-woman is the beginning of the entire process of transformation, since becoming involves moving away from the molar standard towards the molecular, or from the majoritarian to the minoritarian position. When Deleuze and Guattari use the term "woman" here, they mean (in quite a general sense) that which is other and that which is different. They use "woman" as a minority position opposed to "man" as the universal and the standard of human existence. They do not use the term to evoke a specifically gendered type of body or existence or an economic and political class position. Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term "woman" could seem irreconcilable with feminist objectives that privilege female specificity and lived experience. Even more, it could seem antithetical to Wittig's literary agenda since she condemned and avoided the use of "woman." Even though Deleuze and Guattari employ the term "woman," I do not view it as contradictory to Wittig's thought in *Le Corps lesbien* because Deleuze and Guattari use it to mean "other" in a minoritarian sense that aligns with Wittig's understanding of the oppression of women within the patriarchy. To become-woman for Deleuze and Guattari is not to fall back into or subject oneself to the oppressed and enslaved subject position that Wittig describes; it is in fact the opposite, and it describes a liberatory position that rings similar to Wittig's lesbian position. With "becoming-woman," Deleuze and Guattari argue that the subject must leave behind the dominant system of existence (what they would call "stratification," "striation," and the body made into an "organism") and instead begin to exist outside of restrictive categories. This is to say, their "becoming-woman" is the beginning of the process by which women (and men) cease to be women and men (or to exist within fixed and enforced identitarian categories) in order to move through various other becomings on a trajectory towards freedom. Throughout this discussion, I do not conflate the "woman" in

Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-woman" with Wittig's use of "woman" as a social class, for that would indeed render the two concepts antithetical. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari choose the term "woman" from the pairing man/woman in order to underline the opposition there and argue for a transformative process that moves the subject towards the minority position. The fact that they choose the term woman shows that they recognize the minority position women occupy. In this way, I read an unlikely resonance between their concept and the way Wittig draws attention to women's position and her call to cease being women and become lesbians.⁶⁶ For Deleuze and Guattari, the term "woman" is merely the one they choose to speak of that which is *not man*, meaning that which is secondary and inherently minoritarian. In the way that their "becoming-woman" is not pejorative to actual women, it is a useful way to conceptualize the first step in a process of becoming in *Le Corps lesbien* that resists reified systems and seeks to establish alternative subject positions.

Although Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-woman does not call for physical transformation into the specific body of a woman, it does still concern "the body" in an abstract and molecular sense because this state of becoming aspires for what they call "the body without organs." To understand this concept, it is first necessary to foreground that the "body without organs" for Deleuze and Guattari is a metaphor for a liberated, desirable state; it has nothing to do with a literal invocation of an empty physical body that would be a lifeless, dead body. Their

⁶⁶ I don't want to belabor this point unnecessarily, but it is worth repeating that Deleuze and Guattari are *not* referencing the physical bodies of women or the actual social and political reality of women in their concept. Their point is much more abstract than that, and in this sense, Wittig's conceptualization of the lesbian position is more specific. This is admittedly part of why their concept draws so much critique from feminist theorists because it risks effacing those real conditions and instead using the idea of "woman" as a means to a different end. I still see value in it in as much as it is possible to see past their use of "woman" to the process of becoming that it describes. It is unclear—in light of all that the word "woman" evokes—why they did not choose a different word from the myriad of binary oppositions that exist (like day/night, hot/cold, wet/dry, etc.) or create an entirely new word that could have been free of any and all conceptual baggage. Perhaps this is intellectual laziness on their part, and so much of the trouble with their use of the word "woman" could have been avoided.

metaphor describes an opposite state, for this new “body” is not a docile one; it does not belong with a “cohorte lugubre de corps cousus vitrifiés, catatonisés, aspirés” (187) that results from repression and emptying. Instead, these are boundless bodies, “plein de gaieté, d’extase, de dance” (187). Their figurative image of “the body without organs” describes a process of unmaking and remaking “the body” as it is representative of the self, and this process is full of joy and ecstasy. If the body represents a self contained and restrained within societal and ideological structures, then the “organs” they mention are the many specific ways that the subject is controlled, forced into categories, and restricted. To “remove” these organs is to free the self through an act of refusal and resistance; to “remake” the body is then to create a new self and a new way of existing outside of dominant systems.⁶⁷ Deleuze and Guattari further describe how the body without organs is not a specific destination or achievable stasis; it is a practice, a set of practices, and a horizon that one is forever working towards: “Le Corps sans Organes, on n’y arrive pas, on ne peut pas y arriver, on n’a jamais fini d’y accéder, c’est une limite” (186). When they use “the body” here, they describe a state of being and a way of living. This state is tied to desire as well (they abbreviate “corps sans organes” as “CsO”): “Le CsO est le désir, c’est lui et par lui qu’on desire” (203). The body without organs enables one to desire and *is* desire; it is a state that empowers the subject and allows it to expand and transform.

The way that Deleuze and Guattari speak of the subject becoming through the body without organs has much in common with Wittig’s descriptions of the lesbian lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*. As part of their description of this state, Deleuze and Guattari ask the question of why one cannot use the body in a completely different way (which is to say, live in radically different way): “Pourquoi pas marcher sur la tête, chanter avec les sinus, voir avec la peau, respire avec le

⁶⁷ I discuss this in much more detail in my article for *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*. I trace the origin of this concept for Deleuze and Guattari and include more detailed description from both their text and Wittig’s.

ventre” (187)? Wittig’s couples provide an answer to this question and an example of seeing through their skin and walking on their heads. Her protagonists defy and permeate every physical boundary, law of nature, and societally imposed behavioral norm in order to fill themselves with each other and experience freedom after first having emptied themselves of the “organs” that bind and restrain them. Deleuze and Guattari’s similar characterization of the “body without organs” positions this liberatory state of becoming alongside Wittig’s lesbian subject position and provides a helpful lens through which to read the many moments in Wittig’s text when the lovers unmake and remake their bodies. Initially, Wittig’s many descriptions of the ways the lovers meticulously and reverently remove their organs from their bodies—not in a metaphorical sense but in explicit, graphic language—can be shocking and confusing. Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs” metaphor helps to read Wittig’s literal descriptions of the lovers removing their organs and remaking their bodies in the text. Deleuze and Guattari describe how the process of making the body without organs is not one of wild destruction but is rather careful and precise: “On n’y va pas à coups de marteau, mais avec une lime très fine” (198). The way that Wittig’s lovers carefully explore and travel through their bodies aligns with this description. Deleuze and Guattari continue to describe how, in the process, one invents “self-destructions” that are not about actual death but that move ever towards the transformative process:

On invente des autodestructions qui ne se confondent pas avec la pulsion de mort. Défaire l’organisme n’a jamais été se tuer, mais ouvrir le corps à des connexions qui supposent tout un agencement, des circuits, des conjonctions, des étagements et des seuils, des passages et des distributions d’intensité, des territoires et des déterritorialisations mesurées à la manière d’un arpenteur. (198)

Similar to how Deleuze and Guattari describe destruction that is not related to death but to life, so Wittig’s lovers destroy their bodies in order to resuscitate immediately and defy the process of death. The lovers do not actually kill each other but open themselves to millions of connections,

levels, and thresholds in their continual state of intensities and deterritorializations. Deleuze and Guattari's metaphorical concept here illuminates Wittig's objective: that these acts for the lovers are expressions of their freedom and of the immensely pleasurable, perpetual state of becoming within which they exist. The ways that they unmake and remake themselves exemplifies the "body without organs" state. Wittig's fictional text provides a concrete and powerful demonstration of Deleuze and Guattari's abstract theory.

Within the reality Wittig creates in *Le Corps lesbien*, the "organs" that the lovers have freed themselves of are all the required societal behaviors and beliefs that would make them into and perpetuate their oppression and as "women." When Wittig's lesbian characters refuse to conform to the heteronormative order and to be "women," they literally destroy the body as it is objectified within patriarchy. They then reconstruct new bodies that are representative of their liberatory way of existing. In this sense, the entire project of *Le Corps lesbien* describes a process of becoming that moves towards the body without organs and expands upon Deleuze and Guattari's conception while avoiding the binary residue that hangs over their theoretical attempts to articulate such constructions (most notably with their term becoming-woman). More than just imagining the inverse or negation of the standard, Wittig creates a "becoming-lesbian" that exists on the other side of the binary and outside of categories altogether. It is a becoming defined by what it moves toward and not what it moves away from, by the multiplicity of other becomings that it can access and with which it can connect. To understand the text of *Le Corps lesbien* as expressing a process of becoming is not to say that the lovers' have yet to achieve their utopian state of liberation; it is instead to read their many bodily destructions and reconstructions as expressions of a process of living and being. Their existence is a perpetual becoming, and that becoming is pleasurable. Just as Deleuze and Guattari's *devenir* is not a strictly linear process, so

the lovers exist in an atemporal space that is dynamic and fluid. Their utopian existence is not stagnant or fixed but infinitely variable, and they express their freedom through the diversity and range of their becomings.

d. *Je suis le lieu d'un grand vacarme: Haecceities as Utopian Assemblages*

Within their elaboration of *le devenir*, Deleuze and Guattari describe a state of being that results from diverse becomings under the name *heccéité* (haecceity), and it is the type of existence that Wittig's lovers experience throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. It includes all concurrent factors in any given moment in a multifaceted, rhizomatic relation: "Il y a un mode d'individuation très différent de celui d'une personne, d'un sujet, d'une chose ou d'une substance. Nous lui réservons le nom d'*heccéité*...tout y est rapport de mouvement et de repos entre molécules ou particules, pouvoir d'affecter et d'être affecté" (318, their emphasis).⁶⁸ A haecceity is a relation that does not differentiate between particulars like subject, animal, atmosphere, and time of day but instead understands each moment as a happening or event, an assemblage created through the combination of factors that mutually act upon and influence each other. Deleuze and Guattari's haecceities are constantly shifting collectivities that do not work towards destinations or settled states: "Une heccéité n'a ni début ni fin, ni origine ni destination; elle est toujours au milieu. Elle n'est pas faite de points, mais seulement de lignes. Elle est rhizome" (321). Here they describe how haecceities exist in expansive, ever-present moments. They do not move towards specific destinations but are "in the middle," at the intersection of factors that compose the experience of being. They further describe how haecceities do not distinguish between a hierarchy of "acting subject" and "passive background" but include all of

⁶⁸ One could perhaps think further about the fact that in French "haecceity" is gendered female, though Deleuze and Guattari do not assert that there is any gendered connotation to this relational state.

the concurrent factors at play in any given moment: “Le climat, le vent, la saison, l’heure ne sont pas d’une autre nature que les choses, les bêtes ou les personnes qui les peuplent, les suivent, y dorment ou s’y réveillent. Et c’est d’une seule traite qu’il faut lire : la bête-chasse-à-cinq-heures. Devenir-soir, devenir-nuit d’un animal, noces de sang. Cinq heures est cette bête ! Cette bête est cet endroit !” (321). Deleuze and Guattari’s solution to the problem of expressing such an interconnected assemblage is to write the phrase with hyphens and to tell the reader to read it “without a pause.” In this conception of being where multiple factors come together and exist concurrently, to understand oneself as continually moving from haecceity to haecceity is to understand being in a state of becoming.

As a way of understanding the self in a both-and relation with associated factors, surroundings, time of day, other beings, etc., the haecceity is an expression of utopian relationality. It is a utopian state because it understands the self in intimate and inexorable connection, and it asserts that the self *is* the combination of all factors happening within the space of any given moment. Wittig’s couples in *Le Corps lesbien* move through this type of ever shifting rhizomatic existence as they create and recreate their relational version of utopia. The way that Wittig situates her protagonist-lovers in spatiotemporal haecceities reveals that the haecceity is characteristic of her vision of utopian relationality. In one scene, *j/e* describes a moment where she is in a cold river while the water runs through her and eventually freezes. Her first sentence exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari’s construction of haecceities: “J/e suis dans le cours d’eau froid en plein midi...M/es gencives sont exacerbées, elles sont à peu près disons sciées par l’eau” (169). Here she is not just the speaking subject, but instead she-is-in-the-cold-water-at-midday, read without a pause. She is an event composed of affective factors and she enters into relation with those factors—she is and becomes them. The situation is not merely a

backdrop upon which the action of the scene unfolds; rather the action *is* the assemblage created from the concurrent factors. *J/e* is the relation between the spatiotemporal factors and the site where they intersect and converge.

In addition to instances where the speaker enters into an assemblage with her surrounding natural elements like air, water, wind, and sun, Wittig creates deeper moments where *j/e* becomes a haecceity together with the other protagonist who functions for her as the spatiotemporal background. This is to say that the second protagonist *is* the event into which the first enters and becomes. This expansion of the haecceity to the relation between two beings adds another layer to Wittig's depiction of utopian relationality, for it presents a radically different understanding of being and subjectivity. It shows that the desired utopian union exists in the relation of one's being with the other. In one such scene, *j/e* searches for her beloved in the sea, and then she comes to understand that her lover is the water through which she moves. *J/e* begins in a similar way to the above-cited passage where she-is-in-the-water:

Au plus large de la mer porteuse en ce lieu de milliers d'algues *j/e* nage pour te chercher. *J/e* suis enveloppée de toute part par la masse liquide noire, *m/on* corps est roulé par l'eau enroulé par les végétations...Un obscurcissement se fait la nuit de *m/on* corps redoublant l'autre, *j/e* crois tout à coup que tu es *m/on* adorable l'eau qui *m/e* va et *m/e* vient au plus étroit de *m/on* corps *m/a* très glorieuse *m/a* plus éternelle aimée, *j/e* crois que tu es celle qui *m/* engloutit maintenant et à jamais. (140-41)

Here *j/e* searches for her beloved, all while she traverses and is traversed by the water, in a both active and passive mixing of self and other. In this moment, Wittig's lovers exemplify the haecceity relation where they are both inside and outside, background and foreground, flesh that moves through water and water that moves through flesh. The description of the water imagery in this passage expresses the earlier exclamation "*I am you you are me inexorably,*" read without a pause. The "*I*" and "*you*" here are not merely two beings who move closer to each other but

beings who become water and take on the molecular being of the sea in order to deepen their relation.

Another water-related fragment expresses the two lovers' haecceity relation and emphasizes the radical way their relational existence is a process of becoming one another and the surrounding world. The passage begins with a description of a "small rain" that falls upon *tu*: "Une petite pluie choit sur toi multiple disperse, cellule après cellule tu es touchée, l'eau tombe mollement" (162). This opening line establishes the haecceity of tu-in-the-rain and expresses a relation of movement and rest, affecting and being affected. Soon *j/e* tells how she is the rain and becomes a storm: "*j/e m/ /accrois, j/e tombe sur toi à coups redoublés, des éclairs d'orage m/e traversent, ta peau crépite, tout ton corps s'en va en eau, j/e m/ /épands sur toi du haut en bas, j/e coule en fontaine, j/e suis sur toi déversée à grand bruit*" (162). Not only does *j/e* assume the role of the natural storm here, but she spreads herself completely over *tu* and "flows like a fountain." This description collapses the distinctions between *j/e* and *tu* and the world around them. The lesbian position that Wittig illustrates through such descriptions of haecceities leads to (or could lead to) millions of possible transformations as she shows throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. The fantastical interpenetrations like this one position her protagonists in an indefinite and unspecified temporality, with an awareness of both the ways they affect and are affected, which in turn allows them to defy and escape the work of death.

Throughout *Le Corps lesbien*, the two lovers' moments of being-in haecceities overlap with other becomings, as in the becoming-sea and becoming-storm of the previously cited passages, since those physical transformations help facilitate and deepen their becoming-other and becoming-self. More specifically, these moments include visions of becoming-animal, where the lovers' physical transformations allow them to enter into their relations in new and different

ways. In one moment, *j/e* admires the other's image revealed in the dawn's sunlight and subtly implies a becoming-animal: "Quand après l'aube le soleil aveugle tu m/ /es révélée dans ta gloire peau composée d'écailles dans la lumière éclatante" (172). This moment that includes your-skin-revealed-to-me-in-the-dazzling-sunlight-after-dawn also implies the becoming-animal (or perhaps becoming-insect) since the speaker uses the word *écailles* (scales) to refer to the other's skin. *J/e* then refers to herself in similar terms with antennae, six legs, and fragmented vision: "m/es antennes flexibles te palpent dans tes cheveux tes oreilles sur tes paupières...j/e te retiens entre m/es six pattes...j/e te vois partout à la fois" (172–73). This description of becoming-insect grows out of the lovers' relationship to haecceities, for not only can they act as the spatiotemporal backgrounds for each other, but they can assume the molecular structure of other beings in order to interact in deeper ways.

Just as in Deleuze and Guattari's other theorizations of becoming, in becoming-animal, one does not imitate an animal or physically assume its form, but rather, one enters into a relation with the other in such a way that the particles emitted will be animal as a function of the relation. They explain this through the example of a dog: "non pas imiter le chien, mais composer son organisme avec *autre chose*, de telle manière qu'on fasse sortir, de l'ensemble ainsi composé, des particules qui seront canines en fonction du rapport de mouvement et de repos, ou de voisinage moléculaire dans lequel elles entrent" (336). In the passage cited above, Wittig does not suggest that the two lovers *become* insects, but rather, she draws attention to insect characteristics that enable them to perceive each other and enter into a relationship with specific characteristics. Their becoming-insect allows them to know each other in a way that surpasses the sensations of the human body, whereby facilitating an ever closer and deeper relational experience. This transformation proves that part of the utopian aspect of the lovers'

relation is their ability to interact with one another in any way they please, even in the molecular form of various creatures. With the addition of becomings-animal throughout *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig expands the transformative range of the lovers' becomings and positions them even further outside of identifiable states of being. Wittig introduces the many processes in *Le Corps lesbien* of becoming-animal subtly through specific word choice like *poil* (animal hair, fur, or coat) instead of *cheveux* (human hair): “Ton poil est tout noir et brillant. Dans l’intervalle des longues *mâchoires* dents découvertes je reconnais ton sourire ambigu infini. Tes *oreilles hautes* bougent et s’agitent. M/a main en se posant sur *ton flanc* couvert de sueur fait se hérissier ta peau” (14, my emphasis). In this scene, the speaker recognizes the other within the becoming-animal not specifically as a horse but through the horse-like characteristics. In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that one does not become the physical animal, Wittig never explicitly states “j/e deviens x” or “tu deviens y.” Her careful mention of certain attributes and the ways that the lovers use them makes evident how the lovers interact in provocative and fascinating ways.

Wittig includes too many instances of becoming-animal in *Le Corps lesbien* to specifically mention them all, but I include here just a sampling to give an overall impression of their prominence and diversity in the text: there is a becoming-swan; “Tu étends tes ailes par-dessous m/oi. J/e cherche du bec leur dessous” (32); other becomings-horse (56–57, 103–104); becoming-shark (67–68); becoming-bird: “j/e m//envole...J/e bats des bras alors, j/e m/e mets à voler longuement sans fin du côté du soleil lèvres serrées” (95); becoming-snake (125–126); becoming-feline: “tes pattes...ta fourrure est grise...Tu sautes parfois de ton bond de féline pour m//atteindre tes pattes m/e saisissant au cou” (135–36); becoming some sort of mud monster or unidentifiable creature: “Tes bras formés de boue...J/e t’adore à l’égal d’une déesse monstre de

pourriture...j/e te tue ainsi m/on plus beau monstre” (161–62). There is even a moment of becoming-flower (as a flowering bush or wisteria that recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s wasp and orchid rhizome)⁶⁹ where the speaker refers to “m/es fleurs bleu pâle,” while the other gradually succumbs to the perfume and the surfeit of pleasure: “J/e suis terriblement haute grande forte, tu ne le déplores pas tandis que j/e ruisselle sur toi à toutes fleurs à toutes couleurs à toutes odeurs. Toi m/a très désirée jambes molles tu te laisses aller, tu dis jarrets ployés o glycine tandis que j/e te saoule ad vitam aeternam, amen” (163–64). Here the becoming-wisteria metaphor describes how the lovers enter into a yet another type of desirous and ecstatic experience.

These different types of becoming-animal throughout *Le Corps lesbien* may strike the reader as strange in a text claiming to portray the *lesbian* body, along with all the anatomical lists that include all the parts of the *human* body. The various becomings-animal do make it difficult to compose a clear picture of the lovers’ corporeal forms, but this aspect serves to further articulate the fluid and expansive characteristic of their existence in a state of becoming. This is the point, for the lovers’ intercorporeal relations do not imitate anything existent or stay predictably within the confines of established behavior. Wittig’s protagonists do at times assume the recognizable features of human bodies, but the staggering range of becomings and haecceities that Wittig presents in *Le Corps lesbien* shows that “the lesbian body” is the body freed from any and all categories. It is the body as it moves through porous and flexible subjectivity, where the self is not limited to a physical body at all. This intercorporeal experience is intimately tied to Wittig’s vision of utopia in *Le Corps lesbien*, for paradise is the freedom to experience any body (or rather any form), any way. This aspirational vision is utopian because for Wittig it is not merely a matter of writing “lesbian sexuality” as a third category but of

⁶⁹ See their discussion of this relationship in the “Introduction: Rhizome” first chapter of *Mille Plateaux* (9-37), and specifically pages 17-19.

dreaming it into reality as *all* the possibilities that exist outside of the dominant binary. Using Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming to interpret Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* helps to understand the function of the many becomings-animal, the repeated scenes of dismemberment, and the anatomical pieces of the body scattered throughout the text. Wittig's lesbians show that the process of becoming-lesbian is fueled by the desire for ever-closer relation, and to satisfy their desire, they transform and travel through many different becomings. They find paradise in the body and being of the other, even as that body takes on different forms and exists in haecceities.⁷⁰

Throughout *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig creates a paradoxical situation where the protagonists experience fantastic, seemingly violent, and shocking becomings. When Wittig describes her intended shock factor for the reader through the formal and conceptual violence of the text, she likens it in a parenthetical afterthought to her own reaction reading *Tropismes* by Nathalie Sarraute for the first time: "A good reader could be blasted in the process. (As I felt when I was on the street reading *Tropisms* by Nathalie Sarraute for the first time. After that writing and reading were never the same)" (45). In a similar way, the reader—every reader—is indeed blasted when reading *Le Corps lesbien* for the first time by its audacious vision of utopian relations. These relations at first seem grotesque and unbearable, but as the text unfolds, they create an unexpectedly passionate and moving vision. After reading this text, the reader is left

⁷⁰ I will discuss becoming-animal more in the second and third chapters, as it is a theme that appears in all three authors' novels. The becoming-animal in Darrieusecq's *Truismes* is a special case because her novel actually describes the physical metamorphosis of the protagonist into a sow. As already shown, Deleuze and Guattari underline how becoming-animal is not a matter of physical transformation, imitation of animal behavior, or adoption of certain animal traits. It is rather a process of becoming at a molecular level and has to do with existing and interacting with others in a way that is "animal." I find that *Truismes* does both types of transformation—outward in an obvious way and inward in the way Deleuze and Guattari describe. In this way, the text shows how molar transformation can accompany molecular becoming-animal, though it is not a necessary condition.

forever changed, and truly, (in my own experience at least) reading and writing have never been the same.

3. Paradise is Other People: Bridging Differences in *Virgile, Non*

After analyzing how *Les Guérillères* and *Les Corps lesbien* use relationality in form and content to establish their utopian visions, I now move to *Virgile, Non* (1985), Monique Wittig's final novel and the way it presents paradise as a deeply relational, intercorporeal experience. This text recounts a "tout ensemble classique et profane" (7) lesbian-feminist restaging of the journey through the three realms of the afterlife—hell, purgatory, and paradise—where the "afterlife" exists in the present and the damned or "lost" souls are women trapped in the oppressive structures of hetero-patriarchy.⁷¹ *Virgile, Non*, like Wittig's other works, uses relationality as a foundational piece of its utopian vision. Although paradise is a specific place in *Virgile, Non*, it is also a relational state. The text imagines heaven as a genderless communion of the self with the other and with the world through an outpouring abundance of language. *Virgile, Non* includes elements from both *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*, and it builds upon them to culminate in a beatific vision that serves as an exclamation point at the end of Wittig's literary career. Similarly to how *Les Guérillères* tells the struggle to achieve utopia, *Virgile, Non* focuses on the journey to reach paradise. It also includes the inverse of utopia—or dystopia—as part of its description of the realm of inferno. Like in *Le Corps lesbien*, the protagonist of *Virgile, Non* (simply named *Wittig*)⁷² locates paradise in the body and being of her lover—she speaks to her

⁷¹ Throughout *Virgile, Non*, Wittig refers to them as "âmes damnées" but as Diane Griffin Crowder notes, Wittig prefers the English translation as "lost souls" since it implies no judgement. In the world of *Virgile, Non*, the souls do not deserve to be in Hell and can leave—a sharp divergence from Dante's vision of Inferno. See Crowder's discussion of *Virgile, Non* and note no. 30 in "Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism."

⁷² I italicize the protagonist's name to differentiate between character and author, as is customary in writing about *Virgile, Non*.

beloved as “mon beau paradis” and yearns to reach her throughout the journey through inferno and purgatory. Wittig appeals to the souls in inferno on the basis of their shared humanity, and throughout the journey, she overcomes her own frustration and anger to cultivate “la passion active,” a dynamic type of compassion that helps her to feel others’ suffering and fight for their freedom. Although this work is less preoccupied with pronouns and recounts the journey with the first-person perspective of a protagonist named *Wittig*, her introspective narration fades in the final chapter to present the experience of paradise as a relational state that shares the self with others.

Wittig’s reinterpretation of Dante’s text enacts as a feminist “re-vision” of the afterlife journey and an act of “revisionary mythmaking.”⁷³ It generally participates in both of these literary practices, and it goes even further to present an entirely new vision of language that exists within a paradise of restored interpersonal relations. Right from the title—*Virgile, Non*—the fragmented, non-linear narrative sets itself in opposition to its classical models: Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Although the title only names Virgil, the implied refusal implicates all the works influenced by Virgil and Dante, as Fiona Cox notes: “*Virgile, Non* is not simply a rewriting of Virgilian epic, but it is a reworking of all the patriarchal epics that have taken their roots from Virgil” (204). By viewing the text as a “rewriting of Virgilian epic” and a restaging of the *Divine Comedy*, scholars have concentrated their studies on the differences between *Virgile, Non* and the *Divine Comedy*. In the past thirty years since the publication of *Virgile, Non*, scholarly focus has favored *Virgile, Non*’s “outrageous deviations from its model”

⁷³ These terms are from Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker, respectively. See Rich, “When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision,” and Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking.”

(Hewitt 146).⁷⁴ Understandably taking its cue from the work's title, this line of comparison focuses on how *Virgile, Non* exhumes the *Divine Comedy* in order to dismantle its patriarchal foundations. Using Wittig's own description of innovative literature as a "Trojan Horse," Erika Ostrovsky claims that Wittig's goal is to "subvert established categories, destroy past models" (4), and that *Virgile, Non*'s "demolition power" lies in its objective "to pulverize, explode existing structures and even the most fecund inventions of the past" (5). In interpretations such as this one, Wittig's short work acts as a war machine fueled by feminist rage that rips off the façade of Dante's masterwork and exposes centuries' worth of rotting patriarchal thought.⁷⁵ Even familiar labels like feminist "revision" focus mainly on *Virgile, Non*'s destructive work, as Liedeke Plate does in her article "Dis/remembering the Classics" (1997). Plate describes *Virgile, Non* as a "rewriting," "re-telling," and "re-presentation" of Dante's text (73-74), foregrounding her discussion with Adrienne Rich's definition of *re-vision*. By claiming that *Virgile, Non* "invokes Dante's poem only to subvert it" (73), Plate perpetuates the interpretation of *Virgile, Non* as a "revision" in the sense of what it undoes, subverts, and destroys.

Although Wittig certainly assaults Virgil's and Dante's texts throughout *Virgile, Non*, she does not simply dismantle the *Comedy*. Instead she constructs an original afterlife vision, and she actually retains some of the core features of *The Divine Comedy* to display her purposeful alterations. Wittig names her protagonist *Wittig*, maintaining the author/protagonist doubling and

⁷⁴ For the primary works that contribute to this comparison, see Leah D. Hewitt, Erika Ostrovsky, Jeannine Gaudet, James D. Davis Jr., and M.M. Adjarian. Hewitt devotes one chapter to Wittig focusing on the autobiographical element of *Virgile, Non*. Erika Ostrovsky includes one chapter on *Virgile, Non* in her work, *The Constant Journey*, which is focused on Wittig's novels. Jeannine Gaudet mainly paraphrases these previous studies. James D. Davis concentrates on Wittig-the-author as a precursor to queer theory and literature, along with *Virgile, Non* as a necessarily violent work that calls attention to the violence of misogyny. M.M. Adjarian relies on Hewitt's and Ostrovsky's earlier studies in order to explore more deeply the allegorical element in *Virgile, Non*.

⁷⁵ I take this metaphor from Dante himself and how Virgil rips off the Siren's clothing at the conclusion of the "Dream of the Siren" episode in Purgatorio XIX.

creating the same link between the fictional character and the real author. With the protagonist who uses “I,” Wittig continues the more-personalized perspective that she used in *Le Corps lesbien*, but in *Virgile, Non*, she also reflects on her own experience as a lesbian person. Throughout *Virgile, Non*, the protagonist *Wittig* undergoes growth and change, much like *Dante* in *The Divine Comedy*. *Wittig* must learn about the nature of “sin” and suffering, about her place in the cosmic order, and about how to use her language to record her experience. Wittig also loosely maintains the figure of the Sibyl as guide throughout the journey (Dante also replaces the Sibyl of *The Aeneid* with Virgil as guide in *The Divine Comedy*).⁷⁶ In the classical characterization, the Sibyl is a transactional female figure who serves as the mouthpiece of male gods to male heroes. She is a virginal, secluded, powerless prophet and nameless other, doomed to ambiguous vatic utterances.⁷⁷ In line with her refusal of Virgil, Dante, and their underworld journeys (even as they act as her implied models), Wittig refuses their characterizations of the Sibyl. She equally rejects Dante’s replacement of the Sibyl with Virgil,⁷⁸ and instead casts a figure of her own creation in the role: the enigmatically named *Manastabal, mon guide*.⁷⁹ Wittig

⁷⁶ Virgil in the *Aeneid* establishes the Sibyl of Cumae in her dual role as prophetess of Apollo and guide through the underworld to the epic hero. She is a combination of contradictions: pagan, then Christian; clairvoyant, deranged, wise, and irrational. Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* reprises her role as Aeneas’ guide but also writes her a history and predicts that her voice will outlive her ageing, physical body. Dante then replaces the figure of the Sibyl with that of Virgil in the *Divina Commedia*. While the Sibyl is physically absent from the *Commedia*, she is metaphorically present throughout Dante’s entire journey.

⁷⁷ I discuss Wittig’s rewriting of the Sibyl in my article, “Rewriting Patriarchal Ventriloquism: The Sibyl’s words-made-leaves in Monique Wittig’s *Virgile, Non*.”

⁷⁸ Virgil is Dante’s guide through Inferno and Purgatory, but then Beatrice guides him through Heaven. Virgil cannot enter Heaven in Dante’s afterlife governed by Catholic doctrine because Virgil is a “virtuous pagan” and is therefore condemned to the first circle of Inferno, Limbo.

⁷⁹ This definition, “mon guide,” functions like part of the name. It is curiously included in every mention of *Manastabal*, even when she speaks with *Wittig* and refers to herself as “I, *Manastabal*, your guide.” Erika Ostrovsky speculates that since this name begins with *M*, the first letter of Monique, this positions her as an alter ego of the narrator and a double for the protagonist *Wittig* (141).

creates in *Manastabal* a *new*, lesbian Sibyl, a figure that does not simply repeat others' words and knowledge but who is both friend, mentor, and comrade to *Wittig*. *Manastabal* fights alongside *Wittig* to free women trapped in hell; she chastises her when *Wittig* loses hope and gives in to anger at women who have so internalized misogyny that they believe in its benefits; she saves *Wittig* in the Laundromat scene, leads her to momentary respite in Limbo, and finally guides her to the gates of paradise.

Despite the ways Wittig reimagines the patriarchal foundations of the underworld and afterlife journey, an intriguing similarity between the *Divine Comedy* and *Virgile, Non* is the role that relationality plays in both authors' visions of paradise. Claiming this similarity is not to assert that Wittig's paradise is *the same* as Dante's, especially given that Dante's is a static realm rigidly ordered by Christian theology and its doctrines of faith, hope, and charity. Both texts do however express a similar intercorporeal, fantastically intimate relation that only exists in paradise (as mentioned in the Introduction). This is a core aspect of what makes their conceptions of paradise desirable; beatitude for both authors occurs through and because of relationality. This idea resonates through Wittig's other novels, also in a non-religious sense: Dante's neologisms and en-verbed pronouns create a striking resonance with the *elles* of *Les Guérillères* that expresses a singular and plural subject, or a *both-and* intersubjective relation that is a defining characteristic of the utopia Wittig describes in that work. Just as Dante's souls in heaven become the action or the verb itself (the *intuarmi*, "to-in-you-myself" pronoun constructions),⁸⁰ so Wittig's lovers in *Le Corps lesbien* do not just vacillate between being acting subjects or objects, but they are the action; they seek to "in-other" the self and "in-self" the other. In *Virgile, Non*, Wittig expands these themes to explicitly describe the realm of paradise as a

⁸⁰ I discussed Dante's en-verbed pronouns specifically in the "Pre-History" first section of my Introduction.

communion of bodies and souls. It is a free enjoyment of flexible and interpersonal subjectivity as both a physical place and a relational state. While Wittig does “revision” certain aspects of Dante’s masterwork and retain others, *Virgile, Non* is an original vision of paradise. Wittig’s paradise is simultaneously a destination, a union (or reunion) with a beloved, and a shared, intercorporeal experience that bridges differences between self and other.

a. Hell is Other People: Infernal Relations in Wittig’s Dystopian Laundromat

Wittig begins building her vision of utopian relationality in *Virgile, Non* with a dramatic portrayal of its inverse, or what could be called “dystopian relationality.” If utopian relationality is characterized by the connection it creates between beings (or souls) and the way it collapses boundaries between self and other, then dystopian relationality would be the reinforcing of obstinate interpersonal boundaries that leads to increased isolation, suffering, and hatred.⁸¹

Wittig introduces this situation in the fourth chapter of *Virgile, Non*, titled “La laverie automatique” (“The Laundromat” in David Le Vay’s English translation), when the protagonist *Wittig* and Manastabal, her guide, enter one of the levels of hell styled as a modern-day laundromat. The laundromat is a patriarchal location in Wittig’s inferno because it contains only women doing the domestic work of washing and drying clothing for men; the small picture Wittig paints in this chapter contains none of what could be a potential feminist reclaiming of the laundromat space as “women-only” in a productive and dignified way. The opening lines of the chapter set up the dynamic of Wittig’s scene: *Wittig* and Manastabal have come to the Laundromat to liberate the women who are immediately hostile and mistakenly perceive *Wittig*’s benevolence as aggression. An anonymous, antagonistic speaking voice begins by addressing

⁸¹ “Dystopian relationality” could be an interesting characterization of Dante’s *Inferno* as well, since the ultimate punishment and suffering is separation from God in Dante’s Christian universe.

Wittig: “(Est-ce pour m’insulter et te moquer de moi que tu viens ici dans ce cercle, transfuge, renégate?)” (13).⁸² The speaker then proceeds to repeat a list of lesbian stereotypes:

(Va-t’en retrouver les gouines répugnantes comme même l’une d’entre elles les désigne, quoique pour moi *puantes* conviendrait mieux... Vous n’en prétendez pas moins vouloir sortir tout notre sexe de sa servitude. Il y a de quoi mourir de rire, si ce n’est que ma bile m’étouffera avant, quand je songe que la seule chose qui vous intéresse, c’est de le corrompre tout entier, notre sexe. Crois-tu que je n’aie pas des oreilles pour entendre ? Je sais tout de la peste lesbienne qui doit selon vos dires gagner de proche en proche toute la planète). (13-14)

Wittig listens to these accusations that lesbians are *puantes*, a *peste* out to corrupt all of womankind and even the entire world. The woman correctly understands *Wittig* as a lesbian, but in the woman’s eyes, this is an ugly, abject state. The speaker even inverts Biblical language when she says, “crois-tu que je n’aie pas des oreilles pour entendre,” for in the New Testament Gospels, it is only Jesus who exhorts the listening public to “have ears to hear.”⁸³ By using this phrase, the woman casts *Wittig* as a malicious messiah figure, trying to corrupt instead of save. She then positions herself as victim, aware of *Wittig*’s scheme, for she already knows “all about the lesbian plague.” This woman’s distorted perspective of *Wittig* and her hostility sets the stage for the dystopian scene.

Even though the anonymous speaker declares her hostility, *Wittig* still tries to earn the women’s attention by walking around and addressing them in a “noble style:” “Aussi bien, dès qu’elles ont eu commencé, je me suis mise à marcher de long en large dans la laverie

⁸² In *Virgile, Non*, Wittig replaces traditional quotation marks with parentheses. I repeat that structure here with the addition of quotation marks to delineate the text as citation. There has been some speculation as to Wittig’s purpose with this use of the parentheses. James D. Davis suggests that *Virgile, Non* has the least amount of “orthographic peculiarities” of any of Wittig’s novels—gone are the insertions of the large O as in *Les Guérillères* and the fractured pronouns of *Le Corps lesbien*. Davis describes Wittig’s parentheses as “one zealous effort to banish quotation marks in favor of parentheses, which may be read as a violent castration of ideological testicles “and the creation of a pictographic vagina to enclose discourse ()” (115).

⁸³ This phrase appears multiple times in the four Gospels, for example in Matthew 11:15 “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (English Standard Version). See also Matthew 13:9, Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8, 14:35.

automatique, essayant mon style noble pour attirer leur attention” (15). This style has no effect though and the women seem as if they are deaf: “Elles restent sourdes à mes exhortations” (16). Since the women do not actually have ears to hear *Wittig’s* message of salvation and they refuse to believe based on her words alone, she tries to convince them by sight. She resorts to the extreme measure of appealing to the women through their shared female anatomy:⁸⁴

Comme aucun mot ne semble pouvoir atteindre leur compréhension, je me mets à poil entre deux rangées de machines à laver et je m’avance parmi elles, non pas telle Vénus sortie des eaux, ni même telle que ma mère à faite, mais enfin avec deux épaules, un torse, un ventre, des jambes et le reste. Je n’ai donc rien de spécial à exhiber si ce n’est la parfaite conformité humaine avec les personnes de mon sexe, une similitude des plus évidentes et banales. (16)

Wittig takes the drastic measure here of unveiling her body or “stripping naked” (as the English phrases it), in order to show the women that she has *the same body*. She thinks this similarity is so obvious that it is banal; there is nothing special to show and no surprise here. *Wittig* bares her body in order to create a sense of solidarity, to earn their trust through her “parfaite conformité humaine.” *Wittig* even reiterates this physical similarity: “(Vous voyez bien que je suis faite du même bois que vous, nous appartenons à la même armée si ce n’est pas le même corps. Il n’y a pas à se méprendre sur mes intentions, elles sont pacifiques. C’est ce qu’ainsi je vous témoigne)” (16). With this statement, *Wittig* shows the women that she is *exactly* who and what she seems, and she even goes so far as to state that they belong to “the same army.” They have a common

⁸⁴ The contrast that *Wittig* describes in this chapter between women and lesbians, and specifically the animosity that *Wittig* has her lesbian protagonist experience due to the hatred of women, has led to scholars to interpret this chapter as representative of the entire work and even as representative of *Wittig’s* personal feelings projected upon the work as a whole. Consequently, *Virgile, Non* has been called more pessimistic and cynical than *Wittig’s* earlier works, criticized for being antagonistic towards heterosexual women and victim blaming them. (See the earlier cited studies of *Virgile, Non*). If one concentrated on chapters like this one and accompanying scenes that take place in *Inferno*, *Virgile, Non* could seem like a terribly dystopian vision for heterosexual women created by a bitter lesbian writer. However, I believe that while the work does contain scenes of suffering in the circles of *Inferno*, it also contains incredible utopian moments, not least of all in its overtly named “Paradise” chapters. As is often the case in feminist utopian literature, *Wittig* presents a mixture of utopia and dystopia.

cause and common enemy, if only the women would recognize that they are stronger together. *Wittig* offers the women a path to freedom if they would look past their differences and see her as one of them—or perhaps, what is more difficult—see themselves as one of her “kind;” and better still, see that they are the “same kind.”

Unfortunately, *Wittig*’s gesture has the opposite effect and pushes the women into a frenzy. Her naked body creates utter pandemonium in the Laundromat, and the women cry “rape” out of terror, as if they have been violated by the mere *sight* of a “lesbian” body:

Elles se mettent à tourner sur elles-mêmes en s’arrachant les cheveux dans la plus pure tradition classique, telles des toupies ou des derviches tourneurs, en poussant des gémissements forcenés, certaines, je peux dire, éructant, tandis que l’une d’elles se met à crier (au viol, au viol) et à se précipiter dans toutes les directions, et, comme elle ne peut pas aller bien loin, arrêtée qu’elle est dans son élan par les machines à laver et les sècheurs électriques qui obstruent tout l’espace, après s’être cognée aveuglément contre chacun des appareils l’un après l’autre, poussée par sa seule terreur, atteint la rue par hasard en répétant la même phrase insane (au viol, au viol). Une autre dans son effroi se jette dans un séchoir qui tourne encore et fait là le plus beau charivari. (17)

The way the women scream and tear their hair like bacchantes or whirling dervishes shows that they already believed the lesbian body was monstrous, and so when *Wittig* unclothed herself, they were primed to be immediately terrified. As Leah D. Hewitt describes, the women can only see *Wittig* through their prejudice that covers *Wittig* like clothing or a “monstrous mask:” “The souls can see ‘Wittig’s’ body only through the grid of their prejudices and fears, that is, as radically different...Like clothing, the body becomes a monstrous mask of itself, neither wholly female nor male, barely even human” (148). Even though *Wittig* strips herself bare, the women figuratively clothe her with their stereotypical beliefs, making her into a danger and casting themselves as helpless damsels in distress in perverse “perfect conformity” with patriarchal logic.

Due to their complicity with and obedience to misogynist thought, the women see themselves as victims and appeal to the authority of the “Father” in an inversion of the Biblical Lord’s Prayer: “(Père, père, ne me rejette pas, moi qui suis à tes genoux, jette un regard sur moi et vois que je suis exactement comme tu m’as faite. Ne permets pas que je tombe aux mains de ces maudites créatures et me perde dans les ténèbres du mal)” (15). When this anonymous soul describes that she genuflects before the Father (she is “at his knees”), she demonstrates her complete mental and physical servitude to “the law of the Father” and reveals her need for his approval. In an inverted echo of *Wittig*’s claim to perfect bodily conformity, the soul entreats the Father figure on behalf of her own conformity to *his* design: “vois que je suis exactement comme tu m’as faite.” This woman’s prayer shows how the women in the Laundromat cannot see that the “maudites créatures” (lesbians) are actually the grotesque creations of patriarchy intended to pit women against one another. *Wittig* shows here that this relational impasse between women and lesbians is a creation of patriarchy for the express purpose of establishing and maintaining that division. It is a dystopian relational state because it pushes the women to distance themselves fearfully from *Wittig*, who only wants to help them and act as their ally.

As the chaotic scene unfolds, the women add another layer to the vision of dystopian relationality by the way they misunderstand *Wittig*’s motive through their own distorted gaze that transforms her body into something monstrous. The women exclaim in their terror how they see *Wittig*’s body, or rather, *what* they see instead of her actual body. First, one cries how the lesbian body is covered in hair from head to toe: “(Regardez, elle est couverte de poils des pieds à la tête, son dos même est poilu)” (17). This could just be the women’s terrified hallucination, but as *Wittig* looks at herself, she sees that she has indeed been changed outwardly and now has hair covering her body: “Je me regarde avec étonnement: c’est vrai, j’ai des poils longs, noirs et

luisants qui me couvrent tout le corps, remplaçant ce qui n'était jusqu'alors qu'un duvet. Je dis donc: (Ah voilà qui va me tenir chaud en hiver!)" (17-18). Here the women's gaze actually transforms *Wittig's* body, but when she notices the change, she interprets it as something positive. Immediately after, she hears another cry: "(Regardez, elle a des écailles sur la poitrine, sur les épaules et sur le ventre)" (18). The women's terrified gaze transforms *Wittig* into a sort of siren or harpy, a less-than human creature, part fish or lizard or perhaps even bird, in an infernal perversion of *Le Corps lesbien's* becomings-animal. It is a perversion not only because it represents an *actual* transformation with physical animal-like features instead of the molecular features that Deleuze and Guattari so carefully explain, but also because the objective is *not* to relate on a deeper level but to enter into a relation that is hostile by making *Wittig* into a monster. This is a one-way, forced transformation with none of the liberating reciprocity of *Le Corps lesbien*. *Wittig* again glances at her body and confirms the women's perception: "Je baisse mes yeux vers ma personne physique une fois de plus et voilà que les poils sont derechef remplacés par des écailles dures et brillantes que je trouve du plus bel effet et qui ne vont pas resplendir au soleil" (18). *Wittig* again interprets the transformation of her body positively—she is not becoming something hideous but beautiful. This shows the difference in "lesbian" thinking versus the heterosexual or straight mind of the women who perceive anything different from them as ugly and dangerous.

Interpretations of *Wittig's* transformation in the Laundromat tend to read it for autobiographical undertones that reflect *Wittig's* own struggles as a lesbian and her frustrations with heterosexual feminism. Claire Whatling interprets this event as a failed attempt at "assimilation" or at trying to pass as a lesbian for a regular woman. The attempt fails because one cannot escape the "old myths" about lesbians that "should not be disavowed but appropriated

as part of a lesbian history of non-conformity” (238). In this interpretation, Wittig’s metamorphosis should stand as a lesson to those lesbians who might be swayed by the promise of assimilation and the temptation to pass themselves off for what they are not, “to deny their sexual difference in the face of their desire to ‘pass’” (238). While *Wittig* cannot change or avoid the women’s perception of her body, she can appropriate it for her own use, and in this sense she acts as a model. M.M. Adjarian reads the scene slightly differently as an allegory for Wittig’s split with the MLF over the question of essentialism and lesbian specificity: “Through ‘Wittig’s’ transformation, the writer allegorically points to the anti-essentialist bent that put her at odds with French feminist essentialists like Antoinette Fouque. Seeking commonality in a unitary female body is as illogical as the animal-fish hybrid she uses to represent that body in the novel” (106). Adjarian’s interpretation points to the scene as a lesson in the futility of using the physical form of the body as a unifying tool; for even though women and lesbians *have* the same anatomical body, that has never been enough to bridge differences in belief. Adjarian’s interpretation then reads the figure of *Wittig* as naïve, (and perhaps as a reflection of Wittig’s own break with the MLF), as an idealistic figure who has yet to learn the true reality of feminist infighting and heterosexual women’s obstinacy. While there are autobiographical shades of the Laundromat scene (and throughout *Virgile, Non*), I read the scene more for what it says about the women’s perception than about *Wittig*’s. It is their perception that transforms her body and that represents their need to distance themselves from her and to prove that she is different from them. This desire for difference and otherness (or even their action of “othering”) characterizes their relational existence in inferno. They are incapable of seeing the other as self, even to the extent that when faced with the sight of her human body, they resort to othering her by giving her body non-human characteristics.

In the continuation of the scene, the women push their perception to its limit and reveal the disastrous and nearly violent consequence of their dystopian relationality. While *Wittig* admires her new scales, there comes a third and final cry: “Déjà je redresse la tête, quand une entre elles rugit en pointant le milieu de mon corps : (Regardez, il est long comme un long doigt. Coupez-le, coupez-le)” (18). *Wittig* saves the most misogynistic and potentially violent aspect of this event until the end, when the women—blinded by their fear and misperception—threaten to perform one of the most heinous acts of violence against the female body (though *Wittig* does not name it as such): female genital mutilation, alternatively called clitoridectomy or female circumcision. When the women point to *Wittig’s* clitoris (though they don’t even know exactly where it is), they repeat the stereotype that the “lesbian clitoris” must be enlarged and elongated. This line of thought holds that the clitoris, supposedly being the main female sexual organ involved in lesbian desire and lesbian pleasure, must be deformed since “lesbian desire” is itself already deformed or abnormal, as Barbara Creed writes: “Desire transforms the body: abject desire makes the body abject” (97). If lesbian desire within patriarchal logic is abject, then the lesbian body must be as well, and *Wittig* represents this through the women’s transformative gaze in the Laundromat. *Wittig* does not have time to verify the accuracy of the women’s allegation or to look at “l’objet incriminé” (18) before the women rush towards her, and Manastabal intervenes to drag her out to safety. The fact that they must flee for their safety shows that even *Wittig’s* best efforts to help the women fail due to the women’s internalized prejudice and self-delusion. This is a scene of utter frustration for *Wittig*, all caused by the women’s perception of her body and her “lesbian” nature. Their distorted perception forecloses any possibility for connection or restoration, and it is their own stubbornness and blindness that

keeps them there.⁸⁵ Wittig evokes these ideas hyperbolically in the Laundromat in order to underscore the reality that one does not need a specific kind of body to be a lesbian and to parody the outrageous stereotypes about the lesbian body as monstrous and abject. Wittig draws attention in this scene to the violence and prejudice enacted by women upon other women and the danger of internalized misogyny. She shows how all of these ideas work together to create dystopian relationality. The women erect non-existent, artificial boundaries between themselves and *Wittig*, and then in order to fortify these demarcations, they nearly resort to violence as a way to protect themselves.

Although the Laundromat scene focuses on the hostilities between women and lesbians and the difficulty (or perceived impossibility) of reconciliation, it also lays a foundation for the utopian relation of connection and restoration that *Wittig* eventually experiences along her journey and finally achieves in paradise. In the thirtieth chapter of *Virgile, Non* titled *La Foire* (or “The Free-for-All” in the English translation, Wittig presents another Inferno scene that compliments the Laundromat by showing how to overcome the stereotypes and successfully bridge the differences between lesbians and women. The scene takes place at the “Free-for-All,” a large fair where men fight over women one at a time, physically tearing the women limb from limb and taking away the pieces they want. Women who are intact after the decision are “distributed” and transported away in large trucks. When *Wittig* (in a particularly Dantesque gesture) asks a passing soul about how the fair functions, the soul explains and then asks if she can join *Wittig*: “(Je t’en prie, laisse-moi venir avec toi car j’apprends vite)” (105). *Wittig* agrees but clarifies that she is a lesbian. The woman does not believe *Wittig* because she does not appear

⁸⁵ There is an interesting similarity here with Dante’s portrayal of Lucifer at the bottom of Inferno, where it is the flapping of Lucifer’s large bat wings that continually freeze the water and keep him imprisoned in ice. For Dante, this is the ultimate picture of stubborn impotence—that the harder Lucifer tries to free himself, the more deeply imprisoned he becomes.

as a monster: “(Allons donc, étrangère, je vois bien que tu te moques de moi! C’est chez ces monstres qui ont des poils sur tout le corps et des écailles sur la poitrine qu’on est déporté si malgré le dressage on résiste)” (105). The woman mistakenly believes that lesbians are the monsters responsible for the fair, that the women are “deported” and taken to some remote location ruled by ravenous lesbian creatures. In order to believe, the woman asks *Wittig* if she can see her “lesbian body.” *Wittig* obliges, baring her body once again and revealing a naked female torso, but this time her body does not become anything under the other woman’s gaze than what it naturally is:

(Montre-moi tes poils et tes écailles pour que je puisse décider en connaissance de cause)...Et je retire ma chemise pour lui montrer la peau de mon torse et de mes épaules : (Juge par toi-même.)
Il semble que ses yeux n’y suffisent pas car elle met ses deux mains avec précaution d’abord sur mes épaules, mes bras et ma poitrine. Puis, comme elle fait mine de continuer son inspection, je l’arrête par ces mots :
(On n’est pas à l’empoigne ici ! C’est assez donc d’une exhibition. Alors dis-moi, c’est oui ou c’est non ?)
Elle ne se laisse pas rebuter et me demande :
(Au moins fais-moi voir même de loin ton clitoris. Car c’est, dit-on, ce qui est le plus caractéristique des lesbiennes.) (106)

When *Wittig* unveils her body in this exchange, it does not become anything monstrous because the woman’s judgment is not blinded by stereotypes and she does not fear the lesbian body.

Wittig’s perception of herself and her body has not changed, but the woman in this scene represents a drastic change in perspective from the women of the Laundromat. To emphasize the messianic undertones of *Wittig* as liberating savior in this moment, the woman—much like the disciple Thomas who had to touch Jesus’ wounds to believe in the resurrection—runs her hands over *Wittig*’s torso to be sure that she’s human. The intercorporeal dynamic in her physical act of touching *Wittig*’s body emphasizes the ideological, intersubjective relation between the two characters, or their coming together and bridging the gap between them through an

understanding of each in relation to the other. This exchange reverses the earlier scene in the Laundromat, showing that although the woman is skeptical and needs to touch *Wittig's* body to understand its similarity and to trust her, the woman believes *Wittig* because she is able to see past the stereotypes about the lesbian body. *Wittig* intra-textually rewrites the scene of the Laundromat in chapter XXX to show how *Wittig* and the women she liberates can move together from the dystopia of inferno to the utopia of paradise.

The next episode in chapter XXXI (titled “Limbo 4” in the English version) continues the theme of embracing commonalities and moving closer to paradise when Manastabal explains the concept of “la passion active” to *Wittig*. As hinted at in the scene from *La Foire, la passion active* is a way for *Wittig* to see the others as herself (and vice versa) and to transform the dystopian relational dynamics of inferno to the utopian ones of paradise. The chapter opens with Manastabal’s response to *Wittig's* question about how they arrived in this place: “(Seule la passion active, Wittig, conduit à ce lieu, bien que les mots pour la dire, n’existent pas. On en parle généralement sous le nom de compassion. Mais pour la sorte dont je parle le mot n’est pas de mise)” (107). In her words to *Wittig* here, Manastabal echoes the Dantean struggle with imprecise language that cannot properly express the realities of the afterlife journey. Words cannot properly describe or contain *la passion active*, but imprecisely, it is “compassion” that leads through inferno to limbo and ultimately to paradise. By labeling this concept “la passion active,” Manastabal implies by contrast that “compassion” is passive passion. In this distinction, although compassion is a positive “suffering-with” relation where one puts oneself in the condition of the other, it is still passive because it submits to suffering instead of fighting to end and escape it.

