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Are Lesbians Women?

JACOB HALE

I argue that Monique Wittig's view that lesbians are not women neglects the complexities involved in the composition of the category "woman." I develop an articulation of the concept "woman" in the contemporary United States, with thirteen distinct defining characteristics, none of which are necessary nor sufficient. I argue that Wittig's emphasis on the material production of "woman" through the political regime of heterosexuality, however, is enormously fruitful for feminist and queer strategizing.

"Lesbians are not women" was the sentence with which Monique Wittig ended "The Straight Mind" at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in 1978. A moment of stunned silence followed (Turcotte 1992, viii). Eighteen years later, this claim often is first greeted with surprise, confusion, nervous giggles, disbelief, dismissal, disdain, or "the incredulous stare" (as we call it within analytic philosophy). Namascar Shaktini initially called Wittig's view "eccentric" in her 1994 *Hypatia* review of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Shaktini 1994, 212).

However, I have encountered positive reactions to Wittig's claim, primarily from nonacademic dykes. Several reactions were: "Cool," "Obviously," and "Well, I'm not, bud, but what about lipstick lesbians?" Increasingly, one finds acceptance of Wittig's conclusion in academic writing. For example, Diane Griffin Crowder (Crowder 1993, 66) and Cheshire Calhoun (Calhoun 1994, 566) have both recently endorsed Wittig's conclusion, although each offers arguments different from Wittig's in support of the claim that lesbians are not women.

It is no surprise that this claim excites such reactions. One reason for negative reactions is that it flies in the face of the dominant culture's definitions of the categories of both gender and sexuality, which do not differ relevantly from those used by lesbian and gay activists. Thus, one of my gay students initially responded by saying, "I would have thought that that

[*woman*] was the one thing a lesbian *had* to be.” Further, Wittig’s claim is incendiary in feminist, lesbian, and gay contexts. Taken by itself, without attention to Wittig’s underlying position, it threatens a number of feminist and lesbian feminist positions; the so-called sex wars have been identity wars, after all. When considered in the context of Wittig’s underlying position, this claim is incendiary indeed, for it threatens to blow up the theoretical structure of any political work based on a notion of woman’s identity or women’s identities. Most important, it shakes the foundations of feminism itself or feminisms themselves. For if Wittig’s underlying position is correct, there is no naturally constituted category of women, so there is no naturally constituted subject for feminism to represent, theoretically or politically. Further, if Wittig’s underlying position is correct, the concept *woman* is coherent only within the conceptual context of the political regime of heterosexuality, a regime that oppresses those it classifies as women. This calls into question the desirability of feminist reliance on the concept *woman*, even if only as a concept to be redefined, revalued, or ultimately discarded as Wittig herself urges (Wittig 1979, 120-21; Wittig 1992, 14).¹ Despite the threats Wittig’s view poses, it resonates with the dreams, hopes, longings, and visions of those lesbians who have resisted the heterosexualizing, feminizing, and womanizing pressures of the dominant culture and of some feminist subcultures as well.

Wittig gives her arguments for the claim that a lesbian is not a woman, but “something else, a not-woman, a not-man” (Wittig 1992, 13), primarily in “One Is Not Born a Woman.” Wittig may have intended “lesbians are not women” as a political intervention at a specific cultural, historical, technological, and intellectual moment, as an exhortation to lesbians to refuse their categorization as women. The arguments she offers for this claim, however, make it appear that she is advancing a claim that she believes is already true, and she does not clearly distinguish between strategic refusal and truth-claim. Although taking “lesbians are not women” as a truth-claim may not be accurate Wittig exegesis, it is this construal that I examine in this essay. I believe this approach is fruitful because it illuminates the descriptive elements of the concept *woman* in our culture now, which in turn gives us a better basis for political strategizing, including strategically refusing categorization as women; bluntly: one needs to understand what one is up against to go up against it successfully, unless one is blessed with dumb luck.²

Before beginning my arguments I want to make explicit some of the assumptions in this essay. I remain firmly agnostic about sex/gender distinctions; nothing I say commits me to any particular sex/gender distinction, nor to its demise. I assume that there is nothing necessary, nor necessarily natural, about any culture’s gender concepts. I accept that a particular culture’s gender concepts may change over time, that different cultures may have different gender concepts, that within one culture there may be a number of different, competing gender concepts, and that these differences cannot be determined

a priori. Such variation reflects differences in how gender intersects with subject positioning according to race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, and regional location, as well as differences arising from the varying, sometimes competing interests of specialized institutions and fields of discourse. Despite this intracultural variation, we can identify a set of dominant cultural concepts of gender. Please understand “in this culture” as appended to every reference to a category of gender or sexuality throughout this essay; unless I specify otherwise, I am writing about the dominant culture of the United States now. Although my analyses may apply more widely, I am in no position to claim so.