Manastabal explains that “la passion active,” on the other hand, is brimming with force and vitality. It is “active” in that it works in every possible way to defeat the source of suffering:

(Car elle bouillonne, fermente, explose, exalte, embrase, agite, transporte, entraine tout comme celle qui fait qu’on est embrassé à sa pareille. La même violence y est et la tension. La passion qui conduit à ce lieu tout comme l’autre coupe les bras et les jambes, nous le plexus, affaiblit les jarrets, donne la nausée, tord et vide les intestins, fait voir trouble et brouille l’ouïe. Mais aussi comme l’autre elle donne des bras pour frapper, des jambes pour courir, des bouches pour parler et des facultés pour raisonner. Elle développe les muscles, fait faire l’apprentissage des armes et des divers métiers et change la forme du corps). (107-108)

The set of verbs describing *la passion active* here express power, assertion, and opposition. Manastabal also contrasts active passion to “regular passion” or simply “passion,” which is implied three times through “celle qui fait qu’on est embrassé à sa pareille,” “tout comme l’autre,” and “mais aussi comme l’autre.” This seems to say that the passion that draws one to another and binds two souls in a reciprocal relation is active and can contain the “same violence and tension,” meaning that passion is similar to “active passion” in a way that compassion is not. Manastabal’s description of “la passion active” recalls Wittig’s earlier descriptions in *Le Corps lesbien* of the lovers’ violent relations. Just as that passion devastated the bodies of the two lovers, so active passion in *Virgile, Non* can cause suffering and increased struggle. However, as Manastabal continues, it also gives “des bras pour frapper, des jambes pour courir, des bouches pour parler et des facultés pour raisonner.” In this way, it strengthens the body and equips it for the struggle. This description also recalls the *guérillères*’ militant tactics when it states that active passion “développe les muscles, fait faire l’apprentissage des armes et des divers métiers et change la forme du corps.” This describes the community of the *guérillères* as one of active passion—not only compassion for shared suffering, but also passion that enables them to fight together and to use the violence and tension for their advantage. Finally, Manastabal explains that active passion is both the reason for travelling through hell and the force that fortifies them

throughout the difficult journey to paradise, “Si ce n’est pour cette passion active, Wittig, que ferait-on dans ce lieu maudit et qu’est-ce qui permettrait de l’endurer? (108).” This description of active passion creates a sharp contrast with the hateful passion and violence of the Laundromat. While active passion proceeds from genuine care for the other, the women’s violent passion grew out of misperception and fear. With Manastabal’s explanation of *la passion active*, Wittig foregrounds that paradise, as the ideal end to the arduous journey, is a destination characterized by the relational state of active passion. In order to complete the journey and reach paradise, one must care deeply for the other and share in their situation but then fight with their body and with their intellect.

b. Paradise is the Beloved and to be with the Beloved

Throughout *Virgile, Non*, the protagonist *Wittig* learns about active passion and puts it into practice in the myriad ways she frees women from the circles of inferno. She learns to see past their differences, to overcome her anger at their indifference and internalized subservience, and to identify with their suffering in order to liberate them. All the while, she personally yearns for a beloved figure who awaits her in paradise. Just as *Dante* desires to be reunited with his beloved Beatrice, so *Wittig* journeys toward her beloved who waits for her in heaven among the angels. The way that *Wittig* speaks to her beloved (even from the depths of inferno) reveals that she understands paradise not only as a place where her beloved resides but also as the state of being-with her beloved. The fact that this is a specifically female gendered beloved, a *she*, further characterizes *Wittig*’s paradise as the realization of a lesbian relation. *Wittig* reveals throughout her journey that she conceives of the relation with her beloved *as* paradise. Put differently, *Wittig* believes that utopia exists through a state of communion with the beloved.

In the first mention of *Wittig's* angelic beloved in the second chapter of *Virgile, Non*, Manastabal reassures a frustrated and afraid *Wittig* that the journey is both necessary and ordered from on high: “(Crois-tu que tu puisses te détourner de ce voyage nécessaire. Sache donc que je suis ici avec toi sur la recommandation de celle qui t’attend au paradis et s’est mise en peine de te voir si mal embarquée pour l’enfer)” (10). Through Manastabal’s words, *Wittig* retains two key features of Dante’s original structure: firstly, that the journey is orchestrated from heaven by the protagonist’s female beloved who is grieved by the protagonist’s current state;⁸⁶ and secondly, that being reunited with the beloved is an associated part of the experience of paradise. Although *Dante* is reunited with his beloved Beatrice within the plot of *The Divine Comedy*, *Dante* clarifies in *Paradiso* that the state of blessedness for the protagonist as for all blessed souls, is communion with God. The relation of *intuarsi* and *inmiarsi* reflects one’s relation with God onto that with other souls as well. *Wittig's* desire for her beloved, by contrast, specifically names her beloved *as* paradise, when *Wittig* refers to her as “celle qui est ma providence” (10). When *Wittig* remembers her beloved, she rediscovers her courage for the journey: “S’il le faut donc j’irai jusqu’au bout de l’enfer pour retrouver de l’autre côté au milieu des anges celle qui m’a donné le goût du paradis par ses bienfaits” (10). *Wittig* expresses here that her personal goal of the journey is to reach her beloved on the “other side” of Inferno. She states that her beloved’s “loving deeds” have “given her the taste of paradise,” implying that paradise is something experienced in the company of another person. The use of the word “goût” (taste) could have a purely figurative meaning as in a small amount, but *Wittig* could also intend this to be more literal, meaning that the experience of paradise is sensorial. Due to *Wittig's* consistent

⁸⁶ In the *Divine Comedy*, it is Beatrice who visits Virgil in Limbo and exhorts him to guide Dante through the journey. Beatrice comes at the behest of St. Lucy who is in turn informed by the Virgin Mary, so there is a chain of divine female intervention at work behind the desire to save Dante’s soul.

descriptions in the paradise chapters of *Virgile, Non* that characterize paradise as an overwhelming sensorial experience,⁸⁷ her use of the word “taste” aligns with that latter interpretation. Taste as one of the five senses also implies the others, since taste is linked in proximity to smell, and taste as it happens in the mouth and with the tongue implies touch. While taste has religious connotations and appears frequently in Biblical metaphors for the experience of heaven and being with God, *Wittig’s* use is different in that it is her beloved who has given her the taste of paradise and who awaits her there.⁸⁸

Although *Wittig’s* beloved is a distinctly non-Christian and non-religious figure, *Wittig* does use Christian language to describe her, whereby further situating her beloved *as* her paradise. *Wittig* addresses her directly: “Quoi mon souverain beau, mon souverain bien! Il faut donc que tu prennes figure humaine pour que tout à coup je ne te trouve plus aussi abstrait. C’est pour moi un mystère aussi insondable que le mystère de l’incarnation dans la religion d’où je viens” (20). In this declaration, *Wittig* names her beloved as “my sovereign beauty” and “my sovereign good,” whereby conflating beauty with goodness.⁸⁹ She reveals through expressing her

⁸⁷ See the paradise chapters where *Wittig* describes the sensory experience: For example in chapter VI, Manastabal tells *Wittig* “(Regarde autour de toi, pèse l’air qui te touche, respire le vent, remplis tes yeux des formes des masses et des couleurs.)” (23). In XIV, *Wittig* notes “les couleurs brillantes comme après la pluie et l’air qui respandit,” “l’attaque conjuguée de différentes sortes de parfums végétaux,” and “le chant des voix conjuguées de l’assemblée céleste” (47). XXVI begins with “Le vent cesse subitement de souffler. Les larmes forcées par sa pression sur les yeux s’arrêtent de couler. Et je vois sous le soleil éclatant la prolixité des couleurs, la profusion des fleurs et des plantes, je respire l’air devenu tiède et embaumé” (87-88). *Wittig* even mixes the senses, like in the description of “le ruissellement continu de lumière autour d’elle” (88).

⁸⁸ There is the exhortation of Psalm 34:8, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” This same metaphor appears later in Psalm 119:103, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” It also appears in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews 6:5 referring to those who “have tasted the goodness of the word of God,” and also in 1 Peter 2:3, “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” These references pertain to this discussion of *Wittig’s* use of the word, not in order to draw a Biblical parallel, but to tease out the broader implication of the use of the word to describe paradise. For while the Christian faith describes Heaven as reunion with God, here *Wittig* makes it reunion with her beloved. Yet the figurative description that one can taste goodness remains the same.

⁸⁹ Dante creates a similar relationship between the protagonist Dante and his beloved Beatrice in *Paradiso*, when the protagonist refers to Beatrice as “his paradise.” When *Dante* sees Beatrice’s smile, he remarks; “ch’io pensai co’ miei toccar lo fondo / de la mia Gloria e del mio paradiso” (“I thought that I—with mine—had touched the height of

desire that her beloved “take human form” that her beloved normally appears to her in an abstract and non-human way, which implies that she is an angel or perhaps her heavenly form is something else entirely. *Wittig’s* reference to the mystery of the incarnation creates a connection between her beloved and Jesus Christ—as the “Word of God” made flesh through the incarnation—and it reinforces the previously cited connection with “tasting” paradise since Jesus’ body is evoked through the bread in the Christian practice of the Eucharist. Manastabal further complicates this metaphor by exhorting *Wittig* to “find the words” to describe paradise, lest it disappear: “(Il faudra bien trouver les mots pour décrire ce lieu, sous peine de la disparition brutale de tout ce que tu vois)” (22). Manastabal charges *Wittig* with the lofty task of incarnating paradise through her words; she must choose the right words at the right time, or else she will lose the vision. This belies the idea that while paradise is a destination for the traveling pair, it is also something *Wittig* has the power to create and contain through her words. By mixing images in these passages, *Wittig* connects the figure of *Wittig’s* beloved to Christ as the Word of God and the Word made flesh; she then has Manastabal replace the beloved with the vision of paradise that can only be incarnated through *Wittig’s* accurate description, a paradise-made-word and then paradise-made-flesh. This chain of substitutions collapses the distinctions between *Wittig’s* beloved as a physical figure and a metonymic stand-in for paradise as a whole. *Wittig* further delineates her vision of paradise in this chain of implied transformations: for *Wittig*, paradise is a recognition of similarities as seen in the negative example of the Laundromat and in the positive example of *La Foire*; it is also the reunion with her beloved as

both my blessedness and my paradise,” *Paradiso* 15.35-36). Dante later uses a neologism to refer to how Beatrice “imparadises” his mind: “quella che ‘mparadisa la mia mente” (28.3). Gina Psaki discusses this more in her chapter “The Sexual Body in Dante’s Celestial Paradise.”

“mon beau paradis;” and it is the linguistic space where *Wittig* finally finds the right words at the right times incarnate and express heaven through language.

c. Paradise as a Hemorrhage

Throughout the journey with Manastabal, *Wittig* reflects on the nature of language and words, and on what it means to have the right words at the right times. While *Wittig*, like *Dante*, is tasked with recording and retelling her experience, her ability to reach paradise is intrinsically tied to her use of the correct words to describe it. When she fails in the precision of her language or employs words that are too lofty and clichéd, she is barred from the vision of paradise or from sustaining the vision long enough to remain there.⁹⁰ As M. M. Adjarian describes, one of *Wittig*'s main goals as she travels with Manastabal is to learn how to use language properly: “Finally, to escape both hell and limbo, the ever-questing narrator has yet another task. Not only must she learn to temper her speech and actions in relation to women. She must also learn the role language plays in creating Paradise” (112). As Adjarian notes by stating that *Wittig*'s language “creates paradise,” *Wittig*'s vision of paradise fades when her words cannot describe it, and thus it is her use of language that *creates* her entry into Paradise. Throughout the journey of *Virgile, Non*, *Wittig* must then establish a different relation between herself and language. She must learn which words to use at which times, which words are not overladen with meanings, and even more, how to remake those words that are already clichéd so that they can be reused and restored.

As *Wittig*'s journey unfolds, it becomes clearer that paradise is a place *made* of words and intrinsically tied to language. *Wittig* states this in chapter XX when she speaks directly to

⁹⁰ This happens in chapter VI when Manastabal encourages *Wittig* to give a name to the experience of paradise. *Wittig* offers “beauté” and Manastabal laughs and tells *Wittig*, “(l'enfer est proche...car il y a encore loin à aller)” (23).

paradise as her destination and desire, continuing the metonymic chain of substitutions that connect her beloved as angel, as the Word, and as paradise itself. She describes how she reaches towards heaven from the depths of inferno: “Je tends vers toi, mon beau paradis, du plus profond de l’enfer, bien que je ne te connaisse que par éclairs et que si les mots me manquent tu disparaîs comme dans une hémorragie à l’envers” (64).⁹¹ In this statement, *Wittig* expresses her longing for paradise and her frustration that she is only able to see it when her words can fully express its wonders; otherwise it vanishes violently like blood rushing back into the body. The curious simile of “une hémorragie à l’envers” to refer to the loss of the vision of paradise could have multiple meanings in English, for *à l’envers* could express “in reverse,” “backwards,” “upside down,” or even “inside out.” When Le Vay’s English translation chooses to render the phrase as “a hemorrhage in reverse,” it describes a backward-moving linear motion. If *Wittig*’s vision indeed recedes in a such a way, then this also implies that her vision of paradise occurs like a hemorrhage *moving forwards*, or like a flow of blood rushing *out* from the body. If a hemorrhage is normally understood as a flowing from the inside to the outside, then the more abstract interpretation of a “hemorrhage inside out” would be a hemorrhage that functions in an opposite way, or a forceful flowing from the outside in. *Wittig*’s use of the hemorrhage image to describe the vision of paradise also creates a connection with the biological process of menstruation, which in turn echoes *Le Corps lesbien* and its many images of spurting, spilling, and seeping blood. Perhaps by linking the vision of paradise with menstruation, *Wittig* is not implying an essentialist female essence rooted in the body to the experience of paradise but instead a sort of freedom from not having to hide or stop-up the flow of blood from the body, and by association,

⁹¹ It is important to note that *Wittig* refers to the object of her desire here as a masculine-gendered singular entity, “mon beau paradis,” instead of the earlier, female-gendered “celle qui est ma providence.”

the freedom to desire union and reunion with her beloved.⁹² If *Wittig* witnesses moments of paradise like a hemorrhage, it could also imply that the vision comes from inside herself, that it is the making-external of something internal; the celebration of something not to be considered a waste product or excrement but beautiful and desirable; something to be set free instead of contained and hidden. Above all, while the hemorrhage image could be purely negative (as in the case of blood loss from a wound or injury), in *Virgile, Non*, Wittig inverts this image and transforms the hemorrhage to positively tie it to the vision of paradise and having the right words at the right times.

Since the hemorrhage vision of paradise in *Virgile, Non* happens through language, the responsibility to describe the wonders of heaven resides solely with *Wittig* and her ability. She describes this process in chapter X, emphasizing the materiality of language:

Quand les mots m'atteignent au fond de l'enfer et ne me font pas défaut, quand je marche soutenue par leur cohorte ailée, quand bruissants, légers, sonores, ils remplacent la cohorte des anges qui, elles ne quittent le ciel qu'exceptionnellement, c'est alors mon beau paradis que je cherche parmi eux les mots pour te dire et au moyen desquels te donner forme une fois pour toutes. (65)

In this description where *Wittig* searches for words that “do not fail,” she searches for the right words that possess their own substance and agency. They have power to support and carry *Wittig*—they rustle lightly and their sound is a product of their materiality. *Wittig's* task in *Virgile, Non* to fix her vision through words mirrors Wittig's larger conception of the work of the writer that she explains in “The Trojan Horse:” “What a writer re-creates is indeed a vision, but the first powerful vision of *words*, not things” (72). This work to present words themselves before reification and sedimentation has revolutionary potential for the writer seeking a different

⁹² I'm thinking here of the “coming out” metaphor that exists in Anglo-American culture for expressing homosexuality and also of the “free bleeding” movement as a way to not conceal menstrual blood. One could perhaps take this to an extreme conclusion and say that Wittig's vision of paradise is a “free-bleeding” vision of paradise.

way to speak from a position *outside* of established language. *Wittig* receives a taste of this as she is supported, lifted, and carried along by words even as she searches among them to find the right ones to give permanent form to paradise and to the figure of her beloved.

In chapter XXXVII, *Wittig* and Manastabal gain another fleeting glance of paradise, and *Wittig* witnesses the full force of language freed from its confines. In the opening lines of the chapter, she describes the sight of words that fall through the air by the thousands:

Des samares dans leur vol descendant, tels quels, les mots tombent par mille, l'air en est empoissé. Des ailes de papillon au battement doux, tels quels, ils frôlent les yeux par milliers. Des feuilles se détachant des arbres en une nuit, tels quels, ils tombent silencieux, enflant ou s'amointrissant dans leurs formes. Des flocons de dissemblable densité, obscurcissent le ciel visible entre leurs espaces en longs éclats bleus, tels quels ils s'appesantissent jusqu'à toucher terre. (126)

Just as Dante employs a trio of similes to express the inexpressible sight of God in the last canto of *Paradiso*,⁹³ here *Wittig* includes her own trio of metaphors to serve an opposite function.

While Dante's comparison highlights the difficulty and failure of communication, *Wittig's* describes the glorious physicality of the fluttering words that signal the entrance to Paradise.⁹⁴

Her use of the adjective *empoissé* (from the verb *empoisser*) recalls the appearance in *Les Guérillères* of the verb *empoisonner* that was used to describe how the words of patriarchal language *poisoned* the women's mouths, lips, and throats. Here by contrast, the fluttering words "poison" the air in a positive sense by filling it completely with their physical presence, covering

⁹³ See *Paradiso* XXXIII: 58-66 where *Dante* finally looks upon the Triune God and *Dante*-author expresses the failure of his language to capture the sight and of his mind to remember it faithfully. He states that he only remembers the feeling, like one who awakes from a dream, or like snow that melts, or like the leaves of the Sibyl that were scattered by wind.

⁹⁴ *Adjarian* also notes the falling words in the sixth vision of Paradise, but in a different way. *Adjarian* interprets the falling words as a sign of their exclusion from heaven since they occur only at the threshold and therefore cannot actually contain *Wittig's* desire. For *Adjarian*, they are empty vessels. I see this interpretation as at odds with *Wittig's* joy in this chapter, and instead I interpret the words as a triumphant sign of liberation, "empty" meaning "free," in that they are no longer subject to patriarchal discourse.

the glimpses of blue sky as with tar or pitch. The harder “z” sound of *empoisonner* also becomes a softer double-s in *empoisser* that mimics the sound of butterfly wings beating or leaves falling to the ground. In this extended description, *Wittig* first compares the words to winged seeds (“des samares”) falling to the ground. Next, they are like butterflies’ wings (“des ailes de papillon”) that make a gentle sound and brush against her eyes. Lastly, they appear like leaves (“des feuilles”) that fall silently from trees. The fourth seeming metaphor (“des flocons de dissemblable densité”) begins like the others with “des” but reads as further description of the others instead of an additional image. Of the three distinct metaphors, the first highlights the words’ descending movement and the second mentions their sonorous quality. The third references the other two through its description of “falling silently.” The repetition of the phrase *tels quels* further emphasizes that the words are “just as they are,” “just like that,” nothing but themselves. Through these metaphors, this moment encapsulates a vision of language incarnate, not the Word-made-flesh, God-made-man, but words-made-flesh, or language given its *own* physical substance.

At this point in the journey and in the text of *Virgile, Non*, there have been five previous “Paradise” chapters, but this is the first time that *Wittig* sees the words-incarnate. This chronology reveals the progression in *Wittig*’s developing relation to language, and it shows that as she approaches paradise, language itself becomes more agile and free. Upon seeing the words-incarnate in the above cited moment, *Wittig* remarks: “Jamais leur présence physique ne m’aura causé une joie plus parfaite. Je dis: (Je tends vers toi mon beau paradis)” (126). *Wittig*’s use of the future tense in this statement implies that she *will* encounter these words again, though her joy will never be as great as this first time. She also repeats “mon beau paradis” that she had previously used to speak to her beloved, but here instead, the fluttering, falling words *are* also

her paradise. They occupy that position as well, further conflating her beloved, the space of paradise, and the language that fills paradise. *Wittig's* statement that the sight of the words "will never bring me more joy" encapsulates the feeling of having finally reached utopia, being able to grasp and perceive it once and for all. This encounter with fluttering words shows that paradise in the world of *Virgile, Non* is not only a physical place but also a linguistic space. It is a place that exists in and of language. *Wittig's* journey is one of language where she must refine her words, emptying them of overused concepts until they are able to articulate the utopian vision of paradise. *Virgile, Non* shows that one cannot *use* language in a better, more nuanced or egalitarian way without first undoing its "entombment in the concept" (Zerilli 112, note 38). *Wittig* describes this emptying process in "The Trojan Horse:" "The writer must take every word and despoil it of its everyday meaning in order to be able to work with words, on words" (72). Through their joyous, unrestrained physical movement, *Wittig's* falling words represent the opposite of "entombment" that showcases her "working with words, on words." When freed from servitude to concepts, to the system of signification, and "despoiled of everyday meaning," the words signal the protagonist's arrival in the final realm and the achievement of *Wittig's* dream of genderless, free language.

Immediately after *Wittig* calls to her *beau paradis*, she describes how she turns to tell Manastabal about the phenomenal sight of the words, only to find that she cannot see the figure of her guide because the air is too thick with the falling words: "Quand je me tourne vers Manastabal, mon guide, pour lui parler du phénomène, je ne l'aperçois que par intervalles dans les trouées de bleu causées par la discontinuité de la chute des masses noires" (126). This description creates a striking connection with a similar moment in *Dante's* journey, when at the culmination of the ascent of Mount Purgatory, *Dante* and Virgil reach the earthly paradise and

Dante—finally—earns the sight of his most beloved Beatrice. In the moment, he is so moved that he turns to exclaim his joy to Virgil, only to find that Virgil has vanished. What began as a rapturous moment suddenly turns into one of sorrow, and Dante’s sadness at the loss of his dear guide overwhelms him. It becomes even worse though, for Beatrice then rebukes *Dante* for his sadness, for weeping in her presence over the loss of Virgil when he should be rejoicing at her beatific presence. Dante’s initial joy deteriorates into shame, so much so that he refuses to raise his tear-stained face to meet Beatrice’s piercing gaze.⁹⁵

I linger on this description of the moment in Dante’s *Purgatorio* in order to more-fully appreciate the contrast that *Wittig*’s vision of the fluttering words creates in *Virgile, Non*. Like *Dante*’s, *Wittig*’s moment is initially joyous, and though *Wittig* cannot see Manastabal when she wants to share the joy of the sight, this does not lead to sadness, shame, or rebuke. Instead, it leads to greater joy, for after *Wittig* states that the words obscure the sight of Manastabal, she simply returns to admiring the words’ movement. She describes their materiality and undirected movement: “A un moment donné, les mots s’agitent, bruissent et leur tombée, à la fois plus lente et plus rapide, à la fois s’accélère et se ralentit. Je les vois faire des méandres de vol et s’en aller au hasard” (126). As they fall, the words are truly free to float and meander, quickly or slowly, without direction or rush. The waterfall-like rush of words does soon slow, however, until the sky is clear and blue again. *Wittig* then tells how she asks Manastabal, “d’où vient le manque de mots si subit,” before she repeats her earlier phrase and Manastabal offers a complementary interpretation:

(C’est comme une hémorragie à l’envers.
Et Manastabal, mon guide :

⁹⁵ See *Purgatorio* XXX: 43-54 for Dante’s joy and then distress at Virgil’s disappearance; 55-145 for Beatrice’s rebuke.

(Ou encore l'envers du paradis.) (127)⁹⁶

With the repetition and reinvocation of the hemorrhage image, *Wittig* signals that the experience of the cascading words-incarnate here *is* the hemorrhage that she spoke of earlier. The words rain down upon *Wittig* and Manastabal like blood flowing out of the body. The words recall the all-capitalized lists of body parts in *Le Corps lesbien* in that they exist *tel quel*, just as they are. Manastabal's somewhat enigmatic response that the loss of words is "the other side of paradise" (from the translation) aligns with *Wittig's* statement in a double-negative construction, to mean that the hemorrhage-in-reverse (or the loss of the hemorrhage) is equal to the inverse-of-paradise (which is inferno). To put this positively then, the hemorrhage is paradise, and the loss of the hemorrhage is inferno. To go even one step further, if the hemorrhage of words is paradise, then the relational experience *Wittig* has with language also plays a part in *Wittig's* construction of utopian relationality.

This scene of the hemorrhage of language in the Paradise VI chapter represents a radically different, utopian relation with language and an intercorporeal relation with the material presence of language, or what Annabel Kim calls a "corps-à-corps" with language.⁹⁷ In this relation, the speaking subject is not the master of the language but only one physical entity among many. In this way, *Wittig* reimagines the relation between words and speaker to overturn domination and utility and instead imagines that words and the human subject share the same physical space. That *Wittig's* journey culminates in this linguistic vision positions it as a key aspect of paradise, as Erika Ostrovsky writes:

⁹⁶ I retain the formatting of the text on the page with the speakers signaled almost like in a screenplay.

⁹⁷ See Kim's discussion of *Wittig's* attention to the materiality of language, or what Kim calls a "poetics of unbecoming" as it appears in *Le Corps lesbien* in Kim's section "Corps-à-corps with Language" (169-173) of the chapter "Toward a Poetics of Unbecoming; or Language has a Body" from *Unbecoming Language*.

It therefore becomes clear that the journey undertaken in this work is also that of language. This should not be surprising considering the importance that Wittig (the writer) attributes to this domain. And it also suggests that *Virgile, Non* has as its fundamental subject (as did her previous works) the question that is most significant for her literature: the matter of words. (158)

The “matter of words” or their material substance, is indeed the question of the Paradise VI chapter, and Wittig’s answer lies in the fluttering, physical presence of the words. In her essay, “The Site of Action” (1984), while discussing the work of Nathalie Sarraute, Wittig also describes the *matter* or material language that she later employs in *Virgile, Non*: “Language exists as a paradise made of visible, audible, palpable, palatable words” (94). Wittig also echoes her own statement in *Le Chantier littéraire*: “Le langage existe comme un paradis fait de mots visibles, audibles, palpables, palatables” (61).⁹⁸ In *Virgile, Non*, Wittig achieves this image of paradise through the materiality of words, where paradise exists in language and language itself is paradise.

d. Paradise is a Place of Intercorporeality

Just as Wittig draws attention to intercorporeal experience with the physical *corps* of language, she also highlights the embodied experience between souls in paradise. *Wittig* notes this in chapter XXXII, the fifth paradise chapter, when she and Manastabal observe the comings and goings along the gangways that connect paradise with limbo and the celebration that welcomes new arrivals (94). She states that this is all part of the “Beggar’s Opera,” or the ever-growing song of the triumphant that increases in sound and complexity as more and more souls add their voices to song:

Les voix parfois longtemps tenues passent des stridences les plus aiguës aux vocalises les plus basses. Elles roulent sourdement ou planent comme le plain-chant. A personne n’est

⁹⁸ *Le Chantier littéraire* is Wittig’s reflection on her process of literary writing. She worked on it up until her death, and it was then published posthumously in 2010. It has received little critical attention, but Annabel Kim provides an in-depth study of the work in *Unbecoming Language*, alongside Wittig’s *L’Opoanax* and *Le Corps lesbien*, and *The Straight Mind*.

déniée l'entrée de la cité céleste, c'est pourquoi l'allégresse tonne dans les chants. Une fois éclairées, transfigurées, les nouvelles arrivantes se confondent, brillant de tous leurs feux, avec les anges, même leurs voix sont difficiles à distinguer. (111)

Wittig's description here recalls the final fragment in *Les Guérillères* when the warriors gather to celebrate their victory and sing together. Here the new arrivals to paradise immediately add their voices to the song, which then blend and become indistinguishable in the collective sound.

Wittig's heaven is also radically inclusive, for no one is denied entrance. Diane Griffin Crowder interprets this inclusivity in the vision of the entrance to paradise like a Gay Pride parade, as a “massive demonstration of solidarity and defiance of the isolation of the closet” (78). She emphasizes this point by stating, “Paradise is thus a coming out,” and “paradise is not attained alone (78). It is true that throughout *Virgile, Non* that paradise is not attained alone, and this is large part of why *Wittig* has to learn about *la passion active* while she receives both Manastabal's chiding and encouragement. *Wittig* does not draw attention to the gender of the souls entering heaven here though (which situates the experience beyond gender), but she does specifically mention the intercorporeal dynamics of their singing together and the sight of their “transfigured” figures. In the midst of this great demonstration of solidarity, *Wittig* mentions how the souls are “illuminated” so that they then “blend with the angels.” In this way, in addition to the mixing of voices, the moment describes a mixing of figures or corporeal forms, so that when one enters paradise, their corporeal contours blend with those of others. This transformation characterizes paradise as a place where one shares and participates in the essence of many, just like the song made up of many voices. Just as in choral singing and *Wittig's* “Beggar's Opera,” adding one's voice to the song, one does not seek to retain their individual sound but willingly blends it with others. As one's voice loses its boundaries and blends in an intangible way with

the voices of others, so in Wittig's paradise the souls blend together in a joyous intercorporeal relation.

Wittig's vision of intercorporeality in heaven is not only a merging of distant figures but grows to include the entire range of sensorial experience. The final chapter of *Virgile, Non*, titled "La cuisine des anges," continues Wittig's vision and culminates in a celestial banquet where the first person "I" vanishes completely. After the entire journey filtered through her perspective, Wittig's narration and introspection recedes to give way to an unspecified, collective experience like that of *elles* in *Les Guérillères*. The chapter begins with the sight of angels arriving on motorcycles (which reinforces Crowder's interpretation of paradise like a gay pride parade): "Les anges à moto débarquent sur les lieux alors que dans les champs on en entend d'autres chanter, Soupe, belle soupe du soir" (136). This opening reads like one of Wittig's observations in previous chapters, but then it introduces the ambiguous narrative perspective through the use of "on," which could imply a collective "we," a third person "they," or an impersonal "one." The narrating voice notes that there is singing (in a continuation of the song in chapter XXXII), and it is specifically a song about the soup being prepared.⁹⁹ The fact that the main dish in Wittig's heaven is soup is of no small importance; for just as Wittig reflects the reality of heaven in the metaphor of many voices singing together, so she reflects it in the type of culinary dish being prepared. Just as many voices combine to create a song, so many disparate elements combine to create a soup, and in this way, soup is to cuisine what song is to sound.

The narrator then describes the communal commotion involved in preparing the banquet and lists the various tools involved, in an echo of the language-as-hemorrhage image and Wittig's *entassement*, list-style syntax from *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*:

⁹⁹ This is also a reference to the song in *Alice in Wonderland*, which itself is a parody of James M. Sayles' "Star of the Evening, Beautiful Star."

Au milieu de l'esplanade il y a une cuisine de plein air autour de laquelle vont et viennent des anges portant les divers ustensiles, les casseroles, les seaux, les chaudrons, les bassines, les cuves, les pôles, les plats, les écumoirs, les louches, les fourchettes et les cuillers à pot, les couperets, les hachoirs, les couteaux, les coutelas, les tranchoirs, les paroires, les fusils, les broches, les lardoires, les haches, les crocs, les marteaux. (137)

This passage paints the scene of the open-air kitchen and the busyness of cooking by listing the many utensils, dishes, and containers involved. The length of this list along with the banality of its objects could seem strange within a heavenly context or even contradictory to the idea of paradise as a “perfect place” or even a genderless place.¹⁰⁰ However, this list serves to echo the inclusivity of earlier paradise chapters and *Wittig's* fleeting glimpses, where no one is denied and no words are denied. Diane Griffin Crowder reiterates this idea when she writes that the abundance of words represents the togetherness of the souls: “Paradise is an overflowing of words, celebrating the coming together of these souls” (78). *Wittig's* paradise includes even the tools involved in cooking, and more importantly, it lists *all* of them. No item is left out because all are valuable and all have a place in the angels' kitchen.¹⁰¹ Just as *Wittig* describes the sight of fluttering words in Paradise VI that marked the threshold of Heaven, so *Wittig* includes similar description throughout the Angels' Kitchen, which echoes the rapturous sight and sensation of

¹⁰⁰ By seemingly making heaven a kitchen and the preparation of a dinner, one could accuse *Wittig* of falling back into gendered categories and making heaven actually a reflection of the patriarchy's “women's work” of domestic cooking. As I show though, the point of this kitchen and the description that *Wittig* provides is thoroughly detached from any patriarchal connotation. There aren't only or exclusively women here, and moreover, the point of this kitchen is communal, more like a pot-luck supper, that the participants create for themselves.

¹⁰¹ Interestingly, *Wittig* includes presents an infernal inversion of the Angels' Kitchen in an earlier chapter of *Virgile, Non* (XXXIX titled “The Great Gorge” in English and untitled in French), which foreshadows the joy of the Angels' Kitchen by describing its opposite. This earlier chapter describes one of the circles of Inferno as an immense feast that starving women are forced to look at and smell from afar. They are eventually allowed to approach, but only after men have ravaged the elegantly prepared table leaving scraps, half-gnawed bones, and even regurgitated food. The observing *Wittig* describes how, through emphasis on the sensory experience of *not* partaking in the banquet, the women suffer. Like the Laundromat chapter earlier in *Virgile, Non*, the infernal feast chapter presents a moment of dystopian relationality where the hierarchical relation of abuse, separated, and deprivation perpetuated by the men upon the women is the source of the women's suffering. In his circle of Inferno, it is the complete refusal to share that enacts the torture. In the Angels' Kitchen by contrast, all is shared, prepared together, and enjoyed together.

the words-incarnate. Wittig fills the Angels' Kitchen chapter with blocks of words that obscure the page like the words "tarring" the sky in Paradise VI. The first is the one of cooking utensils above, which nearly obscures the activity happening in the scene. This forces the reader to shift their perspective and to understand that the "activity" in the scene and the focus of the chapter is actually the words themselves. This is Wittig's achievement of a paradise "made of visible, audible, palpable, palatable words." What's more, these words do not fade or vanish but remain throughout the chapter, adding a sense of finality and permanence that proves *Wittig* (as the narrating perspective) has truly arrived in her utopia once and for all.

Wittig continues this effect by including a series of lists of sights, sounds, smells, and even verbs that reinforce the sensory experience of paradise that appeared only in flashes throughout the journey in *Virgile, Non*. After the cooking utensils, the narrating voice describes the way various colors of light spread through and blend with the natural environment:

La lumière bleue, argentée, ocre, orange, jaune éblouissant, transforme en prisme la résine le long des pins, se diffracte sur les feuilles d'eucalyptus, se masse en un tunnel éclatant à l'entrée des branches les plus basses, plumette sur la poussière en suspension, ou bien elle devient impalpable, lisse, tendue, étincelante, faisant percevoir le ciel tout concave et immense. (137)

In this description, the narrator separates the various colors of light with commas and only includes one adjective modifier, "éblouissant" after "jaune." The light is the acting subject that performs all of the verbs, whether reflexive or not. This describes the light as a flexible, mobile entity, using the surrounding trees and branches as means to its own transformation. The phrase "se masse en un tunnel éclatant à l'entrée des branches les plus basses" lends a particularly physical quality to the light, and the spatial image of a "tunnel" at the "entry" to the lowest branches describes how the light curls and shapes itself. The narrator then emphasizes this material quality by negating it: "ou bien elle devient impalpable, lisse, tendue." The use of

“impalpable” to describe the light echoes the occurrence of “palpable” in the last lines of penultimate chapter (XLI) in *Virgile, Non* when Wittig and Manastabal finally realize that they have reached the end of the journey. In that moment, Wittig sees her beloved approach at last: “Bien que celle qui est ma providence s’approche de moi, aucun obstacle ne surgit, aucune chute ne s’ensuit. C’est donc le paradis palpable sensible souverain. J’y cours, j’y vole s’il est vrai que c’est ici et maintenant que prend fin ma longue pérégrination dans l’enfer” (136). Wittig’s exclamation here that paradise is “palpable sensible souverain” recalls the statement above when Wittig references Sarraute’s use of language, and it foregrounds the description of the Angels’ Kitchen in the final chapter, where the experience of paradise is a feast for the senses and where even light itself is tangible and sovereign.

As the description in The Angels’ Kitchen unfolds, the narrating voice notes all of the activity and bustle that demonstrates the spirit of *la passion active*—all are working together and working for each other in harmony and enjoyment. The narrator describes as she watches the figures: “Quand on la considère à quelque distance, toute l’activité semble tenir dans les déplacements, les allées et venues, les circulations, les montées et les descentes à flanc de colline, les traversées latérales et diagonales, les progressions le long de la pente raide, les courses, les avancées et les reculs, les évolutions et le piétinements (138).” This description uses the second (and last) occurrence of “on” in this chapter, most likely in an impersonal sense like the English, “one,” but perhaps in the sense of *nous*. Next the narrator observes angels passing by and carrying fruit in baskets:

Des anges passent à présent portant sur leurs épaules des paniers et des caisses de fruits. Elles les disposent ensuite au centre de la cour dans des entassements géométriques. Il y a des cerises, des fraises, des framboises, des abricots, des pêches, des prunes, des tomates, des avocats, des melons verts, des cantaloups, des pastèques, des citrons, des oranges, des papayes, des ananas et des noix de coco. (138)

This description includes the only occurrence in the chapter of *elles*, used to refer to the angels. This echoes *Les Guérillères*' use of *elles* for the community of beings who were previously “men” and “women” since “anges” is grammatically gendered masculine in French, but Wittig labels the *anges* as female earlier in *Virgile, Non* (or more precisely, lesbians).¹⁰² All of the activity and description in the Angels' Kitchen characterizes Wittig's heaven as a dynamic, constantly moving place; it is not a static realm reserved for worship and adoration of the Triune God as it is in Dante's *Paradiso*, but a place where active passion expresses itself through shared preparation and pleasure of all.

Although the various blocks of words and lists in the final chapter of *Virgile, Non* contain commas and generally follow grammatical rules, this style still recalls Wittig's use of punctuation-less *entassements* of words in *Les Guérillères*. In that text, Wittig used this style of writing to signal the difference of the reality of life for the guérillères after their victory in the war and to show their different relation to language. In the context of the final chapter of *Virgile, Non*, this style similarly signals a different relation to language and existence, and it further emphasizes the abundance and celebration taking place in heaven. There is none of the purposeful ambiguity or dissonance for the reader (like in the mixing of nouns and adjectives in *Les Guérillères*' market description). Instead in *Virgile, Non*'s description of abundance, each separate object or sensation has its section—meaning the narrator lists the utensils, then the light, the birds, the spices, the fruits, etc.—and there is no deliberate confusion of objects and

¹⁰² See chapter VI, the first paradise chapter, where Wittig exclaims her surprise to see that the angels have vulvas. She then refers to them as “une série de dykes” (21). There is somewhat of a contradiction in *Virgile, Non* that does not obscure its message but it is there: Wittig does label the angels as lesbians, yet her descriptions of The Angels' Kitchen position it more as an un-gendered or de-gendered space. Perhaps that is a sort of ultimate vision, but lesbianism as a social position is a means or way to get there. That is why in *Virgile, Non*, it is lesbians who are tasked with freeing heterosexual women, even despite hostile moments like in the Laundromat. Women are then free to enter paradise in *Virgile, Non*, and Wittig does not make it a point that once they enter heaven they become lesbians. As she says, paradise is open for all, and therefore it contains a mixed group.

modifiers. The various objects and sensations in this chapter are mostly listed without adjectives, which in turn evokes the sensation of “tels quels” or “just like that,” “just as they are” from Paradise VI. In this final chapter, *Wittig* has been reunited with her beloved and even more, she has been transformed and transfigured to such an extent that she is indistinguishable, just as she described while watching others enter paradise in Chapter XXXII. Her perspective has shifted from that of “I” to “on;” neither her physical figure nor her voice (meaning the way she speaks about herself and for herself) are distinguishable from the collective experience in the Angels’ Kitchen. The wealth of description in Chapter XLII—free from the first-person perspective, from dialog (even reported or paraphrased conversation), and from all trace of personal identification or distinction—casts Wittig’s paradise as a place of intercorporeal community and intersubjectivity.

Utopian relationality infuses every inch of The Angels’ Kitchen; it shines through the communal actions and the joyous preparations like the light spreading through the trees. Even more than a place of lesbian experience, Wittig’s paradise is a place of communal experience outside of gender since she does not emphasize gendered pronouns in the descriptions (except for the single *elles*, which could include a mixed group, as in *Les Guérillères*). Paradise is “palpable sensible souverain” through the invocation of all the senses and the abundance of words that harkens back to the “hemorrhage in reverse” metaphor. In the occurrences of that phrase earlier in the text of *Virgile, Non*, it had expressed the loss of the vision of paradise, but The Angels’ Kitchen, finally, is the moment where there is no reversing that utopian hemorrhage of language. The long descriptions and lists of words flow to create the sustained vision of *Wittig’s* glimpses that had only ever vanished before. The words in The Angels’ Kitchen rush with the force of a hemorrhage to include everything, show everything, describe everything. The narrating voice

desires to use the words and use them now, for there is no longer any need to wait or any reason to hold back. The hemorrhage of words in the final chapter signals at long last the achievement of utopia.

Paradise for Wittig *is* a hemorrhage in a more figurative sense as well, in that it is a sharing, spreading, combining not unlike what Wittig described between lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*. The combination in The Angels' Kitchen of many distinct souls acting, creating, and feeling as one echoes on a larger scale the couple's exclamation in *Le Corps lesbien* that, "I am you you are me, inextricably." This type of intercorporeal existence pulsates through Wittig's final vision of paradise. In Deleuzian terms, The Angels' Kitchen is a great haecceity: it is an ongoing event into which one enters and becomes, with no distinction between spatiotemporal factors, background, foreground, acting subjects and passive recipients. Wittig imagines, therefore, at the conclusion of *Virgile, Non* that the experience of heaven is so intimately connected with others and with the surrounding world. Her vision of paradise is a becoming-other through a sharing and opening of the self, where one's being intermingles with that of others like voices blending in a song, ingredients in a soup, and perfumes mingling in darkness. This vision surpasses the disastrous differences of the Laundromat to create a new image of intercorporeal subjectivity, and it is this specific relation that makes the experience paradise. As the culminating vision in Wittig's final novel, and the formal and conceptual connections it maintains to Wittig's earlier works, *Virgile, Non* demonstrates that utopian relationality is essential to Wittig's theorizing of both a present and an imagined state of utopia. By conceiving paradise through reimagined relations to language, to the self, and to others, Wittig creates both an original poetics and a theory of intercorporeal subjectivity.

III. HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Or écrire c'est travailler ; être travaillé ; (dans) l'entre, interroger, (se laisser interroger) le procès du même *et de* l'autre sans lequel nul est vivant ; défaire le travail de la mort, en voulant l'ensemble de l'un-avec-l'autre, dynamisé à l'infini par un incessant échange de l'un entre l'autre ne se connaissant et se recommençant qu'à partir du plus lointain – de soi, de l'autre, de l'autre en moi. Parcours multiplicateur à milliers de transformations.

- Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," 159¹⁰³

This passage from Hélène Cixous' essay "Sorties" in *La Jeune Née* (1975) lays a foundation for multiple aspects of her theory of *écriture féminine* that she develops in her essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975) and in her subsequent fictional works. She describes here a process of writing that functions through a continual, reciprocal recognition of the other-in-self. She signals the reciprocity of this process by alternating between active and passive verb constructions: *travailler, être travaillé; interroger, se laisser interroger*, and she specifies that this process happens in the space in-between, (*dans*) *l'entre*. The parentheses imply that writing itself *is* the between—it is created and creates in the productive space of difference between self and other. Her assertion that this type of writing undoes the work of death infuses the passage with an aspirational and utopian spirit, but she goes even further to emphasize that it is *desire* for the relation of one-with-the-other that infuses the writing with dynamism and power. Desire for difference located in the other, in the self, and the other-in-self produces a relation that travels through and continually proliferates a multitude (or even an infinite number) of transformations. This type of writing ultimately leads to a different understanding of the self as it exists in the relation; it allows the self to enter into a life-giving communion with the other(s) of non-exclusion and non-possession that refuses binary and hierarchical constructions of meaning. Cixous' description in "Sorties" of what will later become reified as her concept of *écriture*

¹⁰³ Cixous includes a paraphrase of this passage in "Le Rire de la Méduse," p. 51.

féminine is already profoundly utopian in mid-1970s and only becomes more so through its transformations in her essays and fictions of the 1980s.

In the chapter that follows, I trace the emergence and development of Cixous' utopian conception of intercorporeal subjectivity in her reflections on writing and in her fiction. Although I begin with a brief discussion of Cixous' well known and polemical essays, I focus more on her fiction since she addresses and rewrites her own theories within her novels. Much of the criticism that Cixous received in the 1970s and early 1980s that crystallized American academia's conception of her as negatively utopian, escapist, and essentialist is based on readings of "Sorties," "Le Rire de la Méduse," and a 1976 interview entitled "Le sexe ou la tête" in the journal *Les Cahiers du GRIF*. American feminists who could not read Cixous in her original French mainly knew her through "The Laugh of the Medusa," the 1976 English translation of "Le Rire de la Méduse" by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen in *Signs*. Otherwise scholars had to endure a relatively long gap (for a period of such rapidly evolving feminist thought) until the edited translation of the *Cahiers* interview as "Castration or Decapitation?" in *Signs* in 1981, and then the 1986 translation of *La Jeune Née* as *The Newly Born Woman* (1986). By 1986 however, Cixous' reputation was already firmly established as an essentialist feminist theorist, and she was grouped with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva and "The French Feminists." Cixous was and to a certain extent is still known in American academia for being the writer of "The Laugh of the Medusa." While I discuss this essay briefly in order to understand how it lays a foundation for a fuller picture of utopian relationality her fiction, I pass to the 1980s to focus on the development of her utopian thought in her essay, *Tancredi continue* (1983) and in her novels *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983) and its sequel, *La Bataille d'Arcachon* (1986). These two novels were published in succession and represent a specific moment in Cixous' thought. They

demonstrate a self-aware, wiser Cixous working through and weighing her own theories and struggling to accomplish the type of writing she envisions as liberatory and necessary. I read these two novels as the culmination of her utopian thought that begins with “Le Rire de la Méduse” and builds through the late 1970s into the 1980s.

Utopian relationality as it appears from this ensemble of Cixous’ theoretical and literary production is, like that of Monique Wittig, a vision of paradise created through a state of being-with the other. For Cixous, this state comes specifically through the recognition and appreciation of difference, both in the self and in the other. Through dizzying metonymic chains of metaphors and images, Cixous constructs her vision of utopia as ever-shifting difference that surpasses all boundaries. It is precisely the ability to move through difference that defines the self as fluid and free. With her construction of utopian relationality, Cixous refuses the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, which both define woman as a site of lack, and she carves out a new place for woman within language and desire. It is a place of fulness and abundance—of both being able to desire and to speak of that desire. Cixous’ theory is purposefully steeped in paradox and wordplay to create a both-and relation that cannot be contained within traditional gendered language. In order to articulate a concept of the self outside of hierarchies and categories, she experiments with formal strategies that break language and draw attention to the ways it suppresses and silences difference. The way she works on language in language produces a new way to speak about the self and understand the self in relation with the other.

While Wittig reimagines and redefines the subject’s relation to language, to the self, and to others in her fiction with focus on the community, Cixous presents a slightly different vision of co-existence and non-exclusion between self and other. While Wittig privileges the pronoun as the site of her revisioning the gendered subject in language, Cixous disrupts the constitution of

meaning in metaphor and in traditional subject-verb grammatical constructions, with specific emphasis on the relational unit of the couple. Both authors express desire, passion, and alternative sexuality outside the restrictive realm of heteronormative relations, and they both employ the themes of violence and war as backdrops for their dreams of utopia. Their protagonists defy death and exist in relations that move through endless metamorphoses. Where Cixous' conception of relation-as-paradise diverges is the importance she places on a "feminine" economy of giving that always has more to give and a process of wanting that is always able to want what it has. The acts of giving and desire that *give* instead of take permeate her writing as the hallmarks of the radical new relation she imagines. When read side by side, Wittig's and Cixous' visions of utopian relationality are the expression of a similar desire to surpass the limited position offered to women in the gender binary and to imagine what a truly free state of being could be.

1. *Écriture Féminine* as a Utopian Dream of Giving and Desiring

Cixous' essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" is an evocative manifesto and a call to action that sails upon a sea of poetic images and ever-shifting metaphors, which can be both exhilarating and disorienting. From a contemporary perspective, the essay can read like an intriguing artifact but one that no longer has anything productive to say to a 21st century audience. The essay is a temporally rooted piece in Cixous' long, varied, and ongoing career as an experimental writer and public intellectual, and I read it for its function as a starting place but certainly not the end of the development of Cixous' utopian thought. The essay is dated and does contain certain "cringe worthy" moments, as we might now call them in retrospect.¹⁰⁴ My point in my interpretation of the essay is to carefully discern the first shoots of Cixous' utopian thought that later flourish in

¹⁰⁴ I'm thinking specifically of certain phrases like, "nous sommes 'noires' et nous sommes belles" (42); "elle écrit à l'encre blanche" (48).

her *Promethea* novels, and not to reopen debates around certain passages, phrases, or even single words. The utopian aspects in *écriture féminine* are positive and full of potential, even if they seem to ring of idealism and essentialism. I approach the essay as open-ended, almost like a work-in-progress that is acutely aware of its own internal contradictions and theoretical qualms (as Cixous later mentions in *Le Livre de Promethea*). The early Cixous of this essay chooses to sacrifice succinct clarity in favor of flowing imagery to make a splash, which she certainly does. Since the essay is long and dense, I focus only on her theorization of woman's "bisexuality" as it relates to a concept of plural subjectivity and enables a specific type of writing. This bisexuality is a way of opening the self to myriad possibilities instead of simply positing the possession within the self of two types of sexualities or a fusion into an androgynous hybrid. Through this conception, Cixous begins to theorize a subjectivity that defies an economy based on hierarchy, loss, closure, and giving that is actually taking. The bisexual self that she imagines thrives through locating and living difference within the self and creating a both-and relation of giving without loss.

Cixous begins her discussion of bisexuality in "Le Rire de la Méduse" with a disclaimer that the concept she speaks of is *not* the "conception *classique*" (her emphasis). She explains that this conception is based on lack and a fantasy of androgynous wholeness: "d'un être "total" (mais fais de deux moitiés) ...bisexualité fusionnelle, effaçante, qui veut conjurer la castration" (52). This idea simplistically imagines the fusion of two halves, which in turn erases the specificity of each part in a homogenized whole. By contrast, the concept she describes of "the other bisexuality," posits the multiplication and preservation of differences within each person:

L'autre bisexualité...c'est-à-dire, repérage en soi, individuellement, de la présence, diversement manifeste et insistante selon chaque un ou une, des deux sexes, non-exclusion de la différence ni d'un sexe, et à partir de cette "permission" qui l'on se

donne, multiplication des effets d'inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l'autre corps. (52)

This definition opposes itself to the classical one by specifying that the self identifies within itself the presence of both sexes, and in so doing, opens itself to the productive effects of difference. It is a position of non-exclusion that allows for the multiplication and expansion of desire. Cixous further elaborates that this is a “vatic bisexuality:”¹⁰⁵ “Or cette bisexualité en trances qui n’annule pas le différences, mais les anime, les poursuit, les ajoute, il se trouve qu’à présent, pour des raisons historico-culturelles, c’est la femme qui s’y ouvre et en bénéficie” (52). The idea here of *bisexualité en trances* is complex, for even as Cixous imagines it as a powerful state capable of animating and accentuating difference, her use of the descriptive phrase *en trances* conjures the image of the classical Sibyl of Cumae. The Sibyl could be interpreted as “bisexual” in the sense that she is a female figure tasked with communicating the prophecies of male gods to male heroes, but in the classical accounts, this state is forced upon her without any of the “permission” Cixous mentions. The Sibyl is violently possessed by the god (or overcome with obvious undertones of rape), in a frenzied “trance” through which she raves unintelligible prophecies.¹⁰⁶ Since the figure of the Sibyl seems only to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes of female hysteria, instrumentalization, and exclusion from language (if not speaking solely to ventriloquize masculine discourse), the echo of this image potentially renders Cixous’ idea self-contradictory and diffuses any spark of revolutionary power.

¹⁰⁵ From the translation, p. 884.

¹⁰⁶ For classical references to the Sibyl, see the *Aeneid*, which first mentions the Sibyl in the context of a prophecy in Book III where Helenus gives Aeneas a series of instructions for his journey. Helenus describes the Sibyl as “the frenzied prophetess” (*insanam vatem*, III.443) who scratches the god’s words on leaves that are then scattered by the wind and consequently, she can neither retrieve them nor remember their order. See *Aeneid* III.441-452 for the full description and Book VI.42-44, 81 for Aeneas’ visit to the Sibyl and their journey through the underworld. Ovid also includes a much shorter description of the Sibyl in *Metamorphoses* XIV.101-153.

This potential association with Cixous' *bisexualité en transes* is problematic, but Cixous' objective with the phrase and the conception behind it is deeper than mere classical allusion. Her use of *transes* as a feminine plural noun instead of the singular *en transe* (as in the expression *être en transe*) implies that this is not simply about "being in a trance" or losing oneself in a state of hysteria or hallucination. It is instead about an ecstatic experience—one that is pleasurable, rare, and open to the other. Cixous intends this concept to be prophetic in a positive way as a harbinger of something that is yet to come, of a new era of liberated writing, sexuality, and interpersonal connections. As she writes, this type of openness and acceptance of difference has the potential to change all of human relations and thought: "elle entraîne à une mutation des relations humaines, de la pensée, de toutes les pratiques" (50). This in turn can produce (and will produce) new types of female subjects, "celles après lesquelles plus aucune relation intersubjective ne pourra être la même" (57). Cixous grants this lofty potential initially but not exclusively to women for the specific historical and cultural reasons that they have as-yet been excluded from language and culture as man's "other." Since women already exist in a state of otherness—which is to say, women *are* other or are that which is *not* man—this "feminine" subject position is already a minoritized one. It is therefore already primed to recognize and accept difference.¹⁰⁷ The fact that Cixous positions her *autre bisexualité* as a freely chosen position, as a "permission" or choice that one gives oneself, makes it decidedly active instead of passive, and leaves open the possibility that both men and women can choose to live in this way. Cixous also understands this bisexual position as generative of a new type of writing; the

¹⁰⁷ In French, "feminine" has the connotation of both "female" and "feminine," meaning that which pertains to the female subject, and not only to "femininity" as exterior features and mannerisms associated with a gendered behavioral and social construct (as is the English meaning).

openness to difference connects to an openness to language and speech in a clear reversal of the Sibyl's speechlessness and frustrated relation to language.

Cixous speaks further about this idea of bisexuality in her interview "Le sexe ou la tête," which was transcribed from a conversation she had in 1975 with the editors of *Les Cahiers du GRIF* and published in their journal in 1976. She first describes the bisexual subject position in spatial terms of inside vs. outside, where the feminine subject surpasses these boundaries: "C'est un passe-frontières : elle n'est jamais ni dehors, ni dedans, alors que le masculin serait de l'ordre du « rentrons le dehors dedans, si c'est possible »" (15). Her positioning of female subjectivity defies closure and confinement along with the "masculine" idea that the outside must be returned to the inside, to its rightful place. She then links this spatial fluidity to bisexuality:

Et c'est ce « ni dehors ni dedans », c'est ce « loin de l'opposition dehors/dedans », qui permet le travail de la bisexualité. Quelque part, la sexualité féminine est toujours bi-sexuelle. Bi-sexuelle, ça ne veut pas dire, comme le comprennent beaucoup de gens, qu'elle fait l'amour avec un homme d'une part et avec une femme de l'autre, ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle a deux partenaires, même si ça peut vouloir dire ça à l'occasion. La bisexualité au niveau de l'inconscient, c'est la possibilité de se prolonger d'autre, d'être dans un rapport avec l'autre de telle manière que je passe dans l'autre sans détruire l'autre; que je vais chercher l'autre là où ille est sans essayer de tout ramener à moi. (15)

Cixous emphasizes in this description, as she did in "Le Rire de la Méduse," that this bisexuality is not merely a matter of sexual preferences or partners but a psychic state that concerns one's relation with the other—it characterizes one's ability to "extend into" the other (*se prolonger d'autre*), to be in a dynamic relation with the other that does not destroy (*je passe dans l'autre sans détruire l'autre*), and which does not seek to possess (*de tout ramener à moi*). She uses the pronoun *ille* as a purposeful combination of *il* and *elle*, (which the English translation renders as "s/he" (55), to signal that the *autre* she refers to here is both male and female. It is already a both-and subject position instead of a binary either-or individual position that exists *because of* the exclusion of the other. Her point here is to oppose what she understands as the dominant,

masculine economy based on possession and taking, or “passing into the other” in order to subsume and overpower. In that economy, the other is only valuable in as much as it is useful to the dominant subject, through its capacity to return to the subject whatever the subject gives. This is a way of “losing” only in order to win back more, which is ultimately narcissistic and fearful of ever truly giving away any of the self.

Due to the nature of the charged language in the passage above and the generalizing statement, “la sexualité féminine est toujours bi-sexuelle,” one must approach this passage with caution. I do so inasmuch as it echoes Cixous’ earlier reflections in “Le Rire,” and since the relation it describes between the self and other is a prototypical version of utopian relationality. Cixous sees in this open, permeable relation between self and other what she describes under the name of “bisexuality:” a radical type of physic relation that enables a liberatory way of writing and existing. Even though she uses the term “bisexuality,” the both-and relation resonates in an idealistic, aspirational way for how Cixous wants women (and men) to be and to exist together. Cixous was well aware of the potential for misinterpretation in her line of reasoning though, and she specifically asked that the entire passage quoted above be deleted from the main body of the text in the 1981 English translation. In this version, the passage only appears in a footnote with the translator’s explanation that it, “is regarded by the author as expressing a position tangential to the central interest of her work” (55). This shows that Cixous recognized, five years after the interview, that using the term “bisexuality” to label the specific subject position would be difficult in the new decade. While the label still remains tenuous, what is important for my discussion is the underlying relational dynamic in Cixous’ conception. Beneath the label, she describes a state of openness to the other and a re-valuation of difference that forms the foundation for utopian relationality.

In addition to bisexuality, Cixous describes this relational position in “Le Rire” and “Le sexe” with other terms that carry over more prominently into her work in the 1980s. As part of opposing the masculine economy of closure and *No*, the feminine position she advocates for is one of affirming openness and *Yes*. She explains this in “Le Rire” with a reference to Molly Bloom, the wife of main character Leopold Bloom from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: “Le féminin (les poètes le soupçonnèrent) affirme: ‘ (...) *and yes I said yes I will Yes.*’ Et oui, dit Molly en emportant *Ulysse* au-delà de tout livre vers la nouvelle écriture, j’ai dit oui, je veux Oui” (53). This affirming repetition of “Yes” is not to say that the feminine position must be passive and receptive but rather that it chooses to affirm instead of negate. This state of openness creates the conditions for endless transformations and continuations instead of mere return. As part of this position that says Yes and wants Yes, both the feminine subject and the *nouvelle écriture* it produces proceed from a type of desire-that-gives, *le desir-qui-donne* (67). Cixous explains that this giving-desire is the opposite of taking-desire as it exists within the patriarchal economy. She specifies that taking-desire means giving only in order to take back, which is deeply fearful of loss and therefore only gives through the security of being able to always regain and never actually lose any of the self.

Her opposing theorization of the gift-that-gives resists imprisonment in the gift-that-takes and expands the multiplication of self and other into a joyous infinity: “(Non enfermée dans le paradoxe du don qui prend; ni dans l’illusion de la fusion unienne. On n’en est plus là). Elle entre, elle entre-elle moi et toi entre l’autre moi où l’un est toujours infiniment plus d’un et plus qui moi, sans craindre d’atteindre jamais une limite : jouisseuse de notre devenance. Nous n’en finirons pas!” (67). There is a resonance here of her defense of bisexuality, for just as *l’autre bisexualité* is not a fantasy of unitary fusion and loss of self, so giving-that-gives loses nothing of

the self by freely offering itself to the other. This openness creates a dynamic movement through and within difference; it multiplies the self, as Cixous implies through her rapid movement through pronouns in the phrase, “elle entre-elle moi et toi entre l’autre moi.” In this series of subjects, there is elle, moi, toi, and l’autre, but all exist concurrently in the space between and among themselves. It is a space of desire-that-gives, that wants “yes,” and wants to say yes to the other. Cixous emphasizes that in act of saying yes to the other, one does not just become individually but together—it is then “notre devenance.” The final line of the “Le Rire” drives the utopian spirit of togetherness openness to the other home by adding the plural *nous* to the many subject pronouns Cixous uses: “Jamais nous ne nous manquerons” (68). The English translation renders this statement as, “In one another we will never be lacking” (893). If desire-that-gives produces this *nous*, and *nous* exists in a state of being “in one another” as an absolute lack of lack, this state is profoundly utopian. The fact that it comes at the conclusion of Cixous’ essay creates a resonance with Monique Wittig’s *nous* at the conclusion of *Les Guérillères*. Although Cixous refers to *nous* at other times throughout her essay, she moves from the *je* that begins the essay and the many affirmations of *la femme* to finally culminate and leave the readers with *nous* as the representation of plenitude and relation-as-paradise.

2. *Qui sont-je/ qui songe?* Plural Subjectivity and Openness to the Other

In her preface to the *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (1994), Cixous continues her reflection on subjectivity that exists “in one another,” and she expands upon her *nous* that concludes “Le Rire de la Méduse.” Thinking back on her previous writing, Cixous states that as an author, she does not ask “What am I” or “Who am I” but instead “Who *are* I:” “The self is a non-closed mix of self/s and others...No I without you ever or more precisely no I’s without you’s...A subject is at least a thousand people. This is why I never ask myself ‘who am I?’ (*qui suis-je?*) I ask myself

‘who are I?’ (*qui sont-je*)—an untranslatable phrase. Who can say who I are, how many I are, which I is the most I of my I’s?” (xvii).¹⁰⁸ The grammatical awkwardness of these statements in English articulates the unconventional relational state that Cixous expresses here. Her conception of subjectivity moves beyond bisexuality to plurality, to then posit a self that is always and necessarily multiple, as *selves*. In her description, Cixous plays on the French possibilities of *qui sont-je / qui songe* for the act of writing, since the *I(s)* who write are also the ones that dream, and the play of difference within the self is what gives rise to creativity and expression. She continues to explain that *I* always exists in a state of fluctuating difference:

Pure I, identical to I-self, does not exist. I is always in difference, I is the open set of trances of an I by definition changing, mobile, because living-speaking-thinking-dreaming...The difference is in us, in me, difference plays me (my play). And it is numerous: since it plays with me in me between me and me or I and myself. A ‘myself’ which is the most intimate first name of You...It crosses through us like a goddess. We cannot capture it. It makes us teeter with emotions. It is in this living agitation that there is always room for you in me, your presence and your place. I is never an individual. I is haunted. I is always, before knowing anything, an I-love-you (xviii).¹⁰⁹

Here Cixous contrasts a singular, individual, and “pure I” to her idea of an I that exists in difference and in the play (in) between self and other. Her use of the word “trances” echoes her earlier theorization of bisexuality, and as in “Le Rire,” she does not advocate for a negative state of hysteria or loss of self. In this description, it is a state of altered consciousness where the *I* can freely move and transform. She emphasizes the dynamic and generative nature of this plural subjectivity with her series of hyphenated verbs, “living-speaking-thinking-dreaming,” to mean that this relation opens up new possibilities and avenues of being. “Difference” as she refers to it here is itself a plural entity with agency and the ability to influence; it moves, plays, haunts,

¹⁰⁸ As far as I can find, this is only available in English in the *Reader*. It has a note at the end that reads: “Translated by Susan Sellers and revised by Hélène Cixous” (19), and perhaps the French version only existed in order to be translated for the Preface.

¹⁰⁹ The translator notes here that Cixous plays on the sonorous likeness in French of *je* (I) and *jeu* (play or game).

crosses through, and *is*. The idea of difference as a “goddess” reflects back onto Cixous’ characterization of Promethea (since this Preface was published after the novel). Difference is the other here—it is the force that acts upon the self and creates a “living agitation” that works to expand the self, make room for the other(s), and play *with, in, and between* the bounds of neatly contained individuality. Cixous moves quickly through a series of prepositions in her description to further emphasize the fluid nature of this living difference, and she then reinforces the I that exists in difference through destabilizing all the terms used to describe the self; for difference moves between *me*, and *me*, or *I*, and *myself* with is the first name of *You*. This progression multiplies the self (where the repetition of *me* reads as different selves or shades of the self), and it casts the self as synonymous with *You* and with the other. For if “myself” is also the name of “*You*,” then self and other are one and the same. Knowing the other, the *You*, is then also knowing the self more intimately. This is why Cixous concludes this passage with one more name for *I/You*: an *I-love-you*. Since this is a relation of openness, searching for and celebrating difference, it is also one of affirmation and love.

This dimension of love is vitally important to Cixous’ conception of plural subjectivity and the self’s relation with the other. As it is related to Cixous’ theorization of the gift and giving, it surpasses superficial connotations of romantic love and instead concerns the command that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,”¹¹⁰ where the underlying assumption is that one always loves the self first and foremost. To “love the self” as Cixous understands it then means to possess the “pure I,” the “I-self” that Cixous refuses. In her alternative theorization, the I is always an I-love-You because it is always already an I-You, an I-and-You, I(s)-and-You(s). One

¹¹⁰ Cixous discusses this in her essay “Le sexe ou la tête,” (11). It comes from Jesus’ command to his disciples in the Bible, in Mark 12:31 and Matthew 22:39. Although she knows this concept generally from the New Testament, Cixous, as a secular Jew, uses it here more in an ontological way than in its connection to Christianity (as a reflection of God’s love for humanity).

does not love or privilege the self first and then the other second in a rigid hierarchy because the I and the self are equal, co-existent, and comingled. For Cixous, one does not love the other because one first loves the self, and self-love is not the necessary condition for other-love. Cixous dismantles this logic where You is subordinate to I, by allowing the two subject positions to exist simultaneously as facets of the same being. To love the self/other is to give the self to the other and receive the gift of other into the self. Cixous' conception of plural subjectivity exists in and because of this reciprocal relation of difference.

Cixous' theorizations of plural subjectivity that proceeds from psychic bisexuality, openness, and an economy of giving-that-gives in "Sorties," "Le Rire de la Méduse," and "Le sexe ou la tête" of the late 1970s catalyzed much of the enduring criticism of her thought as utopian in a negative sense—as escapist, essentialist, and elitist. Toril Moi's analysis of Cixous in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) positions her as an evocative but esoteric theorist, heavily reliant upon Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction. I focus here on Moi's evaluation and explanation of Cixous since it contains and recapitulates the main points of contention with Cixous' thought, especially for American feminists. Moi depicts Cixous as a thinker produced by French intellectualism, who, by speaking its language and using its tools, actually fortifies the house she claims to dismantle. Moi bases her analysis on Cixous' theoretical writings between 1975-77, and she draws primarily from the three texts mentioned above, along with *La venue à l'écriture* (1977). The title of Moi's chapter, "Hélène Cixous: an imaginary utopia," summarizes her general conclusion of Cixous' usefulness. While Moi acknowledges Cixous' attempt to position *écriture féminine* as a "forceful feminist reappropriation of Derridian theory" (110), she criticizes Cixous for positioning her work in the Lacanian imaginary and for

being “utterly metaphysical” and clearly “biologistic” through copious references to the physical female body (113).

Moi praises Cixous for opposing patriarchal binary thought through establishing her new type of feminine writing on the basis of Derridian *différance*—as both “deferral” and “difference” where meaning is endlessly deferred and created only through the relation of signifiers. Moi reads Cixous’ reliance on Derridian *différance* as positive, useful, and effective, but she then explains how Cixous contradicts and undoes the progressive aspects of her thought with essentializing language and references to the pleasures of the female body. Moi then ties Cixous’ use of biologistic language to Lacan’s imaginary realm, concluding that “her vision of female writing is in this sense firmly located within the closure of the Lacanian imaginary: a space in which all difference has been abolished” (117). If the Imaginary is the pre-linguistic realm where the child knows no separation between itself and the world, where there is no lack, and one enjoys unitary and immediate presence, then to remain in this realm, as Moi argues, would be to refuse entry into the Symbolic and become “incapable of living in human society” (100). Cixous’ theory, in these terms, is an idealization of regression back into a state of imaginary unity where all contradictions are resolved. Moi notes that this preoccupation and emphasis on the Imaginary is common of utopian writing in general, and she thus groups Cixous with such writing that disregards real material needs in favor of fantasized alternatives. Moi concludes that this absence of concerns for actual factors prohibiting women from writing “constitutes a major weakness of Cixous’s utopia...Stirring and seductive though such a vision is, it can say nothing of the actual inequities, deprivations and violations that women, as social beings rather than as mythological archetypes, must constantly suffer” (123). To return then to Moi’s title for her chapter, she labels Cixous’ theory as ineffectually utopian since it looks past

actual injustices in its fixation on mythological archetypes and its retreat into the world of the Lacanian imaginary.

As an aspect of her critique of Cixous' reliance on the Imaginary, Moi faults Cixous for only focusing on the relational unit of the couple, whereby severely limiting the applicability and transferability of her work:

For Cixous, women seem to relate to each other exclusively on a dualistic (I/you) pattern: as mothers and daughters, lesbian couples or in some variety of the teacher/student or prophet/disciple relationship. The paucity of references to a wider community of women or to collective forms of organization is not only conspicuous in the work of a feminist activist, but indicative of Cixous's general inability to represent the non-Imaginary, triangulated structures of desire typical of social relationships. (125)

While it is true that Cixous describes couple-relations in her works, this is not a defect, oversight, or symptom of close-mindedness. It is a conscious choice that seeks to address the binary nature of patriarchal society. Cixous makes this clear in "Le sexe ou la tête," when she writes that all cultural and social opposition proceeds from the Man/Woman opposition: "Ca marche toujours comme ça, et cette opposition c'est une opposition en **couple**" (7, her emphasis). Identifying the couple as the primary unit of oppression within patriarchy, Cixous undertakes its rewriting and reimagining. This does not limit her theory exclusively to couples but rather shows that this is the starting place from which she can then expand. She describes how she sees her work on the couple as *the* way to transform culture from the inside out:

S'apercevoir qu'il y a couple, que c'est le couple qui fait fonctionner ça, c'est aussi signaler le fait que c'est sur le couple qu'il faut travailler si on veut dé-construire et transformer la culture. Le couple en tant que lieu, espace de la guerre dans la culture mais aussi en tant que lieu, espace demandant, exigeant la transformation complète de la relation de l'un à l'autre. C'est sur le couple qu'il faudrait travailler toujours, et donc... (7).

She describes the couple here in spatial terms as both "place" and "space" of existence, as the site of war waged between the two parties fighting for dominance and power. Cixous sees this

space of the couple as “demanding” and “insisting on” a reimagining of the relation between self and other, proving that her theory is purposefully relational. In the lines immediately following the ellipsis pause, she speculates on what such a “reimagined” couple would be like: “par exemple, sur « qu’est-ce que serait une relation de couple tout à fait autre, qu’est-ce que ce serait qu’un amour qui ne serait pas la simple couverture, le simple voile de la guerre ? »” (7).¹¹¹ This type of “completely other” relation is the one that characterizes utopian relationality in Cixous writing. It is the relation she envisions of being-with the other and being-in the other that is not based on war, on possession, or on taking. Cixous labors to describe what such a relationship would or *could be* in her essays of the 1970s, and then she imagines *what it is* in her Promethea novels. Even in the Promethea novels, her focus remains on the couple, for one must first recognize and rewrite the self/other dynamic before one can proceed to rewrite all of wider society and culture.

Interestingly, Moi does not include Wittig in her study of the “most representative figures” of French feminist literary theory and perhaps would find some affinity with Wittig’s more militant stance. It is helpful to remember that Moi believes feminist criticism does and should have a specifically political bent, as she states in her preface: “The principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices” (xiv). Since her own analysis of the theoretical positions of the writers she includes is concerned with the political value of their work, it is not surprising that Moi takes issue with the general intellectual nature of French theory (Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray, and Kristeva included). While admittedly, the realms of psychoanalysis and philosophy can seem detached from the material struggle for real social and cultural change, and even worse, can seem frustratingly

¹¹¹ The passage of text contains the French quotation marks, and then I added the English ones.

embroiled in their own esoteric rhetoric, this is not the case with Cixous' theory. Cixous engages with Freud, Lacan, and Derrida because they are her intellectual forefathers and the dominant figures in French academia at the time of her writing. Her work reflects her own very real struggle as a woman to enter academic fields reserved for men and to write her way out of systems built on (and made to perpetuate) her silence and submission. Looking back upon "Le Rire de la Méduse" as her entry into the realm of literature, Cixous describes her writing (*l'écrit*) as the cry or scream (*le cri*) of one desperate to make her voice known, to speak the unspeakable, and write the as-yet unwritten or even unimagined.¹¹² Cixous believes in the power of imagining alternative states of being and ways of thinking and articulating them in new forms of writing in order to effect concrete, real-world change. In her 1987 essay, "Saying 'yes' to the other," Verena Conley actually confirms this, stating that "Cixous has always said that "to think of something begins to make it possible" (94). If Cixous is "thinking of something" in her 1970s essays, then she is certainly working towards making it possible. Cixous' work exists in the realm of ideas, of language and words, and as a university professor, she understood that ideas change people and people change the world; therefore, the theorizing, imagining, writing, and speaking that she does in her early work carries the potential for real-world change. I read Cixous in this sense and especially interpret her fiction as positively utopian and full of potential for actual transformation.

There are scholars who feel similarly and offer notable defenses of Cixous' theory. Barbara Freeman, writing in 1988, provides a convincing case for the non-dualistic and subversive aspects of Cixous' thought and feminist textual practice. In her essay, Freeman

¹¹² Cixous references this play on words in her work, *Ayā ! Le cri de la littérature: Accompagné de Adel Abdessemed*, Galilée, 2013.

summarizes and addresses the familiar accusations of Cixous'—her seeming essentialism, the assertion of a monolithic and extralinguistic “female essence,” and the resulting conclusion that both of these aspects are not only ineffectually conservative at best but dangerous to feminist political practice at worst (59-60). Freeman criticizes Cixous' critics for themselves misunderstanding her conception of and construction of the body within the text. Furthermore, she claims that the critics themselves conceive and speak of the body as if it were a universal, biological given. Freeman understands that for Cixous the body is not a totalizable entity but rather becomes visible and livable through difference; therefore it is impossible to crystallize its shape and features in any one definite form. For Cixous, if one accesses this productive difference, it leads to more language, speech, and expression: “the body and writing are not linked causally, but rather are correlates of each other...Body and text, in such a formulation, are co-constitutive” (62-63). In this co-constitution, the function of both is to locate the site at which the displacement occurs, “that more and not less of the one produces more of the other” (64). Freeman summarizes this as a “signature” of Cixous' style and thought under the label of “intermingling or co-habitation of body and text” (65). Although Cixous mentions the female body and its parts, the more she speaks of it, the more she leads the reader back to the text and to the language that articulates the body. As Freeman writes, “as soon as the reader tries to extract the body from the ways in which it is written, to anatomize it, the body, this supposedly essential object, dissolves” (65); the body in Cixous' text is thus a slippery, non-totalizable entity, a “locus of incessant movement” (65). Instead of finding a stable ground or center to hold on to, the reader only finds more metaphors.

Additionally, Freeman makes the case for Cixous' use of metaphor as a strategic tool of destabilization instead of as a “trope of similitude.” This is to say that Cixous deploys metaphors

to draw attention to difference instead of to construct an image of the female body based on its likeness to other objects. This is a paradoxical use of metaphor because it makes the rhetorical trope function by inversion and forces it to signify the opposite of its anticipated meaning. Freeman labels this textual tactic “metaphorization,” which insinuates difference and upsets the terms involved in the metaphor (70, n. 30). In this sense, Cixous’ writing does not assert likeness between terms but rather “functions so as to locate difference where none had previously been seen to exist” (70). This is evident in the way Cixous copiously deploys the verb *être*, which is more commonly used to assert the primacy of being in a metaphysical sense. Cixous however uses the verb to make each term’s opposition reflect back upon the other and therefore undo the stable identities of both. In the terms of a standard metaphorical equation, term A equals term B, and therefore A is effaced or covered by the image and likeness of B. For Cixous, she makes the terms of metaphors operate reciprocally, where both A equals B and B also equals A. This reciprocal similarity retains the presence of both terms and challenges their fixed identities in a process of intermingling and co-habitation. This appears in a slightly different form in Cixous’ statement: *qui sont-je?* By employing *je sont*, Cixous does not even need a secondary term to destabilize the primary term. She instead enacts this process at the level of the verb *être*, for when she writes *je sont* instead of *je suis*, she short-circuits the verb’s ability to function, to convey an understandable idea of being. Since a plural verb should not follow a singular subject, and a singular subject cannot perform the action of a plural verb, the metaphorical process breaks down. It is in this rupture at the level of the subject-verb connection that Cixous locates difference and pinpoints the action of language in constituting the subject. She then works to create meaning and constitute the subject otherwise.

Lucy Sargisson advocates for the productivity of Cixous' thought for its utopian aspects, which Sargisson reads as representative of "transgressive utopianism." Sargisson locates this transgression in Cixous' heterogenous approach to the self/other relation and the "non-possessive attitude" of her thought, which is "a letting go of the notion of property and the desire to possess; a shift away from the position that naming is claiming" (190). Sargisson echoes Cixous' insistence on the importance of the couple and asserts that the self/other relation is the primary one at the center of Cixous' thought, more so than the man/woman relation (191). Like Francis Bartkowski, Sargisson locates a productive aspect of Cixous' utopianism in the valorization of becoming and process: "Loving the other is a vertiginous and never-ending *process*" (191). Sargisson interprets Cixous' thought as a powerful argument for regeneration and revitalization of "otherness" or "strangeness," without the threat or fear of danger as it is conceptualized within patriarchal logic and a hierarchy of inclusion or exclusion. Sargisson concludes: "Cixous places an intrinsic value on difference which can and should, she suggests, be recognized as such, loved as such, and learnt from. Cixous's work on the Self/Other-self/other relations is profoundly utopian in all senses" (194). My analysis builds on Freeman's and especially Sargisson's to further reconceptualize Cixous' writing as productively utopian and innovative through her visions in her fiction of relationality through difference. To put it otherwise, speaking of utopian relationality in Cixous' thought and writing is a way of naming and describing the experience of living productive difference that opens the self to the other. Utopian relationality is the depiction of this sort of ideal relationship that does not fear difference but celebrates it and continually gives of itself in order to have more to give. It is a process of expansion and becoming greater than the self through the relation with the other.

It would be appropriate then to speak of Cixous' utopian revitalization of the self/other relation as a "re-vision" of this relational dynamic as it exists in patriarchy. To borrow from Adrienne Rich, the stakes for this theorization and re-vision could not be higher. They show us "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh" (18). Rich states that for a writer undertaking the task of re-vision (and the female writer in particular), "there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us" (19). Rich's description aptly describes Cixous' writing of the 1970s and 80s: through paradox, wordplay, and seemingly endless metaphors, Cixous navigates both the challenge and the promise of a new way of writing and a vision of utopia. Cixous understands that this process is difficult and risky but also that the fundamental transformation of society through a new psychic geography and the realization of new, better ways of being-together in the world are worth risking everything.

3. Pure Turquoise: Subjectivity that Surpasses Gender in "Tancredi continue"

Cixous carefully walks on the ice, navigating both the challenge and promise of articulating her utopian vision in her 1983 essay, "Tancredi continue."¹¹³ In this essay, Cixous continues to develop her theories of psychic bisexuality, plural subjectivity, and desire-that-gives. The work describes a utopian union between two star-crossed lovers from Torquato

¹¹³ This essay was originally published in March 1983 in *Etudes Freudiennes*, 21-22. It was then collected with other essays in *Entre l'écriture*, published by Editions des Femmes in 1986, even though it is a fragment of a longer unpublished work of fiction called *Jerusalemme continue* that Cixous wrote in 1981-82. The English translation was produced by Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers and included in *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers, Open University Press, 1988. It was then modified and republished in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays: Hélène Cixous*, ed. Deborah Jenson, Harvard University Press, 1991. The pieces in translation that I use are from this latter version.

Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581)—Tancredi and Clorinda—as they also appear under the names Tancredi and Aménide in Giochino Rossini's 1813 operatic version, which is itself an adaptation of Voltaire's *Tancredi* (1760). As her reflection moves from Tasso's text to Rossini's melody, Cixous struggles to understand the two main characters outside of gender categories and to express their desire for each other that proceeds from their difference. As Jeannelle Laillou Savona describes, the essay's mix of poetic language, wordplay, and theoretical grappling results in an exhilarating and at times disorienting ride: "It seems to have been written between the night and day of consciousness, in a superhuman effort to transcribe a phantasm and express a truth all the more profound as it is inexpressible in the rational language of abstraction. Hence the text's continual and almost painful movements between metaphors" (616). In addition to her continual movement between metaphors, Cixous experiments with unconventional linguistic strategies throughout the essay, mixing pronouns and subject-verb agreements in an attempt to situate the characters' subjectivity as both male and female. Throughout the entire effort, Cixous repeatedly laments the failure of her own language and its gendered limitations. The utopian relation that Cixous describes in *Tancredi continue* expands and multiplies the self, elevating it into an ecstatic celestial realm. The relation is difficult to describe, as she admits many times, because it is the relation she had pondered in her earlier essays, "une relation de couple tout à fait autre." At the climax of the essay, Cixous narrates a vision of the lovers' relation as she sees it contained in the infinite space of a single instant. She labels the relational state "pure turquoise," and locates it within this aesthetic metaphor to express a combination of two colors that produces a third, even as it retains the original two. This "pure turquoise" articulates her conception of the self as plural, open to the other, and capable of transformation. It reads like the continuation of her thought in

“Le Rire” and “Le sexe ou la tête,” and it pushes her thought ever closer to the figure of Prometheus.

Cixous begins her essay by stating that she is reading a French version of Tasso’s text, (titled *Jérusalem Délivrée* in translation), and she provides the necessary information to set the stage for her reading of the complicated gender dynamics already at work in the original story of forbidden love. Clorinde is a female warrior fighting for the Saracens, who aim to take possession of Jerusalem. She possesses the “manly” qualities of a traditional knight, like strength and courage, and conceals her body underneath her helmet and armor. Tancredi is a Christian knight fighting to protect the holy city, and as such, he should view Clorinde as his enemy. Because he chooses instead to love her and open himself to a passion that transcends differences of allegiance and religion, Cixous concludes that while Tancredi is a man, he loves like a woman. This bold claim aligns with Cixous’ theorization of desiring and giving that destroy hierarchy and celebrate difference. Savona notes that there is a hint of blurred gender lines already present in Rossini’s opera, due to what she calls “sartorial androgyny” inherent in the original production, meaning that Clorinde dresses as a male knight, per the story, and the role of Tancredi is played and sung by a woman, as per the demands of the vocal range (617). Cixous takes this hint of blurred gender and androgyny to an entirely other level, far beyond role reversal and the performance of a different gender. She reads in both Tancredi’s and Clorinde’s characters the glimmering of an alternative subjectivity that illuminates a way out or an exist, a figurative *sortie*, from the regime of binary gender and desire-that-takes.

Cixous proceeds to lead the reader through her interpretation of the text, saying that she is not interested in the history of the war between the Faithful and the Infidels but in a sort of

gender war, “l’autre histoire, celle qui est cachée sous l’Histoire, celle de deux etres” (141).¹¹⁴ She refers to this other history as “l’histoire de l’amour, c’est-a-dire l’histoire de l’autre et de son autre” (141). “The other and its other” that she refers to here are Tancredi and Clorinde, since they are “other” to each other and also already other to themselves. In this way, they represent Cixous’ larger reflection on and re-vision of the couple as *the* foundational unit of interpersonal society. Cixous also refers to them with the capitalized, “les Autres, les débordants” (141), to emphasize that they overflow, they surpass their countries, their faiths, and their histories; their ability to reach out across forbidden lines and recognize the reflection of the self in the other positions them outside of the normal realms of reason and possibility. In their boldness, they risk everything to preserve, as Cixous describes: “les deux toujours-autres, qui osent accomplir la Sortie... Avec courage ils ne se connaissent pas eux-mêmes, avec noblesse ils ne se possèdent pas eux-mêmes, avec humilité ils ne se contiennent pas, ne se refusent pas, s’accordent pour perdre soi, jusqu’à s’approcher de l’autre. Je ne sais plus si je dois dire ils ou elles” (142). Cixous’ use here of the capital “S” for *la Sortie* evokes the title of her earlier essay, and it signals that this couple has in fact found *the* Exit from the linguistic and relational trap of gender. They accomplish this through their audacious desire that “dares” with courage, nobility, and humility to occupy a space of non-exclusion and non-refusal, to relinquish possession of their selves even to the point of risking or “losing” the self. This does not mean total effacement or forfeiting of subjectivity and agency but rather the loss of the fixed idea of self, the self that they had previously known and been. The final line of the passage above introduces one of Cixous’ main themes in the essay: the difficulty of comprehending the two lovers within gendered categories

¹¹⁴ Cixous is also apparently not interested in the ending of Tasso’s story, where Tancredi accidentally kills Clorinda in battle. Cixous’ entire argument in this essay revolves around the two characters’ love for each other and the way that love is transformative; the way it pushes them into a relation beyond gender.

and her own frustration that she does not know how to speak of them. When she wonders if she should call them *ils* or *elles*, she implies that Tancredi might better belong under the feminine plural pronoun due to his relationship with the other and the way he chooses to love. In these ways, Tancredi overflows his masculine gender and initially seems more female than male.

After only a couple pages of describing her process of reading, Cixous transitions to describing her process of listening to Rossini's opera, and she leans into her reflection on Tancredi as female instead of male. She notes that the story has changed slightly, "l'histoire a un peu glissé" (143), in the transition from one version to another because Clorinde has become "Aménaïde."¹¹⁵ Tancredi has also become a "Tancreda" (as the English translation renders Cixous' feminization of Tancredi); Cixous writes this as: "Je dis une Tancredi;" "(La) Tancredi;" "(elle) est un Tancredi" (144). These gender-bending linguistic acrobatics seek to express that through loving Clorinde-now-Aménaïde in a way that is *other*, Tancredi him/her self has now become even more *other* as well. The way he desires and relates to Aménaïde transforms his masculinity at a psychic level—Cixous does not mean that this is a physical transformation or that he has developed anatomically female features. She is careful to qualify that this she/Tancredi is not simply Tancredi-become-woman: "Je dis une Tancredi, je ne dis pas une femme...pour qu'un homme aime une femme comme Tancredi aime Clorinde ou Aménaïde, il faut que ce soit une femme" (144). The point here is not about the body but about the nature of the desire: the *way* that Tancredi loves, the way this love acts upon Tancredi, and the type of relation it allows Tancredi to enter into with Aménaïde. That this is a psychic state renders it all the more difficult to express. To borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology again, the state that Cixous attempts to describe seems to be the "becoming-woman" of Tancredi. It is

¹¹⁵ There are of course other changes and "un peu glissé" is putting it lightly. Since Cixous is interested in the character of Clorinde and her relationship with Tancredi, Cixous does not spend time describing the other changes.

his process of moving from a majoritarian position to a minoritarian one, which in this case also happens to be a psychically feminine position. This is the first becoming that leads him to other becomings, and Cixous can only circle around it by alternating between and mixing the linguistic markers of the two genders. One could argue that Cixous could simply create new, alternative pronouns and just be done with it—for why belabor this struggle with all these pronouns? Cixous' point though is precisely to highlight the boundaries and restrictions of binary gender categories and then to carve out a space from *within* those existing categories for her characters to exist alternatively. Yes, her characters are *other*, but they grow out of what already exists. They are fascinatingly anomalous products of the binary system, and they have somehow learned how to escape the cords that bind them. The provenance of this ability and the conditions that give rise to it are what Cixous aims to discover.

Cixous expands her struggle to an interpretation of Tancredi's plural subjectivity, writing that Tancredi is not just *a* she but many: "En tout cas, elle n'est pas *une* femme. Elle est plusieurs. Comme tous les êtres vivants, qui sont des êtres parfois envahis, parfois peuplés, incarnés par d'autres, vivant d'autres, donnant vie" (147). This connects to Cixous' earlier theorization of subjectivity as plural, for "I is never individual," and that regardless of gender, any self always comprises many selves. This is the "I" that exists in difference and that gives life through its own difference to that of the other. Cixous then attempts to describe this state and draws attention to the absolute inability of gendered language to approach it: "et que cette personne soit une elle et un il et un elle et une il et une ellil et une ilelle, je veux avoir la permission de ne pas mentir, je ne veux pas l'arrêter si elle transe, je le veux, je la veux, je la suivrai" (147). Here Cixous plays with multiple combinations of gendered pronouns, indefinite articles, and direct object pronouns to express the fluidity of both the desired subject and her own

desire (implied by *je*), which is equally as fluid and capable of following the other through its various transformations and oscillations. Her use of “transe” as a verb, as an act that elle *does*, connects back to her description of “vatic bisexuality” and extends it—the “transe” here is not a state that *elle* enters into but an act that she carries out.¹¹⁶ Cixous situates this *personne* in the subjunctive mood as well, signaled by “soit,” to express the hypothetical desired state of this relation as it exists (or could exist) in language. This passage that begins as a clause with “et” is the continuation of a long sentence already in progress, and the rest of it proceeds only with commas to separate the independent clauses that contain both subject and verb (like *je le veux, je la veux*). This creates a sensation of breathlessness, of almost frantic fumbling within language to find something, anything adequate, anything useful. The series of pronouns contains no punctuation to separate and demarcate them, further indicating the quick movement from one label to another. Unfortunately, none of the possible solutions succeed at articulating such a subject that overflows, spills, and seeps in-between and through them all. Cixous emphasizes this idea of expansion in her final line of this section of the essay: “Et tout ce que j’ai voulu essayer de dire c’est qu’elle est si infinie” (148). Cixous’ reference to Tancredi’s infinity here harkens back to her description of writing in “Sorties,” as Tancredi’s love for Aménaïde is a similarly dynamic process. Through desiring “l’ensemble de l’un-avec-l’autre,” Tancredi opens (her) self to the other, the other that is self, and the possibility for “milliers de transformations.”

In the next section of the essay, titled “Ourselves we do not owe” (which Cixous writes in English),¹¹⁷ she describes Tancredi and Aménaïde’s relationship through the metaphor of “pure

¹¹⁶ The English marks the strangeness of this usage and the wordplay with italicization, rendering the phrase as “if she goes into a *trans*” (84).

¹¹⁷ This is a quote from William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Act I Scene 5. The entire line is: “Fate, show thy force; ourselves we do not owe; / what is decreed must be, and be this so.” *Owe* here means “own” and it is the character Olivia’s way of giving herself over to love, as fate will have it. Perhaps Shakespeare meant these lines

turquoise,” which also works as a metaphor for utopian relationality. The color turquoise in Cixous’ description is a combination of royal blue and pure white, and she sees it as representative of the union between Tancredi and Aménaïde, respectively. Cixous uses the metaphor to express a utopian both-and relation that grows out of openness to and desire for difference. It then multiplies and expands each in the communion with the other. Cixous begins by describing how she “sees” the characters glide across her psychic stage in a sort of dream vision: “Je les ai vues glisser, l’une toute en blanc, l’autre toute en bleus sombres, comme – pas une femme – pas un homme – pas seulement – comme – la personnification du mystère – humain – comme l’humain en personne, se penchant sur son propre mystère, qui n’est ni homme ni femme évidemment” (150). Cixous subtly genders both figures female in this description with the feminine plural past participle, *vues*, and she uses *toute* instead of *tout* when referring to Tancredi, “toute en bleus sombres.” She states in the last line though that the “mystery” of the figures is that they *both* are neither feminine nor masculine, but something else, something other that she cannot quite articulate. Cixous communicates the limits of her language first through relying on similitude with “comme” and then with negation, “pas une femme” and “pas un homme.” She perceives what the characters *are* but cannot yet articulate the vision except through recourse to what they are *not*. As another way of expressing her limitations, Cixous uses n-dashes surrounded by an extra space on both sides (–) throughout the description, as opposed to longer em-dashes (—) that similarly insert a pause but graphically link words together. Her n-dashes create an enormous amount of visual and grammatical space in what would otherwise read as a long, comma-laden statement. The dashes mimic the movement of her

more as a commentary on fate or providence and its role in love, but Cixous uses it in a different way to imply that we do not possess stable enclosed selves. This is the sense of “ourselves we do not *own*.”

thought as it searches, pauses, turns, and reaches for other words to describe the characters. The white space between words seems to expand on the page just as the characters exceed and overflow gendered labels.

Cixous then proceeds through a series of metaphors in the attempt to describe the way the two beings move towards each other (pp. 150-152), which serves to further emphasize the novelty and strangeness of the relation and Cixous' inability to compare it to anything existent. First, they are two questions, asking and answering each other simultaneously through their presence: "une question tournée vers l'autre, et l'autre seulement à la réponse;" "c'est-à-dire deux questions se dirigeant l'une vers l'autre d'un même rythme soutenu." That they are each simultaneously a question and an answer begins to articulate their both-and relational state. Next, they are like two arrows released at the same moment by two archers on opposite sides of a mountain, which reinforces the mirrored and reciprocal nature of the relation: "comme deux flèches tirées au même instant par deux archers égaux des deux côtés de la montagne." In a partial reference to the opera, the characters next rise like two alto voices: "montent comme deux voix d'alto s'élançant des deux bords de la mer." They appear like two birds who fly towards each other: "les deux oiseaux s'aperçoivent de loin, et libres, se rejoignent au-dessus des nuages où on ne les voit plus mais on entend très clairement leur cri de triomphe." Finally, they are like two ships gliding over the water, "comme deux barques sur l'eau," before they return to each being concurrently the question, "Pourquoi moi?" and the answer, "parce que c'est toi." This rapid deployment of metaphors further destabilizes the gendered categories that Cixous tries to escape from and emphasizes her search for accurate ways of describing the pair. Like the physical transformations that Wittig's lovers undergo in *Le Corps lesbien*, Cixous' metaphors blur the form of the characters bodies and shift the emphasis to their ways of becoming and

being together. Cixous showcases here the process of productive and dynamic difference as it catalyzes transformation. The quantity of images proves that it is not the actual likeness that matters as much as the metamorphic process of moving through them. When Cixous ends where she began by reprising the metaphor of questions and answers, she positions all the images contained in-between as different aspects of the multifaceted beings.

After the series of metaphors, Cixous arrives at her vision of utopian relationality as expressed in the turquoise. She begins by stating: “J’ai vu en rêve une turquoise vierge” (154).¹¹⁸ While the color turquoise would normally be gendered masculine in French, Cixous makes it *une turquoise*, a feminine color formed from two grammatically masculine colors in the combination of *le bleu* and *le blanc*.¹¹⁹ Color is an interesting choice to express Cixous’ vision of subjectivity that surpasses gender, or of a subjectivity that can travel between and through genders, since colors can be both nouns and adjectives; as nouns, the colors blue and white are masculine, but as adjectives, they can already transform to fit multiple genders and numbers. Just as Tancredi (who should be firmly male) can love in a way that is female, so Cixous describes how the turquoise contains a shining white pearl, and it is this interior whiteness that reflects through the blue exterior to create the visual effect of turquoise: “ma turquoise contient son plus précieux. Une perle opaque est le secret de sa transparence. Le secret du bleu royal est la blancheur infinie de sa profondeur” (155). The “true secret” of this turquoise is that it contains both blue and white, and each color reflects upon and through the other. The turquoise is not a complete

¹¹⁸ Cixous uses “vierge” instead of “pure,” while the English translation renders it as “pure turquoise,” losing the sexual implication. She does not linger on or further explain her connotations with “vierge” though.

¹¹⁹ One could speak of Tancredi and Clorinde as represented by two masculine colors since they both *appear* masculine—Clorinde cross-dresses. Or, maybe it would be better to refer to them already as feminine colors, something like *la bleue* and *la blanche*, but these feminized versions read like adjectives instead of nouns (as in the sense of *la tasse bleue*, *la femme blanche*, etc). Cixous instead uses the colors as nouns. Turquoise would be feminine in the sense of the actual stone, *une turquoise* like *une pierre*, but Cixous also seems more interested in the immaterial and figurative qualities of this turquoise instead of any physical properties.

combination of the two but is the visual effect created by their proximity and the way they reflect on each other. It is their being-together, their ability to spread their color upon one another, that creates the turquoise. Just as the two colors occupy the same space in a visual both-and relation, Cixous again attempts to describe how they occupy a both-and relation in terms of gender. In the way that Tancredi contains both blue and white, so he seems to be both male and female: “Il était si beau qu’on sentait qu’il était belle. Et elle n’était pas seulement une belle femme, elle était beau” (156). To be both male and female at once, or to surpass the binary system of gender is to be like the blue that contains the white, and the white inside of the blue that reflects its whiteness back upon the blue. They are both *il* and *elle*, *beau* and *belle* concurrently.

This state of turquoise as the expression of the utopian relation of the two protagonists does not represent the ending of the two beings, or the loss of self in the other, but their expansion. Cixous explains how their union and communion is an augmentation of their selves: “Chacune accroît l’autre, chacune accrue de l’autre. Chacune d’autant plus éclatante et grande qu’elle comprend mystérieusement l’autre. Est-ce que Tancredi est une femme qui finit ou un homme qui commence à être une femme pour être un homme ?” (160). Cixous reinforces the sense of expansion here with her repetition of “chacune” and the two forms of the verb *accroître* (to increase), “accroît l’autre” and “accrue de l’autre,” where *accrue* is the adjective form from the past participle *accru*. Cixous’ use of the verb *finir* reflects on the dichotomy between beginning and ending vs continuing and becoming, and it connects back to the idea presented in the essay’s title, “Tancredi continue.” Although Tancredi changes, he/she does not cease being one in order to become the other. That would be the logic of an economy of exchange that Cixous specifically refutes, and so instead of trading one self and one way of being for another,

he/she can be and can become both. This is a vision of the self within the logic of the gift-that-gives.

Cixous underlines her point that there is no ending necessary in order to begin—meaning that one *continues* and passes endlessly from transformation to transformation without forfeiting the self—by asking and then concluding *when* and *where* one begins:

Quand commence femme quand continue quand devient quand poursuit quand enfin
touche enfin embrasse ?
... Non ; je devrais plutôt demander :
Où commence homme commence femme continue ?
Continue (161)

In this series of questions, Cixous first asks: when does a woman begin? The question is deliberately unclear though and could be interpreted as “when does woman begin,” or “when does one begin to be a woman?” The questions that follow contain neither subject nor object, creating the effect that they could reflect back upon the “woman” mentioned in the first question or upon something else. Therefore, “quand continue quand devient” could be interpreted as “when does woman continue when does she become,” or something similar to the English translation, “when continues when does one become other” (97). The fact that Cixous does not include gendered pronouns, adjectives, or any gendered markers shows her effort to express a subject outside of the gender binary. By using the third-person singular verb conjugations (commence, continue, devient), she only signals that the subject she refers to is singular. The progression of action through the verbs echoes the progression in the *rapprochement* of the two lovers: they begin to become-woman, they continue, they become, follow, touch, and finally embrace. The lack of punctuation in this passage creates the effect that all of these steps in the process are to be read together. They all happen in quick succession, with no breaks or pauses. Cixous then changes her question structure from *quand* to *où* in order to not ask when but *where*—where does

man begin woman begin, continue? Again, the fact that the final *continue* is not plural means that she is not referring to both man and woman becoming simultaneously, but instead to the progression of one being through man to woman and then to something other, to the state-of-being within the turquoise. Her conclusion to all these questions is simply, “Continue,” with no punctuation after, which leaves the conclusion formally open, just as the concept of continuing implies an action without end. Cixous expresses through her questions and answers here that this is a state of constant and continual becoming.

Throughout Cixous’ description of her vision of the turquoise, in addition to her authorial interjections about the failure of language to express the vision, she describes her own emotional reaction to the vision and her longing to reach it, touch, it, and incarnate it in her own life. Her yearning for this type of relational utopia is painfully acute. She tells of her feeling right after she states that she sees the “turquoise vierge:” “En sanglotant je cherche à la saisir. Elle est au milieu du ciel. Elle est au-dessus de ma vie comme mon propre cœur extérieur. Je la veux, je la vois” (154). This statement shifts from the past tense of the previous one, “*j’ai vu en rêve une turquoise vierge*” (my emphasis) to the present with, “en sanglotant je cherche...” This signals that what began as a description intended for the reader (Cixous’ telling of the story), now becomes a description of her reaction in the moment. That the vision immediately tells of her sobbing (*en sanglotant*) conveys its emotional power. This effect is also the result of recognition; Cixous sees in the turquoise the reflection of her own being projected and suspended just out of her reach. She describes this as she continues, using possessive pronouns and emphasizing both her desire and frustration at seeing but not being able to reach it: “Je la vois briller, la splendeur de mon existence, mon trésor extérieur, je vois au-dessus de ma tête le sens de toute mon histoire. Une seule nuit m’en sépare. Je cherche à la traverser. Je tends mes mains, je sanglote de

rage, je l'ai au bout de mes doigts" (154). Here Cixous directly connects the turquoise to her own lived experience, and she underscores the precious nature of this turquoise through her use of the words "splendor," "treasure," and "meaning" (*le sens de toute mon histoire*). It is this turquoise that gives her life meaning, that answers the question her life has always asked, and that she has posed through her very existence. The image of reaching out her hands in desire recalls Wittig's similar expression throughout *Virgile, Non*, when she speaks directly to Paradise, "Je tends vers toi mon beau paradis." In a somewhat similar sense, the *beau paradis* that Wittig longs to reach is now the *turquoise vierge* that Cixous sees but cannot grasp. The intensity of Cixous' description and of her desire reflects the utopian nature of the state of turquoise because she wants it so desperately that she "sobs with rage," but cannot grasp it, not yet. To merit such desire and such a pouring out of that desire, the turquoise must be sublimely beautiful and precious. Out of this desire, Cixous attempts to reach the turquoise through kindling a flame from the tinder of her very soul, in the hope that the fire can reach across the distance: "Je brûle mon âme pour qu'une flamme parvienne plus haut, plus près, que moi, mais ce qui monte le plus haut plus haut plus près de la turquoise c'est la fumée, et les yeux pleins de larmes je sanglote d'espoir" (154-55). This description again emphasizes the intensity of her desire along with the desperation of failure because it is only the smoke that rises, not the fire. The repetition of "plus haut" and "plus près" expresses her insistent desire to reach higher and closer. She also includes another repetition of *sangloter*, though this time it does not result from rage but hope; it is "*sangloter d'espoir*." There is now hope of reaching the turquoise, understanding it, and becoming it. Her hope draws nearer to satisfaction in the phrase immediately following, for she perceives: "Le pourquoi de ma vie est une turquoise que je pourrais tenir dans ma main droite" (155). She understands here that the reason for her life—the "why"—is a turquoise that she could

hold in her right hand. Her use of the conditional tense, *que je pourrais tenir*, implies a hint of hope in that sense that this is an aspirational, ideal state, a not-yet but possible way of existing.

The way that Cixous speaks of this vision of the turquoise and its reflection of “le pourquoi” of her life reverberates with similarities to Dante’s beatific vision at the climax of *Paradiso*. This connection heightens the utopian resonance of her description; it characterizes the relation she describes and perceives in the turquoise as an expression of paradise. While Dante continually appeals to the muses for help, Cixous instead cries out to Mozart and Rossini to help her express number without gender and gender without limit: “Au secours Mozart, Rossini, au secours nombre sans genre, genre sans limite!” (161). Just as Dante labors to describe the sight of the Trinity, or how three distinct figures can exist concurrently within the form of one God,¹²⁰ Cixous struggles to describe how two gendered positions can coexist in the figures of Tancredi and Aménaïde. She perceives that Tancredi embodies the turquoise, is both blue and white and contains the blues of the night along with the whites of the morning, but she does not know how to express this subjectivity: “ce qui est plus qu’une femme, ce qui est plus qu’un homme, mais au-dessus de moi, tout étincelle et m’éblouit et se confond en une seule personne” (161). She emphasizes again here that the figure of Tancredi is a mixture that exceeds and overflows, *more than* woman and more than man. She then proceeds in a paragraph-length descriptive question to wonder how to name such a figure:

Comment s’appelle une personne qui semble plutôt une femme aux yeux bleu foncé, au regard glacé en apparence et à l’intérieur brulant, qui est large et imposante comme la nuit et des étoiles frottent leur petits museaux sur sa grosse poitrine et ferment les yeux d’amour, qui se bat comme un héros, donnerait sa vie comme une mère, et qui ne rêve pour un destin que d’amour, et qui enlève les forteresses plus facilement qu’un baiser, et sa voix est si grave et chaude et humide, on dirait la mer des larmes humaines et toute

¹²⁰ *Paradiso* XXXIII, lines 109-139. Dante describes in these lines near the end of the *Divine Comedy* how the vision of the three-part God is like seeing three colors that are simultaneously the same color and three circles that reflect each other like how rainbows reflect other rainbows. He then tries to explain the paradox of the figure of Jesus—both God and human in one being—as a geometer tries to “square the circle” (lines 133-139).

femme non liée par les nœuds du mariage, qui l'entend, éprouve le besoin ardent de s'y immerger? (161)

Cixous describes here a figure who appears like a woman but with blue eyes, meaning that she has a blue interior that reflects outward through her eyes, in a reversal of how the whiteness of Aménaïde reflects upon the external blueness of Tancrède, creating the turquoise. The figure Cixous describes here would be an incarnation of the turquoise through being white on the outside and blue on the inside. Cixous describes the figure with god or goddess-like proportions: “large et imposante comme la nuit,” and who brushes against the stars that adore her. She is both stereotypically masculine and feminine in that she is a “hero,” she is strong and conquering, yet gentle like a mother, with a voice that “sounds like a sea of human tears.” The mixture of attributes and metaphors once again serves to obscure any attempt at clear visualization and instead conveys a sense of the figure’s *being*, not her appearance. Even more interesting is that Cixous tells of the impression the figure makes, or the way one would feel in her presence. Women would be drawn to this genderless or mixed-gendered goddess for her allure is inescapable and every woman not already bound by marriage would feel the need to “immerse” themselves in her. The curious use of the verb *s’immerger* rings of water imagery, so dear to Cixous, of the depth and immensity of the sea as it is ever-changing and uncontainable. It also invokes Jewish religious practices of purification and cleansing.¹²¹ The relation it describes is slippery though just like that of the turquoise; it is not a simple combination, approximation, or adoration, but specifically the desire to be *in* this female figure. The *in* implied in *immerger*

¹²¹ Since Cixous draws from Biblical Old Testament imagery rather than New Testament Christian imagery of baptism, perhaps because she has in mind here something like *mikveh*, a ritual bath designed for purification in traditional Jewish law. There is special gendered significance of this practice related to impurity of the blood, as women were required to immerse themselves after menstrual periods and childbirth. Cixous complicates this idea though, as she speaks of a figure as if it were a body of water. This is somewhat similar to Biblical references to God as “living water,” like in Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13.

faintly echoes Dante's celestial en-verbed pronouns as well and seeks to articulate a similar relation with this goddess figure—what could be called an *in-her-ing* of the self. This description of a nebulous and desirable figure seems to foreshadow the figure of Promethea. Without explicitly naming her (or perhaps she is not yet *able* to name her), Cixous moves from the vision of Tancredi and Aménaïde to a figure that encapsulates their relational way of being. Having moved from her theories in “Le Rire” and “Le sexe ou la tête” to their poetic reformulation in “Tancredi continue,” Cixous then concludes the essay with a foreshadowed glimpse of the image of Promethea that would soon come at length in her next novel.