Finally, I do not assume that it's better to be a woman than to be something else, nor do I assume the converse. Instead, I believe not only that gender should be consensual,³ or at least more consensual than it is now if full gender consensuality is impossible, but also that if our goal is to further feminist and queer political aims, we would do well to have both the strategies of gender proliferation and feminist redefinition and revaluation of womanhood operating at the same time. Any prediction of success in this context is an empirical prediction about effects in an exceedingly complex, rapidly shifting social/cultural/economic/technological field, hence not a prediction about which a high degree of certainty is warranted. In addition, it is more likely that these two strategies, operating in tandem *and* in creative tension, embodied in a multiplicity of tactical ways, will succeed than that either one alone will.

“YOU'RE NOT A REAL WOMAN”

One argument Wittig gives for believing that lesbians are not women is based on the observation that lesbians are often accused of not being real women or of being “not real women”; heterosexuals mean this both as insult and as threat. Wittig uses the principle “to be one, one has to be a ‘real’ one” to derive the conclusion that lesbians are not women (Wittig 1992, 12).

Her mistake here is trivial. The word “real” is sometimes used in ways that conform to Wittig's principle. However, other functions of the word “real” may be at work in the accusation that lesbians are not real women. J. L. Austin pointed out that “real” sometimes functions as “a dimension word” that can be used to express commendation, for example, “‘Now this is a *real* carving-knife!’ may be one way of saying that this is a good carving-knife” (Austin 1962, 73). Conversely, “not real” sometimes functions to express disapproval. Common examples include saying that decaffeinated coffee is “not real coffee,” low-fat milk “not real milk,” paper plates “not real plates,” and so on. One more frequently hears the positive commendation expressed, for example: “I prefer eating from a *real* plate and, yes, I'll wash the dishes,” “I think I need some *real* coffee before listening to *another* philosophy paper.”

It is plausible to believe that this is the use of “not real” in the accusation that lesbians are not real women. On this reading, it does not imply that lesbians are not women; instead it implies that lesbians, while women, are not good women because they do not behave in relation to men in the ways that are valued positively for women. Similarly, a white European American middle-class woman who is not a good cook, doesn’t care about keeping a clean house, or refuses to have sex with one particular man (even if she is having sex with other men) might, for any one of these reasons alone, be told that she is not a real woman without this implying that she is not a woman at all. Of course, “real” need not have the same meaning in every use of “not a real woman,” so my argument leaves open the possibility that when non-lesbian women are told that they are not real women this is intended to imply that they are bad women, whereas being a lesbian is incompatible with being a woman at all. However, analyzing the accusation that lesbians are not real women hardly seems a promising way to answer or dissolve this question.⁴

WHAT IS IT TO BE A WOMAN?

The second of Wittig’s arguments relies on her analysis of interconnections between the category of sex, heterosexuality as political regime, and the concepts *woman* and *man*. Here are three quotes in which Wittig argues for her view that lesbians are not women.

From “Paradigm”:

Insofar as the virtuality “woman” becomes reality for an individual only in relation to an individual of the opposing class—men—and particularly through marriage, lesbians, because they do not enter this category, are not “women.” Besides, it is not as “women” that lesbians are oppressed, but rather in that they are not “women.” (They are, of course, not “men” either.) And it is not “women” (victims of heterosexuality) that lesbians love and desire but lesbians (individuals who are not the females of men). (Wittig 1979, 121)

From the end of “The Straight Mind”:

Let us say that we break off the heterosexual contract. So, this is what lesbians say everywhere in this country and in some others, if not with theories at least through their social practice, whose repercussions upon straight culture and society are still unenvisionable. An anthropologist might say that we have to wait for fifty years. Yes, if one wants to universalize the func-

tioning of these societies and make their invariants appear. Meanwhile the straight concepts are undermined. What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for "woman" has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women. (Wittig 1992, 32)