Cixous closes the essay on an even more personal note by lamenting with other women the state that they have been reduced to, “on est enfermées, on s'enferme, on s'enfemme” (164). With “on,” she echoes her movement to *nous* at the end of “Le Rire” and places herself among these women, as one who has also been imprisoned, enclosed, and “en-womaned,” or worse, who “en-womens” herself. She states at the end, “Le mot “femme” me retient captive” (168). Here at the other side of her reflection that began with the liberation of Jerusalem in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, she finds herself at the dream of *woman* delivered. While she is well aware of the forces who wage war over the possession of women, over the term “woman,” and over their physical bodies, she desires to exist otherwise—to be like Tancredi/Tancreda and Clorinde/Aménaïde who defy their allegiances to pursue a love that liberates them. To live the state of pure turquoise is to free the self from imprisonment (and self-imprisonment) in gender categories. To be *in* this state is to be free to overflow, transform, and become through a relationship that seeks and enjoys difference in the other. This is also a relation of love that defies all hierarchy, possession, and fear. These are truly things to dream of, as Cixous states: “ce sont des choses qu'il faut songer” (165). She writes one final time that Tancredi is able to

become-woman and become-other, become-turquoise specifically because of the difference of the process of love: “Ce n’est pas simplement le sexe / C’est comment aime l’amour” (167). This is then the conclusion: it is the difference of how *love* loves and how one can love or desire the process of loving-the-other. In an essay riddled with both questions and answers, or partial questions and imprecise answers, Cixous returns at last to the image of “plus haut,” that lofty space where the turquoise resides, which she could almost but not quite reach: “Plus haut, les questions ne suivent pas, il n’y a que des réponses” (168). This statement encapsulates Cixous’ conception of utopia as relation in the essay; it is a place where there are no more questions, only answers. It is not simply a version of the Christian conception of heaven nor even the Old Testament, original Garden of Eden or Earthly Paradise as a place free from sin. Cixous’ conception in *Tancredi continue* is more subtle, nuanced, and original through the specific relational dynamic it seeks to express. Just as she imagined Tancredi and Clorinde as both questions and answers, or as the answers to each other’s questions, so the realm of “plus haut” is a realm of perfect knowledge where each person finds the response to the question of their being through relationship with the other. It is the same space from which *écriture féminine* comes, a place of freedom, overflow, and plurality of selves. One could surmise then, following Cixous’ reference to Molly Bloom in “Le Rire,” that if utopia is a place of only answers, all of the answers must be Yes.

4. Loving the Other is Loving the Self: *Le Livre de Promethea* as a Book of Utopia

Cixous realizes her desire to write a vision of “woman delivered” in her 1983 novel, *Le Livre de Promethea*. In two meta-textual moments within the work, Cixous hints that she envisions the book as a feminized version of the Prometheus myth. She states in the middle: “je pense inéluctablement à l’auteur de *Prometheus Unbound* (130), and then near the end, she

writes that the provisional title for the work was *Promethea délivrée* (247). Despite these references, Cixous' revision of the myth is much larger than just casting the figure of Promethea as a "woman delivered" or positioning the book as a rewriting of Percy Shelley's 1820 lyrical drama (Shelley being the *auteur* that Cixous mentions).¹²² The "deliverance" in *Promethea* is much broader and imagines an entirely new figuration of female desire in keeping with Cixous' theorization of a feminine economy based on desire-that-gives. In the economy of Promethea, "liberation" is not freedom from or "power over" the other, but freedom *in* the other and "power to" move ever closer and know more deeply. This is a vision of deliverance through a fantastically intimate relation, and it presents an experience of utopia in, with, and through the body and being of the other as the desired result. Although Cixous employs Biblical imagery from the Old Testament and its vocabulary of deliverance, her conception of utopia (like in "Tancredi continue") is not a vision of salvation from sin in a New Testament sense or a restoration of prelapsarian existence in an Earthly Paradise like the Garden in the book of Genesis. It is not a specific place at all but a state of existence that proceeds from the relationship with Promethea. Part of what makes Cixous' conception so alluring and slippery is the way it draws imagery and vocabulary from both myths and biblical imagery and then uses them for its different purpose, in a continual process of re-vision and reappropriation. For Cixous, deliverance comes from and through the figure of the female goddess Promethea. *In* this way, *Le Livre de Promethea* is Cixous' full expression of the theoretical pieces of utopian relationality

¹²² The author she refers to here is Percy Shelley, who wrote a four-act lyrical drama called *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820. Shelley positioned his work as a reply to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. This is itself based on Hesiod's description of the titan Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven to give it to mortals. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to a mountain and ordered an eagle every day to devour Prometheus's liver, which always regenerated due to Prometheus' immortal nature and therefore condemned him to unending torture. In Shelley's poem, Prometheus is freed by Hercules and lives in peace with his love, Asia, while Zeus is overthrown, which ushers in a new era of peace for mankind.

from her earlier essays, collected together, revised where necessary, and re-visioned in the fictional figure of Promethea.

In the figure of Promethea, Cixous presents an answer to the “why of life” and incarnates her vision of utopian relationality. As in “Tancrède Continue,” the relation at the heart of *Le Livre de Promethea* enables the characters to be more than their gender, and like Wittig’s lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*, Cixous’ characters reciprocally explore and enjoy every part of themselves. Their interactions encompass a full range of transformations and Deleuzian becomings, even to the extent of becoming-animal. Cixous bends and plays with language in order to express this unconventional state that exists outside of normal linguistic structures. Like Wittig, Cixous frames the relationship as one of desire and passion, although Cixous qualifies that it is a relationship of “love,” meaning that it is based on her theorization of desire-that-gives. The relationship surpasses temporal and spatial boundaries, defies all demarcation of inside or outside, and opens the subjects up to infinity. Cixous even frames the book itself as a narrative of deliverance to be commemorated and as a prayer to be repeated and ritualized, in order to help others achieve such a state of being. The end result is that *Le Livre de Promethea* is a powerful and deeply utopian book that burns with the all-consuming but not destroying fire of the burning bush.

Fire is the foundational image that Cixous relies on throughout the book, and just as fire is slippery and constantly moving, so the narrative of the work flickers in and out of linear time and points of view. It can barely even be called a narrative since it functions like a centrifuge, swirling around the relation of the protagonists at its center in a constant effort to describe and to remain there. *Le Livre de Promethea* continues Cixous’ focus on the couple through depicting one relationship, but it does so in a kaleidoscopic fashion, considering the relationship from all

angles as it continually expands and stretches. The relation exists in an immediate present that is perpetually developing and enfolding before the narrator. The book lays a foundation for the continuation of Cixous' development of plural subjectivity by focusing on three characters involved in this relation: a narrating *je* or *I* who describes her writing process and the difficulty of writing the book as she struggles to write it; *H*, who is the narrator in the third-person, or the figure of the author seen from the outside as a character; and Promethea, a goddess figure who is the narrator's and H's lover. Right from her name, "Promethea" signals the promise of a goddess or female god, as "promet" plus "thea" implies. Due to the way that Cixous constantly oscillates between speaking positions and points of view, Jeannelle Laillou Savona divides the narrating *I* into at least "four different *I*'s": the *I* in love that addresses Promethea directly; the *I* of the numerous direct dialogues with Promethea that introduces an element of theatricality; the *I* of the character-narrator who describes the episodes and analyses the interiority of love by speaking about Promethea in the third-person; and finally, the *I* of the "meta-narrator who unceasingly comments on the relationship between story and narrative or narrative and narration" (620). This fragmentation of the *I* illustrates Cixous' preoccupation with and privileging of plural subjectivity; for the author of the book already "contains multitudes," and through her relationship with Promethea, she is further multiplied into more selves. Like both a goddess of fire and a thief who steals fire to bring it to mankind, Promethea helps the narrator to catch fire and to burn, and this time it is not only the smoke that rises, but the flames as well.

As the writer of the book, the narrator *je* states that her goal is to describe the other two characters as closely as possible: "Mon but est de glisser au plus près de l'être des deux vraies faiseuses, jusqu'à pouvoir épouser le contour de leurs âmes avec la mienne, sans cependant causer de confusion. Mais dans l'extrême proximité parfois nécessaire il peut toujours arriver

que deux je se touchent” (12). Here she positions the other two beings, *H* and *Promethea* as the “real makers,” whereas *je* is just the faithful observer and recorder of their relations and actions. With the statement, “jusqu’à pouvoir épouser le contour de leurs âmes avec la mienne,” she expresses her desire for an impossibly intimate relation, to “marry the contour of their souls.” This fantastical “extrême proximité” leads to the multiplication of selves and even creates the condition for their overlapping and co-mingling. Throughout this characterization of *je*, Cixous positions the narrator as acutely aware of her plurality and able to seamlessly transition between subject positions and points of view. The narrating *I* further explains how this *je* is herself a character, meaning that she is not an autobiographical *I*:

Quand je dis “Je”, ce n’est jamais le sujet d’une autobiographie, mon je est libre. Est le sujet de ma folie, de mes alarmes, de mon vertige. Je est l’héroïne de mes fureurs, de mes incertitudes, de mes passions. Je s’abandonne. Je m’abandonne. Je se rend, se perd, ne se comprend pas. N’a rien à dire de moi. Je ne ment pas. Je ne mens à personne. Je ne ment à personne, je le jure. (28)

In this description, Cixous speaks of “je” in an external way from a third person perspective as a character in the book. The narrator observes this “je” as an “other” and faithfully transcribes what she sees and learns. Cixous purposefully plays with grammatical convention here, using the construction “je est” instead of “je suis” to locate “je” simultaneously in the first and third-person subject positions. By so doing, Cixous forces the reader to ponder what it really means to speak of *I* as a she, like when she writes, “*I is the heroine...*” While the verb *être* is supposed to communicate a relation of equivalence, when Cixous writes, *je est*, she draws attention to the site of difference within the phrase. She establishes difference from within a construction of likeness. Cixous continues this proliferation of difference when she alternates between the first- and third-person constructions, “Je s’abandonne. Je m’abandonne.” The rapid succession that comes with, “Je ne ment pas. Je ne mens à personne. Je ne ment à personne” serves to question both subject

positions and destabilize them. The alternation functions much like Cixous' previous use of metaphor, for by saying "I does not lie. I do not lie. I does not lie," Cixous forces the reader to follow her as she weaves in and out of the singular and plural subject, whereby causing both to bleed together. *I* both does and does not belong to the self. In this way, Cixous demonstrates how *I* can be self and other simultaneously.

Even though the narrator at times refers to *je* as a third-person character, she more often refers to her external persona simply as *H*. In the opening pages of the book, the narrating *I* describes *H* as an author perhaps too fatigued to undertake the lofty task of writing the Book of Promethea:

J'aurais pu laisser la première page à H qui fut elle-même l'auteur de nombreux commencements de livres mais cette fois-ci ce serait peut-être trop lui demander...D'ailleurs, elle est aussi occupée en même temps à bruler les anciens livres, manuels, traités professionnels, volumes théoriques – parce qu'ils l'empêchent de faire la seule chose qu'elle trouve urgente et juste é faire désormais : pousser un grand cri hymnique de jouissance pour faire, dans le cuir de la vieille langue cornée, une trouée.
(12)

In this description, *H* is undergoing a transition from her past theories and writings to the present task. She is too involved in burning and destroying her old writings to begin this new piece, even though all she wants to do is write this *cri*, to shout "her loud hymn of ecstatic pleasure" (trans, 6). *H* often speaks in the first-person as well, creating what Savona labels as the "fifth *I*" (620). *H* explains in the opening pages that she is burning her old theories because previously she wrote about abstract concepts while now, she is surrounded by "reality in person:" "Qu'est-ce que je vais faire avec mes théories, si jolies, si agiles et si théoriques, maintenant qu'elles se voient entourées par la réalité en personne, en la personne précise de Promethea, alors qu'elles ne s'y attendaient pas" (12). Here *H* states that although her past ideas were lovely and agile, they were immaterial while Promethea *is* the material incarnation of those theories. *H* continues to lament

her past writing, making a direct reference to her theories of bisexuality in both “Le Rire” and “Tancredi:”

Toutes mes belle théories...mes championnes formées par moi avec tant de soin et de satisfaction, toutes. Depuis la première, celle de la bisexualité qui me donna toujours un peu de mal, jusqu’à la plus jeune, la plus souple, celle qui m’a portée en dansant sur un air de Rossini, d’un seul galop continu depuis Argel via Santiago jusqu’à Jérusalem. (13)

Cixous (through the voice of *H*) mentions her theory of bisexuality in “Le Rire” as one that had “always given her qualms” and then the one in “Tancredi” that had taken her dancing to Rossini’s music. These are both part of her writing pre-Promethea, or her process of intellectually grappling with concepts that now present themselves before her, realized in the body and being of Promethea. She now seeks to revise and even destroy them, for if Promethea is the culmination of those theories, she is the example of how to cultivate psychic bisexuality, subjectivity that surpasses gender, open-ended desire, and love that revives the other.

Besides being the narrator’s third-person self within the text, Cixous’ use of *H* opens up a range of further polysemic possibility, most obviously because *H* could represent the first letter of “Hélène,” her actual first name. This echoes the author-protagonist doubling of both *Virgile*, *Non* and the *Divine Comedy*, and it underscores the idea that the *Livre de Promethea* contains a description of an experience of a divine realm that the author has seen and seeks to retell. Just like *Dante* and *Wittig*, *H* undertakes the task of recording her experience in this realm, and she is acutely concerned with telling a story that is true: “Maintenant je veux raconter un peu une histoire vraie qui n’est pas inventée. C’est notre histoire. C’est nous” (57). She emphasizes the relational dynamic that underpins her experience by specifically saying that it is *notre histoire* and even *nous*—it is not only her story but *our* story. The *nous* she refers to here is the ensemble of Promethea and *H*, but also perhaps it implies the collective “nous” from the end of “Le Rire.” Like *Wittig* and *Dante*, the narrating *I* seeks to find the right words at the right times to express

the utopian relationship with Promethea. Much like how *Wittig* struggles through *Virgile, Non* to find the correct words to express her vision of paradise, so *H* seeks the right words: “Parce que je ne peux en parler qu’en usant de mots justes” (65). She also struggles against the weakness of language, lamenting the inability of her writing to convey the wonders of the experience: “Les choses les plus belles, on ne peut pas les écrire, malheureusement... les choses qui se passent sont trop belles pour être écrites” (67). If the experience of the relation with Promethea and a description of figure herself cannot be written, perhaps they can only be translated.

Unfortunately, even this proves to be a futile endeavor, for “Promethea est intraduisible” (32).

Unlike Dante, however, (and more like *Wittig*), *H* is still currently living the experience. She has not returned home from a sojourn to then remember and retell but tries to record it as it is happening; this immediate quality is one of her biggest obstacles. She struggles with her inability to record an experience that always out-paces her. Due to this, she states that the work must be a book of the present, “un livre de maintenant” (21). She even goes a step further to state that Promethea *is* the Present: “—Promethea est le Présent renversant que Dieu me fait. Renversée je reçois” (111). Here Cixous’ plays with the possible meanings of *renverser*. The two occurrences appear in the English translation as “astounding” and “astounded,” but the verb could also indicate an act of spilling, knocking over, overwhelming, turning around, turning upside down, or inverting. These shades of meaning communicate an experience of the present that is not only astounding but radically different, and that proceeds specifically from the figure of Promethea. Promethea *is* the changed present that changes everything and leads *H* to her own transformation in order to participate and partake of Promethea’s way of being. In her attempt to capture this present experience, Cixous states that the writing is always in a sense starting over, and the book is composed entirely of first pages: “Chaque page que j’écris pourrait être la

première page du livre. Chaque page est tout à fait en droit d'être la première page. Comment est-ce possible ?" (22). This continual sense of starting over gives the book a vertiginous quality and renders it almost like a stream-of-consciousness series of reflections rather than a narrative. Cixous' focus on beginnings, or on how to begin by continually beginning again throughout the book echoes her description of a "feminine text" from "Le sexe ou la tête:" "de commencer de tous les côtés à la fois, ça c'est de l'inscription féminine. Un texte féminin commence de tous les côtés à la fois, ça commence vingt fois, trente fois" (14). *Le Livre de Promethea* potentially begins hundreds of times in its effort to begin from all sides and all angles. In this sense, it showcases Cixous' effort of framing her own writing as a truly "feminine text." This is not to say that Cixous wants the text as "feminine" to read as unsure of itself, confused, rambling, or even worse, stuttering as it trips over itself in the effort to find appropriate words. These characteristics would only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about femininity and female nature as illogical and hysterical. Cixous is instead interested in the concept of continually beginning in its opposition to ending as a way to defy closure, entertain possibility, and seek difference. In this way, she formally frames *Le Livre de Promethea* as a continuation and demonstration of *écriture féminine*.

Apart from her focus on beginnings rather than endings, the work also consists of first pages because it attempts to describe eternity—an integral aspect of Promethea's *présent renversant* is the disruption and expansion of linear time. Upon reflection, *H* provides this explanation as the answer to her own rhetorical question cited above:

Parce que nous sommes dans l'éternité.
Nous. Promethea, moi, l'auteur, H, vous, toi, qui veut, qui nous aime, qui aime.
Ce livre est un ensemble de premières pages. (22)¹²³

¹²³ I set this in a block quote to mirror the spacing in the book, in which the lines look almost look poetry.

This description expands her *nous* from earlier to include also *vous*, the readers, the ones who desire and who love. She emphasizes the relational dynamic again here, for her being-with-Promethea takes place in “eternity.” The relationship is larger and wider than mere human experience, as Promethea lifts *H* into the realm of the divine. She further describes the relation in terms of inside vs outside, in yet another echo of the state that Dante implies with his en-verbed pronouns: “je veux parler de ce dont je ne sais pas si je saurai parler, je veux parler de l’intérieur, je ne veux pas en sortir” (26). She laments here the inability of her language to speak of “the interior,” by which she means the interior space of the relationship with Promethea and even the experience of being-inside Promethea. But since *H* knows that language describes from the outside and can only communicate an experience separate from itself, she must find a new way to describe the inside while still being inside. She is still living the experience, and she cannot extract herself from it nor set it apart to then analyze and describe it. She states this with the metaphor of a fish and the sea: “Je suis dans l’état douloureux d’une poissonne qui a décidé qu’il est temps maintenant de regarder la mer en face” (26). In this metaphor, *H* is the “womanfish” (trans. 18) and Promethea is the sea; in their relationship, *H* swims through Promethea and is fully engulfed by her. *H* asks this with one more rhetorical question: “comment faire pour être simultanément à l’intérieur et à l’extérieur?” (23). This quality of being concurrently outside and inside of herself and of Promethea characterizes *H*’s experience and Cixous’ intercorporeal structure of utopian relationality in *Le Livre de Promethea*.

The possible meanings evoked by *H* continue further past the authorial role, for as Cixous writes in *Three Steps of the Ladder of Writing* (1993), *H* is the graphic representation of two *I*’s connected by a line that “makes them vibrate” and “forms a passageway between two shores” (3). *H* is also the “stylized outline of a ladder” that the author climbs through writing and the

reader climbs as they follow (4). *H* contains a glimmer of Cixous' reflections on bisexuality in "Le Rire" and "Tancrede" as well because, as she writes in *Three Steps*, "the letter is granted uncommon favors in the French alphabet. If *A* is masculine, as is *B, C, D, E, etc.*, only *H* is masculine, neuter, or feminine at will. How could I not be attached to *H*?" (4).¹²⁴ Cixous uses *H* in order to draw on its alternatively gendered history as a letter, along with its graphic shape. She continues in *Three Steps* to reflect upon its sound and connotations: "Indeed, I write *H*, and I hear *hache* (axe). *H* is pronounced *ash* in French" (4). Both of these resonances are important in *Le Livre de Promethea*, for *hache* as *axe* represents "a cutting instrument to clear new paths" (*Three Steps*, 4), which aptly describes the relationship between the narrator and Promethea. The relationship, as *renversant*, creates a break with the narrator's past self and way of being and then forges for her a "new life." The idea of *H* as *ax* characterizes the way that she and Promethea interact, for just like Wittig's lovers, the couple engage in often violent-seeming acts of passion and pleasure. Like Wittig's lovers, this violence is not intended to hurt but rather to symbolize their wholly different mode of existence. The narrator describes this in a vision, "je me suis re-vue, j'étais penchée sur Promethea comme sur une hache prête à me frapper et déjà je sentais la fente diviser mon âme" (131). Here *H* likens Promethea to an ax, sharp enough to split her soul in two. In another passage, *H* calls out to Promethea to become this ax as she offers herself, ready and waiting upon a table: "O Promethea toi qui sais te transformer en petit être ou en grande être, suivant tes besoins, fais-toi hache et fends-moi, je suis ici, ici, sur la table" (105). In these moments, *H* is *hache* because she desires and receives Promethea as *ax* into herself. As

¹²⁴ According to the Académie Française's 9th edition dictionary entry for the letter *H*: "(se prononce *ache*) nom masculin invariable; Huitième lettre et sixième consonne de l'alphabet. *Un H majuscule. Un h minuscule.*" The 8th edition dating to 1935 lists "H" as feminine noun, while the 7th and earlier editions state that *H* can be either gender: "Lorsqu'on l'appelle *Ache*, suivant la prononciation ancienne et usuelle, son nom est féminin. *Une H (ache). Une grande H. Une petite h.* Il est masculin, lorsque, suivant la méthode moderne, on prononce cette lettre comme une simple aspiration. *Le H (he). Un grand H.*" See <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9H0001>

in *Le Corps lesbien*, the act of cutting is pleasurable and desirable; it is a way for each to give herself more fully to the other, to surrender herself and let herself be remade through the relation.

The related resonance of *H* as *Ash* has particular significance within the text of *Promethea* because, as the reader learns late in the text, this is the name that Promethea calls *H* when she addresses her directly or refers to her in the third-person and not simply as “You.”¹²⁵ Since Promethea is not only a thief of fire (as in the Prometheus myth) but also a goddess *made of fire*, *Ash* as a name functions as a description of the narrator’s experience of Promethea in the relationship. This is to say, *H* is burned through their passionate and pleasurable relationship, and she therefore exists in a continual state of ash, of being and having-been burned. The narrator signals this relationship in the book’s prologue passage when she writes: “J’ai un peu peur pour ce livre. Parce que c’est un livre d’amour. C’est un buisson de feu. Mieux veut s’y jeter. Une fois dans le feu on est inondé de douceur. J’y suis : je vous le jure” (9). Here she plays on the metaphor of fire as love or passion, and to be “in love” as to be “a burning bush.” Just as in the story in Exodus of the bush that burns but is not consumed,¹²⁶ the narrating *I* invokes this image to convey the both-and utopian nature of her relationship with Promethea. She is *in* Promethea just as the bush was burning, yet not destroyed. To be in Promethea and with Promethea is to be “inundated with sweetness.” The narrator reprises this image in the opening pages, repeating that this is “a book of love” that burns like fire: “c’est un livre d’amour...On doit s’y jeter. Une fois dans le feu, on est baigné de douceur” (21). In this repetition, she replaces “inondé” with a similar water-related image, “baigné,” which adds a shade of intimacy and tenderness through

¹²⁵ For example on p. 221. This passage is actually a “prière de Promethea” that she addresses to “mon dieu.” She references *H* as *Ash*, saying: “Faites que *Ash* continue à me transfigurer. Faites qu’elle m’invente comme il lui plait, jusqu’à la fin” (221).

¹²⁶ Exodus 3:1-22, which is the entirety of chapter 3.

the idea of “bathed” or “washed.” The image of the burning bush is an apt one for Cixous as well, since it speaks of a both-and relation not based on dominance or mastery. Rather, it upsets what could be an otherwise obvious relation of dominance and control: the fire that consumes and the bush that is consumed. Cixous uses this image as part of her strategy of upsetting traditional (masculine) logic based on giving that takes. The burning bush is, by contrast, an image of the gift-that-gives: the bush gives itself to the fire just as the fire comeslingles with the bush and both coexist together. No part is destroyed in favor of the other here, and more of one leads to more (and not less) of the other. As one of the defining images of *Le Livre de Promethea*, Cixous bases her vision of utopian relationality on the paradox of the burning bush.

The narrator then makes another metonymic shift from love as fire and fire as Promethea to Promethea as the book itself, for the book is also one of love and of fire: “D’ailleurs c’est le livre de Promethea. C’est le livre que Promethea a allumé comme un incendie dans l’âme de H” (21). With the titular phrase, “le livre de Promethea,” she implies both that it is a book *about* Promethea (or the book that Promethea lit within *H*), and that the book is physically made *of* Promethea, since *de* can mean both provenance and material. This implies a shift from *Promethea délivrée* to *Promethea livrée* (from *livre*), a Promethea-booked or en-booked. *H* emphasizes this latter interpretation when she writes of her process: “Je le rédige juste derrière le buisson ardent, à la lumière de ton brasier. Tu crépites doucement et je note” (31). By referring to Promethea as *tu* here, the narrator conflates the figure of Promethea with that of fire, as Promethea *is* the fire that *H* observes, and the book is the record of that burning. The narrator then moves from Promethea as fire to Promethea as the material of the book, meaning the substance on which and with which *H* writes: “on peut dire que le texte est fait d’elle pour la plus grande part, physiquement, moralement, nerveusement et surtout vertueusement” (11). She also

writes about how the process of composing the book is actually like writing on Promethea and with Promethea's body: "parfois le papier était en effet assez épais pour que je ne sente pas le sang couler sous la peau, sous le papier" (23). Here it is Promethea's blood and body that forms the very substance of the book, just like how Wittig spreads the lesbian body throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. Because the narrator writes the book with Promethea's blood, the narrator describes her writing process as a hemorrhage: "C'est une hémorragie. S'arrêtera quand plus une goutte de sang" (163). This conflation between the hemorrhage and the writing process casts it as a flowing out of words with the violence and urgency of blood rushing from the body. In the complex web of metaphors with which Cixous constructs her vision of utopia in this work, Promethea is paradise and being-with Promethea is paradise, and this experience of paradise comes like a hemorrhage. It could be appropriate then to use Wittig's phrase also for *Le Livre de Promethea*, that if *H* were to lose to vision of paradise, it would vanish "like a hemorrhage in reverse."

It is significant that Cixous, like Wittig, uses the hemorrhage image to express the liberated flow of language in paradise and language that is able to describe paradise. For Cixous it is a positive image of language unbound, of the satisfaction and success of writing the present as it is happening, and it contrasts with all her professions of frustration and limitation from "Tancredi" and earlier in *Le Livre de Promethea*. That Cixous also uses the image near the conclusion of the text is telling; while Wittig's "Angels' Kitchen" contains a hemorrhage of words as an expression of the intercorporeal sights, smells, and sounds of paradise, Cixous concludes her work with a sort of game that involves a hemorrhage of possible titles for the book that has just been written. In this game, which Cixous refers to as "Si-On-L'Appelait" (247), the trio of characters suggest possible titles for this book about and of Promethea, which range from

serious to silly. This final discussion starts when Promethea asks *H* why she no longer wants to title the work “Promethea Delivrée.” *H* replies that it is a beautiful title, but it is full of other stories and histories; it is not faithful enough to their own story. Promethea then suggests, “Promethea a disparu,” and the others interject to fill almost an entire page of the possible titles. This series includes suggestions like: “ – Promethea au Commissariat. – Promethea lit la Bible. – Non ! – C’était pour rire. – Promethea déménage. Promethea ouvre un restaurant. – Non, non. Promethea à gagné. –” (247). The exchange finally ends when they arrive at the appropriate title:

-- Ah j’ai oublié! : Promethea tombe amoureuse.
-- Tombe ?
-- Est. (247)

This *Est* is the final word of the book and leaves the ending deliberately open. As a modification of the earlier phrase, it means that Promethea *is* in love instead of Promethea *falls* in love, conveying the present and continuous characteristic of her love and relation with *H*. The fact that Cixous ends the book with the word *Est* on its own line also implies, in the sense of the independent phrase “Promethea is,” that she continues beyond the words of the book since she is life and fire, which cannot be contained and continue to overflow. In this way, the more Promethea gives of herself to *H*, the more immense she becomes and the greater *H* becomes.

Cixous writes positively about this open-ended style as characteristic of the “feminine” text in “Le sexe ou la tête.” In its defiance of closure, the feminine text expresses the boundless nature of the feminine economy, as Cixous theorizes it: “Un corps textuel féminin se reconnaît au fait que c’est toujours sans fin (f-i-n) : c’est sans bout, ça ne se termine pas, c’est d’ailleurs ça qui rend le texte féminin difficile à lire, très souvent...ça se poursuit et à un certain moment le volume se clôt mais l’écriture continue et pour le lecteur ça signifie le lancer à l’abîme” (14). The label “un corps textuel féminin” for this type of writing creates a direct connection to *Le*

Livre de Promethea, since Cixous frames the book as the actual body of Promethea, written with her blood on her skin. It could alternatively be called *Le Corps de Promethea*. The “textual body” as Cixous describes it is always without end—Cixous emphasizes this aspect three times, saying, “c’est sans fin,” “c’est sans bout,” and “ça ne se termine pas.” There is no specific end point, no closure—the feminine text is open-ended and therefore leaves the story and the writing open to the reader; as the English translation states, “for the reader this means being thrust into the void” (53). The *Est* as the last word of the book implies that while the volume stops, the actual writing, which is to say, the body, being, and experience of Promethea, continues. Promethea *is* and therefore Promethea continues even if words no longer follow after her. Since she *is* also in the loving relationship with *H*, this implies that the relationship continues far beyond the words of the book. As Cixous says many times within the text, the relationship is greater than her ability to describe it and it exceeds what she can contain within her words. The refusal of finality and closure at the end of *Le Livre de Promethea* relates to the idea of the hemorrhage as well because though the entire book is a vision of paradise-in-Promethea through a hemorrhage of language, this hemorrhage is not a way of losing but of giving.

These formal elements that make up Cixous’ book—her reference to and rewriting of the Prometheus myth; the allusion to Exodus’ burning bush; the trio of characters that ruptures binary interpersonal dynamics; the plurality contained within each one of those characters; and her endless use of metaphor and wordplay to describe their interactions—all work together to position this fictional work as a demonstration and revitalization of her past theories of bisexuality and plural subjectivity, and they show how these formal elements form the foundation for Cixous’ vision of utopian relationality in the work. The formal aspects position the work as a “feminine textual body” in figural and literal senses and create a vision of a utopian

relation that springs from the production of difference through the relation with the other. For Cixous, as for Wittig, the form is equally as important as the content; the “how” of her writing speaks just as loudly as the “what” or the type of relation and the continual becoming that she describes. In order to describe this fantastic relationship with Promethea, or in order to speak from both inside and outside at once, Cixous (through the narrating *I*), labors to invent new ways of speaking, new images that can describe the indescribable, write the untranslatable, and accomplish the impossible. She both draws attention to language’s limitations to describe such plural, fluid subjects, and then she plays on the spaces of difference to expand them. She thus navigates both the promise and the challenge of feminist utopian writing in *Le Livre de Promethea*, creating a powerful vision of language that gives power-to.

a. Deliverance and Salvation: Utopian Relationality in the Infinite “After” of Promethea’s Relation with *H*

While *Le Livre de Promethea* does not have a defined structure, Cixous does include pieces of description scattered throughout that recount the process of arriving at the relationship with Promethea. These descriptions give the impression of periods of time before and then after Promethea (in the ongoing present). These align with the religious undertones of the book and the sense of liberation in the provisional title, *Promethea Délivrée*. Cixous’ focus is not on the liberation of Promethea though but on *H*’s story, as a sort of every-woman figure. Promethea delivers *H* from her old life and way of being. Although there is not a definite “after” of the relationship since it expands into eternity and is continually unfolding, there is a “before” that the narrator describes. The way that she describes this before state as one of poverty, lack, and unfulfillment emphasizes the ideal, utopian aspects of the relational state that comes after. The life of deprivation and lack before Promethea represents the experience of woman *enfermée* and

enfemmée, but then the experience after represents the freedom that the relation with Promethea brings. In this sense, Cixous tells a story of the passage from bondage to freedom, with an underlying echo of the story of Moses delivering the Israelites in the book of Exodus that is the task he was given in the burning bush scene. The specific journey Cixous tells is one of discovery and transformation of the self through coming to knowledge of both Promethea and the self-with-Promethea. As in *Virgile, Non*, it is a story of reaching a state of paradise, and it triumphantly announces the advent of a new reality and way of living like in *Les Guérillères*. Utopian relationality for Cixous is then the answer to the problem of woman's place within patriarchy; it is the true *sortie* that brings freedom and happiness, as *H* discovers through Promethea's intervention in her life.

The narrator recounts the story of when Promethea came to her, referring to her previous life as one long "yesterday" before the present "today:"

C'est comme si j'avais mené ma vie dans les nuits jusqu'à quarante-cinq ans, depuis la première nuit jusqu'à hier, naturellement. J'avais mené ma nuit jusque-là, sans prévoir ni espérer ni désirer la fin de ma nuit, puisque j'étais aveugle, c'est comme si j'avais mené ma vie noire et glacée naturellement jusqu'à la nuit d'hier et soudain ce fut la dernière. Soudain, au lieu de la nuit suivante est venu le premier jour. Soudain je ne suis plus du monde noir. Soudain je ne suis déjà plus du tout du monde mien. (52-53)

In this description, the narrator struggles with how to remember and describe her past life because that experience is now so foreign to her. She relies on similes and metaphors to approximate her experience, and Cixous plays with the metaphors inherent in the idea and image of Promethea as fire—light, sight, and heat—by contrasting how *H* had lived her life as a series of endless nights. Cixous creates a distinct temporal shift by using the *imparfait* to describe her previous life as habitual and continual; the repetition of the phrase "c'est comme si j'avais mené ma vie...naturellement" illustrates her struggle with imprecise language and the way that previous way of living seemed "natural." She had lived the way she was supposed to, without

ever desiring anything different or even knowing there was a possible alternative. She reaches for various metaphors to help her description: she lived her life through nights; she was blind; she lived a black and a frozen life. Then, with the repetition of “soudain,” she introduces the sudden transformation of her life. She signals the end to the previous way of life with the *passé simple*: “soudain ce fut la dernière.” This “ce fut” rings of finality and closure; it cuts like an ax to break with the old way of life. Even the pronunciation forces an exclusion of air from the mouth in a slight imitation of pushing away of the old life. It is abrupt and short in contrast to the softness of the *imparfait* of “j’ avais” and “j’ étais” that give a sense of going along with the flow of life, of sameness. Even the elision between “je” and “avais” or “étais” signals her absorption into that way of living; she *was* that way of living. Suddenly then, the beginning of this new life brings an end to her interminable series of nights, like the breaking of day that ends her cold, dark, and blind experience. She marks the transformation here with another shift in verb tenses that moves from the *passé simple* of “ce fut la dernière” to the *passé composé* of “est venu le premier jour” and finally the arrival in the present reality with “je ne suis plus.” She moves through the past tenses and arrives to speak of herself in the present. Even more, she implies that this present precedes her and stretches out before her with the phrase, “je ne suis déjà de tout du monde mien.” With the use of “déjà,” she says that she is “already” here, already changed. Paradoxically, although she has just arrived in the life of Promethea, she has already been here for some time. This emphasizes how time in this new reality functions differently. She emphasizes this alternative temporality by writing: “j’y suis, tremblante pour toujours d’étonnement” (53). The phrase “j’y suis” here echoes her description of being in Promethea like in the burning bush, and it once again destabilizes the correlative function of the metaphor. When she uses *être* to liken the subject to a place or space, implied by the pronoun *y*, this could

mean either “I am *in* it” or “I am *there*” in a spatial sense, or alternatively “I *am* (that place).” This latter sense heightens the relational dynamic in her experience of Promethea—she is no longer a dark night but has become a new day. She is with and within Promethea just as she *is* Promethea.

Along with the language of passing from one period of life to another, Cixous includes a description of her emotional state in this new life that contrasts the joy of this new life with the previous emptiness: “Je suis prise de bonheur, de vertige, de lumière. Mais moi maintenant je veux prendre le feu dans mes mains, moi je veux caresser mon corps, moi je veux commencer à espérer et désirer le jour qui m’a surprise, je veux aller à la rencontre du monde qui m’est survenu” (53). She describes herself in this new state of being as full of joy, vertigo, and light; it is a pleasurable state but also overwhelming in its newness. She emphasizes the reciprocal nature of this relation by first speaking about herself in a passive way, “je suis prise,” but then asserting her desire, “Mais moi maintenant je veux prendre...” The four-fold repetition of “moi je veux” emphasizes how this new relational state empowers her to desire and to express her desire. She underscores this further when she says, “moi je veux commencer à espérer et désirer,” which acts as a reversal of her description of the previous “night” where she could not imagine or anticipate the end of that night. Now by contrast, she wants to hope for and desire the day that has come and continually comes. She also curiously states: “je veux caresser mon corps,” which signals perhaps a newfound knowledge of and appreciation for her own body, or maybe it implies an awareness of the intercorporeal relation with Promethea-as-other and as self. The “mon corps” here could be the body of Promethea, which *H* now refers to as her own. The coming of this new day and this new world then represents the restitution of herself in the form of both her desire and her body.

The narrator describes this new life in terms of renewal and revitalization by explaining that her body along with her sense of self have been remade. At first, she seems strange to herself, but this is only because Promethea has so thoroughly changed everything:

Tu changes tout, bien sûr. Le monde n'a plus les mêmes proportions qu'hier puisque tu en es la nouvelle mesure. Mais moi ? Je me suis étrange... Cette nuit j'ai soudain compris que je devrais changer toutes les pièces de mon être, pas seulement tourner mon regard vers un nouveau monde et le découvrir, mais remplacer un à un chacun de mes anciens organes. A commencer par mes mains. J'ai commandé de nouvelles mains, pour te caresser et t'écrire, des mains à ta mesure. Je les attends. (54)

Cixous describes here how, in the new day and relationship with Promethea, the world expands to fit Promethea's proportions. This is a wholesale transformation of being, and not just the turning of her gaze to a new world. *H* instead must become this new world, through a transformation of her body along with her sense of self. This process is active and requires her participation in remaking her body. Her statement that she must replace "chacun de mes anciens organes" creates a surprising resonance with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the body without organs. The story of deliverance that Cixous' is telling aligns with their theory though since *H* describes how she must learn to live otherwise, outside of the system and mode of life she previously knew. Just like Wittig's lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*, Cixous' narrator here must be remade; she must replace her old organs and their reified ideologies and with new, differently sized ones that enable her to live this new life, inhabit its space, and co-exist with Promethea. Her body is as much a part of the writing process as her mind, for she desires new hands with which to caress and write Promethea. Her use of the verb *caresser* connects back to her declaration of her desire to "caresser mon corps," and it further emphasizes the conflation between her own and Promethea's body.

Cixous continues this poetic description of transformation in typical fashion by sliding through a series of other metaphors, casting Promethea as both thirst and water that satisfies the

thirst. She uses these opposing ideas as a way to transition into a reflection on her desire *for* Promethea: “Tu me donnes soif, Promethea, ma rivière, tu me donnes la soif éternelle, mon eau. C’est comme si j’avais passé ma vie dans une vieille maison de boue séchée, moi-même si sèche, que je n’avais pas en moi la moindre soif d’une soif, jusqu’à hier” (55). Through the metaphors of Promethea as river and as water, the narrator describes how Promethea has awakened in her the thirst, which is pleasurable. She paradoxically describes Promethea as water that creates the thirst for water, and this thirst is itself evidence of her newfound ability to desire. She then speaks of her experience as that of the desert, and herself as the desert: “Je sais seulement: je ne pouvais te rencontrer que sortant d’un désert, ma source. Moi-même déserte. C’est bien” (55). She refers to Promethea here as “ma source,” which the English translator renders as “my oasis.” “Source” has a range of connotations though, and Cixous plays on the more nebulous possibilities of “origin” or “place of beginning,” since the book is itself a series of beginnings. Promethea as “the source” is also the place from which desire and life spring forth. *H* continues this metaphor of her parched self, speaking of how the smallest drop of water from Promethea felt to her like a storm: “Mais après le désert, le plus mince filet d’eau retentit comme un orage...Moi je ne fais qu’écrire la pluie. Promethea est la pluie” (55). Here Cixous expands the metaphor of Promethea as river and oasis to Promethea as rain, and *H*’s task then to “write the rain.” This entire series of metaphors works to describe the coming-of-Promethea as the breaking of a storm and the falling of rain over a parched desert. The state of being-with Promethea is like being inundated by water and continually being in the rain. Just like in *Le Corps lesbien*, here Promethea *is* the water for the narrator; she both creates the thirst and satisfies that thirst.

Cixous expands the idea of her desire for Promethea to a larger reflection about wanting to always *want* what she has, whereby emphasizing the utopian quality of the relation with

Promethea that perpetually satisfies her. She writes: “Laisse-moi vouloir et revouloir ce qui m’est arrivé. Sinon je ne pourrai jamais écrire le livre de Promethea” (53). This is a defining characteristic of Cixous’ conception of utopian relationality, for while the relation *is* the utopia, the relation also creates the desire for the relation and simultaneously satisfies that desire. All of this negates the hierarchy of desire that exists in patriarchal logic, especially for women, where desire is based on lack—since woman can only ever desire what she does not have, and it is precisely lack that creates the condition for desire. Cixous reverses this in the *Le Livre de Promethea* and envisions a new way of desiring what one has. It is a circular and endlessly renewable process instead of a linear one based on possession and consumption. she. The narrator speaks of wanting to always want what she has in the sense that Promethea is the “Yes,” or the answer to and the satisfaction of all that she desires: “Est aussi une Oui. Oui à tout ce que je veux. A tout? Oui. A tout ce que je veux poursuivre, essayer, éprouver. Oui. C’est pour cela qu’en passant par elle j’arrive à l’infini” (179). Promethea is the divine figuration and the incarnation of Cixous’ theory of saying yes. She is the answer to the “why of life.”

The paradox of having what one wants and wanting what one has is the subject of a section of Cixous’ essay, “The Author in Truth,”¹²⁷ where she reflects on a series of works by Clarice Lispector that deal with “the question of having, of knowing how to have what one has” (158). Cixous’ descriptions of Lispector’s writing could apply equally to *Le Livre de Promethea* and show how central this theme is to her thought. She writes that it is “one of the most difficult things in the world” to avoid the “demon” of “always-having more” (158). This logic works in an infernal way, for as soon as someone (she) has, she moves on to the desire for something else (something absent), whereby disregarding the present reality and reaching instead towards an

¹²⁷ I have only been able to find an English version of this essay.

infinity of emptiness, which actually “returns her to zero” (158). Cixous writes that “having what we have is the key to happiness,” and this “having” requires a specific knowledge and effort to recognize and be grateful (158). In order to continue living this way, “a present must be invented that will not stop presenting itself,” (160), where one repeatedly stages and re-stages the having. The narrator in *Le Livre de Promethea* is acutely aware of the need to continually desire what she has, and she seeks to cultivate this specific knowledge and gratitude.

Cixous further describes this in “The Author in Truth” through the image of the lover as “already the lover who savors the wait and the promise, happy already to have something to enjoy, happy that there is, in the world, the to-be-enjoyed, the world that is the book of promises” (160). The use of “already” here connects back to Promethea, along with the invocation of the promise that is Promethea. *Le Livre de Promethea* is (in an almost literal way) a “book of promises,” and so Cixous frames it as the story of lovers who savor their relation and their happiness, along with the promise that this relation will endure. Cixous continues her description in “The Author in Truth,” adding that this state of wanting what you have is a miracle:

One can really have only if one knows how to have in a way that does not destroy, does not possess. The secret: remembering at every instant the grace of having. Keeping in this having the breathless lightness of hoping to have. Barely having after not having had. Always keeping in oneself the emotion of almost not having had. Having is always a miracle. While having, rediscovering endlessly the surprise of receiving. The illumination of arrival. (160-61)

This description connects directly back to the relation in the *Le Livre de Promethea*, where the narrator desires to remember her life before so that she can endlessly savor the present state of having in contrast to the memory of having-not-had. The narrator tells this to Promethea, in the same language of grace: “—Parce que je t’ai, je peux te vouloir, je te veux...Je veux que tu me sois toujours accordée comme la première grâce” (244). Here the fact that she *has* Promethea

allows her to be *able to want* and *to want* Promethea. Promethea acts as a center for *H*, and *H*'s relation of being-with Promethea resists any centrifugal force that would push her away. *H*'s act of wanting maintains the having in a perpetual state of grace—she wants to remember that the relation with Promethea is a precious gift. She again declares her desire near the end of the book, speaking directly to Promethea: “Je veux ce que j’ai eu, je veux ce que j’aurai...je ne veux pas dire non, je ne veux rien fuir, je veux te vivre” (231-32). The insistent repetition of “je veux” emphasizes how the relationship with Promethea enables *H* to speak of her desire. Her temporal shifts from *j’ai eu* to *j’aurai* reinforce the sense of eternity in the relation with Promethea, for the narrator wants what she has had in the past and what she will have. She indicates her openness and willingness to receive the other; she wants to not say no, to not close herself and not deny the other but instead to “live her.” To be-with Promethea is to *live* within and through Promethea. The story of liberation in *Le Livre* is one of passing from the darkness and coldness of night to the light of Promethea’s day, and this eternal day is the experience of utopian relationality as Cixous envisions it. In the relation, *H*'s desire is infinitely satisfied and renewed to want that which it has and what it will have.

b. You Shall tell Your Story: *Le Livre de Promethea* as Testimony, Guide, and Ritual

Cixous underscores the narrative of deliverance, or the passage from bondage to freedom, which runs through the text of *Le Livre de Promethea* with the insertion of the word, *Haggada* (*Haggadah* in English). This only appears two times in the text, on pages 85 and 160,¹²⁸ at roughly one-third and then two-thirds of the way through the book. Each time it occurs, the word acts like a brief interruption in the narrative—it is italicized and has an entire line to itself with two blank lines above and one blank line below. This creates both a visual and conceptual pause

¹²⁸ These correspond to pages 69 and 139 in the English.

in the text; the ample white space surrounding the word on the page reads like a deliberative break, perhaps an exhaled breath or a sigh, in the speaker's otherwise constant stream-of-consciousness narrative. The term *Haggadah* is a Hebrew noun that means "a telling," in the sense of a story of tale, and it is derived from the verb *lehigid* meaning "to tell, say, or declare."¹²⁹ An imperative form of *Haggadah* appears in Exodus 13:8, which reads: "You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt' " (13:8).¹³⁰ The phrase "You shall tell," creates the commandment within *Haggada* to perform the act of telling the story of how the Lord liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (as told in the *Torah* books of Exodus and Numbers).¹³¹ The telling is a testimony to, celebration of, and expression of gratitude for God's fulfillment of his promise to the people of Israel. In addition to naming the act of telling and the story that is told, *Haggadah* contains a third meaning as the name for the written guide to the Passover Seder, or the Jewish ritual commemorating the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. This ritual remembers the Israelites' enslavement and then gives thanks to God for deliverance and redemption. The *Haggadah* as guidebook is composed of many parts: prayers, blessings, fables, songs, and instructions in minute detail for how to perform the liturgy of the Seder. *Haggadah* is then both the act of telling, the story told, and the book that instructs how to tell.

Cixous plays with this tri-part meaning of *Haggadah* in the text; each time the word appears, it functions like a single stone dropped into a pool of water, rippling its connotative potential, subtly yet significantly, through Cixous' act of telling and the tale told. Formally, the

¹²⁹ I'm grateful for the input of my friend and scholar of Jewish history and culture at Yeshiva University, Brad Avrahami, throughout this section.

¹³⁰ Bible verse references in this section are from the English Standard Version translation.

¹³¹ For more info, see "Passover: The Haggadah" on the Virtual Jewish Library.

capital *H* that begins the word recalls *H* the character, perhaps to establish yet another metonymic connection within the authorial persona as the recipient of divine deliverance. Since *H*, as the author and lover of Promethea, is living a story of liberation all while laboring to tell it, she is the embodiment of *Haggadah*; she *is* the story of freedom and the act of writing it. Her act of telling also specifically refuses the patriarchal underpinnings of the Jewish tradition—the lineage of a male God delivering his people through the intervention of Moses, the male hero, which is then recounted as a story from father to son and performed at the Seder by the male patriarch or head-of-the-family. Cixous’ use of *Haggadah* causes this chain to implode since she uses the word improperly or “out of place” as a woman speaking to other women, telling of deliverance by a female goddess.¹³² Her usage of the term both serves to emphasize that her story contains echoes of the Israelites’ passage from slavery to freedom (and again the relation to the burning bush), even as throws the term’s meaning and history into question.

Along with her references to a “new life” and new way of living with Promethea, Cixous emphasizes the serious nature of her story of transformation and deliverance in the two appearances of *Haggada* by surrounding it with discussions of death. In the first appearance, the term comes after Promethea and *H* are talking about having “a taste for death” and death as a gift that they can give each other. The exchange immediately preceding the *Haggada* reads:

Tu m’as donné un gout de mourir.
-- Tu voulais mourir ?
-- Je n’avais pas besoin de mourir. Je mourais.

Haggada

¹³² This quoted phrase is from Brad Avrahami, in our correspondence, who wrote that the term *Haggadah* is “very specific to the Passover celebration and would feel out of place in any other context.”

The juxtaposition here of “Je mourais” before *Haggada* heightens the religious resonance of the term—as the commemoration of the passage from an old life to a new life, in a figurative sense of death and rebirth.¹³³ Cixous departs from the Torah account of course, since her story of deliverance is occasioned and catalyzed by the coming of Promethea, not God-the-Father of the Jewish faith coming to Moses who then comes to the Israelites. Cixous is also aware that it is in the episode of the burning bush in Exodus where Moses receives the commandment from God to liberate his chosen people. In Cixous’ revision of the story, Promethea takes the role of God and *H* assumes the role of Moses. In Exodus 3:4, God calls to Moses from within the bush, and Moses answers, “Here I am.” Cixous’ repeated use of the phrase “J’y suis” throughout the text echoes this phrase. God then commands Moses to not come any closer because the ground is holy, and he gives Moses a long list of instructions from a distance. Cixous changes this part of the narrative, since she uses “j’y suis” to mean “here I am, in it,” meaning that she is actually within the fire itself, “bathed in sweetness.” In this way, Cixous creates a closer connection than that of the Exodus story. As already stated, her *H* is *Ash*—she who is burned within the bush but not destroyed. She exists within the burning reality of Promethea and writes from within, or “écrire le feu dans le feu” (160, in the lines preceding the second *Haggada*.)

The two appearances of *Haggada* also position *Le Livre de Promethea*, the book itself, as a guide to celebrate the ritual of remembrance like in the Passover Seder. This casts the book not only as *H*’s individual story but the story of an entire people. Just as in the Passover Seder—which asks participants to see themselves in the story, or to understand it as their own story since

¹³³ The second appearance of *Haggada* (p. 160) is slightly different and contains a reference to death immediately after in a more mythological than biblical sense. Cixous mentions the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the story of the latter leading the former out of inferno by the hand, looking and smiling back. So Cixous rewrites this myth in this moment and is perhaps creating a connection between *Haggada*, the telling of the Biblical story of deliverance with the Orphean story of deliverance. In the broader story of Promethea and *H*, Promethea takes the position of the god (Orpheus) and travels to the underworld to free *H* (as Eurydice).

they are the descendants of the people of Israel—so Cixous frames her story so that readers can tell it as though it happened to them. Although she tells a specific story in *Le Livre de Promethea*, she encourages her readers to find themselves in it and to add their own voices. In the final pages of *Le Livre de Promethea*, Cixous emphasizes this idea when the trio of characters reflects on how to conclude the book (before their game of “Si-On-L’-Appelait”). First the narrator states: “J’ai dit : -- Cela n’est pas le livre qui prend fin. C’est une nouvelle vie qui commence” (246). Promethea is not content to let those words be the last though and so she continues to list things she wants to give *H*, things to still be included in the book. The narrator describes this:

Promethea a continué à enfile des rêves ravissants sur son fil magique. Elle m’a fait un collier vraiment apaisant.

C’est pourquoi j’aimerais que le livre de Promethea “finesse” ici, comme ça: tout le monde peut essayer le collier; et on peut ajouter tout ce qu’on voudrait bien recevoir.

Promethea se demande si ça peut se faire de “finir comme ça”.

-- Cela ne dépend que de *vous* maintenant. (247)

The *vous* here speaks directly to the reader and encourages them to take this book, this necklace of stories and dreams, and make it their own. It is their *Haggadah*, and they can add their own voice through reading and finding themselves in the story of liberation. The story is never really over since it is made to be continually retold and relived (just as the physical book does not end here but continues for another page of the possible titles). Even more, the narrator and *H* are still living the story as it is unfolding, eternally and continually. At the conclusion of *Le Livre de Promethea*—where the words stop but the story continues—it is up to the readers to take the book as their own story and as a guide to live into the freedom that *H* enjoys with Promethea. It is a model—informed by images of Judaism even as it re-visions those images—for how to create one’s own liberation through utopian relationality, this both-and relation that defies hierarchy, inside vs outside, and the bounds of gendered language. It is an invitation to open the

self to the other, the seek out difference that makes both the other and the self live, and to embrace the promise of a new life.

c. *Je t'aime avec tous mes liquides: Paradise as an Intercorporeal State of joy*

While Cixous' narrator describes the before and after of the coming of Promethea into her life in *Le Livre de Promethea*, she spends much of the book trying to describe the current moment as she is living the relation with Promethea. This focus on the present dynamics of their being-together reveals the intercorporeal nature of the relationship as a communion of bodies and souls, a giving of the self to the other without fear of losing, and an overwhelming state of joy and pleasure. Cixous foreshadows this ecstatic state in the work that precedes *Le Livre de Promethea*, which is titled *Limonade: tout était si infini* (1982), where she specifically describes paradise not as a place but as a “state of joy:”

Et alors, à la fin du livre, elle en avait appris un secret : c'est que « avoir » le paradis, n'est pas impossible ; parce que « être au paradis », ce n'est pas y avoir son domicile ; c'est savoir qu'on peut y retourner. Même pendant la guerre.

Parce que c'est seulement au commencement que le paradis était un jardin avec une adresse précise. Mais depuis, il peut avoir lieu partout, à n'importe quel moment, il faut travailler et se battre pour lui donner lieu. C'est un état de joie qui s'étend tout le long de la vie des personnes qui ont la force d'être sauvage, des femmes pour la plupart. (72)

Cixous tells here of an “elle” who is in the process of writing a book, and at the end of this work, this author learns about the nature of paradise—that it is not a garden (like the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis) with a fixed address nor a place that one can “have.” In keeping with her theory of a feminine economy based on dis-possession and giving instead of taking, Cixous describes paradise here as a non-commodifiable state of being. To “be in paradise” is not to make a permanent home there since paradise is a fluctuating state that one must create and maintain. Paradise can take place anywhere, any time, but it takes effort and desire to remain there. It is necessary to fight for it and to be “savage” in a way that lends itself to not-exclusively

but most often to women. The “savagery” that Cixous mentions here as to do with existing outside of the established norms and breaking with society’s standards and expectations. It implies some of the wildness that takes place in *Le Livre de Promethea* as well, as a way of illustrating the “savagery” of their desire for one another and their alternate way of living. Cixous continues her description of Paradise in *Limonade*, reiterating that it can exist for those who desire to be there: “Très proche et très difficile d’accès en réalité. Parce que ce n’est pas le paradis qu’on perd; c’est le désir d’y être, que la guerre arrive à nous faire oublier. Car l’état d’être-au-paradis, qui semble si simple quand on y est, cet état demande la grande intelligence première, celle qui pense et comprend de l’autre côté de l’oubli et de l’impensé...” (72). Echoing her thoughts from “The Author in Truth,” Cixous states here that it is not paradise itself that one loses but the desire to be there. For if utopia is not a place or an object, but a “state of joy,” one can live this state only as long as one maintains the desire for the state. This idea also relates back to the narrator’s words in *Le Livre de Promethea* about continually wanting to want what she has; as long as she can continue to want Promethea and her life with Promethea, she will have Promethea and the state-of-joy that is their paradise.

Just as Cixous describes in *Limonade*, paradise or the state of being-in-paradise happens in *Promethea* through desire. It is desire that creates, realizes, and sustains this state. *H* understands this but continually worries about how to maintain both her desire and her relation in this state, because she perceives the enormity of desire required. She worries that her desire is not large enough or strong enough because the state-of-paradise is so much larger and greater than her. She repeatedly asks for “superhuman” strength so that she can endure such pleasure and continue to desire it: “Donne-moi la force de subir une si surhumaine jouissance” (50). She continues to explain how living in paradise requires extra-human strength: “Vivre vivante au

paradis exige un travail surhumain (sinon angélique). En vérité c'est être en train d'arriver au paradis qui est pur paradis. Ensuite si on veut rester, c'est tous les jours l'impossible qu'il faut à nouveau accomplir" (75). As a way of expressing her present reality, the narrator says here that "constantly arriving at paradise" is paradise. This echoes Francis Bartkowski's theorization of feminist utopia as process instead of one specific destination. Since the destination for Cixous' narrator is Promethea and the relation with Promethea, to say that she is continually arriving casts the relation as cyclical and atemporal. It has always already happened and is still happening. Living this perpetual arrival seems impossible for one still alive, like *H*, yet she must summon the strength to accomplish the impossible. The narrator then reflects, echoing the words of *Limonade*, that the impossible requires constant thought, desire, and yearning: "Parce que pour faire vivre un paradis, il faut sans cesse y penser, le re-vouloir, tous les jours l'arroser de larmes et s'y promener en le louant et l'encourageant. Il n'y a pas de paradis qui tienne sans l'apport du tendre souci quotidien" (75-76). In this characterization, the state of joy is delicate and requires to be desired and re-desired every day. While it is desire that maintains and sustains the relational utopia in *Le Livre de Promethea*, it is intercorporeality that characterizes the experience of this state of joy. Throughout, Cixous describes the intimate relations between the protagonists in visceral, graphic language that brings to mind Wittig's lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*. Given their different theoretical positions that result from their essays, the striking similarity of their fictional visions of relational utopia is arresting. It shows that utopian relationality as the dream of an intercorporeal state that leads to a radical subject position and freedom in general is a shared objective. Like Wittig's *j/e te suis tu m// es irréversiblement*, Cixous paints a picture of merging of bodies between *H* and Promethea, where each is fully themselves and fully the other: "et nous n'avons alors qu'une poitrine, l'une est dans l'autre, l'une est l'autre," (65). Cixous

speaks here of both *H* and Promethea as *l'une* and *l'autre*, so that it is unclear which is which (or to put it alternatively, they both are both).

The portrayal of love and being-together that Cixous creates is an embodied one; although the precise form of the “body” is difficult to discern throughout the text due to Cixous’ copious metaphors and endless strings of images, the protagonists still express their desire for each other in bodily terms. Giving their body is a part of giving their selves. In one moment, the narrator remembers how Promethea once described her love for *H* in physical terms:

‘je t’aime avec tout ce qui est corné en moi, avec chacun de mes ongles, et avec chacun de mes poils, et avec chacun de mes cheveux,
‘je t’aime avec tous mes liquides, avec mes sangs de plusieurs couleurs, avec ma sueur et ma urine, avec ma morve et ma salive’ (56).

Just like with Wittig’s lovers, this declaration of passion encompasses things that are traditionally considered ancillary to love or even disgusting, like one’s liquids, urine, multi-colored bloods, and sweat. Promethea declares here that she loves *H* with her body, with all that makes up her body, down to her fingernails and her hairs. In another moment, the narrator describes how they are inseparable:

Parce que rien ne les empêche de se contempler, se devisager, s’aimer,
s’approcher, se toucher, s’éteindre,
se prendre, s’épouser, se confondre, s’avancer l’une dans l’autre, en tremblant
l’une dans l’autre, en trébuchant dans l’autre, en s’enfonçant dans l’autre, en
s’immergeant, en se noyant,
car rien plus rien ne les sépare, il y a du temps, il y a du lieu, il y a du jour et de la
nuit, il y a du corps, il y a du sang. (198)

Here there is a long series of reflexive verbs, then the present participle (the -ant forms), along with the repetition of “l’une dans l’autre” and just “dans l’autre,” which all work together to emphasize intercorporeality of the relation, or their ways of being in the other and one with the other. Their relation encompasses the entire spectrum of verbs just as it includes every part of their bodies, and this aspect recalls how Wittig includes various actions as part of “the lesbian

body.” In *Le Livre de Promethea*, each immerses herself in the other, swims through her waters so deeply that nothing can separate them. Cixous’ shift from the series of verbs to the repeated “il y a” in the last phrase gives a sense of abundance, that there is always more, there is time and place and day and night and body and blood. There is Promethea and there is paradise.

In another echo of *Le Corps lesbien*, the narrator describes their relations as a “state of mutual invasion:” “Notre drame c’est que nous vivons en état d’invasion mutuelle” (67). In a passage structured like the fragments of *Le Corps lesbien*, where one character addresses the other as-tu, Cixous’ *je* describes how *tu* enters and spreads through her body: “Tu entres en moi par ma peau, par perfusion, de tous les traits, tu passes en moi grain à grain... Tu arrives au fond. Entièrement. Toi tout entière et jusqu’aux entrailles de mon corps et jusqu’aux entrailles de mon âme, c’est ainsi. Tu viens, et je te cède. Je ne peux pas ne pas te laisser entrer en moi, de toute ta présence large et chaude” (86-87). Here *je* describes how *tu* diffuses herself through the entirety of her body until she reaches the depths (au fond). In this fantastic intermingling, all of *tu* moves within all of *je*, and *je* allows her to enter and even cannot *not* allow her. This picture of their relations paints the “mutual invasion” as a deeply pleasurable and intimate act, like that of *Le Corps lesbien*, a way of giving oneself entirely to the other and being known by the other.

Cixous emphasizes the extremely intimate proximity of these relations:

C’est ainsi que je te veux : plus grande et plus petite plus forte et plus faible plus haute et plus tremblante plus haletante qui moi plus brulante plus pénétrante plus hardie et plus impérieuse plus ployante plus effrayée plus étroite plus acharnée qui toi plus qui moi.

Afin de plus profondément plus tendrement te renverser en moi mon enfant poignant, afin de mieux tomber en moi à ma renverse. (88)

Here the repetition of “plus” creates an emphasis on more and ever more. Like Wittig’s series of words without punctuation, Cixous expresses the immediacy and impatience of the narrator’s desire; the series of qualities with *plus* gives a sense of breathlessness, of expanding in all

directions, surpassing *toi* and *moi* and both simultaneously. The repetition of “more” expresses once again Cixous’ feminine economy of giving-that-gives, where more creates more. Even the contrasting pairs here, “plus grands et plus petite,” “plus forte et plus faible” work to destabilize the sense of binary distinction they normally uphold, for the way that Cixous writes them in quick succession conflates all of these qualities in the body and being of Promethea. For Promethea can be both large and small, weak and strong simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical nature that characterizes her divinity and her femininity. The last statement emphasizes that all of these qualities work together so that Promethea can more profoundly and more tenderly “pour” or “spill” herself into *H*. Cixous’ use of the verb *renverser* here, (“te renverser en moi”), reprises her earlier use to speak of Promethea as “le Présent renversant” and the narrator as “Renversée je reçois” (111). Cixous similarly plays on the passive vs. active senses of this verb here, where both parties are the acting subjects and the objects acted-upon in the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Just as Promethea spills herself into *H*, so *H* spills herself into Promethea.

There is a violent aspect to the lovers’ relation in *Le Livre de Promethea*, just as the lovers’ interactions in *Le Corps lesbien* are at times almost unbearably violent. The violence in *Le Livre de Promethea* (as in *Le Corps lesbien*) is pleasurable, though, and expresses the protagonists’ desire to know each other more deeply. The narrator states matter-of-factly that the relationship is violent: “Tout ce qui se passe dans notre livre est d’une pure violence” (51). Her use of the qualifier “pure” with violence implies that this is a different kind than usual violence, or violent acts carried out with malicious intent. She then clarifies even further that this is an expression of their happiness and pleasure: “Et le livre de Promethea est feu et fureurs. Mais tout cela n’est-il pas le climat même du bonheur?” (65). She also expresses this violence bluntly

when the narrator reflects on their “cannibalism,” or their processes of ingesting each other: “Par exemple notre tendance au cannibalisme...Je suis devenue ton armure transparente, Promethea, c’est moi ta peau, ta soie, ton acier. Mais parfois je me retourne contre toi et je te mange un peu” (71). The narrator reflects on this cannibalism at length, wondering to herself if it is actually a violence or a way of expressing their love. She concludes that it is a way for them to know each other more deeply, a way to become more deeply and more thoroughly. She speaks of this in a moment when they have just returned from the market: “...attendant là que Promethea vienne me choisir, me délivrer, me goûter, me déglutir, m’absorber comme moi j’ai envie de la manger, par morceaux précisément, tout assaisonnée des sourires et des souhaits que l’on a versés sur elle au marché” (73). She describes here how this cannibalism is an expression of their mutual desire for each other and specifies that this cannibalism is a sign of the progression of their love relation. It is a way of knowing each other more deeply and of moving closer to paradise: “Au début nous étions encore assez loin du Paradis. Nous pouvions même croire à la possibilité de rebrousser chemin. Maintenant, nous y sommes : c’est-à-dire qu’il n’y a pas d’autre chemin que celui qui nous attire toujours plus près, plus profondément, plus maintenant, plus toujours” (74). Here she recalls her use of “j’y suis” but makes it “nous y sommes”—this is not just one person in the burning bush but both. Her *je* becomes a *nous* as they are there together, precisely the *nous* with whom and in whom they are never lacking. She emphasizes once again here the *plus* in “plus près, plus profondément, plus maintenant, plus toujours,” to heighten the sense of having and giving *more*, that more leads to more; this is a state of overflowing abundance and of always having more. In this way, their violence is also an expression of their overflowing desire for each other, to be always closer, to know one another more fully, to give all of themselves to the other.

For if they have all of their living together, they also have their dying, their destruction and burning, in order to begin again and always be being-born for the other and in the other.

d. *Un livre des portes: Atemporal Becomings and Crossing Thresholds in *Le Livre de Promethea**

Just as with Wittig's depiction of utopian relationality, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming lend themselves to reading Cixous' similar yet slightly different conception in *Le Livre de Promethea*. As is already evident, Cixous' is a book of becomings; though she does signal a before and an after, she does not signal an ending. Instead, she repeatedly states that the relationship expands into eternity through an infinite and circular temporality. The relationship takes place in the instant, in an ever-present *now*, which is one of the markers of her vision of utopia in *Le Livre de Promethea*. In *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari also give the time of becoming a specific name. They call it "Aeon" (*Aiōn*), "le temps de l'événement pur ou du devenir," (322), and they contrast it with "Chronos," the fixed time of measurable and linear chronology: "le temps indéfini de l'événement, la ligne flottant qui ne connaît que les vitesses, et ne cesse à la fois de diviser ce qui arrive en un déjà-là et un pas-encore-là, un trop-tard et un trop-tôt simultanés, un quelque chose à la fois qui va se passe et vient de se passer. Et *Chronos*, au contraire, le temps de la mesure, qui fixe les choses et les personnes" (320). Aeon is the time of the event, that floats between temporalities while Chronos is fixed and measured in order to clearly define things and people. Cixous describes how the relationship with Promethea exists in the time of Aeon, as an ongoing event, a continual becoming that is at once already-there and still-to-come. The narrator expresses this through her difficulty of writing the book that takes place purely in the present, in the now: "La vérité c'est que ce livre, dont j'essaie de trouver l'entrée la plus commode, est—je ne sais pas comment dire ça—est—d'abord il est-déjà" (14).

Here she reveals the limit of her language to express such a state, specifically with the em-dashes and the repetition of *est*; the book simply *is*, just as Promethea *is*, and already-is. This relates back to her difficulty of starting and of writing a book composed entirely of beginnings and first pages; for she does not know how to find the “entrance” to something that already is and is all around her; she exists within it.

She also references the idea of Aeon time in terms of the “narrative” and why *Le Livre de Promethea* does not and cannot have a defined narrative: “(--Le récit? Quel récit ? Si c’était un récit ! Mais justement ce n’est pas un récit, c’est du temps, c’est le temps brûlant, palpitant d’heure en heure, c’est le temps qui bat dans la poitrine de la vie)” (26). Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of Aeon echoes through Cixous’ description of the “narrative” that knows only relations of speeds as “burning time,” or time that palpitates. Cixous even calls this “magic time:” «Ensuite c’est du maintenant à maintenant. On ne peut plus dire que ce soit une histoire, ce qui nous arrive, c’est du temps magique dont la source et l’héroïne est Promethea » (61). Promethea is the source of this time; she is the infinite and eternal and she enables *H* to pass into infinity through her.¹³⁴ Finally, she speaks of the relationship to time as being “at the center” of paradise: “Suis-je jamais d’ailleurs exactement au milieu du bonheur? J’essaie de rester au centre du Paradis.” (109). If this time is all round, both before and after her, then her task is simply to remain in it. She references the temporal aspect here with *jamais* that implies both always and ever; she poses the question to herself because she does not even know if she is “ever exactly in the middle” (trans 90). How can she tell if she is in the middle or the center if it is all around and always enfolding? That she specifically uses the capitalized word *Paradis* here is telling: she conflates Paradise with Promethea and with perfect happiness. Deleuze and Guattari also note

¹³⁴ There is also an echo here of the Shekinah goddess of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.

how becoming always exists “in the middle”—it is by nature not something that can be pinpointed: “Une ligne de devenir a seulement un milieu... Un devenir est toujours au milieu, on ne peut le prendre qu’au milieu” (360). Just as one can only approach becoming in the middle, so the narrator speaks of her experience of Promethea and paradise as being at the center. This is her experience of Promethea in the language of Deleuze and Guattari’s Aeon time of becoming.

In addition to situating the relationship in the temporal space of becoming, Cixous describes the intercorporeal interactions of the protagonists through the language of borders that they cross, interior and exterior realms that they overflow, and doors that they continually enter. This relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s elaboration that the beginning of the process of becoming or the “initial voyage” passes through such doors and thresholds: “Tous les voyages dits initiatiques comportent ces seuils et ces portes où le devenir lui-même devient” (305). Here doors and thresholds symbolize the way that becoming itself becomes, or the transformations that states of becoming undergo as they pass from one to another. Since it passes through different stages, relations, shapes, and haecceities, it can be understood as progressing from threshold to threshold. Deleuze and Guattari then expand the door metaphor further to state that the self is also a threshold or a door: “Si bien que le moi n’est qu’un seuil, une porte, un devenir entre deux multiplicités” (305). If becoming is a door, and the self is also a door, then the self is a state of becoming here; it is a process of transformation that exists in the space in between multiplicities.

Cixous frames both the narrating self/*H* and Promethea as multiplicities or plural selves in haecceity-like assemblages of co-existent factors, and she describes how they act as doors, or as the space of becoming for each other. The narrator begins an extended reflection on how she journeys through becomings, (with an echo of how the relation proceeds from Aeon time), by

writing that what she is experiencing is an “instant without edges:” “Ce qui vient maintenant est un de ces instants sans bord, purement intérieurs, un petit fragment de profondeur” (134). The series of these instants is what characterizes the infinite space in which the relation continuously unfurls itself. The narrator then expresses her difficulty at writing such a moment and resolves instead to try to fish the moment out of eternity and place it on paper before the reader: “je vais pêcher avec mes mains dans le cours du fleuve Amour, et je ne peux rien en faire d’autre que le déposer tout mouillé et palpitant sur le papier” (134). Cixous then performs this act she describes, and the moment begins with the narrator stating that she must “enter” Promethea, as if Promethea *is* the door:

Il faut que j’entre
Tu es si nue
Il faut que j’entre. Il ne me reste plus qu’à entrer. Tu es si nue. Il n’y a pas de porte.
Pas de peau. Tu es si dévoilée. Il n’y a pas de bord. Et moi non plus je n’ai pas de mur,
pas de mine, mon maquillage a fondu, tu es si nument nue. (134-35)

Here, in typical fashion, Cixous creates a paradoxical image of the door: there is something that *H* must enter and yet there is no door because Promethea is already so open, unguarded and naked. Cixous heightens the difficulty of expressing this state when the narrator reflects that she “cannot enter” because she is already there. She is only able to communicate the failure of her language to communicate this state of being already inside, already within and with, and yet still becoming, moving deeper, and entering: “Mais je n’entre pas, je suis déjà jusqu’aux hanches dans tes yeux, je suis déjà jusqu’aux seins dans ton âme. Tu es si grande ouverte. Je ne peux pas rester dehors. Il n’y a pas dehors” (135). She states bluntly here that there is no outside; there is only inside and the inside envelops all. She is already within and part of Promethea.

It initially seems like Cixous evokes the idea of doors and thresholds only in order to negate them—to state that there is no door and no entering because the narrator is somehow

already inside. Yet Cixous persists with the paradox that the narrator is ever becoming because she still desires to *enter* more deeply. She speaks of forcing her way in: “Jamais je n’ai été si obligé de m’enfoncer si intérieurement à une créature. Parce qu’il n’y a pas d’environs. Pas de heaume, pas de miroitement, pas d’écailles, pas de noli-me-tangere, c’est tout de suite le jardin” (135). In this description, there are no surroundings, no walls, nothing to keep someone out or keep someone in. She emphasizes the extreme proximity of *H* and Promethea with the use of the hyphenated phrase “noli-me-tangere” and the reference to a garden, which recall the *Genesis* story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and also a New Testament scene of the resurrected Jesus who appears to Mary Magdalene. The Latin phrase “noli me tangere” comes specifically from John 20:17 when Jesus says to Mary: “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” The phrase is alternatively translated as “do not hold onto me” (NIV), “do not touch me” (ESV?), “touch me not” (King James Version),” or “stop clinging to me” (NASB). This latter version implies a continuation of the act, meaning that it was not Mary’s act in the moment that Jesus denounced but the continuation, for he still needed to fulfill his ascension. When Cixous places this Latin phrase in her text in order to refuse it through a double negation, “*pas de noli-me-tangere*” along with the other “*pas de*” items in this list of things that are *not there*, or do not exist (like the lack of surroundings, coverings, etc.), she implies that the “do not touch me” command is itself a way of shielding the body or covering the body with the injunction. It is a way of creating distance and pushing the other away. Cixous refuses this by collapsing the distance through the double negative – there is no *do not*. This means that there is only permission to—to hold onto, to cling to, to touch (and by extension then, to know). In the relation with Promethea, there is only proximity and permission, only yes. One could conclude

then that as *H* enters ever more deeply into Promethea, she encounters only open doors, spaces that lead to further becomings, only progression instead of prohibition.

Furthermore, the garden reference that Cixous includes in the phrase following “*noli-metangere*” links the phrase from the book of John back to the Garden of Eden story in the book of Genesis. For in the scene in John, Mary Magdalene first mistakenly thinks that Jesus is the gardener (John 20:15). Even more than this detail though, when Cixous writes, “*c’est tout de suite le jardin*,” she references God’s commandment to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to not eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, their disobedience of his commandment, and then their banishment.¹³⁵ By speaking of the relationship with Promethea as “*le jardin*,” Cixous is connecting the idea of prelapsarian reality where there is not yet punishment for the sin of the garden to the state of being-with Promethea, as Promethea is paradise for *H* just as the Garden was paradise for Adam and Eve. Promethea, as fire and life-giving goddess, can be understood as a rewriting or re-vision of the patriarchal Christian God-the-Father in that she does not encircle and forbid, close off, or erect walls and armor. She does not give commandments or lists of what *not* to do, lists of “*you shall not*;” she does not seek to possess and delineate her possessions. In this way, Promethea is a female figuration of both Jesus as the Messiah and God the Father as absolute authority.¹³⁶ The fact that *H*’s relationship is a rewriting of both God’s command forbidding Adam and Eve to touch and then Jesus’ telling Mary not to touch him underscores

¹³⁵ Genesis 3 recounts this drama with the serpent that tempts Eve. When Eve replies to the serpent, she repeats God’s command, whereby literally filling her mouth with the words of the Father. Genesis 3:2-3 (ESV) tells of her response: “And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Here, interestingly, Eve adds to God’s actual command from Genesis 2:16-17 that forbids them from *eating* of the tree specifically, but not touching. Then: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” It is implied then that Eve heard this from Adam.

¹³⁶ There is here again a reflection of the idea of Shekinah of Kabbalah.

how both of these commands express lack, or what cannot be had. With Promethea, all is freely given and nothing is denied. This garden is given and created by Promethea herself, her body and her being, not ordered by a God-the-Father, but by the mutual relation of love and giving. In this way, Promethea is the door and the way, not to “the Father,” but to herself and an eternal utopian relation of love between self and other.¹³⁷

Cixous finishes her wet and palpitating description of this *instant sans bords* by writing how she cannot *not* fall into Promethea’s body and become part of her, due to Promethea’s openness: “Comment il est difficile d’embrasser un être d’une telle nudité sans commencer à tomber doucement dans sa poitrine. Puisqu’il n’y a pas de garde-folie. Et c’est tout de suite le palais, la gorge, déjà c’est la vallée du cœur, déjà le cœur est là” (136). Instead of embracing Promethea here (similar perhaps to what Mary Magdalene desired upon seeing the resurrected Jesus), *H* falls into Promethea’s chest, and travels from the roof of her mouth to her throat, chest cavity and finally her heart. The repetition of *déjà* in the description repeats the atemporal sense that she is already there, that this has happened before and is still currently happening. *H* continues this emphasis on *déjà*, writing: “Tu es si ouverte, je ne peux pas rester devant tes yeux, déjà je suis debout dans tes poumons, je veux caresser tes seins, déjà je sens l’humidité de tes entrailles si lisse sous mes doigts...Déjà je suis dans ton ventre, je patauge dans ton sang, je me roule sous tes côtes entre tes poumons” (136). Here she describes a progression and a process of

¹³⁷ Interestingly, Jesus speaks of himself as “the way” and “the door” to God the Father in the New Testament. For example in John 10:9, “I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved” and “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Paul also speaks of Jesus this way in Ephesians 2:18 “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” It seems that Cixous is opposing the patriarchal logic behind these figurations of a Messiah (if in a general sense and perhaps not the specific lines of the New Testament) along with their exclusivity.

movement that recalls the lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*. The way that she travels through Promethea's body implies not just that Promethea is a door in a large, integral sense, but also that each part of her body is a door that *H* can travel through. Every part of Promethea opens itself to *H* and leads her along the journey of becoming.

The narrator then returns to the image of the door, specifically, stating that she is trying to write the door: "Ce qui m'intéresse c'est la porte, la porte de cet instant" (137). All her effort in this scene is to describe the door of the *instant sans bords*, or to accomplish the impossible, to frame the experience without edges in terms of a thresholds that she crosses. She further expresses this difficulty in the sense that she can only ever cross this door one time, and then it is already in the past: "On ne peut y passer qu'une fois. Alors ? Il faut trouver une autre porte, pour une autre vie... (Ceci sera donc aussi un livre des portes)" (137). Once she has passed through this instant's door, she cannot pass through it again, so how can she describe it in this experience that exists in the present? When she states that the book itself will be "a book of doors," she expresses that it is a book of becoming, of trying to capture instant by instant the ever-evolving relationship with Promethea. In addition to being a book of first pages, of beginnings of descriptions of the instant that is passing, and of descriptions of the body and being of Promethea, it is a book of the self (or rather many selves), in the way that Deleuze and Guattari state that the self is also a door. The utopian relation that Cixous creates through all of this imagery is therefore an infinite multiplication of selves through myriad becomings. It is a relation of proximity and permission where nothing is denied and all is given so that it can be given again, eternally. Understanding the entire book as a doorway through which to enter the realm of Promethea describes the book as a space of the *becoming* of becoming.

The narrator concludes this reflection on doors and becomings by speaking of the next door, the “door of tomorrow,” for just as she always passes through one door and cannot return the same way, so there are always new dimensions and depths of the relation to discover: “Jamais plus je ne serai capable de passer par cette porte. Jamais je ne reviendrai par ici. Demain je trouverai une autre porte, nous descendrons ensemble dans l’éternité par une autre entrée...demain nous nous aimerons plus aigu, plus loin, plus épais, plus profonde, l’épouvante sera plus vaste, c’est impossible aujourd’hui, mais plus jamais je le sais nous ne vivrons ici” (137). Just as her process of becoming is always moving and changing, so she is always traveling through another door. She adds here the *nous*, stating that together she and Promethea will journey deeper into eternity by another entrance. Thus their becomings happen together, and the more they travel together, the more thresholds they cross, the more profoundly they will love each other. Cixous again emphasizes this element of “more” through the repetition of *plus* here: in the future tomorrow, there will always be more, and they will accomplish tomorrow what is impossible today. They will reach imaginable and unreachable depths in their relation through their ever shifting becomings. The narrator closes the chapter by writing :

le corps qui va prendre feu demain est en train de se préparer, nous allons nous lever tout à l’heure
la nouvelle ignorance se déroule doucement au fond du ciel, nous sommes rouges, nous sommes attentives et ignorantes et émues, nous ne savons à nouveau rien,” (138)

This description of moving towards a “new body” that will burn with an ever-hotter passion each new day frames this process in terms of knowledge. The narrator states that each day begins with “la nouvelle ignorance,” or a pleasurable state where “nous ne savons à nouveau rien,” to mean that the process of becoming is also one of learning; they are new each day as they stand at the threshold of every new door, and with every crossing they have everything to learn and to gain. There is no forfeit of innocence and no price to pay for this new knowledge (in a complete

reversal of the Adam and Eve story) but only eternal pleasure. Interestingly, Cixous ends this sentence—which also marks a sort of chapter section break in the book—with a comma. This small formal detail illustrates the process that the narrator is describing and emphasizes the continual nature of the relation. The comma leaves the description unfinished and implies that more is coming because more is always coming. Every day begins anew and gives them new knowledge. Just as Deleuze and Guattari describe becoming as a continual, open-ended process that exists “in the middle,” so Cixous stops this section in the middle of a sentence to show that there is no end to the becoming of the protagonists.

e. *Devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible: Progressive Becomings in *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d’Arcachon**

Many of Cixous’ descriptions of *H* and Promethea’s relationship lend themselves to interpretations in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of becoming-animal. This is not to say that Deleuze and Guattari (as two male writers) give shape to Cixous’ “feminine” writing, and even less that their theories have the final say as the best way to describe what Cixous articulates in *Le Livre de Promethea*. Just as for Monique Wittig, Deleuze and Guattari’s writing exists in an analogous context to Cixous,’ but the similarity of their images allows for a fruitful analysis. Cixous’ fiction gives form and shape to Deleuze and Guattari’s (at times incredibly abstract) theories, whereby making the theories more understandable. As with the lovers in *Le Corps lesbien*, the protagonists in *Le Livre de Promethea* move through bodily transformations and metamorphoses in their effort to know one another more profoundly. The two metaphors that Cixous uses most often those of water—as in the sea, the ocean, rain, rivers, flowing, and fluidity—and of mares—like those depicted in the Caves of Lascaux, which Cixous likens to

Promethea.¹³⁸ While Cixous uses the French “jument,” she is aware of the resonance in the English translation of “mare” with the French “mer” whereby creating a translingual loop that connects back to water imagery. While Cixous does use these images metaphorically, she also uses them in the sense of becoming-animal to describe the ways that the lovers interact with each other on deeper levels. For Cixous, these are more than just metaphors since her objective is to express a radically different state of being. Instead of simply stating that Promethea *is* a mare, Cixous uses animal-like characteristics to describe her: “Mais au lieu de fuir, elle arrive au galop, elle entre en haletant par la fenêtre” (23). In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory, it is the *way* that Promethea arrives and interacts with *H* that creates the becoming-animal.

While water imagery could be interpreted as pointing to a stereotypical idea of anatomical or essentialized femininity as fluids and flows, Cixous uses these images not to fix the female body in biological evocations but to express the range of the characters’ becomings. The fluidity of water expresses the transformative nature of their relationship and the way it cannot be contained. Instead of imagining the protagonists as specific entities with specific bodies, the water imagery illustrates their constant movement. This further expresses their openness to each other, to difference, and to the world. As previously cited, the narrator refers to Promethea as the sea and herself as a fish. Through this becoming-fish, she expresses the difficulty of writing the book: “Je suis dans l’état douloureux d’une poissonne qui a décidé qu’il est temps maintenant de regarder la mer en face” (26). In this state of becoming-fish, she tries to look the sea in the face, expressing the enormity of Promethea and the way the narrator is completely surrounded by and exists within Promethea. She also speaks of *H* from the outside as this fish, not to specifically say or state outright that *H is* a fish, but to note her fish-like qualities:

¹³⁸ Cixous mentions the Lascaux Caves at various times throughout the text.

“(gémît H, le corps arqué, le écailles étincelantes de sueur, les nageoires écarquillées, les ouïes lancinantes, essayant de passer, au risque de crever, du règne de l’eau au règne de la parole)” (27). Here her reference to *H*’s scales and fins position her in a becoming-fish, which communicates *H*’s difficulty of passing from the realm of water to the realm of writing. This does not set up a relation of imitation or resemblance, as Deleuze and Guattari caution, but a mode of expansion and a transformation of being. They reiterate these aspects when they write of becoming-animal: “Mais nous, nous ne nous intéressons aux caractères, nous nous intéressons aux modes d’expansion, de propagation, d’occupation, de contagion, de peuplement. Je suis légion” (292-93). Cixous’ descriptions of the narrator and *H* go further than just characteristics to express this idea of propagation of the other in self and self in other, of “contagion” and *peuplement*. Through her becomings-animal, the narrator could state, “I am legion.” She becomes more than herself through the relationship with Promethea. This functions as part of Cixous’ descriptions of “mutual invasion,” since Promethea is a people and *H* is also already plural; she declares this to Promethea: “Je suis déjà très peuplée de toi” (93). Separately and even more together, they contain multitudes. Cixous’ use of the water imagery functions as a way of amplifying the protagonists and spreading their becoming throughout the work.

The narrator continues with this water imagery to describe how the protagonists become one another. Like how Wittig positions her lovers in haecceities in *Le Corps lesbien*, so Cixous does the same in order to show how the lovers become one another—they act as the spatiotemporal background for their own becomings. They are not distinct from the surrounding natural factors like wind, air, and water but instead they blend with those factors to create assemblages. Cixous describes a moment of becoming-water or becoming-river that tells how the protagonists move ever closer to each other and then merge, just like Wittig’s lovers who

descend down into the sand and travel like wind through each other: “elles suivent leur cours longtemps, chacune dans son propre paysage, et il nous a semblé qu’elles allaient se jeter à la fin dans deux mers très éloignées. Puis il y a un séisme, Promethea sort de son lit en écumant et c’est torrentiellement qu’elle tombe de toutes ses eaux bouillonnantes sur mon courant, paresseux alors” (57). In this description, they begin like two separate rivers headed to the sea, but then after an earthquake, they become the rivers that run together. Cixous describes Promethea “with all her waters” that run into H’s slow-moving current. Here the becoming-water expresses the intercorporeal dynamic of their relation and this specific way that they interact with each other. The narrator also describes herself in terms of rain, or as a becoming-rain:

Peur ? Vigilance. Parce que l’épanchement est si incessant.
 Je pleus. Je pleure mon sang sur toi. J’ai peur un jour de n’avoir plus une larme.
 Je pleus. Je suis dans l’état d’humidité passionnée. J’écume. Les mers sont toutes
 énervées, sous ton poids les mers plient s’arquent, explosent, les mers veulent t’inonder.
 Je pleus des milliers de mots qui n’avaient jamais encore goûté l’air. (94)

Here Cixous plays with the proximity of terms and the repetition of the vowel grouping “eu” in the phrases “j’ai peur,” “je pleus” and “je pleure,” meaning “I am afraid,” “I rain,” and “I cry.” To cry and to rain are already similar acts through their relation to water, and Cixous takes this a step further to make “je pleure mon sang” into an act of raining. She then writes “j’écume” along with the description of “les mers,” creating the image of herself as the sea, or as a mixture of many foaming and churning waters. She closes this metonymic chain by connecting raining to writing, as she “rains millions of words” that have never “tasted the air.” Her use of “goûté” creates a link between the verb *goûter*, to taste, and *goutte* as a drop of water or tear. Her words then become like raindrops and writing becomes an act of raining. *H* uses the chain of metaphors in this description to express both her becoming-with Promethea and her act of writing the book, where writing is a bodily act that requires her blood and her waters.

In another passage reminiscent of Wittig's lovers where *j/e* searches for *tu* in the water only to realize that *tu* is the water, Cixous describes how the narrator searches for Promethea, only to realize that Promethea is inside her: "Et depuis: chasse et harcèlement, je te traque, sauve-toi, je fais la chasse à l'âme partout dans ton corps, je chasse sans armes, c'est la chasse à l'amour, je lâche des colombes adroites et puissantes sur toi. Mais ce n'est toujours possible. Parfois c'est en moi que tu te caches, c'est moi-même que je dois fouiller pour te dénicher" (66-67). Here she realizes that although she tracks Promethea, Promethea hides herself within *H*. *H* is the space that enables a mutual becoming, as Promethea becomes-*H* and *H* becomes-Promethea through her searching. This description exemplifies their state of "mutual invasion," and Deleuze and Guatari's use of "contagion" and propagation. In a reverse picture of this becoming that takes place in the narrator's interior space, the becoming between *H* and Promethea also expands beyond their own bodies to involve the entire universe. Just as they create universes within themselves, they can incorporate all of their exterior surroundings and even give rise to other becomings. The narrator describes how one single kiss in a specific moment gives rise to a celebration that envelops the entire world:

Il est très rare désormais que le baiser reste posé entrer nous deux ; à peine échangé, il convie l'univers à la fête, et c'est une infime et renversante célébrations, il y a de la genèse dans l'air que nous respirons – donc à peine je me penche, et déjà je vois le monde tressaillir, le chêne qui est à trois pas à droite de Promethea prend lumière subitement, toutes ses feuilles sont saisies, et l'arbre entre dans le fond de mon âme avec les yeux de Promethea, pour toujours. Oui, le monde entier est frappé de mes étonnements. Des milliers d'extases se produisent. (66)

The narrator begins this description with her knowledge that their kiss will not stay between the two of them; she is aware that their relation envelops and expands into their wider surroundings. It invites the universe to participate in their love and their togetherness in a great cosmic celebration. Their relation is so life-giving that "there is genesis in the air" they breathe. Their

kiss shakes a nearby tree that then catches Promethea's fire and burns into *H*'s soul like Promethea's gaze. Just as Promethea expands into *H*, into the nearby tree, and into the wider world, so their ecstasy overflows and encompasses all of the surrounding factors in a haecceitic assemblage—they are not simply two beings but are the combination of the natural factors and the very air they enter into relation with.

In *La Bataille d'Arcachon* (1985), Cixous' subsequent novel that follows *Le Livre de Promethea*, she continues the story of the relationship between *H* and Promethea. The narrator tells of *H* and Promethea's separation while *H* is away in Arcachon and Promethea remains in Paris. The novel functions like a sequel to *Le Livre de Promethea* with the same three-part protagonist structure, though the narrating *Je* follows *H* and speaks from *H*'s point of view most of the time. The work describes in detail the pain of their separation, but in the third chapter or section of the work, titled "L'arrivée de Promethea," Cixous includes a description of their reunion that reestablishes their utopian relation. This description in the moment of arrival expands Cixous' earlier descriptions of *H* and *Promethea's* becomings, and it moves into what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming-imperceptible." As they explain, becoming-imperceptible is the next step in the progression through becoming-woman and becoming-animal that arrives at a stage of becoming that exists against the backdrop of everyday life while still retaining its revolutionary, singular nature. Deleuze and Guattari describe becoming-imperceptible first through the rhetorical question of, if all becomings move towards other becomings, "vers quoi se précipitent-ils tous ?" (342) (or what are they all rushing toward? trans. 279). Their answer is then: "Sans aucun doute, vers un devenir-imperceptible. L'imperceptible est la fin immanente du devenir, sa formule cosmique" (342). Paradoxically, as they state throughout *Mille Plateaux*, becoming is a never-ending process, and yet here they identify becoming-imperceptible as its

“immanent end.” Since this “end” is still itself a state of becoming, it is a different type of becoming that enacts a “fusion of the self with the cosmos as a whole” (Braidotti 2006, 25). It is in this sense an ultimate expression of utopian relationality as an eternal interconnectedness that surpasses the individual. To achieve this state, they write of how one must eliminate all that is superfluous to becoming and that roots one in specificity instead of openness: “Éliminer tout ce qui est déchet, mort et superfluité, plainte et grief, désir non satisfait, défense ou plaidoyer, tout ce qui enracine chacun (tout le monde) en lui-même, dans sa molarité. Car tout le monde est l'ensemble molaire, mais devenir tout le monde est une autre affaire, qui met en jeu le cosmos avec ses composantes moléculaires” (343). Here they speak of letting go of fixed identities and rigid molar components, or all that categorizes and organizes, determines and dictates the self and its behavior. This is an “unrooted” state that allows the self to flow through transformations into this state of immanent proximity with the entire world.

They make the distinction here between “tout le monde” (everybody/everyone) as a molar aggregate, or one large homogenizing mass of humanity, vs “becoming everyone,” which is to enter into the molecular components of the universe or the level where real becoming takes place. Becoming-everyone is to enable the self to become so expansive that it can penetrate and disperse through the molar collectivity of the entire world to the molecular; it is the ultimate haecceity or way of existing in relation with everything else that exists. They continue this explanation of “becoming-everyone,” adding that this is a generative process of “making a world” and “making-world:” “Devenir tout le monde, c’est faire monde, faire un monde. A force d’éliminer, on n’est plus qu’une ligne abstraite, ou bien une pièce de puzzle en elle-même abstraite. Et c’est en conjuguant, en continuant avec d’autres lignes, d’autres pièces qu’on fait un monde, qui pourrait recouvrir le premier, comme en transparence” (343). They explain here that

becoming-everyone is “to world” or “to make a world” (trans. 280). This is not a process of losing the self in infinite abstraction but of becoming nimble and flexible like an abstract line that can “conjugate” with other lines to make a new world that can overlay the first like a transparency. This way of becoming then is a way of living in the existing world but living differently; it is creating a new experience and new conditions of possibility like overlaying a transparency. Just as becoming-woman and becoming-animal lead to haecceitic existence that involves the entire cosmos, so here becoming-imperceptible expands even more to remake the world through one’s experience of the world, or to make a new world that can overlay the first world.

In the arrival scene in *La Bataille d’Arcachon*, *H* meets Promethea at the airport upon Promethea’s arrival in Arcachon from Paris. What begins as a simple scene of reunion expands into a description of utopia through the experience of becoming-imperceptible. The scene starts when the narrator sees Promethea emerge from the airport and describes: “Jusqu’à ce que soudain toute Promethea a été là, enfin, comme le soleil, et son visage embrasé. Il n’y a eu qu’un regard. Et H a pris feu...Elle est sortie de la foule comme le soleil, et elle a frappé. Il n’y a eu qu’un jet de lumière et H était dedans” (36). All it takes here is one look from Promethea and *H* is “inside.” In the instant that Promethea approaches *H*, they are once again together. The narrator describes this as being together under the same magical cloak:

Aussitôt H et Promethea ont été enveloppées dans une même flamme comme dans un manteau magique. Et on ne les a plus vues. Jamais encore cela ne s’était produit qu’elles sortent d’une aérogare complète avec guichets, voyageurs, enfants, boutiques, comme elles seraient sorties de l’océan du lever du soleil...Elles ont fait tout ce qu’il avait à faire dans cette aérogare sans interrompre leur extase. Et personne ne les a vues. (36)

Here they accomplish all they need to in order to leave the airport without leaving their state of ecstasy and their relation of proximity. It is as if they have layered their own world over the

existing one; they move through all the banal features of the airport as they must—around other people, counters, children, shops, etc.—yet none of this interrupts their joyous reunion in being completely enveloped in-the-other. They move through all of this, and yet their movement is imperceptible. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, the type of movement that takes place in this state is inherently imperceptible. It is necessary but it happens above the realm of perception:

“Le mouvement est dans un rapport essentiel avec l’imperceptible, il est par nature imperceptible...Les mouvements, et les devenirs, c’est-à-dire les purs rapports de vitesse et de lenteur, les purs affects, sont en dessous ou au-dessous du seuil de perception” (344). In this way, *H* and *Promethea*’s reunion exists both above and below perception, as they slip through all of the necessary acts and things that they must do to leave the airport, yet they never emerge from underneath their magical manteau.

The narrator then describes the drive home from the airport in one long, paragraph-length sentence that captures the breathlessness and immediacy of their relation along with its utopian nature. This description characterizes their experience of utopian relationality as a becoming-imperceptible:

Promethea n’a pas cessé de bruler pendant trois heures. Elle était une vaste fontaine de feu qui ouvrait ses yeux de flamme et sa poitrine de flamme et *H* tombait doucement dans Promethea, et nageait de joie et riait parce que sa fontaine était si profonde et les flammes si fraîches, *H* était merveilleusement bien dans Promethea, c’est elle qui se baignait, Promethea l’entourait, conduisait à peine, la voiture voguait sur la route d’eau étoilée, le ciel était sur la terre, Promethea était infinie, la voiture s’enfonçait dans l’épaisseur de la vie, de temps à autre *H* émergeait un instant, jetait un regard sur l’étendue de la nuit, vérifiait la direction, tout était eau et feu et lait noir plein d’étoiles, et pas un grain de sable, et *H* regardait le visage de Promethea la regardant, le visage de Promethea ressemblait aux portes de Paradis, il était infiniment désirable et accueillant, il était immobile et frémissant, il était tendre et sacrifié, il était vulnérable, Promethea ouvrait, *H* voyait l’âme de Promethea descendre lentement à la renverse dans l’intime éternité, *H* entraînait, c’était un lac de douceur, ce n’était qu’une caresse qui s’ouvrait jusqu’au cœur. *H* a suivi Promethea jusqu’au fond du paradis. (37)

This paragraph describes their relation as a coming together, or a becoming-each other, and a becoming-imperceptible in one long sentence that only separates phrases with commas (except for the first and last sentences that end with periods). Cixous reprises the imagery of the burning bush from *Le Livre de Promethea*, for here Promethea opens her “poitrine de flamme” to *H*, who enters and finds the flames fresh instead of destructive. Throughout this description of *H* in Promethea and Promethea as the fire that surrounds *H*, somehow the pair is simultaneously still driving home from the airport. They paradoxically inhabit the normal realm of existence even as they expand into the imperceptible realm (which is perhaps also the space “plus haut” of Cixous’ pure turquoise in *Tancredi Continue*). *H* emphasizes the way that being-with and being-in Promethea creates an experience of paradise for her, when she remarks that Promethea’s face “resembles the gates of Paradise” and is both desirable and welcoming. This further recalls the idea of Cixous’ “pas de noli-me-tangere” in *Le Livre de Promethea* where the relation with Promethea is radical because it is so open and inviting, and where nothing is forbidden. This also recalls Wittig’s remark while watching beings welcomed into paradise in *Virgile, Non*, for paradise is similarly a place where all are welcome.

At the end of Cixous’ description here, *H* makes the connection between Promethea as paradise even stronger when *H* follows Promethea “jusqu’au fond du paradis.” With this powerful statement, Cixous emphasizes yet again that the relation between *H* and Promethea is a utopian one and that it leads to the very heart of paradise. Their relation then becomes imperceptible in the way it exists amidst the regular world and concurrently creates a different world for themselves, a world that exists in an alternate spatiality and temporality. They travel to the depths of paradise even as they drive on the road, and more than creating a world for themselves, they *are* their own world; they become-world. Their becoming-imperceptible defies

death as it expands through time and space, by moving deeper and ever-deeper into their connection with each other and the cosmos. The world that they create is a utopia, and their utopia in turn proceeds from their being together, their love for each other, and the intercorporeal ways they open their selves to each other. Cixous continues the description in the sentence that starts the next paragraph, reinforcing the way the couple is “not of this world:” “Pendant le trajet, elles n’ont pas été de ce monde. Leur Arcachon non plus, n’était pas de ce monde. Même si elles mettaient trois fois plus de temps que d’ordinaire, en passant par l’autre monde, elles finiraient par y arriver” (37). As Deleuze and Guattari write that becoming-imperceptible is “to world,” in this description *H* and Promethea create and enjoy a world unto themselves. Deleuze and Guattari also phrase this idea in terms of “worlding:” “C’est en ce sens que devenir tout le monde, faire du monde un devenir, c’est faire monde, c’est faire un monde, des mondes” (343). In Cixous’ description, Promethea and *H* slide from the terrestrial world to the one that they create through their being together. They have made a world and made of the entire world a becoming. They are becoming-world and they have made this becoming into a becoming-paradise. Cixous shows through both *Le Livre de Promethea* and this description from *La Bataille d’Arcachon* that *H* and Promethea’s utopian relation is so transformative and moves through such a diversity of becomings that it can achieve a state of becoming-imperceptible. This aspect casts Cixous’ vision of utopian relationality in the two works as incredibly powerful with the ability to affect everything and everyone, or to “world” and “become-world.”

Cixous takes her theory of bisexuality from “Le Rire de la Méduse,” transforms it in “Tancrede continue,” and expands it further in *Le Livre de Promethea*. She pushes it to an exciting climax in *La Bataille d’Arcachon* where, not only can the lovers surpass gender categories, they surpass the entire existent world and overlay it with a new world of their own

creation, a paradise made from their relation. Their being-together is so capacious that it can “world” and “make world.” Overall, Cixous’ utopian theory finds fruition in *Le Livre de Promethea* through its many formal and conceptual features. The fact that her fiction becomes more similar to Wittig’s fictional description of relational utopia shows that the two writers actually move closer together; though their theories and literary production begin at very different places, their fiction of the early to mid-1980s places them on almost parallel tracks. Ultimately, their depictions of utopian relationality serve similar purposes. They express a radically different state of being achieved through an intimate and renewed relation with the self, others, and the world. This is also a different relation to language—both in the way Cixous’ and Wittig’s protagonists use language and the way both writers search for new ways of writing able to articulate such a relation. Their utopian visions propose becomings that lead to new conceptions of intercorporeal subjectivity, which ultimately contain vast transformative potential.

IV. MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ

Tous mes livres parlent de ça : ce qui manque à quelqu'un, c'est à lui de le trouver. Quand une femme cesse de demander à un homme de lui apporter tout ce qui lui manque, elle peut enfin commencer à l'aimer et passer du besoin au désir. C'est aussi ça, mes livres. Les personnages passent du besoin au désir.

- Marie Darrieussecq

In an interview with Jeannette Gaudet in 2002, Darrieussecq explains how her books describe the passage from “besoin au désir.” This process is positive and liberatory, even though she at first seems to position it as revolving principally around lack, and even more, female lack.¹³⁹ When she states that her books speak of how one must individually find what they are missing, she seems to reinforce the sense of isolation and the personal, internal nature of this search. Within the context of a discussion of utopian literature and relationality, it may seem strange to begin with such a description and to include a writer who appears to be self-admittedly more concerned with dystopian elements like loss and lack instead of utopian ones like fullness and satisfaction. While Darrieussecq does state that she wants to explore lack, she also notes her focus on the *process* by which one arrives at fullness; in her phrasing, this is the passage “du besoin au désir.” The transition from need to desire rings with utopian undertones and reveals an unlikely utopian aspect of her writing. It also aligns her work in the lineage of Wittig’s and Cixous’ focus on desire for the other and their descriptions of utopian relations. Darrieussecq’s protagonists move from need—or from valuing the other in a transactional way based on perceived usefulness to the self—to instead valuing the other for their own inherent qualities.

¹³⁹ A Freudian psychoanalytic implication is here in the way Darrieussecq speaks of “manque” and then uses as the positive example of “a woman who ceases to demand that a man give her what she lacks.” I don’t think that Darrieussecq actually intended this interpretation though, as the protagonists (both male and female) in her novels lack various things more related to the loss of loved ones and family members, traumatic experiences, etc. Her works are more concerned with interrogating the nebulous effects of loss and not overtly with confronting phallogentrism. The interview with Gaudet is titled “Des livres sur la liberté: conversation avec Marie Darrieussecq,” in *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 59, 2002, pp. 108-118. The citation here is from p. 114.

Need focuses on the self while desire focuses on the other, and the progression from the former to the latter illustrates an expansion of subjectivity and understanding of the self in, with, and through relation. Echoing Cixous, Darrieussecq states that this state of desire can even occasion love.¹⁴⁰ The need-desire dichotomy as a utopian progression contains shades of both Ruth Levitas' conception of utopian literature as "an expression of desire," and Francis Bartkowski's assertion that feminist utopias "enable the conditions of desire." Although Darrieussecq does initially describe this process in gendered terms, she concludes with a more open characterization of "les personnages" that could include both her male and female protagonists. As they traverse this trajectory, the protagonists express the desire for a deeper, intercorporeal relation with others—where often the self is "the other" or alternatively it is the wider, environmental world.

Darrieussecq's prodigious fictional oeuvre, which consists of 15 novels in 26 years,¹⁴¹ is characterized by a conceptual and linguistic exploration of loss, emptiness, alienation, and disintegration, even as it contains less obvious and even discounted utopian moments. Helen Chadderton explains that Darrieussecq is intrigued by difficult and unspeakable experiences because they are not "codified by language," and they therefore force her protagonists to develop innovative linguistic solutions capable of comprehending and expressing these experiences in authentic ways (5). In addition to linguistic solutions that can express their need and suffering, Darrieussecq's protagonists develop new relations with language and new ways of speaking and thinking in order to express their desire or perhaps also their "unspeakable" utopian experiences.

¹⁴⁰ Darrieussecq does set up a heterosexual relation here, and this also appears in her novels as her female protagonists struggle as lovers, wives, and mothers through relations with men. She adheres to this binary in her thought and writing but in no way argues for it as the only way or "right way" of living and desiring. She has spoken openly about her own experience as a wife and mother as reflecting onto her understanding of what it means to be a woman and possess a female body. Although this aspect certainly sets her apart from Wittig and even from Cixous' descriptions in *Le Livre de Promethea*, I do not see this as foreclosing comparison or similarities between all three writers.

¹⁴¹ She has also published works for theater, collections of essays, children's books, translations, and biographies.

They learn how to speak what could be called Bartkowski's "language of utopia" (9). Against a backdrop of dystopian experiences, moments of utopia erupt in Darrieussecq's novels like fleeting flashes of light that illuminate the otherwise dark reality. These surprising moments demonstrate how Darrieussecq carves out utopian elements in a decidedly dystopian landscape. This tension and oscillation are key to Darrieussecq's work, for even when her protagonists live in nightmarish near-futures, they still search for and establish utopian relations. Beginning with *Truismes* (1996), Darrieussecq's protagonists experience terrible events, witness horrors, and suffer personal anguish all while they labor to extract themselves and achieve a tenuous sort of personal freedom. Utopian elements are integral parts of Darrieussecq's writing, even as they appear comingled with louder dystopian moments in relations of continual seepage, mutual contamination, and superimposition. In this sense, Darrieussecq's visions of utopian relationality are more subtle than Wittig's and Cixous,' but they are no less powerful for their rarity and precarity. Darrieussecq is also different from Wittig and Cixous in that she is first and foremost a novelist. She is concerned with language's ability to tell transformative stories and to expose contemporary problems by magnifying them in a slightly distant future. Her books do not have a specifically political function, and they hold less of the urgency and immediacy that underscores Wittig's and Cixous' fiction. While Darrieussecq's writing reflects aspects of Wittig's and Cixous' earlier utopian projects, especially in terms of form, it also engages the contemporary cultural moment, in both France and the United States. As Chadderton describes, Darrieussecq "acknowledges a debt to past literary techniques while remaining right on the pulse of popular culture" (3). By continuing a spirit of linguistic experimentation and poetic innovation, Darrieussecq presents unlikely yet timely ways to conceptualize and express utopia in her fiction. Through her moments of utopian relationality, she envisions expansive subjectivities who

overflow corporeal boundaries and develop new conjugations of the self in relations of openness and desire.