From the last paragraph of "One Is Not Born a Woman":

To destroy "woman" does not mean that we aim, short of physical destruction, to destroy lesbianism simultaneously with the categories of sex, because lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ("forced residence," domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (Wittig 1992, 20)

Following Judith Butler to some extent, I propose the following reconstruction of Wittig's argument (Butler 1987, 136-37):

- (1) The category of sex presupposes a discourse in which sex is binary, *man* and *woman* are exhaustive, and *man* and *woman* are complementary opposites.
- So, (2) The category of sex is subsumed under the discourse of heterosexuality.
- So, (3) To be a woman means to be in a binary relation with a man.
- (4) No lesbian is in a binary relation with a man.
- So, (5) No lesbian is a woman.

I want to assume that premises (3) and (4) are true and ask: Under what interpretation of *binary relation with a man* are they true?²⁵ At first, it seems that the answer must be that one is in a binary relation with a man just in case one is in a sexual/affectional (though not necessarily monogamous) relationship with a man. Paradigmatically, this would be a heterosexual marriage (Wittig 1992, 6-7; Wittig 1979, 121).

There is nothing in Wittig to suggest that heterosexual marriage is the only relationship that counts as a binary relation between a man and a woman, nor would this restriction be plausible. Further, she has not said that a heterosexual marriage always counts as a binary relation between a man and a woman; this would not be plausible either. Imagine that the man who posted the following personal ad in *Deneuve* (a national lesbian glossy) finds what he's looking for:

ATTENTION CALIFORNIA DYKES

My GAM boyfriend needs a green card through marriage. If your girlfriend needs one too, this GWM can reciprocate.
(*Deneuve* 1994)

Apparently, heterosexual marriage is a paradigm example of a binary relation between a woman and a man, but being married is neither necessary nor sufficient for being in such a relation. Even reading *binary relation with a man* as a fuzzy concept, a number of "problem cases" arise; I will not examine all of these apparent counterexamples.⁶

A number of my colleagues and students have asked if Wittig would say that Catholic nuns, simply in virtue of being nuns, are not women. Although in "One Is Not Born a Woman" Wittig writes, "Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically" (Wittig 1992, 20), in "The Category of Sex" she writes, "Some lesbians and nuns escape [the category of sex]" because they are not "seen [as] (and made) sexually available to men" (Wittig 1992, 7). This contradiction reflects an inadequate specificity in Wittig's work about the degree and types of participation in heterosexuality necessary for membership in the category *woman*.

While being a nun may be a way of resisting or escaping marriage, nuns are symbolically married to Jesus Christ. Some lesbians' gender self-presentations are indistinguishable from those of heterosexual women whose self-presentations, arguably, signal their sexual availability to men. Many lesbians and Catholic nuns participate in institutions that help maintain the political regime of heterosexuality. Sometimes they are highly subservient to individual men in these institutions, and must make themselves sexually available to individual men who have institutional power over them. Lesbians and nuns are not entirely free from male control of their reproductive labor, even if this is not controlled by an individual man in the same way it may be within a heterosexual marriage. A lesbian may be barred from adopting children or be denied custody or visiting rights to her children, simply because she is a lesbian (Calhoun 1994, 564-65). Nuns and lesbians are both vulnerable to male control of their reproductive labor if they are impregnated through rape.

A distinction between ideological components of the categories *lesbian* and *nun* and their (imperfect) instantiations might avoid these difficulties. Things get much worse for Wittig's view, however, once we attend to the lives and experiences of people who do not fit clearly into the binary distinction between heterosexuals, on the one hand, and gays and lesbians, on the other hand. Not only has Wittig overlooked bisexuals, her view has no way to categorize cases such as those suggested by the following personal ad from the Women's category in *Venus Infers*, a self-described "quarterly magazine for leatherdykes" (*Venus Infers* n.d., 2):

Looking for Daddy

This handsome fag boy needs a daddy: a strong, tough, loving daddy with a sharp knife and a big dick. Let me serve you, and let me show you what a pig I can be, with proper discipline. Experienced daddies only. Dykes, FTMs, and gay men in the Bay Area all welcome. My boy pussy awaits you. (*Venus Infers* n.d., 48)