Like Wittig's and Cixous,' Darrieussecq's moments of utopia happen through relations with the "other"— where this conception includes the self-as-other (in an echo of Cixous' plural subjectivity); people and bodies external to the protagonist as other; and also, notably, the wider world in which the protagonist is situated as other. In line with contemporary culture, Darrieussecq infuses her writing with an attention to the natural world, or what could be called an "eco-consciousness," informed by 21st century awareness of the increasing effects of climate change and the rapid rate of animal extinction.¹⁴² Darrieussecq's positioning of the human self as immersed in and interconnected to the environmental world often colors her utopian moments with a deep desire for a return to the simplicity and purity of nature as contrasted with technological human society. Darrieussecq's fictions demonstrate an ideal, fantastic state of *being-with* that leads to an understanding of the self as situated in intercorporeal relations, but unlike Wittig, Darrieussecq does not call for a total transformation of society through language. Instead, she works within language to draw attention to the injustices and erasures enacted upon the female gendered subject in French.¹⁴³ Unlike Cixous, Darrieussecq is not interested in participating directly in academic, philosophical discussions, and in fact, she has expressed a desire to write "hors de tout système" (Miller and Holmes, 6).¹⁴⁴ While Darrieussecq's visions of

¹⁴² This could also be called a sort of post-humanist way of decentering human experience as the only experience. Darrieussecq spoke in my interview about how she is careful to avoid a human/animal binary in her writing by always referring to animals as "les autres animaux" since humans are just one type of animal among others.

¹⁴³ Darrieussecq spoke about this in an interview I conducted with her at her home in Paris on January 26, 2022. I recorded the conversation, and the citations throughout this chapter are from my own transcription. She also discussed this in a public interview titled "Je est unE autre," in the context of a conference on the theme of "l'autofiction" in 2007.

¹⁴⁴ This interview does not have page numbers, so I've used the page of the pdf.

utopian relationality diverge from those of Wittig and Cixous through being less militant and more popular, as a prominent and visible feminist author of the twenty-first century, Darrieussecq continues their legacy and translates it through nuance and creativity for a new generation of readers and for a different contemporary moment. In Darrieussecq's novels, she does not create clearly delineated utopias, like ideal cities or communities (as in Wittig's *Les Guérillères*). Neither does she concentrate on the process of achieving utopia, as *Les Guérillères* describes so meticulously through its unmaking and remaking of society and language, or as *Virgile, Non* recounts through its afterlife journey eventually ends in paradise. There is no real resolution or respite in Darrieussecq's novels but only progression toward fragile freedom. Compared with the more static visions of utopian relationality in *Le Corps lesbien* and *Le Livre de Promethea* that unfold through continuous processes of living and maintaining ways of being, Darrieussecq's glimpses appear briefly and sporadically. The situations she creates are complex and her characters are deeply enmeshed in the world; they navigate their existence with their bodies in a continual search for a point of balance and stillness at the center of everything where they can move from need to desire, and where the boundaries between self and other become fluid and porous.

In my analyses that follow of *Truismes* (1996), *White* (2003), and *Le Pays* (2005), I trace Darrieussecq's glimpses of utopia to reveal that although they vary from work to work, they demonstrate a common preoccupation with the development of deeper consciousness that comes through intercorporeal relations. *Truismes* is Darrieussecq's first and still best-selling, most well-known novel due to its dystopian near-future setting, emphasis on the female body, and the shocking naiveté of its first-person narrative voice. It has been thoroughly interpreted as a dystopia for its concentration on the negative and violent aspects of the protagonist's female

experience and bodily transformation into a sow, and also for the way the novel drips with irony and anger. My reading does not downplay these important and very evident aspects of the novel. I note them in as much as they establish a foundation of stark contrast for the small but powerful moments of utopia that appear in the text. These moments are intimately tied to language and show how the protagonist's physical transformation also unlocks new linguistic abilities—this is to say that her new physical form brings new extensive vocabulary and even poetic descriptive abilities. Darrieussecq employs a specific poetics in these moments that is lyrical and fluid and could not be more different from the narrator's superficial parroting of “truismes,” or clichéd aphorisms and euphemisms throughout the novel. Due to *Truismes*' element of physical transformation into an animal, it has been read through the Deleuzian lens of becoming-animal, and I add to this interpretation by reading also the utopian moments as demonstrations of Deleuzian haecceities and relations of becoming that are liberatory. The violence of *Truismes* echoes Wittig's feminist rage from *Les Guérillères* along with the coming-to-consciousness of *Virgile, Non*.

I then read *White* (2003) for the way that Darrieussecq describes moments of utopia set against the empty, white Antarctic setting. The love story that Darrieussecq tells between two engineers stationed at a remote research center in *White* (although it is a heterosexual one), reverberates with the eroticism of *Le Corps lesbien* and the hecceity relations of becoming in *Le Livre de Promethea*. I argue that while the content of the relation is less exciting (though certainly still not dull), the nuanced force of *White* lies in its form—in the way it tells its story of relation through the plural, communal narrating chorus of phantoms (the “nous” that describes the main couple's relation), and even more in the ways that the couple's relation necessitates a new lyrical descriptive style. Like the contrast in *Truismes* when moments of utopia break into

the dystopian background, *White's* sparse, fragmented, and literal narration transforms into expansive descriptions of the couple's relations. At the end of my discussion of *White*, I provide a reading of the text through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "the smooth and the striated," or *le lisse et le strié*. This reading serves to show how Darrieussecq's work exemplifies the tension between smooth and striated space as Deleuze and Guattari describe them, and that the utopian moments in *White* can function as depictions of smooth space. In this way, the dichotomy of smooth vs. striated works as a helpful terminological and theoretical framework to understand utopian relationality. The utopian moments in *White* happen through the facilitation of smooth spaces since they are the spaces of becoming and haecceities. By reading Darrieussecq alongside Deleuze and Guattari, I follow the example of Amaleena Damlé when she argues for a reading of *Truismes* through Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming-woman and becoming-animal. Damlé interprets Darrieussecq's text as a way to "valuably supplement" Deleuze and Guattari's concepts" (16), and even more as a way to explore the gendered implications of metamorphosis in their philosophy of becoming.¹⁴⁵ My reading of *White* through the theories of smooth and striated space sees Deleuze and Guattari's theories as a supplement to *White* and as another way to conceptualize the utopian experiences of the protagonists.

In *Le Pays*, I note Darrieussecq's echo of Wittig's *je clivé* and the struggle to write the present moment, like in Cixous' *Le Livre de Promethea*. I also note the ways her protagonist (seen both through first and third person perspectives) develops and describes utopian relations with the world around her in fleeting moments when she allows herself to both expand into the

¹⁴⁵ Damlé sees similarity in the ways that both Deleuze and Guattari's theories and Darrieussecq's text have been "subject to highly polemical and contentious debates within feminist frameworks" (15). Damlé also addresses the ongoing criticism of Deleuze and Guattari's "use of female-specific vocabulary in conjunction with a bewildering lack of precise attention to feminist issues and to sexual specificity" (16). Damlé offers her reading as a way of reconciling Deleuze and Guattari for feminist politics (16). Although I agree with Damlé and I mention becoming-animal in relation to *Truismes*, my analysis is focused less on the bodily transformation of the protagonist and more on the transformation of her relation with language and with the natural world.

environment and welcome it into herself. *Le Pays* expresses Darrieussecq's struggle to communicate a capacious female subject and then to express that subject in language. In all three novels, Darrieussecq's moments of utopian relationality are specifically tied to desire, and like those of Wittig and Cixous, these moments enable her characters to articulate their desires and then to satisfy them, even if only temporarily. Throughout her writing, Darrieussecq is attentive to processes of becoming, transformations and metamorphoses of the body in flux that render it a non-exclusive site of interaction and connection. When read alongside Wittig's and Cixous' work, Darrieussecq's writing shows how the issues of the 1970s and 1980s have splintered and spread into the complicated crises of the twentieth century, and that linguistic and literary engagement with issues of gender-based oppression in language is still relevant. Literary engagement is notably colored by pessimism and favors dystopia. Above all, Darrieussecq creates works of hybridity and oscillation where utopia appears amidst dystopia, and the most important thing to do is to search for moments of utopia, establish relations with the other, and testify to the transformative experience.

1. Blood and Body Horror: How *Truismes*' Dystopian Vision takes the Reader to "Disturbing Places"¹⁴⁶

Marie Darrieussecq burst into the French literary scene in 1996 with the publication of her first novel, *Truismes* (P.O.L). She was twenty-seven years old and reportedly composed the text over a six-week period, "en rage et colère."¹⁴⁷ This anger pulsates through the novel's pages

¹⁴⁶ I borrow this quote from Shirley Jordan's "Saying the Unsayable: identities in crisis in the early novels of Marie Darrieussecq" (10).

¹⁴⁷ Darrieussecq has mentioned this in a multitude of interviews when talking about *Truismes*, including my own in 2022. She has given many interviews and public appearances during her career and consistently repeats herself almost word for word in answers to similar questions. See Miller and Holmes 3; Gaudet (2002), 110; Kaprièlian 11; Lambeth 806 and 812-13; Jordan 137.

as it tells the story of a young woman who slowly transforms into a sow (with no explanation of the reason why and no clear cause). Far from being a simple story of human-to-animal transformation however, the novel describes a non-linear process that zigzags through grotesque, abusive, and humiliating situations specifically related to the female body, all to then reach a final semblance of freedom through permanent hybridity—at the end of the novel, the narrator learns how to control her metamorphoses and shift back and forth whenever she desires. She comes to inhabit a dual existence and to accept the state of her body (or *bodies*). Throughout, Darrieussecq describes the narrator’s dealings with and reactions to her body in great detail; the narrator constantly scrutinizes herself in the mirror and labors to retain (or regain) her “*cambrure d’humain*” (149) through policing her body with the trappings of superficial femininity, like dieting, shaving, applying a host of creams, perfumes, and make-up. In this way, *Truismes* highlights the “problems” of the female body within a masculine-controlled reality, in that this body functions as a passive object of desire, a site of abjection, and an uncontainable combination of fluids and flows. Through its detailed descriptions of the protagonist’s experiences, *Truismes* represents the female body as a special type of dystopia that the protagonist’s metamorphosis seems to only exacerbate. Over the course of the narrative however, she learns that her body’s transformation is actually the path to freedom.¹⁴⁸

As the backdrop for the protagonist’s physical transformation, *Truismes* takes place in a dystopian near-future version of Paris, where the city has been partially destroyed and a neo-fascist government reigns.¹⁴⁹ Even more than the state of the city, the deeply misogynist and

¹⁴⁸ She learns this in part from Yvan, her werewolf lover during part of the text (121-138) who teaches her that she can control her transformations through concentration and breathing. She develops the novel’s only reciprocal relationship of care with another with Yvan. That Yvan is the wealthy owner of a perfume brand named *Loup Y-Es-Tu* is another of the text’s ironies.

¹⁴⁹ Darrieussecq told me that she imagined the text set around 2010. For more descriptions of the “dystopian” aspects of the text, see Simon Kemp, “‘La même d’une phrase à l’autre:’ Language and Selfhood in Marie

patriarchal state of society reduces female existence in this reality almost exclusively to debasing physical transactions. The regime and its leader, “*Edgar* quelque chose” (the narrator does not know his last name), hide their perversions and justify atrocities under the guise of a euphemistic slogan, “pour un monde plus sain” (64). The protagonist herself repeatedly uses the word “saine” to describe her body and what others remark about her body. After encountering and then having sex with a professor (the misogynist and abusive but ironically named *Honoré*) in the changing room of a waterpark, the narrator notes: “Jamais, haletait Honoré, jamais il n’avait rencontré une jeune fille aussi saine” (17). At her job in a *parfumerie* that really functions like a brothel, the narrator speaks of “her clients:” “Ils disaient tous que j’étais extraordinairement saine. Je devenais fière, je veux dire, fière de moi” (21). Part of the novel’s dystopian reality is this heightened objectification of the female body, both by the narrator and others (men and women) who comment on and utilize her body however they want. For a *jeune femme* in this world where patriarchy reigns supreme, sexual attractiveness, or being “saine,” is everything. In the world of *Truismes*, when a young woman is thin enough, firm enough, and conforms satisfactorily to the patriarchal standards of sexual attractiveness and availability, then she is labeled “healthy.” This use of “saine” is just one example of the many *truismes* that the book includes—the clichéd statements that the narrator ignorantly accepts and repeats as truth, in addition to the ever-present play on words between “truisme” and “truite.”¹⁵⁰ By pinpointing this misogynist fallacy in the

Darrieussecq’s *Twenty- First Century Fictions*,” (2019); Jeannette Gaudet, “Dishing the Dirt: Metamorphosis in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*” (2001); Päivi Koponen, “Animal Dystopia in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*” (2017); and Lorie Sable-Otto, “Writing to Exist: Humanity and Survival in Two “fin de siècle” Novels in French (Harpman, Darrieussecq),” (2005).

¹⁵⁰ For example, the narrator repeats what her boyfriend Honoré says: “Il disait que le travail corrompait les femmes” (18); “Honoré m’a dit que les femmes ça a toujours des problèmes de ventre” (23). She cites what she reads in magazines and advertisements: “Dans *Femme femme* ou *Ma beauté ma santé*, je ne sais plus, j’avais lu que le plat préféré des Romains, et le plus raffiné, c’était la vulve de truie farcie” (59); “C’est la *rationalité* qui perd les hommes, c’est moi qui vous le dis” (126).

guise of euphemistic praise, Darrieussecq draws attention to the ideologic structures of patriarchy and how they are ingrained within women.

The narrator views her body as her currency, and even though she employs it at times for personal gain, it is always passive and she is too naïve to realize that the transactional ways others use her are in fact acts of harassment, abuse, and rape (it is only the reader who recognizes this, in another of the book's ironic layers). Unlike the reader, the narrator sees herself through an all-encompassing male gaze and evaluates her success based on her sexual attractiveness, often referring to her "chair" instead of "corps," and "l'aspect *pneumatique*" of her flesh (13). It is even more troubling that she often speaks about her body's "appetizing" qualities, in a foreshadowing of her eventual transformation into an animal raised for its meat. Early on when looking at herself in a mirror in that same waterpark changing room, she states: "je me suis trouvée, je suis désolée de le dire, incroyablement belle, comme dans les magazines mais en plus appétissante" (15). Later, when she oscillates between her human and developing pig-form, upon regaining a more human appearance, she states: "il faut dire que j'étais assez appétissante à nouveau" (89). That she refers to her human body as "appetizing" is just another example of how Darrieussecq injects the story with biting irony. As Jeanette Gaudet writes, the idea of women's bodies as consumable is a tiresome commonplace of the advertising industry, and when the narrator uses the adjective "appétissante," she "repeats a symbolic cultural construct in its usual figurative sense" even though it prefigures what is literally coming to pass (184). That she parrots advertising slogans and phrases objectifying her own body is further evidence of the narrator's conditioned ignorance and her inability to think for herself, or her mental subjection to and participation within this dystopian reality.

The protagonist's "hyperbolized naiveté" (Gaudet 188) hits the reader hard in the text's opening pages, when the narrator describes through appalling candor her "job interview" with the director of the *parfumerie*:

Le directeur de la chaîne m'avait prise sur ses genoux et me tripotait le sein droit, et le trouvait visiblement d'une élasticité merveilleuse (...) Le directeur de la chaîne tenait mon sein droit dans une main, le contrat dans l'autre main (...) Ses doigts étaient descendus un peu plus bas et déboutonnaient ce qu'il y avait à déboutonner, et pour cela le directeur de la chaîne avait été bien obligé de poser le contrat sur son bureau. Je lisais et relisais le contrat par-dessus son épaule, un mi-temps payé presque la moitié du SMIC, cela allait me permettre de participer au loyer, de m'acheter une robe ou deux. (12-13)¹⁵¹

The image of her reading the yet-to-be signed contract and thinking about how she will be able to buy a new dress while the director has his way with her is chilling. When she patiently allows him to fondle her breast and then concludes that "le trouvait visiblement d'une élasticité merveilleuse," she interprets his approval as success without considering (or even having) her own opinions in the moment. For the feminist-minded reader, scenes like the one above can be infuriating and necessitate a process of "double reading" (Gaudet), meaning that one must decode the information and understand what is really going on behind the narrator's simplistic delivery. This is similar to the phrases that use "saine" and other truisms throughout the work. Isabelle Favre reiterates the idea of reading beneath the text, arguing that when the text provides an excess of information, the reader becomes more engaged for having to uncover the underlying meaning: "le texte incite donc la lectrice à opérer son propre 'tri' textuel, ce qui a pour conséquence son engagement dans un jeu qui l'amène à observer de près le discours de la narratrice, plutôt que s'en dégager" (166). This interpretation assumes that the reader is more educated than the narrator and that they will easily recognize Darrieussecq's purposeful irony beneath the text's simplistic statements.

¹⁵¹ I placed the ellipses here in parentheses to differentiate between Darrieussecq's own frequent use of ellipses. I follow this procedure throughout the entire chapter.

The narrator's "undeniably vacuous tone" (Gaudet 182) is nevertheless disconcerting and poses an obstacle to the reader who might be insensitive to the text's carefully constructed rhetoric. Gaudet acknowledges this, writing that the "discrepancy between the politically loaded events narrated and the artless, if not blasé, delivery of the female narrator" certainly sets Darrieussecq up for a slew of criticism (182). Perhaps most virulently, Shirley Jordan argues that the narrator's uncritical perspective serves to reinforce the platitudes she repeats: "rather than contest them her aim appears to be to reinforce them so thoroughly that their insidiousness and absurdity are consistently underlined" (144).¹⁵² Jordan continues her critique, targeting the protagonist for her interest in appearance as a means to please the male gaze: "her heroine is non-intellectual, narcissistic, predominantly interested in beauty products and entirely dependent for her sense of self-worth on masculine desire" (144). Due to these aspects, Jordan concludes that the novel is deeply pessimistic, a "study of the worst in women's experiences, riddled with soft-porn images and sexual violence, and with a narrator who is unpardonably light-hearted and too insouciant to denounce the social order" (146). The traits that Jordan lists are true—the narrator is narcissistic, insouciant, obsessed with beauty, and constantly offers herself to masculine desire. These traits are most pronounced at the beginning of the novel though because, as the narrator undergoes physical metamorphosis, she also experiences an intellectual awakening and *does* learn to think for herself. When Jordan labels her as "unpardonable," Jordan does not take into consideration the novel's ending (which is actually its beginning), and she therefore, unfortunately, misses large part of the novel's trajectory.

Truismes is as much about linguistic transformation as it is about physical transformation, for when the protagonist learns to think for herself and to liberate herself from all of society's

¹⁵² Jordan's chapter is quoted as a conference paper by Gaudet but then appeared as a book chapter in 2019, while Gaudet's and Favre's essays are from 2001 and 2000, respectively.

clichés, she then develops the ability to write and speak of her experience (even while in her pig form). In this way, *Truismes* is structured like a confession or testimony, with the introductory paragraph framing the story through the narrator's rhetorical apology to her readers for her "écriture de cochon" (11) and her "indécentes paroles" (12) that describe the events in the book but *not* her present existence. She pleads to the reader for their understanding of her various difficulties while writing in the forest and laboring to hold a pen, saying: "Je ne vous parle de la difficulté pour trouver ce cahier, ni de la boue, qui salit tout, qui dilue l'encre à peine sèche" (11). Perhaps most difficult of all is the act of remembering, for she now understands that her unemployment and job search is what started the entire series of events: "la recherche d'un emploi me plongeait dans des affres" (12). In this way, the story begins as it ends, when the narrator lives in her hybrid-pig state and has decided that her tale is worth telling. She recognizes that her tale is disconcerting, stating in the opening line: "Je sais à quel point cette histoire pourra semer de trouble et d'angoisse, à quel point elle perturbera de gens...mais il faut que j'écrive ce livre sans plus tarder" (11). These statements in the introductory paragraph reveal that the narrator has found a voice and a desire to write. The metamorphosis of her body has led to an awakening of consciousness and an understanding of her past suffering.

Even though she has received much criticism, Darrieussecq has mentioned her purposeful use of such a "voix naïve" in interviews about *Truismes*, stating that it was appealing and effective for her:

Je n'avais pas entendu cette espèce de voix extrêmement naïve, complètement en dehors d'elle-même, une voix inconsciente. Pas une voix *de* l'inconscient, mais une voix qui n'a pas conscience de ce qu'elle est et, donc, qui est capable de dire des choses très lyriques ou alors des horreurs. C'est un décalage qui m'amusait forcément. Ça me permettait de jouer et de créer par moments des effets ironiques. (Gaudet 2002, 109, emphasis is Darrieussecq's)

As Darrieussecq states, when the novel's story begins with the narrator's job interview, the young woman is ignorant of what she experiences and what it means. She does not possess the linguistic or cognitive abilities to make sense of her reality or express it outside of clichés and euphemisms. The *décalage* in the text between her blunt descriptions of horrors paired with verbose lyrical passages creates an almost vertiginous contrast. This effect is in part due to the way the protagonist's vocabulary develops and expands as she undergoes the physical transformation. Darrieussecq describes this in the same interview as a necessary "enriching" of the narrator's vocabulary since her experience is so far outside of society's codified repertoire:

Au début elle a un vocabulaire très pauvre et peu à peu, la syntaxe et le vocabulaire s'enrichissent. Elle arrive à penser parce qu'il lui est arrivé un événement qui n'est pas du tout codifié, répertorié par la société, un événement monstrueux. Donc elle est obligée de penser seule cet événement inouï, inédit. D'une façon moins spectaculaire les autres livres fonctionnent un peu comme ça. Il y a une évolution de la parole, de la prise de parole, qui va vers plus de liberté. (109)

It is this *prise de parole* that allows the narrator to liberate herself from truisms, to learn to think and write on her own. The monstrous transformation that she undergoes is actually one of liberation and represents the text's final aspect of irony—the narrator finds freedom from gender-based violence and objectification through escaping the system, both in the form of her body and her geographical location since she flees the city to live permanently in the forest amongst the other animals. This ironic inversion shows that although *Truismes* unfolds in a deeply dystopian reality, it contains a glimmer of utopia in the protagonist's development of new linguistic abilities and consciousness of self. One could argue however that even the "glimmers of utopia" as I call them and discuss in more detail in the following section are perhaps still part of *Truismes*' multi-layered irony. It is true that the irony never truly vanishes since when the narrator is able to articulate and write her story, she also mentions her difficulty holding a pen (with her hoof) and writing on the forest floor. This image of a pig-woman is tragicomic and

almost asks not to be taken seriously. Although the work is steeped in irony, it nevertheless emphasizes a coming-to-consciousness of language and the self as this process relates to the female protagonist finding a sort of very real and important freedom for herself. In this sense, Darrieussecq even goes one step further in *Truismes* to not only carve out small moments of utopia from within dystopia, but she also shows how utopia can glimmer underneath the façade of irony. I read the moments of utopia in *Truismes* as earnest and sincere, which serve to further heighten their extraordinary nature and their contrast with the rest of the novel.

a. Becoming-other and Becoming-world as Becoming-self: *Truismes*' Lyrical

Descriptions of Utopia

Amidst its horrifying scenes and ironic statements, *Truismes* also contains occasional lyrical passages that create a striking contrast in tone. In this section, I argue that these lyrical moments are small glimpses of utopia that the narrator experiences, even amidst and within the text's irony. This duality between lyricism and irony or utopia and dystopia reflects the narrator's bodily hybridity throughout her transformation and the text's larger emphasis on both-and relations. Just as the situation in *Truismes* is never black and white, so neither are its moments of utopia wholly detached from the narrator's reality. I focus my analysis on these moments because they describe a profound and new relational state between the narrator and language and also between her body and understanding of embodied self as she exists within the natural, sensate world. Notably, these moments always take place when she is in her porcine or "pig-form," which underlines how her physical transformation—supposedly "monstrous" and abject—actually enables her to develop new linguistic and intercorporeal knowledge. More than

just contrasting a physically perceptive “animal” form with a rational human form,¹⁵³ these moments describe how the narrator’s sense of self expands and opens to the wider world. They present flashes of peace and awareness of other animals, of natural forces like wind, air, sunrise and sunset, sounds and smells, specifically when she is alone in the midst of nature. These experiences contrast sharply with the violence and abuse she experiences with other people when in “civilized society.” This is not to assert that Darrieussecq sets up a simple binary opposition between civilization as evil or corrupt and untamed nature as pure, but rather to argue that for this narrator in her dystopian reality, these moments in nature are *the way* that she finds freedom. They allow her to desire and feel in new ways outside of the limited ones she has only ever known. This enhanced consciousness allows her to develop a new subjectivity that is all the more transgressive for its refusal of society and its sexual norms.

Although these passages are a fascinating part of the text, critical analyses generally overlook them in favor of the text’s more obvious and arresting dystopian elements. It is possible that text’s immediate shock factor works against itself and downplays its beautiful moments, since they depart so sharply from the *voix naïve* that the reader expects. Gaudet describes the lyrical moments as brief respites for the narrator from male sexual predation, during which she is able to take pleasure in “renewed sensory contact with the world” (185). Gaudet reiterates that these moments are tied to sensations: “Some of the most lyrical passages in the novel are precipitated by her discovery of the pleasures of the sensate” (190). Michèle Schaal labels these passages as “bucolisme” that serve to “animalise” the narrator or show her heightened animal sensibility: “Le ‘bucolisme’ participant également au performatisme du roman au travers de

¹⁵³ I mean this in the sense that one could draw a simple dichotomy between human knowledge and “animal” knowledge, where the animal form understands in a more physical way since it is not as intellectually developed of a creature. This is to say that it possesses the capacity for “bodily” knowledge but not rational thought.

scènes lyriques et sensuello-sensibles qui animalisent le « je », renforçant ainsi l'absence de raisonnement humain lorsque la narratrice devient truie" (51). The "bucolic passages" as Schaal states do "animalize" the narrator through her increased sensorial capacities, but they do not necessarily reinforce the absence of "human reasoning" as the narrator becomes a sow. It seems that the text actually argues for the opposite, again as part of its ironic message: that as the narrator loses her human form (or develops her hybrid bodily existence), she becomes *more* human in that she develops the ability to think and speak for herself. Anne Simon references *Truismes'* lyrical passages along with transformations in Darrieussecq's other books to show how these align with her general ecological concern and decentering of the human as the privileged perspective: "Changer de lieu, et surtout changer de corps (pour devenir truie, requin pèlerin, chien ou calmar géant), c'est s'autoriser à changer de regard pour donner à voir un monde qui, pour être habituellement invisible à nos yeux d'humains pourvus d'ocillères, n'en existe pas moins, et n'en a pas moins *droit* à l'existence" (22, Simon's emphasis). While I agree with Simon's statements, I interpret the passages on a deeper level that does not only read them for a sort of "animal" or sensate consciousness outside of the human, or for descriptions of the natural world as a refuge from an oppressive masculine gaze. I read both of those aspects—heightened sensation and nature as refuge—as contributing parts of Darrieussecq's construction of brief utopian experiences that exist within the novel's dystopia. They are elements of the utopian relation that narrator enjoys in these moments. Through both their expansive poetics and expression of different consciousness, the passages reveal a new way of being in the world. They multiply the self, breaking open and blurring spatial boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, finite and infinite. In these moments, the narrator becomes more than herself and

feels her place at the center of the world. They are moments of becoming and contain *Truismes*' vision for a better life.

About a third of the way into the story, the narrator experiences the first of these moments, which begins to build Darrieussecq's utopian vision of intercorporeal subjectivity. The narrator recounts how she enjoyed taking refuge in the "petit square" near the *parfumerie* during her lunch breaks. Soon, instead of just brief escapes from her lascivious clients, her scenes in the square become sensation-filled affairs where she experiences a deeper relation with the wider world. Instead of just sitting on the same bench and eating her lunch, she listens to and observes the other animals and enjoys the taste of flowers and nuts: "Dans le square je trouvais toujours des boutons d'or, c'était le printemps de nouveau, et je les mâchais lentement en cachette, je leur trouvais un goût de beurre et de près gras" (50). As a contrast to the often short, blunt phrases that the narrator utters throughout *Truismes*, here she uses a series of run-ons with only commas separating the phrases. This creates the effect that as she experiences (or remembers) heightened sensations, she also feels a need to write and express quickly. It is an effect of accumulating sensations and linking them together, like the way that smells and tastes overlap (or like Wittig's *guérillères*' perfumes mingling in darkness). The phrases run together as the narrator's understanding of herself in the world begins to expand. She continues to speak of the birds, using the same list-style syntax: "Je regardais les oiseaux, il y avait des moineaux, des pigeons, des étourneaux parfois, et leurs petits chants pathétiques me tiraient des larmes. Un couple de crécerelles nichait juste au-dessus de la parfumerie, je ne m'étais jamais aperçue" (50). Although she only includes a handful of types of birds in her description here, it recalls, ever so slightly, Wittig's list-style writing and especially her inclusion of *all* the types of birds in "The Angels' Kitchen." As this passage in *Truismes* comes fairly early and lasts less than one page, it shows

the beginning of the narrator's burgeoning consciousness and is already marked by a difference in vocabulary and syntax.

The narrator then expands her descriptive abilities and sensorial experience, as she moves into a deeper (and less self-centered) relation with the natural world. In a scene that comes closer to the book's halfway point, the narrator returns at night to Honoré's apartment after an intense fight earlier in the day, only to find that he has locked her out and dumped all of her things outside the door. As if that were not enough, he also slit the throat of her pet guinea pig and placed its bleeding body in the pocket of her work blouse. Confronted with this grotesque sight where there is "sang du cochon partout sur le palier" (68), she vomits and then retreats to a nearby park. There she describes an expansive, sensorial experience that could not be more different from the scene outside the apartment. Her description of watching the sun rise in the park endures for nearly three pages. She notes the birds chirping; rats and mice looking for food; cats on the hunt; pigeons finding a place to settle; and even a disoriented bat who cannot find its way home. She describes the colors of the sky:

Le ciel était gris pale avec des trainées roses, et les fumées des usines étaient vert vif dans l'aube ; je ne sais pas pourquoi ça me faisait un tel effet, j'étais comme qui dirait émue. Les merles et le rossignol commençaient à se taire, et maintenant c'étaient les moineaux qui pépiaient, les petits dans les nids réclamaient leur pitance. Je me sentais incroyablement éveillée et affamée. (68-69)

These observations contrast with her earlier narcissistic focus on her own appearance in the eyes of others. There is also an invitation to "double reading" implied in her statement that she feels "awake" and "hungry," since she is figuratively asleep during the story's first half but finally begins to "wake up" to her state and to the injustices around her around this point in the narrative. While being hungry happens off and on during her transformation and is always linked with her animal state, it would not be too much to interpret this also as a contrast with her former

life of rigorous dieting and vomiting.¹⁵⁴ Here in the park, she is *hungry* for something real and nourishing, for water, earth, and forest: “J’avais un intense goût d’eau et de terre dans la bouche, un goût de forêt, de feuilles mortes” (69). Her use of *goût* here echoes her earlier references to her own body as “appetizing,” but now she is the one doing the tasting and enjoying. She describes the sensation of eating and savoring with the most poetic language of the scene:

Alors, j’ai commencé à manger. Il y avait des marrons et des glands. A cet endroit de la banlieue on a planté des chênes d’Amérique qui deviennent rouge vif à l’automne. Les glands surtout étaient délicieux, avec comme un petit goût de terres vierges. Ça croquait sous la dent et ensuite les fibres se défaisaient dans la salive, c’était coriace et rude, ça tenait bien au ventre (...) Il y avait beaucoup de racines aussi, qui sentaient bon la réglisse, l’hamamélis et la gentiane, et dans la gorge c’était doux comme un dessert, ça faisait baver en longs fils sucrés. (69).

This description of the pleasure of tasting, chewing, swallowing, and feeling in her stomach various types of chestnuts, acorns, roots, and plants showcases her growing ability to sense deeply and to articulate what she feels. With the adjective “délicieux,” and the phrases, “doux comme un dessert,” “ça faisait baver en longs fils sucrés,” she speaks of a sweetness and a desire that she has never known before.

Her emphasis on the sensations of eating and tasting with the repetition of *goût* echoes both Cixous’ and Wittig’s use of the term in reference to their descriptions of paradise. Wittig’s emphasis on paradise as a place of sensations, as “palpable sensible souverain,” and as an experience of overlapping sensations reverberates through Darrieussecq’s lyrical passages in *Truismes*. Even more, Wittig’s descriptions in *Virgile, Non* of her beloved as “celle qui m’a donné le goût de paradis” further implies the primacy of taste as a way of experiencing paradise. For the narrator in *Truismes*, it is not a specific figure that gives her the “taste” of paradise or that

¹⁵⁴ I do not mean to imply that she is bulimic, even though the narrator certainly does practice disordered eating. I only mean that during her transformation she experiences bouts of intense hunger which she links to weight gain and then reacts to by dieting. Her stomach is often upset by the various things she eats and especially by meats, and so she does a lot of vomiting.

welcomes her into the utopian relation; rather it is the earth herself (*la terre*) that acts as this *celle*; the earth offers the narrator nuts, leaves, roots, and plants, and it is their taste that catalyzes the narrator's pleasurable experience. It is as if the narrator here almost enacts Manastabal's command to *Wittig* upon entering one of the circles of heaven : "(Regarde autour de toi, pèse l'air qui te touche, respire le vent, remplis tes yeux des formes des masses et des couleurs)" (23). When the narrator in *Truismes* finally has the opportunity to look around herself and really see, she feels the air and breaths the wind. She certainly "fills her eyes" with the forms and colors around her when she observes the sunrise. Her experience echoes another passage from *Virgile, Non*, when *Wittig* describes the sights and sensation of paradise: "Et je vois sous le soleil éclatant la prolixité des couleurs, la profusion des fleurs et des plantes, je respire l'air devenu tiède et embaumé" (87-88). Just like *Wittig*, the narrator in *Truismes* remarks about the sunlight, the flower, plants, and air. All of this shows that the narrator's experiences are not just evidence of a heightened animal sensibility, but of her entrance into an experience that is utopian in contrast with her former dystopian existence.

The element of irony is still there underneath these lyrical moment of course, since the narrator only has these experiences while in her pig form, away from society and other people. The fact that she experiences moments of utopia in a different body reflects back upon her female experience within patriarchy and in this way, it functions more as a criticism of society and the way it treats women than upon the narrator. In her interview with Jeannette Gaudet, Darriussecq addresses the play between irony and sincerity in these moments, stating simply that she reads these moments truly as the expression of the narrator interiorizing the experience and expressing something new. In reference to the "sections très poétiques où le personnage en forme de truie commence à ressentir le monde autour d'elle," Gaudet then asks if these moments

function as “pastiche de la parole poétique” (109). Darrieussecq replies: “Ah non! Je pense qu’elle les intériorise vraiment. En tout cas, je ne les ai pas entendues comme ça. Ce n’est pas ironique. C’est lyrique à mon avis” (109). Interpreting these moments as utopian in a deeper sense than just lyricism vs irony emphasizes how they demonstrate the protagonist’s developing linguistic consciousness along with her awareness of her intercorporeal embodiment and subjectivity. Furthermore, they highlight the way utopia and dystopia coexist and comeingle in Darrieussecq’s 1990s reality (and the 2000s reality of the narrative) where, perhaps, visions of utopia can no longer appear with the same purity or detachment of 1970s and 1980s.

In another moment in the park that takes place at sunset instead of sunrise, the narrator’s description broadens from the sights, smells, and colors that she sees to express a deeper intercorporeal knowledge. She states how she feels “les rêves” of the birds in the park:

J’entendais, en haut des arbres, les plumes des moineaux se froisser dans leur sommeil précoce, leurs paupières battre soyeusement dans les derniers réflexes de la veille, et je sentais leurs rêves glisser sur ma peau avec les derniers rayons du couchant. Ça faisait des rêves d’oiseaux partout dans l’ombre tiède des arbres ; et des rêves de pipistrelles partout dans le ciel, parce que les pipistrelles rêvent même éveillées. (80)

Here she feels and understands the dreams of other animals, and she even states that she feels them beneath her own skin. Her sentiment collapses the distance between herself and the birds. It expresses a knowledge felt and received in the body, and it shows that she is opening herself to the “other;” her corporeal boundaries are becoming fluid and porous. One could argue that her personal boundaries have always been “open” in the sense that her body was available to others and was variously violated over the earlier part of the book. The moment in the park here creates an important contrast with that earlier state of passivity because that was only ever a one-way relation for the narrator. Her body was used in a transactional way by others but never in a mutual sharing, and it certainly never led to increased knowledge of the self or others. She did

not learn or gain anything from those interactions, and in fact they left her feeling more isolated and alienated afterwards. Her experience in the part at sunset, by contrast, is a sharing of dreams, which means a sharing of desire, of hope, and perhaps even of fear. She does not mention what the dreams entail but just that she is able to feel them in her own body. She then starts to feel alone when night falls, but states that the dreams alleviate her isolation: “Il y avait les rêves des oiseaux dans mes rêves, et le rêve que le chien avait laissé pour moi. Je n’en étais plus si seule” (81). The dreams of the other animals have bled into her own dreams; they become a shared experience. Darrieussecq creates a chain here where the sensations lead to knowledge and the knowledge leads to a different conception of herself as interconnected and situated in the world with others. It is an intersubjective understanding that proceeds from the narrator’s corporeal sensations.

Furthermore, Darrieussecq’s use of the verb *sentir* in relation to dreams creates a complex effect, for the verb *sentir* has multiple shades of meaning that can be determined based on context. It is most commonly understood as “to smell” but can also mean “to taste,” “to feel,” or “to sense” in a more figurative implication that approaches something like “to perceive.” A translation of the phrase “je sentais leurs rêves glisser sur ma peau” to mean “I smelled/ was smelling” or “I was tasting their dreams” creates an almost incredulous synesthetic effect since one does not normally “smell” or “taste” dreams. Something more like “I was feeling” or “I was perceiving” would fall into the realm of commonly understandable ways of referencing dreams. However, the ambiguity of meaning that *sentir* offers adds to the intercorporeal layering of sensations in this moment. The point is not just that she smells or tastes or feels in an isolated way of using one single sense, but instead that she understands in a way that employs all of her

senses—they overlap and comingle because smelling *is* tasting, tasting is feeling, and feeling is perceiving. They are all connected, and this is what the narrator communicates.

The layering of meaning here also implies a sort of haptic knowledge that contributes to the narrator’s development of proprioception, or her understanding of her body in the world and in its relation to other objects, animals, and the environment. Darrieussecq speaks of her specific interest in this “sixth sense” in *Truismes*, relating it to the way that sharks understand through the way their bodies brush against other objects:

Oui, c’est un lyrisme qui vient du corps. Je pense qu’effectivement ça lui donne de capacité de description plus fine. J’étais toujours fascinée par la ligne de contact des requins qui ils s’insolent de côté. Les requins se dirigent avec cette ligne de contact et ça leur donne—s’ils avaient la parole—ils auraient une capacité de description plus fine que nous, sur cet aspect-là. C’est un autre sens, disons, que nous avons aussi d’ailleurs, la proprioception, ça s’appelle. Les malvoyants ils sentent les obstacles, parce qu’on les sent en fait. Bon, chez certains animaux c’est beaucoup plus développé que chez nous.¹⁵⁵

Here she explains that the lyricism in *Truismes* “comes from the body,” which is to say that the narrator’s capacity for such an effusive, developed style of description proceeds from the way she can sense in deeper ways through her “animal” body. That Darrieussecq uses the term “proprioception” is telling: etymologically, this breaks into “proprio” meaning that it pertains to the self, and “ception” meaning an understanding or idea. The term then communicates a cognitive representation of one’s body constructed through sensorial ways of orienting oneself in the world. It expresses how one understands oneself in relation to others, and in *Truismes*, it shows that the narrator is broadening her way of understanding herself. Proprioception could almost function like an appropriate synonym for “intercorporeal subjectivity” in the sense that

¹⁵⁵ This quotation is from my interview. Her comment here was in response to a question I asked about the lyrical passages in *Truismes*.

proprioception is an understanding of the self gained through relations of the body with other bodies in space and time.

Darrieussecq expands her usage of *sentir*, along with the haptic layers of meaning it evokes in the concluding pages of the *Truismes*, when the narrator finally arrives in the forest and experiences an eruption of sensations. This multi-page description reads like the achievement of utopian relationality in the book and is the most powerful glimpse of utopia that the narrator experiences. It is still a glimpse though and does not function like *Wittig's* entrance into The Angels' Kitchen, in the sense of proclaiming a sort of final arrival and the start of a permanent stay. For the narrator in *Truismes*, as with the other moments in the text, this is a fleeting experience where time expands and her awareness and capacity for sensation becomes fluid. The experience then does recede, but the reader is led to believe that the narrator will and does enjoy moments like these afterward in the life she continues to lead in the forest. While this experience, like the others, brings refuge and peace, it does not function as a coping mechanism or mere way to escape the novel's patriarchal dystopia. Instead, it showcases her entrance into and enjoyment of a new way of existing that is sensorial and intercorporeal. As in the other moments, she begins by describing the smells of the surrounding plants and trees: "Ils sentaient l'écorce, la sève sauvage ramassée à ras de tronc, ils sentaient toute la puissance endormie de l'hiver" (139). In this moment of mixing sensations, she states that she could smell "the sleeping power of winter" contained within the plants. Just like how she smelled-tasted-felt the dreams of the birds at twilight, here she can smell-feel-perceive their latent power stored up from winter hibernation. She next describes how the roots split the earth: "Entre les grosses racines des arbres la terre était éclatée, meuble, comme si les racines la labouraient de l'intérieur en s'enfonçant profondément dedans. J'y ai fourré mon nez" (139). This image shifts her experience to one

intimately closer than in her other experiences in parks, for here she enters into her physical surroundings. Just as the roots labor from within the earth to spit it open and then dive back down deeper, so she desires to add herself into the mix and she does. The image of her sticking her nose into the dirt seems appropriately porcine in the moment, but since she specifically uses her snout, it again references her uses of “goût” to mean both smell and touch. It creates an echo of Cixous’ phrase “pas de noli-me-tangere” in *Le Livre de Promethea* and Cixous’ specific double negative (*no* do not) to emphasize the contrast in the permission or the paradisiacal *Yes* that the relation with Promethea offers. In a similar way, it is as if the narrator in *Truismes*, after suffering through a lifetime of *No*, finally finds *Yes* in the forest among the roots and the soil. There is no prohibition and nothing keeping her from enjoying herself, from touching, feeling, and knowing. After struggling through so much need in the story of *Truismes*, she demonstrates in this moment how she has finally passed from need to her own desire (instead of acting as an object of others’ desire). She desires and she is able to satisfy that desire.

She continues her description using *sentir* along with the verbs *fouiller* and *creuser* to note how she rummages and digs in the dirt.

Ça sentait bon la feuille morte de l’automne passé, ça cédait en toutes petites mottes friables parfumées à la mousse, au gland, au champignon. J’ai fouillé, j’ai creusé, cette odeur c’était comme si la planète entraînait tout entière dans mon corps, ça faisait des saisons en moi, des envols d’oies sauvages, des perce-neiges, des fruits, du vent du sud. Il y avait toutes les strates de toutes les saisons dans les couches d’humus, ça se précisait, ça remontait vers quelque chose. (139)

Her description here expands to include an intercorporeal reciprocity, somewhat like how previously the birds’ dreams mingled with her own dreams, although here it is the satisfying smell of the leaves and dirt that creates the effect, as if “la planète entraînait tout entière dans mon corps.” This is a huge statement that implies that her body becomes large enough somehow to contain the entire planet or to welcome all the sensations of an entire, vast natural world into

herself. She becomes impossibly spacious in this moment, with an internal depth she has never had or felt before. The moment is also a spatio-temporal one where time becomes fluid, or perhaps it implies that she experiences this moment outside of time, when she states that “ça faisait des saisons en moi.” In the moment, she is able to feel, to be, to contain multiple seasons. She even feels particular elements of the seasons, like flights of wild geese, snowdrops, fruits, and wind, all existing simultaneously within and through her. She has become in this moment a center, or a point at which everything collides and merges. In Darrieussecq’s own words, “c’est une sorte de point brûlant qui serait le centre du monde, qui serait un centre utopique si vous voulez, un centre de sensation, un centre *du tout*” (her emphasis).¹⁵⁶

The narrator’s description then continues to describe how she experiences this “centre du tout” in her body and blood, pulsating through her veins with the beating of the entire world: “Dans tout mon corps, j’ai viré à nouveau avec le tournoiement de la planète, j’ai respiré avec le croisement des vents, mon cœur a battu avec la masse des marées contre les rivages, et mon sang a coulé avec les poids des neiges” (140-41). Here she aligns herself with a cosmic rhythm, as she turns with the turning of the planet, breathes with the intersecting winds, her heart beats with the ocean tides lapping against the shores, and her blood flows with the weight of snows. Each of these phrases connects one part of her body to a part of the world, setting up a correspondence and a sort of harmony with natural phenomena. Notably Darrieussecq does not write this series of correspondences through similes or even metaphors, meaning that the narrator does not breathe *like* the wind; rather these aspects of her body occur *with* the natural phenomena. The presence of *avec* in each phrase is key because it links the experiences together in space, time, and likeness. *Avec* specifically establishes relation, as it is a connecting word, and it aligns the

¹⁵⁶ This is from my interview, in response to my question specifically about what the “quelque chose” could be in the last phrase of the citation from p. 139, “ça se précisait, ça remontait vers quelque chose.”

actions in concurrent processes. This experience dissolves the alienation and isolation that the narrator felt earlier in the book; she finally enters into a deep, lifegiving relation with all of her body together with all of the world. This is her utopia—that she is large enough, fluid enough, and sensitive enough to feel herself at the center of a world that moves and breathes together with her, not against her or in spite of her. She becomes the world and the world becomes her, in one great assemblage of connections and correspondences. This moment appears like the sun breaking over clouds after a storm—it illuminates the ending of *Truismes* with this description of terrestrial harmony. It shows that she has developed a intercorporeal awareness of herself in the world, along with a linguistic awareness of her ability to speak sincerely instead of only through naiveté and truisms. In this moment, she has finally found her place.

In the concluding paragraph of her description in the forest, the narrator specifically mentions the “knowledge” she possesses in the moment, implying that this experience brings understanding in addition to sensation. She implores the reader to “not laugh” since it all sounds improbable:

La connaissance des arbres, des parfums, des humus, des mousses et des fougères, a fait jouer mes muscles. Dans mes artères, j’ai senti battre l’appel des autres animaux, l’affrontement et l’accouplement, le parfum désirable de ma race en rut. L’envie de la vie faisait des vagues sous ma peau, ça me venait de partout, comme des galops de sangliers dans mon cerveau, des éclats de foudre dans mes muscles, ça me venait du fond du vent, du plus ancien des races continuées. Je sentais jusqu’au profond de mes veines la détresse des dinosaures, l’acharnement des cœlacanthes, ça me poussait en avant de les savoir vivant ces gros poissons, je ne sais pas comment expliquer ça aujourd’hui et même je ne sais plus comment je sais tout ça. Ne riez pas. (141)¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ This citation also begs the question of who her readers are, or who the narrator addresses herself to. I think it is purposefully unclear. The narrator speaks of her editor in the novel’s opening paragraph and of readers who might be scandalized by her story; yet she feels the need to tell her story and has somehow managed to get it published. She also makes references to moments in the story’s reality that she thinks the reader knows. For example, when describing about how Edgar also suffered some sort of transformation into a horse, the narrator states: “Il paraît qu’il hennissait et qu’il ne mangeait plus que le herbe, à quatre pattes. Pauvre Edgar. Bon, après vous connaissez la suite. La guerre a éclaté et tout ça, il y a eu l’Épidémie, et puis la série de famines” (114). The way this statement assumes the reader knows the history of recent events shows that she assumes the reader is of her contemporary time, having lived through those events. That the narrator also asks the reader to “not laugh” implies that she suspects the reader

She connects her newfound *connaissance* here to her muscles and how the knowledge makes her body move, whereby further underscoring the intercorporeal nature of this scene. Like the earlier citation where she feels the earth's processes in her heart and blood, here she feels a connection to other animals, to her "race," pulsing within her arteries. These sensations and the knowledge they bring are life-giving, as she states with the powerful phrase: "l'envie de la vie." This desire for life itself has now replaced her earlier superficial desires, and she feels this deeper desire "beneath her skin." She has developed a very different relation to her body, and her proprioception has exploded into feeling herself as a "point brûlant," a point at the center of everything. She states that this desire for life "comes from everywhere," in another series of phrases that link her to various natural processes and other animals: the desire comes like galloping wild boars in her brain and like lightning strikes in her muscles; it comes from the depths of the wind and the oldest of continued races. The description uses only commas to separate its series of phrases, reiterating the effect of speed and excitement, of the sensations happening simultaneously in a sort of sensorial jouissance. When she states that she even feels the distress of the dinosaurs and the restlessness of the coelacanths—creatures supposedly extinct—she expresses the fluid temporality of her sensations in this moment; they stretch back to ancient times and then also "push her forward" towards perceiving the existence of these other animals. The fact that she says she does not even understand how she knows all of this reveals that this is not a cognitive type of knowledge. It is not based on reason and logic but on sensation, connection, and the relation she enters into with the world. Just as for *Wittig* in the Angels' Kitchen, the experience of paradise is a feast for the senses, and just like how *Wittig*

will misinterpret her sincerity here as unrealistic fantasy and may find her language overblown, even though she states that she doesn't know how to explain the sensations.

shifts her perspective from the first-person “I” to “on,” so the narrator here comes to understand herself as more than an “I” and more like a “we”—she feels the feelings of other animals and exists together with them. This moment encapsulates a fleeting glimpse of paradise-as-relation; the utopian force of the description comes from the characteristic of the relation that she experiences with the natural world and with the sensations of other living and even extinct animals. It is a becoming-world in a cosmic sense where she feels herself much larger and greater than herself, and it triumphantly defies the alienation, isolation, and physical violation that she suffered throughout *Truismes* to reach this state, at last.

This description at the end of *Truismes* echoes Wittig’s exuberant exclamation when she finally arrives in paradise: “C’est donc le paradis palpable sensible souverain. J’y cours, j’y vole s’il est vrai que c’est ici et maintenant que prend fin ma longue pérégrination dans l’enfer” (136). Although the image of the narrator at the end of *Truismes*—in her pig-form in the forest, experiencing a sensorial and intercorporeal moment of paradise—still rings with faint undertones of *Truismes*’ ever-present irony, this does not dampen the power of the scene. To reiterate, much of the utopian force here comes from the incredible contrast and divergence in style, vocabulary, and imagery from other descriptions in *Truismes*. This moment of utopian relationality, or of utopia represented as a state of being occasioned through deep, sensorial and physical relation with other animals and with the environment, places for the narrator in *Truismes* a crowning end to her own peregrination in an inferno of patriarchal abuse and exploitation. The fleeting paradise she discovers is not a specific place but a way of existing that offers her freedom to truly feel and desire. Against the backdrop of *Truismes*’ dystopian elements, this final, extended utopian moment along with the earlier ones show that it is possible for glimpses of utopia to shine through dystopia, and even more, Darrieussecq offers them in her novel as the achievement

of the narrator's liberation. The contrast between the narrator's *voix naïve* and her vast vocabulary and fluid style in the lyrical moments cited above cannot be overstated—this contrast infuses the moments with power, beauty, and sincerity. If *Truismes* is a harrowing depiction of a specific female type of hell, then these moments represent the inverse—a vision of a female heaven, where one can escape the bounds of gender; where there no transactional or exploitative sexual dynamics; and where the body becomes a joyous way to welcome the world into the self and to give the self to the world, by choice. This vision exemplifies a process of becoming-other that is also becoming-self through expanding the self into the world. Perhaps equally as important as its dystopian elements, this surprising utopian vision in *Truismes* demonstrates how utopian relationality leads to the development of deep understanding of the self and acts as both the narrator's path of resistance and her eventual achievement of freedom.

2. *Un vide parfait: Utopian Relationality in White*

Marie Darrieussecq's sixth novel, *White* (2003), diverges from her previous works by telling the story of two named protagonists, one male and one female, seen through the perspective of a third-person, quasi-omniscient chorus of phantoms. With *White*, Darrieussecq leaves behind the *rage et colère* of *Truismes* for a much quieter meditation on personal trauma and the internal emptiness it creates.¹⁵⁸ The collective narrator refers to itself simply as “Nous, les fantômes” (44), and though it speaks as one entity, it comprises the many voices of memories, dreams, and fears. As Darrieussecq explains, the chorus is a “nous collectif...celui de

¹⁵⁸ Darrieussecq's books after *Truismes* focused more on her more central—and less popular—psychological themes of absence and disintegration. Darrieussecq has said that she considers her first three novels like a triptych, with *Truismes*, *Naissance de fantômes*, and *Le Mal de mer* revolving around the theme of absence and finding a path back to the self (see Kapriélian 6-7; Lambeth 810, 816). Her fourth novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001) is also her most experimental and longest, which tells the story of one family reeling in separate but interconnected ways from the loss of one of the children. Then Darrieussecq switches gears yet again with *Le Bébé* (2002), which is an autobiographical account of her experience of motherhood with her first child. With *White*, she returns with force to her concern with “phantoms” and working through personal trauma and absence.

la névrose et celui de la convention sociale. C'est un vaste nous, celui des morts qui nous pèsent, celui de l'empêchement général" (267). In addition to this change in narrative perspective, she moves away from familiar urban and suburban settings to situate *White* in a "non-lieu" (154), fifteen kilometers from the South Pole at a remote research station in Antarctica, simply called "The Project White." In this isolated location, silence is deafening, and all is white. This space of utter emptiness where no one lives and nothing happens allows Darrieussecq to excavate the protagonists' internal emptiness, or "questionner le vide."¹⁵⁹ Even though the protagonists come on the expedition to escape their pasts, they soon learn that it is only through their intercorporeal relation that they can truly empty themselves of the emptiness. In this way, their relation is what enables them to dispel their phantoms and develop a new, wider sense of self.