Since the ad text begins, "This handsome fag boy. . .," we may infer that this handsome fag boy is not open to all experienced dyke daddies in the Bay Area. In contemporary dyke usage, when "fag" is applied to dykes, it indicates features of the gendering of one's sexual partner, one's own gendered self-presentation, and one's preferred sexual practices. How must this boy's dyke daddy be gendered? High femme is clearly out, but exactly where this boy would draw the line between butch enough and too femme for dyke daddy material is unclear. Probably this handsome fag boy and any prospective dyke daddies who respond to the ad can work out all these gendered nuances between themselves, without any theoretical help from me.⁷

This ad presents three distinct ways in which a simple binary distinction between heterosexual and homosexual fails to account for real people's embodied experiences of sexual desire and practice. First, it points out the possibility of dyke-fag sex, without this sexual activity necessarily recategorizing either participant as heterosexual or bisexual (Califa 1994; Sadownick 1993, 25-26). Second, it points out that dyke sexuality may be gender-nuanced much more subtly than the simple categories of *homosexual* and *lesbian* can cover. Finally, since this ad lists FTM (female-to-male transsexual) daddies as a possibility, it points to the existence of people whose gender and sexuality may confound both the binary Wittig wishes to discard and that which she presupposes. Simple classification of sexual activity between this handsome fag boy and an FTM as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian fails. Categorizing any of this as *bisexual* misses the crucial cultural-situatedness of these practices; they are intelligible within sites of overlap between dyke, fag, leatherqueer, and trans communities.

Similarly, Judith Halberstam argues against a simple binary distinction between *heterosexual* and *homosexual*, in part by invoking a list of some of the many self-categorizations used within queer communities to specify sexual desire and practice. She writes:

Some queer identities have appeared recently in lesbian zines and elsewhere: guys with pussies, dykes with dicks, queer butches, aggressive femmes, F2Ms, lesbians who like men, daddy boys, gender queens, drag kings, pomo afro homos, bulldaggers, women who fuck boys, women who fuck like boys, dyke mommies, transsexual lesbians, male lesbians. As the list suggests, gay/lesbian/straight simply cannot account for the range of sexual experience available. (Halberstam 1994, 212)⁸

Insofar as sexuality is related to gender, the most important point in the foregoing is that Wittig's analysis of the categories of sex obscures the specificities of the ways in which human beings are gendered through sexuality and the ways in which human beings gender themselves through sexuality, when it is precisely these specificities of gendering to which we must attend if we are to get clear about how gender works in our culture, about how gender works in other cultures, and, ultimately, about how the oppressions gender enables can be overcome.

The problem, then, for Wittig goes well beyond the point that the concepts *woman*, *man*, and *lesbian* are inherently vague. The problem is deeper: her analysis is too simplistic to handle the variety of ways in which people, including lesbians, are gendered. Since Wittig's view is that the concepts *man*, *woman*, and *lesbian* each rest on a single defining characteristic, her view does not have conceptual room for the multiplicity of genderings present even only among contemporary U.S. lesbians.

In the next two sections, I develop a view more complex than Wittig's of the dominant culture's concept of *woman*, while retaining what I consider to be the important contributions she has made to our understanding of the categories of sex.

THE "NATURAL ATTITUDE" TOWARD GENDER AND THE CONCEPT WOMAN

In this section, I develop some themes necessary to articulate my proposed reconstruction of our culture's concept *woman*. I begin by asking: What are the commonly held presuppositions that constitute our dominant cultural attitude about what gender is?

The landmark essay from which I draw to answer this question is Harold Garfinkel's "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sexual Status in an