Somewhat like *Truismes*, *White* leans toward dystopian elements more than utopian ones, not in the sense that it takes place in a negative version of reality but more so in the way its protagonists are internally haunted by trauma and guilt. *White* is not critical of the societies its protagonists inhabit and it does not focus on specifically gendered physical violence. It instead circles around descriptions of how the characters continue to live with psychological wounds that never heal, and which perpetually hollow them out from the inside and render them susceptible to innumerable phantoms. Rather than focusing on questions of what it means to be female and to inhabit a female body in a male-dominated world, in *White* Darrieussecq considers broader questions about what it means to be human and how to confront the "ghosts" of one's past. She explores what happens when her characters are left in a place of complete desolation with

¹⁵⁹ She speaks about this concept in interviews, including my own in response to my question about *White's* protagonists: "Comment est-ce qu'ils peuvent être remplis de vide, paradoxalement?" She discussed "vide" in *White* in relation to both the physical location of the protagonists and their internal state before and after their relation. See also Lambeth 812 where she discusses her fascination with "le vide" in a general sense; Concannon and Sweeney 2, where she uses the phrase "questionner le vide" on page 2 and discusses *White* specifically.

nothing except their thoughts and memories, along with the sounds of their heart beating and their own blood pounding in their veins. Since such a difficult setting could potentially foreclose all possibility of interpersonal and intercorporeal relations, it is all the more significant that the introspective narrative in *White* erupts (just before the end) into a passionate love story.

Darrieussecq explains this aspect, saying that in addition to other questions, “*White* est une histoire d’amour au pôle Sud, qui pose très simplement la question suivante: jusqu’à quel point peut-on se toucher réellement si l’on ne s’est pas débarrassé de ses fantômes, si l’on n’a pas expédié les fantômes hors de soi?” (Lambeth 267-68). *White* shows both the limitations of connection when the characters are encumbered by their phantoms, along with the pleasure and freedom they experience together once they dispel their phantoms. Crucially, their relationship with one another is not simply the end, or the by-product, of the process of transitioning from need to desire, but it is also the means; it *is* what allows them to expel their phantoms and to desire relation with each other and the wider world. In this sense, the relation brings them back to themselves and gives them what they are truly looking for.

Just as *Truismes* presents flashes of utopia like cracks in its otherwise all-encompassing dystopian reality, so *White* includes glimpses in its descriptions of the couple’s physical relations that break spatiotemporal boundaries and expand far beyond themselves. As in *Truismes*, these moments are fleeting and do not arrive until nearly the end of *White* (after about 160 pages). They are exceptional moments that explode with fullness and a sense of cosmic harmony. just as in *Truismes*, when the two protagonists come together in *White*, their relation expands to encompass the entire world—everything is involved and everything is connected. These moments of utopian relationality in *White* demonstrate the protagonists’ new-found freedom. The relation enables them to become *le centre du monde* and *le centre du tout*; they become-world in

a Deleuzian sense through their reciprocal process of giving themselves to each other and welcoming the other and the world into themselves. As I discuss in detail in the last part of this section, *White* also exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's dichotomy of smooth versus striated space, *le lisse et le strié*, as these concepts respectively facilitate and foreclose spaces of becoming through relation. Darrieussecq's protagonists in *White* labor to impose striation upon smooth space and to overcome the striation within themselves to eventually achieve a smooth space through their intercorporeal relations. *White* shows how their relation is a state of permeability and non-exclusion, and how through their act of opening and giving, the protagonists develop a new sense of "nous" or "nous-deux" instead of isolated selves. Their relation enables them to speak in the first person (the only moments in the book when they do) as a "nous" instead of an "ils" or even a "he" or "she" described separately by the phantoms. Like *Truismes*, the relation is tied to language and comes through lyrical description that contrasts with *White*'s stark, staccato text. Through the combination of all these elements, Darrieussecq constructs the couple's relation as their paradise. When added to the vision she creates in *Truismes*, it shows a further developed and equally as moving picture of utopian relationality.

a. *Questionner le vide: White's Fugue on the Theme of Emptiness*

The two protagonists in *White*, Edmée Blanco and Peter Tomson, each come for the six-month assignment at the remote Antarctic research station to escape their pasts and the hollowness that plagues their daily lives. They are both engineers for Project White: Edmée works to ensure the lines of communication with the outside world, while Peter maintains the base's central heating system. They are drawn to each other (subconsciously) by their parallel searches for a fixed "center" amidst centrifugal lives full of emptiness. Edmée was born in Bordeaux, France but raised in Canada and currently resides in the city of Douglastown near

Houston, Texas. She and her NASA scientist husband, Samuel, have no children. She leads a comfortable, suburban life in a planned housing community, *le lotissement*, complete with a central fountain, public garden, and rows of identical houses. The narrating chorus describes Edmée's life through her recollections, typified by the identical sight that awaits her every morning: "une-maison-une-pelouse-une-maison-une-pelouse. Le bassin carré de la fontaine. Quelques piscines dans l'allée la plus riche. Au loin, les tours de Houston" (120). The monotony and sculpted superficiality of the neighborhood wears on Edmée, and she has a reputation among the neighbors for being idle, "particulièrement oisive — un mari, des diplômés, mais ni enfants, ni travail—" (159). In this combination of cookie-cutter homogeneity and inertia, Edmée searches for a geographical "center" that could metonymically provide her with a psychological center. She tries to imagine that the physical center point of her neighborhood is at the center of everything: "La balançoire et la fontaine étaient au centre exactement du lotissement, et Edmée Blanco aimait à penser que vue par satellite, sa position géographique dans l'architecture du lotissement était centrale aussi" (121). Edmée imagines her neighborhood as it would look from a great distance, and by so doing, she performs a centrifugal movement of perspective; while she longs to be at the center, she can only imagine this by pushing her view outward, even as far as that of a satellite.

As the book progresses, the chorus reveals that Edmée's comfortable neighborhood actually sits at the center of loss. They describe how when Edmée looks out her window to observe the neighborhood of distracting fullness, she feels instead a deep, existential emptiness:

D'ici elle pouvait rêver à la fenêtre, surveiller le terrain de jeu, et se distraire aux allées et venues des vélos. Puisque de toute façon, depuis le *big bang*, depuis le début du début, on ne faisait qu'être chassé de plus en plus loin par la force centrifuge de l'explosion ; puisque que de toute façon, Samuel et la Nasa derrière lui l'affirment : le centre s'était perdu. Le noyau initial, le point zéro, le cœur de cœur, s'était — *pfut* — pulvérisé. (123)

During this quintessential idle-housewife activity—watching neighbors out the window—Edmée feels the force that has pushed existence away from its lost center ever since the earth’s creation; she senses that this central emptiness was born simultaneously along with the earth. She feels the inherent paradox here: that the act of creation also created absence, *le vide*, and unleashed the force that continually pushes life away from the center. The center is in fact gone, and so life swirls around a sort of black hole, a core of emptiness. The phantoms reiterate how Edmée feels this emptiness in her city: “Si le vide a un centre, Houston est au centre du vide, et Douglastown en est l’immédiate périphérie” (159). If emptiness had a center, it would be nearly where Edmée lives. This sentiment echoes the question that Edmée asks herself during her work at Project White: “où est le centre du monde?” (158). The fact that she continues to ask it reveals her dissatisfaction with the idea that *le centre est perdu*. She feels, somehow, that there is actually a center; she just does not know where it lies. Edmée also reflects as she adjusts to the rhythm of life at Project White that, “tout est vide et blanc” (34). The homophonic resonance of her phrase has a second meaning here, as “tout est vide” sounds like “tout *évide*,” with the verb *évider*, to empty or hollow out. Instead of “everything is empty,” the phrase would then mean “everything empties itself. There is a further shade of meaning in *évider* understood as “to core,” or to “take out the center” of something. In this sense, the centrifugal force Edmée feels, and which afflicts all life from the moment it is born, is a self-inflicted fleeing away from the center by continually removing one’s center. This is a literal de-centering of the self and then replacing that physical center with an empty space, an absence, or a *centre de vide*.

Peter Tomson suffers from a similar sense of emptiness, along with his own version of feeling that he lives at *le centre du vide*. His feeling stems in large part from a lack of familial, national, and linguistic identity. He lives in Iceland, but no one knows where he was born, “né on

ne sait trop” (21), and he has never fully mastered the Icelandic language. As the phantoms recount, his parents uprooted him from their unspecified war-torn country when he was young, and they sent him to Iceland to seek refuge with foster parents. When they returned to join him, they were barely recognizable, and even worse, they had lost his sister, who ostensibly died in some sort of atrocity. The possibility that it could have been him haunts Peter, and his fragmented familial identity never recovers. Peter’s sense of internal emptiness manifests in a desire (more like a need) to “tout prendre,” to fill himself with everything so that he will no longer lack anything. The phantoms describe how Peter feels this need during his work at Project White: “Peter voudrait absorber tout le paysage. Il tourne sur lui-même. Englober, d’un coup, comprendre : tout le paysage. L’air, le soleil, le sol. Ce paysage habité par eux-seuls, ce non-lieu, ce non-sens formidable, air soleil sol. Habité par eux seuls. Crevasses et craquements, et le désir de tout prendre, infini, juste en se tenant là, debout” (154). Here Peter’s desire belies his belief that if he could absorb the landscape, *englober*, or include it all and welcome it into himself, then suddenly, he would understand, *d’un coup, comprendre*. He contrasts this desire with the fact that the Antarctic landscape seems to be a “non-place” that defies comprehension, a “formidable nonsense.” For Peter, if he could contain it all for even a moment, then he could understand himself as the fixed point at the center of this harsh landscape.

Like Peter’s, Edmée’s family history is haunted by loss, and the trauma of this absence contributes to her sense of having a hollowed-out center. Firstly, Edmée’s grandmother committed infanticide (killing her own children for no apparent reason), and although Edmée’s mother narrowly survived through the luck of being with a baby-sitter that day, the thought that Edmée might never have been born haunts her. Secondly, Edmée’s neighbor and friend in *le lotissement*, Imelda Higgins, commits a shocking and completely unsuspected act of infanticide

that rips through the peaceful suburban community. Before the event, Edmée would regularly babysit the five Higgins children while Imelda would attend yoga. Then, on that fateful day when Edmée decided to go to yoga herself, Imelda—stuck at home, unable to find a sitter, and possessed by who knows what sort of demon—electrocuted her four children in the bathtub, threw the fifth out the window, and then committed suicide by slitting her wrists. After this event, Edmée’s grief and guilt consumes her, for perhaps it was her fault.¹⁶⁰ However improbably, Edmée and Peter both arrive in the Antarctic with their separate histories of trauma and decentered emptiness. Darrieussecq states that, in spite of or rather because of their pasts, the couple’s eventual attraction arises through the secret they hold in common: “ce secret c’est que les enfants peuvent mourir. Ils tombent amoureux par dessus ce secret” (Concannon and Sweeney 3).¹⁶¹ This secret that children can die, that they have died, and that death leaves a hole inside through its own centrifugal power is what eventually attracts Edmée and Peter.

Emptiness and loss are at the center of *White* just as they occupy the center of the two protagonists, which is to say that the book itself has as its theme *le centre du vide*. The book turns around this thematic aspect with the force of its singular style. It employs a mixture of short phrases, fragments, ellipses, dashes, and onomatopoeic groups of italicized letters and words, in addition to the previously mentioned plural and singular chorus of “nous, les fantômes.” Darrieussecq describes her style in a statement that mimics the book’s fragments and the way its phrases often end (or really do not end) with ellipses: “L’écriture de *White* est staccato au début, elle vise à secouer, à donner le mal de mer; les phrases sont plus courtes que dans d’autres livres,

¹⁶⁰ There is an implication in this story too of feminine neurosis, that simply put, the isolating life of a stay-at-home housewife with no relief from caring for five children could drive a woman, like Imelda Higgins, absolutely insane. There is also an element of Greek tragedies in this story of infanticide, as Jean H. Duffy notes in her article, “In the Wake of Trauma: Visualizing the Unspeakable/Unthinkable in Marie Darrieussecq and Hélène Lenoir,” p. 418.

¹⁶¹ The interview does not have numbered pages, but I’ve added the number that corresponds to the page in the pdf.

ça va vite, il y a des bruits, des sons, les fantômes s’amusent...” (3). Through this fragmentary style, Darrieussecq gives formal weight to the task of describing *le vide*. Much of the text’s language is “empty” of traditional grammar structures, like subjects, verbs, and properly ordered syntax. Thoughts fade off into ellipses, unable to reach their center point and connect with each other. While *White*’s language is centrifugal in the sense of the etymological Latin roots of the term: *centri* (or *centrum*, meaning center) and *fuge* (from *fugere*, to flee or move away from), *White* is also structured like a “fugue,” in both the musical and psychological meanings of this term. “Fugue” derives from the same Latin root, *fugere*, and can mean: “a flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality” (OED). This definition reads as though it could be a one-line summary on the back cover of *White*. The book functions like a musical fugue in that it has central themes introduced in the initially separate stories of the two protagonists, which then weave in and out of each other until finally coming together at the end. Like a classical fugue, the book is structured in three parts: part one introduces the characters, first Edmée and then Peter, in similar ways but different registers. The second part follows the development of their work at the base and the slow unpacking of their trauma through memories and dreams. The third part contains the final union of their stories and melodies. Through its polyphonic nature, *White* repeats its themes in different voices at difference times, resurfacing in bits of dreams, flashbacks, and memories as if in different keys; yet the text always circles around the same theme of “questionner le vide” at the center of Edmée and Peter.

The chorus of phantoms is the orchestra that plays this fugue, as they are both the narrating voice moving the story along through backward and forward-looking fragments, and they are the incorporeal embodiment of Edmée and Peter’s fears, dreams, and doubts.

Darrieussecq plays with *vide* in the sense of the phantoms, for in this setting that includes nothing and no one, it is at the same time full of the uncountable host of phantoms, the “nous bien entendu, mais comment nous compter?” (11). The phantoms describe themselves as having always been there: “Nous avons toujours été là. Nous sommes comme le mercure, les fantômes d’Edmée et les fantômes de Peter. Nos fragments se retrouvent, la pesanteur nous réunit ; puis nous nous éparpillons” (152). Edmée and Peter bring their individual phantoms with them to the Antarctic, which then unite with and interact with the other phantoms that haunt the region, “Autour d’Edmée, nous nous reposons. Autour de Peter, nous nous reposons” (156). They further describe how they mix and mingle with each other, exerting their own centrifugal force: “Nous sommes l’indifférence même. Nous nous mélangeons et nous centrifugeons les uns et les autres, comment distinguer parmi nous qui a vécu, qui est resté dans les limbes” (55).

Throughout *White*, Darrieussecq describes the movement of the phantoms, the way they swirl around, intertwine and push each other away, hang on the protagonists’ thoughts, encroach on their dreams, appear in mirages and hallucinations, and above all, how they are tied to the characters: “Nous, les fantômes, cramponnés à Edmée, nous nous amusons comme au manège. Et hop et crac et *ziiiii* ! Sautant de fil en fil, les araignées swingantes de ses pensées ! — Accoudés au bastingage, et hop et crac et *chchchch*... avec la même curiosité nous assistons au gel des haubans” (44). Just as Darrieussecq plays with the paradoxical idea of *le centre du vide* and describes it means to be *full* of emptiness, she creates this chorus of phantoms as an interminable, incorporeal force; they have always been there and they are legion. They are all the stories, dreams, memories, expectations, and thoughts that run through and around all living beings. They fill the empty Antarctic space with their immaterial, ghostly presence.

b. *Évider le vide: Expelling the Phantoms and Opening the Self to the Other*

After the first two sections of text, *White*'s third section describes how Edmée and Peter finally succeed at dispelling their phantoms and consummating their relationship, which is to say, the act of consummating their relationship *is* what dispels their phantoms. This section expresses the utopian aspects of their intercorporeal relation and the way it enables them to develop new subjective awareness. Darrieussecq describes these moments in lyrical, expansive language (much like *Truismes*) that contrasts with the earlier fragmented, cold, and contemplative style of *White*. These moments burst out of the icy expanse with color and warmth, and they bring yearned-for answers to the protagonists' earlier questions. They show how their being together allows them to expand beyond themselves and develop a new subjectivity. In this way, their relation becomes their utopia, even if only within the space of a moment. The phantoms observe this entire process, and they first describe how Peter approaches Edmée's tent early one morning but then concedes to his doubts and enacts his own centrifugal movement. The phantoms then observe how Edmée peaks out and sees Peter walking away: "Nous nous taisons. Notre voix silencieuse, dans l'espace et le gel. La répétition silencieuse depuis toujours. Elle l'a vu, *she's seen him*. Hiiiiiss. Chuuuut. Hushhhh. Siiiiffle, dans le gel et les cristaux, la voix silencieuse depuis toujours. Lit d'ombre sous le grand soleil. *The great white sea*. Edmée est réveillée" (153). As she wakes up in this moment, Edmée sees Peter walking away while the phantoms silently watch. Although both Peter and Edmée want him to come, he does not, and so they circle around the *centre* one last time. The silence of his absence is filled with the sounds of the snowy space—the sound of his footsteps on the snow, the wind whispering, and holding in bated breath.

When Peter finally does visit Edmée some pages later, suddenly it is as if the boundaries of time and space become fluid and malleable as their relation impacts the spatiotemporal factors around them, and they enter into a wider, expansive relation. The phantoms describe this, but— notably—they become upset that there is no longer room for them: “La tente est gonflée à craquer de cette seconde qui dure. Peter et Edmée sont gigantesques. Ils occupent la tente et tout le continent, ils débordent sur les mers. Une force centrifuge est en train de nous expulser — ils prennent toute la place, ils veulent faire sans nous ! (...) — nous résistons : nous pouvons parler pour eux !” (162). When Peter enters the tent, he literally and figuratively shuts out the phantoms; they remark that Peter and Edmée “can do without them.” Time slows down in this single second and Peter and Edmée *débordent*—they overflow their borders, burst out of their confines, and run over the edges of the continent as it stretches into the ocean. The force of their relation multiplies and expands them both in the other. The phantoms resist this process though because they want to continue to speak for the couple, and they drive themselves into a frenzy outside the tent: “Cramponnés aux haubans de la tente, un blizzard fantôme déchiquette nos corps sans matière — « *it was love at first sight !* », « *amour avec toujours !* », « *strangers in the night !* » — poulailler de fantômes, caquètement de plumes et de nuées — « *nous ! nous !* » — hiboux centrifugés à tous vents, valdinguent dehors, dehors !” (162-63). As they rail against their exclusion from the couple’s privacy like a blizzard or a henhouse gone mad, the phantoms throw out clichés about love and clandestine affairs in a desperate attempt to *still* speak for the couple. Their instance of “nous ! nous !” further emphasizes how they want to possess the privileged position of “we” and “us,” but the exclusion strips the phantoms of their power. When the couple is finally together in this moment, they do not *need* the phantoms. Their relation enables them to move from *need* borne of lack and perpetuated through personal emptiness to *desire* catalyzed by

movement towards the other, out of the self, and into the wider world. They become larger than their separate selves in their relation, so much so that the two selves swell across the entire continent. The incredible energy of their being-together creates its *own* centrifugal force that drives the phantoms away. This force is what finally helps Peter and Edmée to liberate themselves, *se débarrasser de ses fantômes*, or *expédier les fantômes hors de soi*, as Darrieussecq describes. Finally, this is a positive centrifugal force; Edmée and Peter have together become the center away from which their force pushes the phantoms. In this way, Peter and Edmée are no longer passive participants, blown around by the choices of others, but they are now the acting subjects, creating their own story through their relation.

A key aspect of the way their expansive relation creates their utopia is the way it changes the point of view in the novel. After the phantoms' earlier description in the first two sections, the point of view shifts during this moment inside the tent to Peter, who is standing in front of Edmée. He now hears his own voice instead of that of the phantoms:

— *patience*, c'est sa voix à lui qu'il entend, sa voix dans sa tête, dans sa langue à lui — il se sent merveilleusement vide, ouvert et vaste, le monde est grand, la nuit tombera dans des mois, nous avons tout le temps (...) nous sommes seuls, l'air, l'avenir, l'espace, sont dégagés et libre, nous sommes impeccablement seuls, nous n'avons rien d'autre à faire qu'à chercher, à chercher comment nous allons faire — et le globe lumineux tourne.
(163)

When Peter hears his own thoughts here, he also feels “wonderfully empty, open and vast,” showing that he is now *vide* in a positive sense, meaning empty of the clichés, other voices, fears, doubts, and insecurities. This new emptiness allows him to open himself to the world and, of course, to Edmée. He achieves in this moment the opposite of his earlier desire to “tout prendre,” to take the entire landscape into himself, for instead of seeking to fill his emptiness, he now opens himself outwards, as the air, future, and space have become fluid and free. He feels time expand as well, as if the night will last for months and they have all the time in the world.

His phrase, “nous avons tout le temps” signals the shift from the earlier *nous* of the chorus of phantoms to what is now become the *nous* of the couple. They have assumed the role of *nous*, not *tout prendre* but *nous prendre*; they have taken the *nous* for themselves. This *nous* then becomes the answer to *White*'s and Edmée's earlier question, *où est le centre du monde?* After all their searching for a center point and a way to fix their existence to a stable point, Edmée and Peter become that center for themselves through their relation. This is an ever-expandable capacious center, large enough to encompass the entire globe. Their *nous* also contains an echo of Cixous' use of *nous* in the final line of the “Le Rire de la Méduse,” when she writes: “Jamais nous ne nous manquerons” (68). The English translation that renders this statement as, “In one another we will never be lacking” (893), equally resonates with Peter and Edmée's relationship in *White*. Their relation expresses desire-that-gives through the way they expand and *déborder*. Their *nous* is emblematic of their relational state of being in this moment, their existence in an absolute lack of lack, and their fulfillment through being-with each other.

Sonia Stojanovic analyses the passage from the *nous* of the phantoms to the *nous* of the couple from the above citation as well, in her article “Marie Darrieussecq's Ghost” (2015), interpreting it as evidence of the author's omniscient perspective and ultimate authority to control what happens to both the phantoms and the couple in the novel. Stojanovic writes that through this new “nous,” “we are reminded who is in charge, who does to ghosts, and to the couple, what she wants” (195), and therefore, this showcases how *White* is Darrieussecq's “experiment in narratology” (195). When the narrative perspective shifts from the collective *nous* that renders the couple silent (by speaking for them) to the *nous* of the couple that speaks for itself, Stojanovic reads this transition as the “end of the experiment,” signaling its success when the phantoms are dispelled and the novel ends almost exactly as it began, with a

description of the peaceful ocean (195). While the change in *nous* does reveal Darrieussecq's formal artifice and experimentation in *White*, it also works at the level of content to articulate the specific nature of the couple's relation, which is what allows them to dispel their phantoms. The *nous* is emblematic for both of them of a different awareness of self as it exists in and through their relation. Even more than just their use of the pronoun *nous*, it is also important to note what comes after, in the phrase "nous sommes seuls, l'air, l'avenir, l'espace, sont dégagés et libre," since part of what makes this *nous* is its expansion into and incorporation of the wider world. In this sense, the *nous* does not just express a pair of beings together but these beings as they exist in relation with all the spatio-temporal factors occurring within the space of the same moment.

Darrieussecq's paradoxical interrogation in *White* of both the concept of the *center* and the *void*—how the void can have a center and the center can exist within a void—creates a distant resonance with Wittig's use of the large graphic O in *Les Guérillères* as both a form that contains and excludes, and as the representation of "le zéro ou le cercle" (*Les Guérillères* 16). Darrieussecq considers how the void can be both negative and positive akin to how Wittig (and les guérillères) ponder the contrasting meanings of *starting from zéro*: this symbolizes the difficult process of destruction but also of liberatory reconstruction. Darrieussecq's *discours du vide* in *White* echoes the guérillère Lucie Maure's verbal deconstruction of logic through overlapping and comingling "that which is" and "that which is not." For *le vide* in *White* is both that which is and that which is not; it can act as an abyss or internal absence (as in the case of death and trauma), and it can also be a positive force as an emptying of the self in order to create a welcoming openness. *White* shows that one's internal center can be full of loss, in a negative and harmful way, or it can be empty of loss, in a positive, life-giving way. To be empty of loss is to be open to the other, as Darrieussecq demonstrates through Peter and Edmée's relationship.

This openness renews, restores, and multiplies them beyond the selves that had retreated down into their hollowed-out emptiness.

In addition to demonstrating a way of opening the self and giving to the other, Peter and Edmée's relationship showcases their transformation as they progress from insular individuals to interconnected beings. In a reprise of the above statement about how Edmée and Peter overflow through their relation to include "tout le continent," the narrating voice describes how their bodies become the continents, and how they become an entire world unto themselves: "Asie-Europe-Afrique-Amérique, traversé par des mains, des nuques, des bouches, des cheveux — Edmée, Peter, Peter, Edmée (...) — P dit oui, murmure oui, roule oui dans la bouche d'E" (163).¹⁶² In this description, the two characters transform from *Edmée* and *Peter* into just *P* and *E*, perhaps as a way of showing that in freeing themselves of their phantoms, they also free themselves of their first names, as the names are tied to their past experiences. They are now different people; they have entered into a different type of becoming, and they reflect this even at the level of their names. The final phrase above ends a paragraph without punctuation, which emphasizes the open-ended nature of their becoming, and the nature of the word *oui* as an expression of desire. *P* and *E* are not bound entities anymore; perhaps "Peter" and "Edmée" are the names of selves in need, lacking, and hollow inside, while *P* and *E* as articulations of desire. The description of their relation reiterates this emphasis on *oui*, even as a language all of its own: "si l'étrange mot *oui* forme une langue autonome, E et P en ce moment la parlent. Le dos, les

¹⁶² The ellipsis inserted in parentheses is mine, to set it apart from Darrieussecq's usage throughout the text. Stojanovic argues in her article that this second shift in narrative voice from Peter's *nous* back to an implied *ils* or third-person perspective further reveals the voice of the author. She implies that this is negative in that it shows how the characters *still* do not speak for themselves, and instead it is now the ghostly voice of the disembodied author speaking for them (194-195). I agree that the voice of the author is present throughout *White* in the third-person perspective of the phantoms, but my point here is the change in their names. Whoever describes them here shifts to describe them differently, which is further evidence of the change in their relation and their understanding of themselves. I don't read this shift as negative at all but as further evidence of the power of their relation.

aisselles, les jambes, les épaules, le cou, le cul, la bouche, le front, le ventre, les phalanges, la fosse iliaque et le creux poplité composent des corps tous pénétrables, chauds, bruleurs d'oxygène, dévoreurs d'eau et de carbone" (176). Here both Peter and Edmée speak "the language of *yes*," which is an intercorporeal language for them, stemming from the various parts of their bodies listed here. This list of body parts, especially with its more obscure anatomical terms, "la fosse iliaque et le creux poplité," recalls Monique Wittig's lists in *Le Corps lesbien*. While her anatomical lists serve a different purpose, they similarly comprise dynamic bodies (even *the* lesbian body), which are *tous pénétrables*, thoroughly penetrated and penetrating, burning, devouring, and constantly transforming. The relation between *P* and *E* here is a heterosexual one—it does not contain implications for universalizing a certain subject position or offering their relation as a standard—and Darrieussecq is specifically interested in how the relation impacts these two, individual people and the implications it holds for liberating them from their personal trauma. Although it is *their* experience, it mirrors some of the intercorporeal aspects of the relation Wittig creates, and it establishes an unlikely connection between the texts.

The three-fold repetition of "oui" in the phrase above also recalls Cixous' theorization of affirming openness with the phrase that she in turn borrows from James Joyce: "*and yes I said yes I will Yes.*" For Cixous, this *oui* contains endless transformations and continuations, just as it does for Edmée and Peter. Their choice to give themselves to each other is the condition upon which their further transformations and metamorphoses can then unfold. For Cixous, this *oui* is intrinsically tied to a type of desire-that-gives instead of takes. A reading of the couple's relation in *White* through this theorization would be to understand their relation as equal and balanced; it is not a transactional one nor one of exploitation or manipulation. Cixous is careful to describe this state of *yes* not as a fantasy of fusion or loss of self, but as giving-that-gives, that loses

nothing of the self by freely offering it to the other. This openness creates a dynamic movement through and within difference and multiplies the self. So Darrieussecq's narrating voice describes: "E n'est pas P, P n'est pas E. Ce qu'ils s'incorporent ressemble à du temps" (165). In an echo of the chiasmic structure above (Edmée, Peter, Peter, Edmée, only now with their first letters), they do not lose themselves in each other but gain more time to be together instead. Just as with Cixous' giving-that-gives, the more that they give of themselves, the more they have to give and experience together.

If centrifugal motion is characterized by *no*—where the act of fleeing is saying no, refusing to face something and instead turning one's back—then the opposite is true of *yes*. The act of returning to the center comes through *yes*, and in this sense, *White* tells the protagonists' progression from lives of *no* to their utopian relation of *yes*. Since Darrieussecq structures *White* around multiple questions and since a question is itself a space of emptiness waiting to be filled (for a question represents an absence of knowledge), it seems fitting that the relation in *White* is the answer to the question: *où est le centre du monde?* This aligns with another of Cixous' descriptions of paradise, in that is a place where "il n'y a que des réponses." Along with imagining paradise as a place absent of questions and full only of answers, she implies that all the answers are *yes*. This is the case, finally, for Peter and Edmée's realization of their relationship in *White*. As an answer to the text's earlier questions about emptiness, the narrator describes how Peter and Edmée create their own *vide* when they are together: "C'est vide d'un vide parfait, vide jusqu'à eux (...)" (169). They are also, "Fous de joie et de vide" (170), in a play on the paradox that the white Antarctic could easily make one go *crazy*, but here it is a positive quality, as in *pleine de vide*, paradoxically full of emptiness and of joy. This echoes the above sentiment that when they have finally rid themselves of their phantoms and their pasts,

they can now offer their emptiness to each other and actually experience that emptiness as fullness. Nothing else can fill them, for this is a *vide* that is incredibly powerful. To use Wittig's words once again, it is state that is "palpable, sensible, sovereign."

As the final piece of her depictions of moments of utopia through Peter and Edmée's intercorporeal relations, Darrieussecq makes it clear that the relation is precisely what dispels their phantoms. Their experience of being-together is what grants them freedom from their past trauma and the many voices that trouble their existence. Darrieussecq states outright that *P* and *E* have left behind their phantoms, and therefore everything that they discover together is fully theirs: "Ils les ont laissés derrière eux. Tout ce qu'ils découvrent fait partie de la découverte ; ce qu'ils explorent, de l'exploration. L'étonnement, ils prennent. L'odeur, les sucs, les poils, les saveurs — l'énorme joie, ils prennent" (170). This hint at the intercorporeal, physical nature of discovery and exploration in their relationship echoes both Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* and *H's* statement in *Promethea* : 'je t'aime...avec chacun de mes poils, et avec chacun de mes cheveux, 'je t'aime avec tous mes liquides, avec mes sangs de plusieurs couleurs, avec ma sœur et mon urine, avec ma morve et ma salive' (Cixous, 56). That *P* and *E's* relation is one of joy further aligns their relationship with those earlier works, and although the other works describe female-female relations, the ecstasy in the intercorporeal experience is the same. The statement above even seems to echo Cixous' description of the joy and fleeting nature of paradise from *Limonade: tout était si infini*, "c'est que « avoir » le paradis, n'est pas impossible ; parce que « être au paradis », ce n'est pas y avoir son domicile ; c'est savoir qu'on peut y retourner. Même pendant la guerre... il peut avoir lieu partout, à n'importe quel moment, il faut travailler et se battre pour lui donner lieu. C'est un état de joie" (72). This statement aptly captures the dynamic of the relation between Edmée and Peter because their being together creates a state of joy, but it

is not something that they claim to “have,” or possess. While their relation could seem banal—the story of a lonely man and a sheltered woman who have a passionate affair in the barren Antarctic—Darrieussecq’s descriptions move beyond the superficial and ordinary by employing lyrical language of intercorporeality and becoming. The echoes of her own earlier descriptions in *Truismes* along with the similar resonances of Wittig’s and Cixous’ descriptions of utopian relations cast the couple’s relations in *White* as glimpses of utopia that contrast with their earlier experiences of trauma, loss, and emptiness. Perhaps part of the reason why the relation in *White* rings as cliché is, as Cixous’ states in *Le Livre de Promethea*, “Les choses les plus belles, on ne peut pas les écrire, malheureusement” (67). Darrieussecq confronts the problem in *White* of how to capture and articulate such an experience in words.

While Peter and Edmée’s relation creates moments of paradise when they are together, it also expresses Darrieussecq’s emphasis on oscillation. Just as in *Truismes*, the protagonists in *White* move in and out of this state in the knowledge that they can recreate it wherever and whenever they are together. One could replace Cixous’ *guerre* in the statement above with Darrieussecq’s Antarctic as the negative force that threatens the couple’s private state of paradise, since they know that they can return there, *même dans l’immensité blanche en Antarctique*.¹⁶³ Or perhaps it would be more fitting to say that they create paradise *même au milieu des fantômes; même pendant que les enfants peuvent mourir*. All those conditions—the harsh geographical setting, haunted psychological register, and traumatic reality of loss—pose obstacles to the protagonists’ realization of their relational utopia. Therefore, perhaps the most important term in all of those potential phrases, just like in Cixous’, is *même*. In keeping with the way Darrieussecq carves out utopian moments from within dystopian realities, *even* with

¹⁶³ I borrow this phrase from the book’s back cover.

overwhelming odds to the contrary, *even* then the protagonists achieve their glimpses of paradise through their relation. This *même* underscores the aspirational, ideal, and powerful nature of their moments. It is appropriate for Darrieussecq's protagonists in *White*, as for Cixous,' to avoid speaking of their paradise as a fixed location or a place that they enter and exit. Their relation is instead something that they *are*; it does not represent a state of "être au paradis," in the sense of *to be* in paradise, but rather "devenir paradis," to *become* paradise.

c. The Smooth Space of Utopia: A Reading of *White* through Deleuze and Guattari's Theories of *le Lisse et le Strié*

Truismes is Darrieussecq's work that calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming and resistance, specifically in the ways the novel employs in literal and figurative ways their themes of becoming, becoming-woman, and becoming-animal.¹⁶⁴ However, all of Darrieussecq's writing leans in a general sense towards Deleuze's themes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, since Darrieussecq is concerned with her characters' processes of both decomposition and recomposition as they overcome loss and trauma to find personal paths to freedom. As Anne Simon explains, Darrieussecq's books contain visions of "un décentrement *et* une réorientation," which corresponds to Deleuze's idea of deterritorialization as the establishment of a new way of existing (18). Simon describes in more detail how all deterritorialization, similarly to how the theme recurs in Darrieussecq's works, leads to a "repolarization" of life: "A toute deterritorialization, à toute sortie du territoire, correspondent donc une reterritorialisation sur un nouveau rhizome, un nouvel embranchement, ou, pour revenir à l'imaginaire de Marie Darrieussecq, un réenclenchement sur un nouveau méridien, un

¹⁶⁴ See Damlé, "Truismes: The Simulation of a Pig."

nouveau fuseau horaire, une nouvelle latitude, voire une repolarisation” (18).¹⁶⁵ Darrieussecq’s novels employ this tension between literal and figural “sorties du terroir,” as escapes or lines of flight along with re-engagement and return, where the “return” is the process by which the protagonists develop a life wholly changed.

White contains these themes of exit and re-entry along with Deleuzian becomings and deterritorializations. More specifically, through its meditation on physical and psychological emptiness set in the Antarctic expanse, *White* reads almost as an illustration of Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of smooth versus striated space (or *le lisse et le strié*), which they elaborate in the penultimate chapter of *Mille Plateaux*. These two types of space are implicated in the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, along with becoming and resistance. Asserting a resonance between these very different texts and writers is not to claim simply that Darrieussecq crafted her work with Deleuze and Guattari in mind. On a more subtle level, I argue for an analogous reading of the texts that allows them to illuminate and expand upon each other.¹⁶⁶ As with the previous chapters, this reading comes at the end of my discussion of *White* to purposefully give space to Darrieussecq’s work to speak—*first*—without additional interpretive framework except my own). I offer this theoretical reading as a secondary way to approach the text and as a demonstration of how Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of becoming

¹⁶⁵ Simon also makes the interesting connection between the presence of ghosts, phantoms, incorporeal voices in Darrieussecq’s oeuvre and the way Deleuze speaks to us nowadays after his death through his writing, simply as a voice (17).

¹⁶⁶ Darrieussecq is generally familiar with Deleuze, and she mentions him in the interview with Kaprièlian, p. 19, in relation to the idea of writing after massacres like Auschwitz and Hiroshima and how her work is infused with “disparition.” She also mentions Deleuze’s idea of becoming-animal as it relates to *Truismes* in the interview Jordan, p. 138. Darrieussecq says that when she wrote *Truismes*, she had never read Deleuze, but it was as if the concept of becoming-animal anticipated *Truismes*. She had in mind more the idea of human-animal transformation from Kafka and even Homer and Ovid. Besides these quick references, she does not engage with Deleuze’s work.

function within my framework as another angle from which to approach and understand utopian relationality.

In the section that follows, I show how Darrieussecq's preoccupation with *le centre* and *le vide* can be interpreted through the Deleuzoguattarian framework of *le lisse et le strié*. Deleuze and Guattari specifically state that a barren desert, like that of the Antarctic, is a naturally smooth space but one in which humans seek to impose striation. As Darrieussecq's protagonists try to recenter themselves through traditional means, they resist the smooth and labor futility to reimpose the striated. The act of dispelling their phantoms symbolizes the passage from striated to smooth space, and therefore, the state of being that they create together through their physical relation is one of smooth space. It is the space of becoming, where they are free to move from haecceity to haecceity, to be expansive and porous, and to fully become. In this way, *White* shows how to successfully transition from striated to smooth space through the paradoxical process of emptying oneself of psychological burdens and external voices while opening oneself in welcoming emptiness to the other. The utopian vision that *White* offers lies in its depiction of smooth space that arises through Peter and Edmée's intercorporeal relation.

Deleuze and Guattari begin their chapter "1440: Le lisse et le strié" with the dichotomy of the two opposing types of space: "l'espace lisse" or "l'espace nomade," and "l'espace strié" which is also "l'espace sédentaire" (592). They describe that smooth space contains the seeds of revolution and resistance; it is the fertile space in which "se développe la machine de guerre" (592). They contrast this with how striated space is instituted by the State apparatus ("institué par l'appareil de l'Etat"). In other words, striated space imposes systems and structures from which smooth space seeks deterritorialization and lines of flight. Striated space is characterized by artificial order, control, and dominance, while smooth space is the space of liberation, expansion,

and becoming. They are careful however to clarify that the two types of space are not separate but exist concurrently and constantly intermingle: “les deux espaces n’existent en fait que par leurs mélanges l’un avec l’autre” (593). Existence comprises a mixture of the two spaces, as smooth space is constantly being translated into striated space, and striated space is continually being returned or reconverted into smooth space; the two types of spaces thus exist in a dynamic state of continual tension and transformation.

Deleuze and Guattari include many examples or “models” throughout the chapter as ways of explaining the characteristics of the two types of space and demonstrating their interpenetrations and transformations. They focus much of their discussion on the “maritime model” since they view the ocean as a quintessential smooth space: “la mer est l’espace lisse par excellence” (598). In this model, the open sea is smooth space not only because of its vast, uncontainable nature but also because it continually resists the human desire to control it both from the surface and from within, as in the case of submarines (600). The sea is the archetypal smooth space in the way it has been controlled, or at least how humans (ever since the first maritime navigators) have labored to impose organization and order upon it: “C’est d’abord sur la mer que l’espace lisse a été dompté, et qu’on a trouvé un modèle d’aménagement, d’imposition du strié, qui servira ailleurs” (599). Although humans have labored throughout history to conquer and map the ocean, it continually resists and reasserts its smoothness in the face of maritime technology and the many expeditions to encompass it as a whole.

Deleuze and Guattari’s maritime model resonates in *White’s* long description of Edmée’s journey by boat to reach Antarctica in the first sixty pages of *White*. The book frames its central tension between smooth and striated space in its opening descriptions of the contrast between the smooth space of the ocean and the striated space of the boat and its effort to navigate the ice and

waves. Although the majority of *White* does not take place at sea, it opens with a declaration of the sea's beauty and its gentle flatness: "La mer est belle, c'est-à-dire (Edmée Blanco l'apprend dans le manuel de bord) presque plate, avec un petit clapot tranquille. Vagues de moins de cinquante centimètres" (11). Edmée's reflections during the journey constantly try to give shape and form to the view of the ocean: "la mer blanche ; sous le ciel blanc. La mer couverte de glace, qui ondule par plaques. Rompue de zigzags noirs. Une marqueterie souple, avec parfois des formes dressées, des corniches, des amoncellements, des gros glaçons qui se retournent, *splash !* Là-bas babord, l'eau est encore libre, noire comme un cuir" (39). The book then ends with a mirror image of this journey, as Edmée sails back to civilization: "Le sang bat, la mer est belle, la Terre tourne, et aux deux poles, tout est calme et blanc" (185). This statement reiterates the "smooth" nature of the ocean from the beginning of the book, and the narrative arc of *White* shows how the smooth space of the Antarctic resists striation and reclaims its smoothness—for the book ends when the research base encounters an unfixable problem, and it then explodes, piece by piece, forcing a total evacuation (178-85). In addition to these mentions of the physical ocean, Darrieussecq describes the vast Antarctic landscape as a frozen "ocean" of ice and snow: "Bien sûr, c'est un océan. Un océan de vide congelé. La croute blanche cède sous les bottes de Peter, dessous aussi c'est vide, du vide pulvérulent pris sous la vieille neige, *crac, crouch,* meringue de vide cuite au froid" (158). Akin to how the untouched nature of the ocean as body of water resists striation, so the frozen ocean that Peter walks upon—an expanse of whiteness and snow that crunches beneath his boots—is its own expanse of emptiness. In this sense, *White's* Antarctic setting is already a geographical smooth space into which the characters impose themselves and their striated efforts at order and control.

Although smooth space comprises certain physical characteristics, Deleuze and Guattari clarify that more than fixed features, it is a space of intensities and affects, meaning that what makes it smooth is the way it interacts with and affects the inhabiting subject. They explain how smooth space is occupied by events and haecceities:

L'espace lisse est occupé par des événements ou heccécités, beaucoup plus que par des choses formées et perçues. C'est un espace d'affects, plus que de propriétés. C'est une perception *haptique*, plutôt qu'optique. Alors que dans le strié les formes organisent une manière, dans le lisse des matériaux signalent des forces ou leur servent de symptômes. C'est un espace intensif, plutôt qu'extensif, de distances et non pas de mesures. (598)¹⁶⁷

As they describe here, smooth space is made of spatio-temporal assemblages that do not privilege any one contributing factor over another but include all factors in an intensive, reciprocal relation. Deleuze and Guattari further imply that “optical” here means to view from far away and to look at something as separate from the self. Smooth space then is less a space of fixed geographical features than of events in constant transformation; it is a haptic space instead of an optic one, or a space where one *feels* and perceives in a corporeal way instead of observing from a distance. They continue to describe how smooth space is occupied by forces along with tactile and sonorous qualities instead of discrete actions: “La perception y est faite de symptômes et d'évaluations, plutôt que de mesures et de propriétés. C'est pourquoi ce qui occupe l'espace lisse, ce sont les intensités, les vents et les bruits, les forces et les qualités tactiles e sonores, comme dans le désert, la steppe ou les glaces” (598).¹⁶⁸ These elaborations explain that smooth space is a space of becoming due to the relations it creates between concurrent factors and the perceiving subject.

¹⁶⁷ Their use of *haptique* recalls *Truismes*' lyrical passages about the sensations of eating and feeling oneself as part of the forest and other animals. One could perhaps understand those lyrical passages as visions of smooth space that contrast with the striated space of the city, the government, and the protagonist's relations within those systems.

¹⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari include a footnote in their text after this statement, offering a reference for “les deux descriptions convergentes, de l'espace de glace et de l'espace de sable. This shows that they understand “desert” in the broad sense of both cold and hot spaces, a desert of sand or of ice.

Darrieussecq's protagonists (through the chorus of phantoms who relay Peter and Edmée's thoughts) describe their perceptions of the "empty" Antarctic space in strikingly Deleuzian terms as an affective space of intensities and haptic sensations. It continually resists their ability to contain and control it, and it confuses their perception through its mixtures of real and imaginary sounds and images:

Le dessous de la terre, la zone du pivot, la réunion des courbes, le creuset des champs magnétiques, ici tout est possible : l'impression, le bruit, la fatigue, les choses décongelées, les états d'âme, les idées exagérées, la fin des mondes — (...) Qu'on entend des pleurs de bébé. Des cloches de troupeaux. Les drisses des bateaux piégés par la glace, continuant leur route dans des espaces indéfinis. Et les cohortes d'ombres, en silence, comme des peuples déracinés. La trace de leurs pas quand on s'éloigne de la base, de longues lignes inexplicables. Sous ce soleil perpétuel, cette fatigue perpétuelle. Conjonctivité et effarement. Cristaux en suspensions, reflets, hallucinations, mirages. (68-69)

In this space where "everything is possible," the protagonists feel at once the underside of the earth with its various zones, curves, and magnetic fields. Inhabiting the space gives rise to a multitude of impressions and ideas: one imagines sounds and hallucinates figures rising out of the distant whiteness. One senses shadows moving across the landscape like silent peoples, and only sees traces of their footprints that vanish behind them in the snow. In a similar moment that expresses the sonorous quality of the experience, Peter reflects on the rhythm of his breath as he walks through the snow:

Peter Tomson respire, respire la glace pilée qui lui est donnée pour air, ça lui saisit les poumons, anesthésie sa gorge douloureuse, et il compte machinalement : un pas, deux pas. Trois pas et quatre ou cinq, et jusqu'à douze, *pam pam pam pam*, lui revient en tête un ritournelle... dans la langue de là-bas, oui, une histoire des saisons, de renouveau, de moulins peut-être ?... sa vieille nounou... ou de vols d'oiseaux de retour, des images, oui, un rythme, une ronde, *la la la...* (91)

Peter feels the intensity of the space in his body here, as the cold air enters his lungs and numbs his throat. He tries to count his steps—to measure his movement through space—but this striated effort actually pushes him back to the smooth space of the sound of his steps. Darrieussecq

emphasizes this through the onomatopoeic italicized, *pam pam pam pam*. This sound in turn leads him to remember a song from his youth, and though this intensive journey takes place in the space of a few minutes, it shows the affective quality of the Antarctic smooth space.

Deleuze and Guattari's statement about how intensities, winds, sounds, and sonorous qualities are what "occupies" smooth space resonates like a description of Darrieussecq's phantoms in *White*, for the phantoms *are* the self-proclaimed, incorporeal forces that fill the Antarctic landscape. They describe themselves in such terms: "Les yeux ici ne voient rien, et les grincements aux oreilles sont ceux du fond de la mer. Le silence fait naître les fantômes, et les mirages leur donnent corps" (123). Just as smooth spaces give rise to striated spaces and vice versa, so the smooth silence of the Antarctic gives rise to phantoms when it becomes striated. In this way, the phantoms are a symptom of striation that seeks in turn to perpetuate its own striation; they fill the physical and psychic spaces with voices, sounds, and images in order to give the impression of understanding and control. They state that they are made up of all the fears and desires that humans bring with them to the Antarctic: "L'ennui et les rêves flous. Les aspirations déçues, les songes. Et tout ce que les humains transportent ici, avec nous sur leur dos en barda. C'est ce blanc aussi" (69). Engineers and explorers bring their phantoms with them on their journeys, whereby carrying the effects of striation with them into the smooth space. The phantoms describe how they are "solid" like the ice in the surrounding landscape and the vast whiteness suits them: "Il nous en faut très peu pour être retenus ; dans cette zone, il nous en faut très peu. Vacillants mais perpétuels. Solides comme la glace. Dans le blanc perpétuel, où rien ne se passe, Projet White hors de vue. Dans le blanc à notre mesure. Plusieurs mythologies nous localisent ici. Nous sommes parfois les morts, ceux qui remuent encore" (49). Here, even the idea that many mythologies tie the phantoms to this geographical site suggest a combination of

the smooth and the striated. For, as both a striating force themselves and a symptom of striation in the form of anxieties, fears, and dreams that people harbor inside them, the phantoms continually threaten the smooth space and constantly push the protagonists to reimpose familiar striated spaces within themselves.

Throughout *White*, as Peter and Edmée deal with the phantoms of their pasts and their present fears, they struggle internally with the warring forces of smoothness and striation, even as they carry out their work at Project White. As engineers, their work itself is striating, meaning that maintaining striation is their job—Edmée controls the lines of communication, linking their base to other points across the earth, while Peter maintains the central heating system and ensures that their work at the base can continue. However, they each in turn feel the futility of their efforts. Cataloguing the space and understanding the experience is ultimately impossible, as Peter says: “Puisque arpenter est impossible. Puisque recenser, cadastrer, détailler est impossible. Devenir poreux, se laisser rapter par l’espace qui creuse ici un point immobile, et ne se met en branle, événement, cahots de machine, qu’avec ses pas à lui, Peter” (155). In this reflection, Peter concedes the indomitable nature of the landscape—it is too large and too vast to measure; yet, he feels the desire to let himself become part of it, to become porous and smooth, instead of imposing order upon the space.

Edmée also struggles with her striating need to orient herself, and this manifests throughout the book in her search for a *centre*, both as a fixed geographical point and some sort of psychological enlightenment that will help her make sense of where (and perhaps also *who*) she is. As she tries to adjust to life at the research base, the phantoms describe her struggle:

Pour Edmée Blanco, c’est plus difficile, de s’habituer au vide. Il lui arrive de faire des courtes promenades autour de la base, pour tenter de comprendre où elle se trouve. Comprendre, non : c’est incompréhensible. Mais pressentir — comme les oiseaux

migrateurs ? — la position géographique, la distance, la solitude. Éprouver le vide dans son corps et dans sa tête, à force de concentration. (72)

Here she recognizes that understanding is impossible, so maybe instead she can sense and feel her position. She thinks that feeling the emptiness in her body and mind will help her position herself within the wider Antarctic nothingness. In a related, extended memory of Edmée's life in Douglastown before coming to Project White, the phantoms tell how Edmée always wanted to be at the center of the world: "Edmée Blanco aimait à penser que vue par satellite, sa position géographique dans l'architecture du lotissement était centrale aussi" (120-21). She then remembers a specific day when a salesman came by her house, offering aerial photographs of the neighborhood with the streets clearly marked so that "on pouvait facilement y retrouver" (121). Edmée remembers how she was not interested in finding her own apartment but rather in seeing the entire neighborhood:

Non, Edmée Blanco avait préféré une vue globale du lotissement, prise d'un peu plus haut, avec le carré bleu de la fontaine, le terrain de jeu, le premier rang de maisons (dont la sienne, avec la minuscule pastille de la couette), le deuxième rang, et le troisième et ainsi de suite jusqu'au sixième, le colimaçon de la piste cyclable, la croix des quatre voies d'accès, et le début de l'échangeur avec la voie rapide vers Houston. Une sorte de logo pour secte solaire, ou de cible. (122)

This long list includes all the specific attributes that Edmée looks for in the aerial view, and all these features are striated aspects of this meticulously planned community: the space around her house and the other rows of houses, with apportioned space for a fountain, a playground, sidewalks, roads, and highways. These all describe an extremely striated space where order has been created, and Edmée longs to see this from a distance instead of close up.

Edmée's desire to see her neighborhood from the satellite view is another symptom of striation, as Deleuze and Guattari further define the distinction between smooth and striated space as the difference between close-range and long-range vision. They explain: "C'est le Lisse

qui nous parait à la fois l'objet d'une vision rapprochée par excellence et l'élément d'un espace haptique (qui peut être visuel, auditif que tactile). Au contraire, le Strié renverrait à une vision plus lointaine, et à un espace plus optique" (615). Here close-range vision, *vision rapprochée*, deals with haptic and sensorial knowledge, while *vision lointaine* pertains to a far-away type of looking. In long-range vision, one cannot physically feel or touch the object of vision, but at close range, one is able to understand in an intercorporeal way directly through the body. Smooth space is a space of "pure connexion" (615) where vision is not optical at all because it does not seek to *see* but to *feel*. The close-range experience defies the traditional exigences of long-range vision, "constance de orientation, invariance de la distance par échange des repères d'inertie, raccordement par plongement dans un milieu ambient, constitution d'une perspective centrale" (616), which are all aspects that Edmée enjoyed in the aerial view of *le lotissement*. Deleuze and Guattari contrast these fixed features of long-range vision with close-range's aspects: "aucune ligne ne sépare la terre au ciel, qui sont de même substance ; il n'y a pas d'horizon, ni fond, ni perspective, ni limite, ni contour ou forme, ni centre ; il n'y a pas de distance intermédiaire, ou toute distance est intermédiaire" (616). This haptic vision that pertains to smooth space is not bound by the laws of perspective, time, or physics. Instead, background and foreground, top and bottom, outside and inside superimpose and intermingle.