'Intersexed' Person, Part 1" (Garfinkel 1967), which was based on Garfinkel's 1958 case study of Agnes. "Agnes" is the pseudonym of a patient who presented at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles to obtain sex reassignment surgery. Agnes was generally recognized to be a boy until age 17. However, by the time she presented at age 19, she had achieved a convincing self-presentation as a woman. U.C.L.A. psychiatrists, including Robert Stoller, were charged with determining whether or not Agnes was a suitable candidate for sex reassignment surgery. Garfinkel "used her case as an occasion to focus on the ways in which sexual identity is produced and managed as a 'seen but unnoticed', but nonetheless institutionalized, feature of ordinary social interactions and institutional workings" (Heritage 1984, 181). Agnes's gendering of herself diverged from some, but certainly not all, of the typical workings of gender as a social practice in our culture. Observing Agnes's range of similarities and differences from typical embodiments of gender allowed "Garfinkel to distance himself from the familiar phenomena of gender and to come to view them as 'anthropologically strange'" (Heritage 1984, 182), thus to "examine the strangeness of all gendered bodies, not only the transsexualized ones," borrowing Halberstam's phrasing from a different context (Halberstam 1994, 226). Garfinkel came to see "the institution of gender . . . as a densely woven fabric of morally accountable cultural practices which are throughout both accountable, and accountably treated, as natural" (Heritage 1984, 198). Garfinkel attempted to identify the primary threads of this fabric, the primary components of the natural attitude toward gender; I follow Kate Bornstein's reformulation of Garfinkel (Bornstein 1994, 46-50; Garfinkel 1967):

1. There are two, and only two, genders (female and male).
2. One's gender is invariant. (If you are female/male, you always were female/male and you always will be female/male.)
3. Genitals are the essential sign of gender. (A female is a person with a vagina; a male is a person with a penis.)
4. Any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously. (They must be jokes, pathology, etc.)
5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones (masquerades).
6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another. (There are no cases where gender is not attributed.)
7. The male/female dichotomy is a "natural" one. (Males and females exist independently of scientists' [or anyone else's] criteria for being male or female.)

8. Membership in one gender or another is “natural.” (Being female or male is not dependent on anyone’s deciding what you are.)

Garfinkel’s reconstruction points out that there is not a *unique* concept of gender held even by the dominant members of our culture. He argues that those who hold the “natural attitude,” dubbed “normals,” are suspicious of some medical and scientific claims about gender. Since “normals” regard the gender binary as “a natural matter of fact,” they find claims made by sciences such as zoology, biology, and psychiatry “strange,” because “these sciences argue that decisions about sexuality are problematic matters” which require “a procedure for deciding sexuality” (Garfinkel 1967, 123-24). The general point here is that specialized discourses about gender do not agree entirely with the “natural attitude” toward gender, nor with one another. These specialized discourses include distinct medical discourses, other scientific discourses, psychotherapeutic discourses, and legal discourses (which vary state-by-state in the United States). Although all of these discourses share regulatory aims, they have somewhat distinct aims and often attempt to regulate differently. Hence, it should be expected that these discourses would differ to some extent in their claims about gender, especially since there is a wide variety of evidence which appears to contradict the “natural attitude.” While “normals” who hold the “natural attitude” must continually adjust their attitude to claims about gender which appear to contradict their attitude, or ignore these claims, or explain or laugh or ridicule or beat them away, specialized discourses about gender are by no means immune from the influence of the “natural attitude” either. Rather, they are shaped by the desire to hold as much, or the most crucial elements, of the “natural attitude” in place, insofar as this is consistent with their specialized aims; indeed, their specialized aims may, sometimes, take less precedence than upholding some aspect of the “natural attitude.”

Often, the “natural attitude” can be maintained only by some rather desperate maneuvers in the face of apparently contradictory embodied lives. One of the most desperate of these many maneuvers used to maintain the “natural attitude” is the medical “treatment” and “management” of intersexed individuals. Individuals who are born with “ambiguous” genitals are assigned to a sex as soon as possible, that assignment is rarely changed after a child is more than eighteen months old, and children are surgically and hormonally altered to match their assignments as fully as possible. Infants with tissue between their legs which does not appear to have the potential for developing into a phallus capable of penis-in-vagina intercourse are usually assigned, surgically as well as legally, to the category *female* (Holmes 1994, 11). Often children are not told that they have been surgically or hormonally altered, and sometimes children’s guardians are also kept ignorant (Kessler [1990] 1994). Often children only learn that they are intersexed when further medical treatments are deemed necessary in response to problems emerging during puberty. Parents and chil-

dren are left with a burden of pain and shame which keeps most of them silent (Chase 1994). This range of practices is not politically neutral; it functions to protect, insofar as possible, “normals” from having to face embodiments that would dislodge their solid status as “normals.”

I'll turn now to examining a second theme in the dominant cultural attitude about gender. Marilyn Frye reminds us that women continually find themselves in “double bind” situations, as an effect of the nature of oppression:

One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found “difficult” or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation. (Frye 1983, 2-3)

We can, I believe, draw two morals about the concept *woman* from the pervasiveness of double bind situations in women's experiences. First, the concept *woman* is internally incoherent; this incoherence arises from the following: a woman is devalued according to how different she is from the white non-transsexual male heterosexual middle-class able-bodied Christian norm, for this norm provides standards of evaluation of human worthiness, and a woman is also devalued according to how close she is to this norm, for it dictates that those people who should have the positively evaluated characteristics it upholds as standards are white non-transsexual heterosexual middle-class able-bodied Christian men.

Second, the concept *woman* is, at least in part, an essentially normative concept. My use of the word “essentially” here should not be understood as implying that the concept *woman* is a natural concept, for a thoroughly cultural construct, such as the game of baseball, can have essential characteristics: without a ball, it isn't a baseball game. The characteristic of *woman* which Wittig takes as uniquely definitional is essentially normative, and the double bind situations of which Frye reminds us arise partly because of prescriptive and proscriptive claims about how women should behave and be. Of

course, the myth that Wittig is showing for what it is—mythical—tells us that the normative elements in the concept *woman* follow from purely physical descriptive “natural facts” about women considered as females; so one element of the myth is that the concept *woman* is, fundamentally and essentially, descriptive.

Since the concept *woman* functions prescriptively and proscriptively, we should expect it to include both positive and negative exemplars; hence, its defining characteristics should allow for the possibility of both. There is no one paradigm of womanhood; rather, at the very least we should expect one positively and one negatively evaluated paradigm. However, there is more than one culturally recognized way to “be a good woman.” One is by participating in heterosexuality in the way Wittig vaguely describes and takes to be the crucial defining characteristic of *woman*. However, there are other ways to participate in heterosexuality, that is, to aid in its perpetuation, which certainly do not require and sometimes preclude sexual/affectional involvements with men. A few such roles are schoolteacher, librarian, nurse, and avowedly celibate, religious devotee.

Further, we find multiple candidates for contemporary negative paradigms in the dominant culture’s representations of, for example, sex workers,⁹ pregnant women whose behaviors could cause harm to their fetuses, “single welfare mothers,” dominatrixes, women who cut off their abusive husbands’ penises, mothers who kill their children, and, perhaps, lesbians.

Consider the Nola Darling character in Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*. The representation of a heterosexual African American woman with the audacity to assume the masculine prerogative of having multiple heterosexual sex partners serves as a useful prop to heterosexist ideology by showing the negative consequences (rape, loneliness) to women whose sexual behaviors do not closely approximate one of the positively evaluated paradigms of *woman*. This oppressive purpose is best served if there are at least a few flesh-and-blood “bad girls” who are punished, who punish themselves, and who meet with bad ends in ways not obviously attributable to human agency. (Remember those old dime store lesbian pulp novels?)

The culturally recognized threat of falling out of the category entirely need not be enforced very often, if ever, to serve its function. The oppressive purposes of the negative exemplars are best served if at least some of these flesh-and-blood bad girls do not, by virtue of their transgressions from positively evaluated paradigms, fall out of the category *woman* entirely. For if all bad girls fall out of the concept entirely, then it would be harder for those whose behaviors and beings bad girls serve to limit—good girls—to see bad girls’ bad futures as possible futures for themselves. This is because it is hard for many women, even those tempted to be bad, to imagine themselves outside the category *woman*, let alone outside the categories *woman* and *man*. Indeed, this imagining may be conceptually impossible for many members of our

culture. If it is true that we attribute gender as universally as Garfinkel asserts, then we cannot imagine ourselves as wholly genderless. To attempt to imagine ourselves as such would be to attempt to imagine ourselves out of social existence. The remaining possibilities, then, would be imagining oneself as having some gender other than *man* or *woman* or imagining oneself on a borderline between the category in which one began life and some other category or the realm of the genderless. I will consider these alternatives in turn.

Given the pull of the “natural attitude” toward gender, it cannot be the case that many bad girls are, thereby, in some gender category or categories other than *man* or *woman*. This “natural attitude,” according to which there are exactly two genders and one’s gender is invariant and determined by one’s genitals, would be severely undermined if many bad girls ceased being women simply by being bad. Maintaining the “natural attitude” requires that there are so few exceptions that they can be clearly demarcated from “the normals.” Otherwise, exceptions could not be treated as pathological cases, as freaks, as jokes, or as some other kind of negatively evaluated aberration or abnormality; rampant anomaly would destroy the “natural attitude.”