When Edmée and Peter finally consummate their relationship in *White*, they experience each other in a haptic way, through *vision rapprochée*, whereby emphasizing how the intercorporeal nature of their relation is that of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth space. Their separate lives are filled with external and internal striation, but when they come together, they are able to achieve the liberating smoothness. Darrieussecq underscores the haptic nature of their relation, describing how when the two first touch, the sensation is so intense that it affects them

all the way to the level of their cells: “Se toucher met à feu les cellules, crée des ponts entre des mondes” (165). This short but vivid description moves from a connection on the molecular level to connections “between worlds,” expressing that there is now no boundary or edge that separates them and, in turn, nothing separating them from the world. In another moment, their coming together broadens like a ripple-effect into the space around them: “L’espace rebondit, élastique et doré” (166). If in the haptic realm of smooth space, there is no horizon, no background, no limit or contour, then the expandable space that Peter and Edmée create (and become) when they come together—a space that grows, stretches, and glimmers—is a smooth space *par excellence*.

In a longer and more lyrical description, Edmée and Peter embody Deleuze and Guattari’s description on an even great scale when their presence multiplies each in the other and renders them immense and fluid. In this moment, their relation ripples through the entire world:

Au large, très au large, la mer se bombe comme sous une marée, un équilibre se crée entre les lois de la physique et, ici, le phénomène : le corps d’Edmée et le corps de Peter roulent l’un vers l’autre. Leur présence, l’un à l’autre, les rend immenses, fluides et massifs à la fois. Au large, très au large, un banc de baleines veut combler de son énorme masse le gouffre ouvert par leur corps. Calmars géants surgissant des fosses ; glaciers vêlant leurs portées d’icebergs ; plaques tectoniques forçant la surface du magma : il faut bien ça, après que P et E se sont trouvés, pour que la physique du globe réajuste son équilibre. (165)

Just as they cause space to stretch like elastic, the force of their bodies moving towards one another in this moment sets off a cosmic chain reaction. Their coming together is so powerful that it causes the sea to bulge; it tears open an undersea chasm and disturbs schools of whales; it wakes giant squids from their pits; it breaks off pieces of icebergs; it shakes the earth’s tectonic plates; and it forces a realignment of the planet’s very laws of physics. In this moment, these two beings no longer exert a centrifugal force away from themselves but have instead become the center of everything around which all else revolves; everything else is moved by their

movements. Although this description could seem ironic through its use of hyperbolic imagery, I read in it Darrieussecq's serious and sincere desire to articulate a relation that is wholly other. It is an absolute state of becoming, and therefore it requires unconventional imagery and language. This aligns with what Deleuze and Guattari state of smooth space: "c'est un absolu qui ne fait qu'un avec le devenir lui-meme" (617). When Peter and Edmée enter into this space of becoming, they align themselves with the becoming of the world, of its many processes and of the lives of its inhabitants, much like the narrator of *Truismes*. When they finally touch and feel each other up close, they become a haecceity ranging far beyond themselves—a great assemblage that stretches over the surface of the earth, into the air and the depths of the ocean. This description expresses the incredible nature of the smooth space they create when they finally dispel their phantoms. It highlights the utopian aspects of the relation in the way it positions them as interconnected beings at the center of the world, affecting and being affected in perfect reciprocity.

Deleuze and Guattari offer another definitional model to contrast smooth and striated spaces that works within the context of *White*, in terms of physical voyages in space versus "voyages in place." They state that to travel in place, "voyage sur place" is "le nom de toutes les intensités" (602), meaning that one experiences and enters into intensities by "traveling in place." They further differentiate the two types of voyages as they relate to the two types of space, not by the character of the physical location one inhabits nor even the type of movement and effort that it takes to arrive there, but by the way one *is* in the space: "le mode de spatialisation, la manière d'être dans l'espace, d'être à l'espace" (602).¹⁶⁹ Either one arrives to

¹⁶⁹ The English translates this as statement as, "the mode of spatialization, the manner of being in space, of being *for* space" (482, my emphasis).

occupy space or one decides to be *for* space, to become the space and to exist as a part of it. They then state that “voyaging smoothly is a becoming:” “voyager en lisse, c’est tout un devenir, et encore un devenir difficile, incertain” (602). Although Peter and Edmée do physically travel to the Antarctic, it becomes clear that the voyage they truly need to make is an interior one. They must learn how to voyage within themselves to then deterritorialize their pasts and dispel their phantoms. The intercorporeal relation that they develop is an example of a smooth voyage, or a “voyage en lisse,” as Darrieussecq describes:

ces trajets, ces métamorphoses, ils les connaissent, ils les ont déjà parcourus, les caresses d’ici qui vont là, le sexe devenu le corps, et le plaisir à la fois dans et hors le corps... comme la pensée, dans et hors le corps... Ce n’est ni une découverte ni un bouleversement, mais un nouveau lac magnétique... Y nager... l’attraction du vide — y loger sa forme... plonger dans les ondes... dans les courants nés des métamorphoses, de l’espace entre les corps, rétrécissement, expansion... (176)¹⁷⁰

This passage comes later in the text and implies that Edmée and Peter have now familiarized themselves with their way of being together. Darrieussecq even refers to their relations as “trajets” (trips) and metamorphoses. If “voyager sur place” is the name of all intensities, then Peter and Edmée’s relations exemplify how to travel in place; for they become much more than themselves through being together. Darrieussecq’s earlier statement about “le passage du besoin au désir” could even be translated here into the Deleuzian image of “voyager en lisse.” This would then mean that *need* is more associated with striated space and its structures of control and segmentation, while smooth space permits *desire* through its uncontrollable, open nature. The continuation of the description builds upon how Peter and Edmée’s relation renders the boundaries of time and space fluid: “Le temps tourne sur lui-même, ralentit, change de sens, abdique — P perd le fil, ça se passe en ce moment même dans l’univers, au cœur des soleils, des novas, des géantes rouges, au début du début du big bang — avant que sur un cri il ne ferme les

¹⁷⁰ This paragraph begins with a lowercase letter, as I’ve kept here.

yeux, Edmée entre ses mains fait un lac de lumière pale” (177). The mention here of the “big bang” and the “debut au debut” echoes almost word for word Edmée’s earlier reflection about how, since the beginning of the creation, the center was lost: “depuis le *big bang*, depuis le début du début, on ne faisait qu’être chassé de plus en plus loin par la force centrifuge de l’explosion (...) le centre s’était perdu” (123). Instead of the earlier centrifugal feeling of being hopelessly de-centered, in this moment Peter and Edmée cause time to turn upon itself, to slow down, speed up, and change directions. They disrupt the centrifugal force away from a lost center and instead toward their own center. To the question that *White* poses, “comment est-ce qu’on se débarrasse des fantômes,” Edmée and Peter’s relation offers the answer: *voyager en lisse*. To voyage smoothly is to create a smooth space of becoming and *y loger sa forme*, to stay there and allow oneself to be drawn into infinite metamorphoses. Additionally, another part of the answer to *White*’s perpetual interrogation of *le centre* and the question: “où est le centre du monde,” would be that it exists at the point of arrival of a “smooth voyage” (and as per Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization, this “arrival” would not be a specific end but rather the continuation of other arrivings). Just as Peter and Edmée establish themselves as the center of the world, the center around which all natural phenomena revolve, so their relation demonstrates that if one can learn to voyage smoothly, one can then arrive at the center and *be* the center.

Even though Peter and Edmée create smooth space through their being together, this space is always tenuous and at risk of being re-striated. Even when it does get reconverted though, its transformative power lingers behind like an echo. At the end of *White*, when the base is about to explode and the crew is frantically evacuating, Edmée expresses the tension between the smooth space that she and Peter experienced versus the current evacuation confusion and the strange prospect of return to regular life:

Retrouver un monde ordonné, régulé, avec des lois, des cycles...des saisons...des inconnues, des anonymes, des rues...Il ne s'agit plus que de péripéties...que de géographie, distances, délais et détours, mais ça y est, ils savent faire, les détails, les empêchements, l'impatience...le temps et l'espace, ils savent faire, contourner, se trouver...Si le gel et les autres les épargnent, ça n'est plus une question de croix à tracer sur la planète, de repère à déterminer ensemble. C'est matériel et arpentable. L'indifférence à tout le reste, ils sauront faire. La fuite à deux, le nous-seuls, le monde, ils sauront. Le pôle Sud, à d'autres. Le caisson isotherme, sans nous. Le désert qui croit, mais sans nous. Mars, et les enfants morts, et les survivants qui soupirent, et les croche-pattes des fantômes, sans nous. (184-85)

She includes in this description many of the striated features of regular life: its rules, laws, cycles, and seasons, and she contrasts these with their *fuite à deux*, and how they have truly left their phantoms behind. She refers to their relation as “le nous-seuls, le monde,” in that they became a world unto themselves. Her reference to “les enfants mort” and “les croche-pattes des fantômes, sans nous” reveals that she and Peter are leaving behind their trauma-related fears along with all the other phantoms they brought with them to the Antarctic, where those phantoms will remain, without Peter and Edmée. As Deleuze and Guattari state, “le lisse dispose toujours d'une puissance de deterritorialization supérieure au strié” (599), and *White* shows how powerful this deterritorializing space really is in the example of Peter and Edmée. Their relation is what leads to the creation of smooth space, and this smooth space of becoming and expansion characterizes their utopian relationality. Smooth space is utopian in that it brings liberation and knowledge; their relationship is utopian in the way that it represents a “smooth voyage” and allows them to free themselves from their phantoms.

Just as *White* initially seems to be a “book about nothing” with a barely traceable plot and fragmentary bits of narrative, it eventually reveals itself to be a book about and concerned with smooth space. The text instead focuses on descriptions of sensations, flashbacks, and hallucinations, and there is little actual scientific progress in the book for much of its 186 pages. The fact that it *seems* like nothing happens is emblematic of the process of internal becoming, or

voyager en lisse, that can only happen in smooth space. Deleuze and Guattari reiterate that traceable progress happens in striated space, while smooth space is the space of becoming: “peut-être faut-il dire que tout progrès se fait par et dans l’espace strié, mais tout devenir est dans l’espace lisse” (607). If all becoming happens in smooth space, then *White* is also a book thoroughly about becoming. To answer the other question that Edmée brings with her to the Antarctic: “Que fait-on quand on ne fait rien ?” (158), *White*’s answer in deceptively simple Deleuzian terms is: *becoming*. Nothing seems to happen in *White* because its narrative cedes to the smooth space of “emptiness” where becoming can take place, and the culmination of this becoming is Peter and Edmée’s final intercorporeal relation. In this way, perhaps the *vide* that Peter and Edmée experience together is the feeling of smooth space that is “empty” of striation. The liberatory and even cosmic power of their relation, as it defies the boundaries of time, space, and physics reveals it to be profoundly utopian. It is a new way of being-in-the world that enables Edmée and Peter to become *E* and *P* and to develop their own smooth space of being, a *vide parfait*.

3. *Je becoming j/e: Utopian Relationality in Le Pays*

After *White*’s chorus of phantoms and reflection on *le centre du vide*, Darrieussecq’s next novel, *Le Pays* (2005), returns to a more familiar structure with a first-person account of a writer’s struggle to write a novel, which is also called “Le Pays.” While *Le Pays* contains less of both *Truismes*’ dystopian vision and *White*’s meditation on internal emptiness, it aligns with the two works through including a female protagonist working through her relationship with her body and the wider world. It also includes similar glimpses of utopia through expansive intercorporeal relations. The plot of *Le Pays* tells of the narrator’s relocation from Paris with her husband Diego and son Tiot to the newly independent country of Yuoangui, a fictionalized

version of the *Pays Basque*. The narrator, Marie Rivière, was born there but after living in France, she returns without knowing the local customs or language and has difficulty assimilating into what should be *her* country. The book thus considers questions of belonging in terms of nationality and linguistic heritage: its second and third sections, out of five total, are titled “L’Etat Civil” and “La Langue,” respectively. As the novel unfolds, it alternates between first and third-person perspectives, with sections when the narrator tells about her life and process of writing, and then sections in a lighter sans serif typeface that read like the actual passages of the book-in-progress. In these mirrored sections, the text repeats certain phrases and events with perspective shifts from first to third person (in the novel being written).

As with Darrieussecq’s other novels, *Le Pays* is neither strictly a dystopian or utopian vision but runs parallel to contemporary reality and even leans toward autobiography—Darrieussecq has implied that the work could be labeled as “autofiction.”¹⁷¹ Readers have even tried to make it into an autobiography, since the narrator is named “Marie Rivière,” and the name “Darrieussecq” comes from the Basque “Darrieu” meaning of the river” (Kapriélien 15). *Le Pays* also runs alongside reality, albeit a reality with slightly advanced technology and small elements of the fantastic, as is common in all of Darrieussecq’s books.¹⁷² Also like Darrieussecq’s other two novels, *Le Pays* describes a type of becoming that contains reflections of the various becomings in the work of Cixous and Wittig. Most notably, Darrieussecq employs Wittig’s *j/e clivé* to express the limitations of representing the female subject in language, and in so doing,

¹⁷¹ See Jordan (2012), 134; Kapriélien 14-15; this is also the subject of the entire Rome interview “Je est unE autre” (2007).

¹⁷² By this I mean that in *Le Pays*, holographic technology is available and the narrator experiences this when she visits the “Maison des morts” where families can upload pre-recorded videos of their loved ones answering chosen questions—before they die. Then the family members can come and play the videos as holograms, as a way of still interacting with their deceased loved ones.

she opens up new possibilities for theorizing and understanding one's being in the world and being with the other. The moments of utopian relationality in *Le Pays* are moments when the narrator is alone or feels herself alone with her body, and then she experiences a sort of "out of body" experience where her narrating self (*je*) becomes a *j/e* that accompanies and travels alongside her. This represents a doubling and expanding of the self, somewhat like in *Truismes* where the narrator learned to live a hybrid experience, as one self in two bodies. This idea of two in one is related also to pregnancy, which figures in all of Darrieussecq's novels that I consider in this chapter.¹⁷³ Pregnancy underscores nearly all of *Le Pays* specifically, for the narrator discovers that she is pregnant with her second child when she has just arrived in Yuoangui. The vision of utopian relationality in *Le Pays* is one of opening the self to the surrounding world that in turn leads to the development of a new self, a self finally at home in country and inexorably part of *le pays*.

Similarly to how the protagonists in *White* become aware and attuned to their breathing, the sounds around them when walking alone in the Antarctic wilderness, and even more to their bodies as they exist in relation, so the narrator of *Le Pays* centers herself around the sound of her own running and her body in the midst of the countryside. The opening lines of the first chapter of *Le Pays* start *in medias res* while the narrator describes herself running: "Je courais, ignorante de ce qui se passait. Je courais, *tam, tam, tam, tam*, lentement, à mon rythme" (11). These lines introduce the narrator, aware of herself and her own rhythm, listening to the sound of her shoes on the pavement. The onomatopoeic record of her feet moving against the pavement here remind of *White's* descriptions of boots crunching on the snow, of intensities and sensations in the

¹⁷³ In *Truismes*, the protagonist worries about being pregnant during her transformation, while gaining weight and whatnot, but then she actually gives birth to a stillborn litter of piglets while in her pig-form. *White* concludes with a sort of abstract, scientific description of the biological process of conception, whereby the reader is led to believe that Edmée leaves the Antarctic pregnant with Peter's child. This seems to be the positive result of their relation.

Antarctic landscape. Her description in this opening section stretches over the course of three and a half pages. She notes how her body is cold at first, solid but functional, and as it becomes warm and easier, she “detaches from herself:” “Peu à peu, en courant, je m’évaporais. Les coureurs le savent, au bout d’un moment on se détache de soi-même. Étape par étape, je ralliais des jalons, un arbre, un panneau, un champ” (12). This initial statement represents the beginning of her passage from an isolated self to a more expansive one; it is not simply a forgetting of the self or way of distracting herself from the act of running.

This description could seem like a literal narration of a “runner’s high,” until the narrator clarifies that what she means by *je m’évaporais* is not an effacement of the self, meaning a loss of self in the act of running but instead a transformation into an other self. This is an expansive process of doubling, as she describes: “Je devenais j/e. Avec le même soulagement que lorsqu’on glisse vers le sommeil, j/e basculais vers d’autres zones. Alors quelqu’un se mettait à me suivre. Ses pas, au rythme des miens, craquaient et claquaient, comme des chevilles” (13). Here the narrator introduces Wittig’s “je clivé” or “je scindé”¹⁷⁴ to identify this other self that grows out of the first self and then follows in similar rhythm. She then describes how *j/e* changes rhythm and comes along side *je*, as a companion: “Puis ça changeaient d’axe, se rapprochant par ma gauche ou ma droite, sur un rythme différent. Et ça venait à mes côtés. Et là, ça me tenait compagnie” (13). This *j/e* now runs alongside the narrating *je*, and even as they are two, they are still parts of one self, since *je* continues to describe the sensations that *j/e* feels: “J/e courais. Au bonheur de penser, à l’extase de penser. J’exerçais ma pensée avec une détente physique, une détente de gâchette—et tout s’ensuivait. J/e ne pensais à rien. J’avais laissé Tiot et Diego

¹⁷⁴ This label is from Patrick Kéchichian’s 2005 review of *Le Pays* in *Le Monde*, titled “‘Le Pays’: le ‘lieu commun des évanouis.’”

derrière moi. J’aurais laissé la maison et le pays et notre récent emménagement, les cartons et le bazar : derrière moi” (13). Although the narrator speaks of *j/e* here, she still refers to this self in the first-person, with the personal pronouns *ma* and *moi*, as in *ma pensée, derrière moi*, and she even refers to her family and their recent move, with *notre récent emménagement*. By referring to *j/e* as herself, she mixes the two selves and reveals that although she speaks of two selves who run side by side, they are still parts of one being. Darrieussecq creates a hybrid self in these descriptions that does not express loss, or a way of approximating an inexpressible subjectivity in language. For Darrieussecq, *j/e* expresses the doubling of the narrator as she shifts from being one to being two. To use Cixous’ phrase from her reflections on plural subjectivity in *La Jeune Née*, Darrieussecq’s *j/e* shows the transformation of the narrator into *l’un-avec-l’autre*, into the space in-between herself and the other, and the other as herself.

Darrieussecq’s use of the *j/e clivé* is immediately arresting for a reader of Monique Wittig’s work; one cannot *not* think of *Le Corps lesbien*.¹⁷⁵ The utopian state that Darrieussecq describes with this *j/e* in *Le Pays* reads like a transposition of Wittig’s militant universalizing of the feminine position in *Le Corps lesbien*. Morag Young writes that Darrieussecq’s use of the *j/e* compared to Wittig’s is “considerably more restrained, being confined to the representation of a disembodied mental state” (63).¹⁷⁶ As Young notes, Darrieussecq does not extend the use of the fractured pronouns to other pronominal and adjectival forms like *m/oi* and *m/on*, as Wittig does, thus maximizing its impact by using it sparingly (63). Young concludes that “the disembodiment

¹⁷⁵ I told Darrieussecq this through the anecdote of my personal experience: when I read *Le Pays* for the first time, I was sitting in the university library one afternoon. When I saw the *j/e clivé*, I gasped loud enough to make the person at the table next to me turn their head. Darrieussecq laughed and said seriously that for her, she imagined this as a sort of inhaling *je*, not out of surprise (like me) but just as the *je* of the act of running: “quand j’ai commencé à écrire pour moi c’était vraiment le *je* de la course, le *je* qui se passait de l’air. C’est exactement ce que vous avez fait.”

¹⁷⁶ Young notes that Darrieussecq also uses the *j/e clivé* for the character Jeanne in *Bref Séjour chez les vivants* (2001).

symbolized by the *j/e clivé* is a prerequisite for the recreation of the self through the writing process in *Le Pays*” (64). Of course, Darrieussecq is a very different writer than Wittig and does not have the same objectives as Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien*. Darrieussecq has described how she does not see herself or her role as a writer in such a militant or overtly political light:

Je n’écis pas dans une visée militante, dans une visée aussi délibérément féministe. Il me semble simplement que la langue est en retard, et que le travail de l’écrivain est de trouver des outils neufs dans le langage, pour tenter de décrire un monde dont la modernité, sinon, nous dépasse sans cesse ; et un monde qui est aujourd’hui, de plus en plus, un monde de femmes. (9)¹⁷⁷

Here she expresses, indirectly, that her use of the *j/e clivé* is the tool that she uses in *Le Pays* to imagine an advancement of the language, a way for language to speak in a new, more modern, and more inclusive way. Even more than being a sparingly used representation of disembodiment, her *j/e clivé* facilitates the narrator’s transformative utopian relation, both with herself and with her surrounding environment. Darrieussecq does acknowledge that there is an echo of Wittig in her use of the *j/e clivé*, but that it is there as a sort of unconscious, perhaps even coincidental way, from her point of view as the author. This is to say that Darrieussecq did not have Wittig in mind specifically while writing *Le Pays*, but that she did have similar concerns about representing the female subject in language and chose a similar solution—the expression of a split subject to show the female subject’s effacement. Darrieussecq states as much: “Pour moi c’était juste une simple façon d’écrire *je* qui rendait compte du fait que nous avons plusieurs *je*, que nous sommes multiples, et que oui effectivement il y a un *je* inconscient aussi.”¹⁷⁸ She also states that this *j/e* is part of her struggle with the French language to carve out space for the feminine in the effacing masculine universal: “ce *j/e slashé* comme ça, les ellipses aussi, c’est

¹⁷⁷ This document does not have page numbers, but this is where the citation would fall in the pdf.

¹⁷⁸ From my interview.

tous ce non-dit du féminin dans la phrase.” She states here that this is a way to render visible what is “un-said,” or unable to be said in language. Her use of the *j/e* *clivé* positions her writing in the literary inheritance of Monique Wittig, even if in an indirect way. It shows that the struggle to express the female subject in the French language lingers on.

As further resonance of the distant echo of Wittig’s *j/e* that carves out a new subject position in language, Darrieussecq’s narrator connects the physical process of running with the process of writing as the scene in *Le Pays* continues. She describes: “Dans le souffle. La route était libre, *j/e* courais. D’une certaine façon, *j’*/avais aussi laissé l’écriture. Ça s’écrivait tout seul. Les pas, ceux de mon corps et ceux qui m’accompagnaient, écrivaient pour moi” (13). As the narrating *je* and *j/e* run side by side, it is as if their steps write for them—their being together enables the writing to happen and to flow without strain. These sensations express a sort of writing with the body in the sense that writing becomes a physical process for Darrieussecq’s narrator; it is something felt in the body and derived from the body. Here the body is the self and writing is in the body; all of these factors are inextricably connected. The narrator then emphasizes this intercorporeal dimension of both the running and writing experience, as the scene moves into a description of the narrator entering into a spatiotemporal relation with distinct Deleuzian undertones: “*J/e* devenais la route, les arbres, le pays. S’absorber dans, absorber le paysage, c’était une partie de la pensée, une partie de l’écriture” (14). The narrator (or the narrator and *j/e*) describes here how she *became* (or *was becoming*) part of a haecceity composed of the route, the trees, the country. The back and forth, reciprocal process she describes with “to be absorbed in, to absorb the countryside” echoes Cixous’ oscillation between active and passive verb constructions that express the state of both containing and being contained.

These descriptions could also be interpreted as the passage from striated space to smooth space, both in a literal sense as from the space of the city to the open countryside, and in a figurative sense from the *je* of obligations, of the recent move with its boxes to unpack and its mess, to *j/e* as a self of intensities and becomings. The narrator describes—in very deleuzoguattarian language—the assemblage made up of relations of speed and slowness, intensities, movements, and flows:

J/e ne pensais à rien. J/e courais. Dans l'air, l'humidité condensait. Dans le cerveau des masses roulaient, s'articulaient ou s'annulaient, se formaient et se déformaient. Les rouages des hanches, genoux, chevilles, fonctionnaient à plein, le piston des bras s'activait, l'air tapissait à grands jets le fond des poumons. Les fluides circulaient, dégrassaient, défatiguaient. L'oxygène irradiait, le cerveau respirait. Agencements, milieu, structures. Le psychologique et l'étatique, le privé et le familial avaient disparu. Ce qui avançait sur la route c'étaient des sphères jouant les unes autour des autres, un équilibre de chutes et de rebonds, un ensemble de sauts. Ni moi ni autre ni personne. Air, paysage, course. J/e ne pensais à rien et dans le rien perçaient les phrases, de plus en plus vite. (15)

Here the narrator speaks of how *j/e* was running, specifically using the first-person verb conjugation, *courais* instead of the third person *courait*. This further reveals how *j/e* is a part of the first person self. *J/e* is still *je*, even as she expands out of her. Darrieussecq describes the sensations passing by the narrator here in the haptic realm that Deleuze and Guattari contrast with the optic realm of long-range vision and distance between the self and the wider world. Darrieussecq uses the word *agencement* to speak of how the narrator's body and sensation of her body blend with the air and humidity, then fluids circulate, and oxygen radiates through her body. *Agencement* is the term Deleuze and Guattari use for "assemblage," instead of the French *assemblage*. While this scene could be read as a negative process of dispossession or of the self dissolving into its surroundings, the last line underscores how, even when the narrator has left her normal mode of functioning and entered into the hecceity, she still receives phrases of writing. This shows that the relation she enters into a productive one. Her use of the verb *percer*,

“dans le rien perçaient les phrases, de plus en plus vite,” could mean to pierce, to wound, to penetrate, or to break through, as if the words themselves penetrate into herself and her becoming. The narrator emphasizes the connection here between haecceitic consciousness and writing, where even as she is permeable and moves from the self to the other to the hecceity, she still retains the ability (or even *gains* more ability) to write. For Darrieussecq’s narrator, running, becoming *j/e*, and then becoming-route-trees-countryside-air acts as the catalyst for her writing. Only when she has become aware of herself within the hecceity, in the middle, and in flux, does her writing come faster and faster. The process of running that the narrator describes here demonstrates Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of “voyaging in place,” or *voyager en lisse*, where one travels—perhaps through physical space as the narrator does here—but more significantly, through the space of becoming, as the narrator also does when she becomes *j/e*. Her process of becoming the road and trees through absorbing the countryside and being absorbed all gives rise to *writing*. Just as in *Truismes*, the haecceity state leads to a linguistic consciousness; it is liberatory for language, and in this sense reveals the desire for expression and the ability to articulate one’s experiences in a new way.

Right after the paragraph cited above, Darrieussecq shifts to a third-person narration of the same scene, and this textual doubling mirrors the doubling of *je* and *j/e*:

Vient un moment – les coureurs le savent – où on ne touche plus terre. On vole. Elle court. Ignorante de ce qui se passe. Bulle filant au-dessus du macadam... Et les phrases venaient, moucherons, libellules, ou coups de sabre. Aussitôt dissoutes ; ou demeurant, chansons, il était temps de rentrer au pays, il était temps de rentrer au pays.

Ce qui l’accompagnait la dépassait peu à peu. Tam clac. Tam clac. L’oxygène se raréfiait. Elle redescendait sur ses jambes. (15)¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ I chose this font to replicate the font in the book as closely as possible.

The description here first speaks about “runners” in general and the moment when “you no longer touch the ground,” but it then references the previous *je* now as *elle* in the phrase, “elle court.” As she runs, phrases come, and some dissipate while some stay. The physical act of running produces language and specifically leads to the phrase, “il était temps de rentrer au pays,” with its double implication of the end of the narrator’s run and the end of her life in Paris.¹⁸⁰ To “rentrer” or return holds both figurative and literal meaning for her, as she physically moves back to *le pays Yuoangui* and returns to the space of her youth, full of slowly awakening memories and sensations.

In *Le Pays*, when the narrator moves back to Yuoangui, she feels a need to situate herself at a center point and to have a sense of centered-ness that echoes *White’s* preoccupation with *le vide* and *le centre*. The narrator in *Le Pays* similarly tries to locate herself in space and time but it is only in the moments of doubling and expansion—during her run and again later during a flight—that she is able to feel that sense of centeredness through the relation she enters into with herself as other and with her surrounding factors. The narrator speaks again of *je* becoming *j/e* in a moment that takes place during the scene of flying in an airplane with her son and husband from Paris to Yuoangui. She describes how she senses *j/e* detaching from herself as she dozes off: “Je somnole. Je suis bien. J/e me dissocie lentement. Quelqu’un est à côté de moi, en plus de Tiot et mon mari ; quelqu’un se penche sur mon fauteuil en plus de l’hôtesse, déambule dans l’avion en plus des passagers...” (38, the phrase ends with the ellipsis).¹⁸¹ She describes here

¹⁸⁰ This phrase appears again on pages 18, which is a continuation of the third-person section cited above.

¹⁸¹ Darrieussecq uses *quelqu’un* here to refer to *j/e* even though it is implied that *j/e* is female just as the narrator is female. Darrieussecq refers to this issue with the French language in the Rome interview, talking specifically about a passage near the end of *Le Pays* that describes the newly born baby girl as “quelqu’un.” Darrieussecq states this pained her to write it that way, but ultimately she chose to use the masculine instead of “quelqu’une” because the uncommon nature of that word would have drawn the reader out of the narrative to focus instead on her use of language in that moment. See “Je est unE autre,” p. 9.

how *j/e* expands out of *je* into the larger space of the airplane cabin. The repetition of “en plus”—*in addition to* her husband and son, the hostess, and the other passengers—expresses that *j/e* is a force of abundance and overflow. It is a part of her that exists in addition to her normal *je*. She also describes how, through the movement and extension of *j/e*, her body takes on different proportions as the boundaries and contours of time and space become malleable:

J/e me diffuse...J/e me regarde assise dans l’avion, j/e me regarde à travers le hublot. Le temps se dédouble (...) Mon corps a pris une étrange densité : un corps léger qui flotte en halo, et un corps présent, une agitation de molécules, un petit monde dans lequel circulent des avions, des cumulus, des corpuscules...J/e suis ici, J’observerai désormais ma vie par le hublot, hier et demain. Nous allons atterrir bientôt mais j/e vais rester là, une bulle en suspens...” (38-39, the paragraph ends again with the ellipsis).

The reflexive verb constructions in the first three phrases, *j/e me diffuse* and *j/e me regarde* create a *mise-en-abyme* effect where the narrating *je* describes how *j/e* looks at her, looking back at *j/e*, and so on. Time and her sensation of time doubles itself, just as herself multiplies, and she feels both her body, present in the airplane, and her body, light like a floating halo. *J/e* allows her to look down on her life, from the past to the future. Instead of a simple “out of body” experience, this moment shows how her expansion from *je* into *j/e* is not just a passage from one state to another, but rather it is living both states concurrently. That she concludes the phrase above (and others) with an ellipsis further shows how the state is one of expansion and unbound possibility. She feels this relation as a center point: “Tout se détermine, l’avant et l’après, autour de ce point...” (38, ellipsis is hers). The state is a both-and relation that allows her consciousness to expand and to feel herself as a center point, in a deep relation with her surrounding factors, her body and its cells, along with the air, the airplane, clouds, sky, yesterday, and tomorrow.

Darrieussecq’s use of *j/e* splits the narrator and amplifies her subjectivity in a positive way that echoes Wittig’s earlier use and also Cixous’ construction of a tri-part subject in *Le Livre de Promethea*. Darrieussecq explains her objective with *j/e* intratextually in a passage that comes

later in *Le Pays*, within one of the third-person sections of the book-being written. In this passage, the narrator reflects on her use of *j/e* from the opening pages of *Le Pays* (the description of running), and she writes that it was necessary to use such a split subject: « Il aurait fallu écrire *j/e*. Un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé. Comme les éléments séparés d'un module, qui continuent à tourner sur orbite. *J/e* courais, devenue bulle de pensée. La route était libre, *j/e* courait. *J/e* devenait la route, les arbres, le pays » (177). Here she paradoxically states that *j/e* expresses a subject that is not broken but still split in a positive way. As the earlier citations in *Le Pays* and descriptions of this subject show, it is a subject that becomes two even as it remains one; in being “detached,” it does not lose its original self and its rootedness but expands and intermingles in an intercorporeal way. Darrieussecq then repeats the lines from pages 14 and 15, starting with the first-person *j/e courais*, but then she shifts to the third-person *j/e courait*. While earlier she had used *moi* and *mon* in reference to *j/e*, she now uses the third-person verb ending to render *j/e* an *elle*, just like the subject of the passages in the san serif font. This point of view transition highlights the prominence of the both-and relationship, and it multiplies the relation a step further: the narrating voice is now able to be both fully *je*, *j/e*, and *elle*, moving from a doubling to a tripling. This now becomes a tri-part refraction that recalls Cixous’ trinity of selves in *Le Livre de Promethea*, and perhaps also even the implied trio of selves in *Virgile, Non* (in the interpretation that Manastabal and Wittig are two halves of one subject, and of course that Wittig is the reflection of the author, Wittig). Darrieussecq’s use of a similarly multiple subject here in *Le Pays* positions her work as an extension of the arc of their thought and their visions of utopian relationality through both-and relations with the self, others, and the world.

The expansion of subjectivity that Darrieussecq creates with *j/e* in *Le Pays* is positive also in the sense that it is a state of amazement—for finding (or becoming) a center point is to

find deep awareness of one's interconnected place in the world. Near the end of *Le Pays*, as the narrator prepares to give birth to a daughter named Epiphanie, she reflects on her need to find a center as a starting point for writing and how amazement helps:

J'aimais le globe sur mon bureau et j'aimais ce promontoire sur la mer parce que j'avais besoin, souvent, de renouer avec la sidération comme un point d'origine de l'écriture. Se tenir debout sur Terre, dans le cosmos et le néant : l'écriture et cette sidération c'était la même chose, c'était constater notre présence face au vide, et là, comme on pouvait, penser. (228)

Here Darrieussecq echoes her overarching themes from *White*: finding a center point and feeling one's presence in the face of cosmic emptiness. If writing is a way to stand up and face the void, not with fear but with amazement, then it is this sense of amazement that helps to establish a center and to allow one to be both rooted and to expand. It is to fully embody one's being, which necessitates deep engagement and sensation of all concurrent spatio-temporal factors contributing to any one specific moment of existence. In *Le Pays*, since the passage from *je* to *j/e* leads to writing and a deeper consciousness of both the self and language, it follows that this relation (and the becoming it expresses), is then a state of amazement that helps one stand upon a spinning planet. She even states as much with, "l'écriture et cette sidération c'était la même chose." As Darrieussecq's characters are constantly poised on the edge of life or oblivion—teetering between the pull of emptiness and the centrifugal force away from the center, or alternatively desiring to live more deeply and to open the self so as to welcome the other—this reflection near the end of *Le Pays* reveals that for the narrator, the way to stabilize her presence and establish her own center in the face of the void is to write, together with a sense of amazement. For amazement, after all, is a way of being in the world, aligning oneself with intensive and affective forces and creating a space of utopia.

Utopian relationality as Darrieussecq imagines it in *Le Pays* contains shades of Cixous' theories of capacious female subjectivity and Wittig's vision of a new female subject in language. Darrieussecq's writing expresses the influence of these other two writers, like "older sisters," who paved the way before her and prepared the literary ground through their participation in more tumultuous, theoretically charged debates.¹⁸² Along with both writers, Darrieussecq describes a process of becoming through entering into relations with the other(s) and with the self. Darrieussecq's protagonists create smooth spaces for themselves amidst the larger striated spaces of their lives and their own internalized habits of striation. They carve out their own version of paradise in relations that allow them to transition from need to desire. Although the relations are fleeting and fragile, that they can return to and recreate them, as long as they continue to desire them, in an echo of Cixous' insistence on the importance of continually wanting the utopian relation and incarnating it through desire. Darrieussecq's characters expand and multiply, rid themselves of their phantoms, become productively empty and open, and detach while still remaining rooted. The radical both-and relations that they achieve with others and with the wider environment show that bright flashes of utopian relationality run through the otherwise dark realities of Darrieussecq's novels. The exuberant states of joy, liberation, and pleasure that these relations unleash, even if briefly, demonstrate the deterritorializing power of this relational state for new ways of conceptualizing the female subject and for new linguistic strategies for expressing both the subject and the relation in language.

¹⁸² Taken from my interview

V. CONCLUSION

Beginning this dissertation about French feminist fiction with a preface connecting Monique Wittig to Dante and reading Dante's en-verbed pronouns in *Paradiso* as a utopian relation (what I called the "pre-history of my project) establishes right from the start the unlikely nature of both my main argument and my choice of authors. Over the last three chapters, I have traced a genealogy through Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, and Marie Darrieussecq and constructed this connection with extended readings and analyses of their fictional texts that show how they are interconnected through the form, content, and function of their fiction. I highlight their similar poetic strategies—the ways they work upon language from within language—that imagine and describe an impossibly intimate, porous relation between the self and the other(s) that is both desirable and revitalizing. I have labeled this relation as utopian not only because at times it occurs within a hypothetical "good place" or physical realm of paradise (as in the case of *Virgile, Non*); or because the authors call it paradise (in the case of *H* speaking of Promethea); or even less, because the characters describe a sort of passionate sexual relationship that falls into clichéd ideas of *jouissance* as the height of pleasurable human existence.

All of these aspects appear and overlap at times in varying shades, but my point has been that the relations the three authors describe in their works express a state of being in relation-as-paradise. This relation expresses a desire to overflow and expand beyond corporeal boundaries, and both the description of the state and the way the authors describe it (of course in slightly different ways throughout their different works) position it as deeply utopian. It is an experience of intercorporeal existence that leads to a conception of the self as it exists in that relation. It also expresses the yearning for union and communion with the other in a way that collapses distance, opens the self to the world, and brings the world into the self. It articulates the dream of a both-

and relationship that would allow the self to exist in, through, and with the body and being of the other (where “the other” is also the natural world and its features, like air, wind, and water). This way of co-existing asserts a radically different understanding of the self. It offers a conceptualization of utopia not as a place or a distant future but as a different way of living and being within present reality. It is a “feminist” strategy—meaning that it strives for liberation and expansion for women, female-gendered subjects, and literary representations of both—instead of merely a “feminine” one—evoking stereotypical ideas of passivity, enforced openness, and loss of self in the other—because it surpasses traditional ideas of femininity and creates something entirely new. While the authors (especially Cixous) do at times invoke potentially problematic ideas of giving the self to the other as they have been laden with gendered connotations, they do so in order to rewrite and revision them. The utopian relational state that they imagine is always a desired choice, which one freely enters into. It then leads to a new experience and knowledge of the self-in-relation (what I call intercorporeal subjectivity).

Since the picture of utopian relationality that the authors construct in their fiction is detailed and multilayered, I have proceeded through my readings of their texts in a similar way. I have privileged multiple citations and passages from their texts that have allowed me to engage deeply with both the form and content of their writing. I have provided numerous examples and analyzed them in detail in order to not just talk about *what* the texts do but to really understand *how* they do it. I have considered in equal measure the ideas they propose through their stories along with the aesthetic qualities of the writing they use to present those ideas, even down to minute details like font style in Darrieussecq’s *Le Pays* and her frequent use of ellipses and onomatopoeias in *White*; the positioning of text on the page in Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien* and Cixous’ use of the letter *H* and her insertion of *Haggada* in *Le Livre de Promethea*. I have even

considered extra-textual features like Wittig's large O's in *Les Guérillères*. These formal properties endow the authors' fictional texts with specific qualities that distinguish them from their essays (in the case of Wittig and Cixous) and are further evidence for why their fiction is just as important as their theoretical works. I have proceeded in each chapter through the works I chose from each author in a linear way to follow the development of their constructions of utopian relationality in their individual novels in a chronological way, leading to a larger picture of each author's trajectory, and then to the ways they overlap, echo through one another, and diverge in rhizomatic ways. Part of my objective in spending so much time immersed in their fictional texts was finally to give them the careful attention and close reading they deserve (and that the format of this dissertation allowed), out my admiration for the courageous risks they take in their writing. My way of reading and writing about these texts is then, in a personal way, my humble offering of appreciation to such ingenious and unique authors.

By placing the trio of Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq together underneath the broad umbrella of feminist utopian literature and analyzing how each author intersects with and diverges from that genre, I have argued for the enduring productivity of utopianism for feminist writing, broadly. More specifically, I have discussed what I see as the utopian aspects of each writer's fiction. This is perhaps a radical and unlikely position regarding all three, for Wittig and Cixous have been criticized for the utopian aspects in their fiction and Darrieussecq has been labeled as a dystopian writer. Excavating the utopian aspects of their writing from underneath interpretations that have dismissed, discounted, and overlooked them has allowed me to see the utopian aspects in their works as productive and positive and to further align their literary objectives broadly with those of feminist utopianism's desire for open-endedness and process.

By comparing these three authors, my argument has also illuminated a different thread within “French feminism,” when it is understood as a monolithic category. Mine is neither the Cixous-Irigaray-Kristeva trio that has become the standard of the American understanding of “French feminism” nor Annabel Kim’s “anti-difference” strain that she establishes through Sarraute-Wittig-Garréta in *Unbecoming Language*. In reality, there were and still are many strains and internal currents within French feminism, and the trio that I have chosen is certainly not meant to be representative of the category or to act as a synecdochic redefinition. The Wittig-Cixous-Darrieussecq trio has allowed me to present a comparative reading of these three authors who might otherwise not be read together or might even be considered mutually exclusive and entirely separate from one another. While Wittig and Cixous wrote in and against similar contexts in 1970s and 80s France (and therefore their works are at least similarly located in time and in a specific feminist moment), Darrieussecq’s 21st century context is admittedly very different. Reading Darrieussecq alongside Wittig and Cixous considers the lingering effects of 1970s and 80s feminist debates in France along with ongoing questions of gender in the French language. Darrieussecq represents a contemporary French perspective that is influenced by the work of Wittig and Cixous (however indirectly) and colored by their earlier literary struggles for the visibility of the female subject in language, the representation of the female body in writing, and the interrogation of language itself as a way of shaping reality.

In the specific case of Monique Wittig, speaking of *Les Guérillères* as a feminist utopia is by now canonical, but I locate its utopianism more in the type of relation it describes between the guérillères than in the type of community it presents. In this way, my analysis builds upon previous ones like those of Francis Bartkowski and Lucy Sargisson, and it considers the relational dynamics at work in the guérillères’ transformation of language, along with the ways

their peaceful life after war is evidence of a different relational existence. Arguing for *Le Corps lesbien* as type of utopian vision could seem initially polemical due to the violent nature of this text. Despite its violence and graphic imagery, I have analyzed it for the intercorporeal ways the lovers interact (and which imply that their violence is not negative at all). I have also acknowledged the Deleuzian resonance of the many moments of becoming-animal and haecceity-type spatiotemporal assemblages that *Le Corps lesbien* includes. My reading of the text alongside Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming illuminates the revolutionary nature of Wittig's many descriptions in both their form and content. My analysis shows that Wittig's text is not only about its shock factor or about universalizing the lesbian point of view in literature, but also about articulating a type of intercorporeal being-together that asserts a new way of existing.

As a loose and distant restaging of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Wittig's *Virgile, Non* contains scenes that take place in paradise as an actual location that the protagonists enter and exit, and so in this sense, discussing those moments as visions of utopia is somewhat obvious. On a deeper level, I trace the way that Wittig specifically structures her afterlife based on relational dynamics. I focus both on Wittig's vision of what I call "dystopian relationality" in the circle of inferno, where it is precisely the relations between the women (heterosexual women and the perceived threat they see in Wittig as a lesbian) that increases their suffering and heightens their separation through hate and violence. More than just including paradise as one of the realms of the afterlife, Wittig describes the experience of paradise in this text as a sensorial, intercorporeal experience shared with others. She underscores this in the text's final chapter where the first-person narratorial voice fades into the communal experience of *nous* (much like the *elles* throughout *Les Guérillères* and the rare *nous* that appears at that text's conclusion).

Arguing for Wittig as a utopian writer and tracing the utopian aspects of her texts does not downplay or negate the violence, graphic shock factors, and political urgency behind her writing. Against the backdrop of these well-studied elements, I read her works as expressions of a desire for union and deeper understanding of the self as inexorably connected to others. This is a starkly non-separatist view that dreams of deeper connection with others and with the world.

Articulating desire as a key function of her fiction reverberates through her careful disruptions and experimentations of form, along with her unconventional content. My readings also argue for the overlooked importance of her fictional texts as expressions of the ideas she articulates in her essays, especially those of *The Straight Mind*. Opposing the ways that Wittig's fictional writing has been misunderstood or discounted due to her polemical essays and statements, my analysis of her fiction argues for its enduring relevance and transformative potential.

Positioning Cixous as a utopian writer in a positive sense pushes back against now-dated interpretations of her writing from the 1970s and 80s as ineffectual, overly idealistic, and unforgivably saturated with the tropes of traditional "femininity." Against these interpretations, I argue that "Le Rire de la Méduse" still has relevance for contemporary readers, and that when read with retrospective clarity, it reveals the ways that Cixous labored against prevailing literary and conceptual ideas of the time and proposed provocative solutions. I refer to this essay as the distilled thought of a younger Cixous—a burgeoning utopian thinker and writer still very much working through her ideas and wrestling with language. The seeds that she plants in this essay spread into "Tancredi Continue" and then grow and blossom in *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d'Arcachon*. Her description in "Tancredi Continue" of a genderless communion that manifests through her vision of "pure turquoise" is filled with fervent emotion and passionate yearning for a relational way of loving the other that surpasses all boundaries and risks

everything to open and offer the self. In *Le Livre de Promethea*, I analyzed her description of the trio of characters—the narrator, *H*, and Promethea—as facets of one self and as ways of differently and radically loving the other. Analyzing *H* and Promethea’s relationship through the lens of utopian relationality reads it as a continual, ever-present state of existing in paradise, where paradise is the experience of the body with and in the other. Cixous is careful to describe how this state and relationship is fragile though and must be maintained through continually wanting it—it is sustained by desire. Cixous phrases this conception of paradise in *Limonade: tout était si infini* as a “state of joy” that one can return to anytime and anywhere, as long as one can desire it. It is a utopia that one creates through being with the other, and which allows the self to overflow and expand; it multiplies the self just as Cixous’ trio of characters in *Le Livre de Promethea* and *La Bataille d’Arcachon* travel within and through each other. This state of joy is a perpetual intercorporeal becoming, and Cixous describes the protagonist’s myriad transformations through metaphors that invoke other animals and natural features (becoming-water, storms, earthquakes, etc.), along with the image of doors that open to other doors, the self as a door, and becoming itself as a door. Even more than depictions of becoming-animal, Cixous’ description of *H* and Promethea’s first reunion scene in *La Bataille d’Arcachon* positions it as a Deleuzian becoming-imperceptible that expands to a cosmic dimension as a becoming-world and a way of “worlding” unto themselves. Reading elements of utopian relationality in Cixous’ texts aligns her formal strategies with those of Monique Wittig and allows for a comparative reading that can consider their analogous poetic strategies even as their conceptual positions diverge. Just as utopian relationality posits a both-and relation, so my argument reads Wittig and Cixous in a both-and conceptual and formal way that sees recognizes their differences but still finds much to analyze in their similar fictional strategies.

Considering utopian aspects of Marie Darrieussecq's novels might be the most unlikely move in this project, considering her evident themes of absence, loss, trauma, and emptiness. Her work has been described as dystopian, not only because she imagines technologically advanced and corrupt near futures (like in *Truismes* and her 2017 novel, *Notre vie dans les forêts*) but also because she interrogates the effects of suffering and follows her protagonists through agonizing experiences. In the knowledge of these aspects, I have been careful throughout to not label her as a utopian writer or her books as "utopian novels." I have rather referred to "glimpses of utopia" that appear fleetingly amidst the dystopian realities in her novels. I interpret these moments as ways of carving out small spaces of light or forming cracks within an otherwise dark reality. The opposition between these two aspects makes them stand out all the more. I have paid specific attention to the effect or function of this contrast along with its form, for the glimpses of utopia in her novels bring very different linguistic strategies and just as they signal a shift in content, so they necessitate a shift in language and style as well.

In *Truismes*, the lyrical passages when the narrator is alone in nature showcase her widening of consciousness. Her expanded vocabulary reflects her growing awareness of her interconnectedness to others. These moments occasion an explosion of lyrical language and long effusive descriptions. They create a break with the text's narrative of abuse and violence and— even more strikingly—with the narrator's *voix naïve* that constantly repeats clichéd statements, euphemisms, and others' opinions of her body. The lyrical moments eventually allow her to understand her experience in retrospect and to even write about it; she develops the ability to tell her story and to publish the very book that becomes *Truismes*. In *White*, Darrieussecq describes the two protagonists' passionate physical relation with similarly long lyrical descriptions that contrast with *White's* narrating chorus of phantoms and sparse, fragmentary descriptions of the

barren Antarctic landscape. Against this backdrop of silence, stillness, and isolation, the couple's relation erupts with heat and vitality in such a way that they expand and surpass their corporeal boundaries in both time and space; they establish themselves as *le centre du monde* where previously their respective centers had only been empty, hollowed out by trauma and loss. Interpreting these elements in *White* and the couple's relation as a utopian one interprets it as the development of a way of being that goes far beyond a mere physical, heterosexual relation. In Darrieussecq's novel, *Le Pays*, she employs Wittig's *j/e clivé* to describe a doubling, and even tripling, process of expansion that the narrator experiences with her surrounding environment as she develops a different understanding of herself. Like the couple in *White*, she comes to understand herself as a center and to find her place in the world.

My interpretations of utopian relationality have been inflected throughout by Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations and terminology of becoming. Their theories have been useful to me as a supplemental way to understand utopian relationality in the novels and as ways to further understand the revolutionary and transformative potential of the authors' depictions of such intercorporeal relations. By reading all three authors through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of becoming, becoming-animal, becoming-world, the haecceity, and the related concept of smooth and striated space (as the physical and psychological space where becoming happens), I have framed utopian relationality as a spatio-temporal relation with real effects upon the self and the world. While Deleuze and Guattari belong to a different context than the three writers, their theorizations of becoming lend themselves both to the formal and conceptual strategies that Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq employ. By providing a Deleuzoguattarian "interlude" in each chapter, I demonstrate how their abstract theories find concrete examples and elaborations in the authors' novels. Furthermore, my readings show how both Deleuze and Guattari and the three

authors are not mutually exclusive, and how their writing can reciprocally supplement and illuminate each in the other. I see this as a continuous back-and-forth process, which is certainly not one-sided or unidirectional (and of course Deleuze and Guattari would not argue for anything other than rhizomatic chains of relation and reflection). I have been careful to not make Deleuze and Guattari the final word on the fictional texts—as male philosophers who explain the nebulous fiction—but to rather let the fictional texts speak first and then to offer additional explanation through Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology of becoming. These readings have allowed me to speak of utopian relationality in terms that I find rich and capacious, especially that of the haecceity.

Utopian relationality as my own concept, along with my methodology of (very) close readings and Deleuzoguattarian interpretations of the texts, have together produced productive and compelling comparative readings. The attention to form that utopian relationality offers understands these texts deeply in a way that is rare; it is a way of reading and analyzing that is anchored in the authors’ original language and draws from knowledge of the linguistic nuances of French. I have also read with an eye to the English translations of the texts and the many translational difficulties they present. Utopian relationality as both concept and methodology facilitates comparative readings of these three different authors, and it lays a foundation for future explorations of feminist fiction. My analysis has been limited to these three French authors since the genesis of this project stemmed originally from similarities I saw between Monique Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien*, Cixous’ *Le Livre de Promethea*, and Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* and *Le Pays*. Consequently, I needed to find a name for this concept and way of writing that I discerned in the three authors’ texts. Despite this specific context, I do not think that utopian relationality is limited to French literature and language or that it has an inherently

French nature. Although my analysis has focused on French, utopian relationality is not necessarily tied to the French language, and the concept could be broadened to include analysis of authors writing in other languages. I argue that it is intimately tied to language and to the process of disrupting and reimagining the way that language works, but this characteristic does not exclude the possibility that this way of writing and this concept could appear and function in other languages. I imagine that one could produce an intriguing analysis of utopian relationality through authors who are similarly concerned with form in fiction, for example like the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (Cixous writes about her since she already recognized an affinity there); the Italian authors Rosa Rosà and Goliarda Sapienza; or even Frieda Ekotto's French-language works about women-loving-women in Cameroon, like her novel *Chuchote pas trop* (2005). Utopian relationality reveals the ongoing importance of utopia for feminist fiction writers along with the primacy of intercorporeal relations and the desire for deep connection with the other(s). These aspects are certainly not limited to one national literary tradition but lend themselves to translingual, transnational, and transhistorical studies of literature. The concept of relation-as-utopia as a linguistic strategy and conceptual position has vast transformative potential for both readers and writers. As Wittig, Cixous, and Darrieussecq show through their novels, utopian relationality can catalyze a complete reconceptualization of the self and an innovative feminist poetics.

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What began as the spark of an idea of utopian relationality in Dante's *Paradiso* has now become a blazing fire, burning in a different time and place but with a similar force of desire. The celestial relation bestowed only upon the blessed that Dante expresses with en-verbed pronouns, his *intuarsi* and *inmiarsi* in-one-ing linguistic solutions, finds a transformed

expression in Monique Wittig's, Cixous' and Darrieussecq's visions of paradise as reimagined relations between selves and bodies, language and the world. The fire of utopian relationality burns throughout their novels, and though I cannot take credit for having kindled it, I can testify to its light, as I have done through this project. Cixous states at the beginning of *Le Livre de Promethea* that such a fire can bring warmth and life, but it can also destroy. It is both beautiful and terrible. It forces one to confront their own fear of being burned and consumed, but as her narrator learns, it offers the paradoxical experience of the burning bush to those bold enough to step fully into the flame. This is a fitting final metaphor for utopian relationality: to be wholly engulfed but not to be burned. When you give yourself fully to the fire, as Cixous describes, you learn that it does not burn but actually bathes you in sweetness. To experience this paradise then, one must first brave the fire: "Mieux vaut s'y jeter. Une fois dans le feu, on est inondé de douceur. J'y suis: je vous le jure." After distant beginnings, travels, and transformations, this is where I too am, and where the study has taken me. This is where the study ends, for now, but just like in the image of the burning bush, the fire continues.

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