The second alternative is that being a bad girl automatically puts one on a borderline between the category *woman* and some other gender category or the realm of the genderless, the realm of social nonexistence. This is the alternative that is closest to Butler’s notion of homosexual abjection. In *Bodies That Matter*, she argues from a Lacanian perspective that casting gays and lesbians into the realm of the abject—a realm on the border between the inside and the outside of our culture’s categories of sex—functions to induce an association between homosexuality and psychosis in the straight mind, thus using the fear of psychosis to keep people straight (Butler 1993). The fear of abjection, of exile from the category *woman*, functions to ensure that many birth-assigned females will strive unceasingly to embody their membership in that category as fully as possible, although full membership may be embodied in different ways, and proper means of such embodiment differ and are contested. Yet the possibility that abjection occurs often runs afoul of the same problems as the first possibility: the “natural attitude” cannot survive if abjection is common.

A multiplicity of regulative strategies is necessary to keep people straight, to keep women from being bad girls,¹⁰ and to keep people clearly within their gender categories. Perhaps having a very small number of birth-assigned females fall entirely out of the category *woman*, as well as a very small number who end up on a frontier between that category and some other category or none at all does serve regulatory functions. This works best, however, when these are infrequently instantiated complements to a number of other more pervasive tactics. These include threatening that this will happen when it will not and severely punishing, in ways other than exile from the category *woman*,

those who do not uphold the natural attitude toward gender or do not conform to one of the positively evaluated paradigms for the gender to which they have been assigned. Ridicule, harassment, scorn, humiliation, not being allowed to use either public rest room, fists, boots, rapists' penises, baseball bats, beer bottles, billy clubs, knives, and guns serve regulatory functions just as effectively as an existential fear of falling out of one's prescribed gender category.

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CATEGORY WOMAN

In this section I offer my reconstruction of the dominant culture's concept of *woman*. There are a number of defining characteristics of the category *woman*. None of these characteristics is a necessary or sufficient condition. My list includes thirteen characteristics, clustered into several groups, differently weighted; some of these characteristics may be satisfied to differing degrees. Any adequate reconstruction of the dominant cultural concept *woman* needs to include all the elements I list, though this list may not be exhaustive. I owe a tremendous debt to Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* in this section (Bornstein 1994, 21-40).¹¹

The first cluster includes five characteristics generally regarded as sex characteristics by those who subscribe to a sex/gender distinction. In our culture, this cluster is more heavily weighted than any of the other defining characteristics.

1. Absence of a penis.

Although presence of a vagina plays a role here, absence of a penis is primary. Initial gender assignment is typically and normatively made by a doctor who does not *examine* genitals but, instead, takes a *quick glance* between an infant's legs. If that doctor sees tissue that seems to have the potential to develop into a penis within "the normal range," the announcement is made: "It's a boy!" If that doctor does not see such tissue the announcement is: "It's a girl!" (Kessler [1990] 1994, 223-24, 227-28). Such announcements are performative in the strictest Austinian sense: announcement constitutes initial assignment, yet the moral accountability of the "natural attitude" requires that this assignment masquerade as a report of an already existing, purely natural fact.

Weighting penises more heavily than vaginas in attributing gender is not limited to attributions to neonates. In their overlay study, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna found that: "the presence of a penis is, in and of itself, a powerful enough cue to elicit a gender attribution with almost complete (96 percent) agreement. The presence of a vagina, however, does not have this same power. One third of the participants were able to ignore the reality of the vagina as a female cue" (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 151). Garfinkel's formu-

lation of the “natural attitude” toward gender is mistaken in this regard. It is not quite accurate that, according to the “natural attitude,” a female is a person with a vagina and a male is a person with a penis. Instead, as Bornstein writes, “It has little or nothing to do with vaginas. It’s all penises or no penises . . .” (Bornstein 1994, 22).

2. Presence of breasts.

After absence of penis when a body is unclothed, presence of breasts tends to be the most heavily weighted of the thirteen characteristics in gender attributions. This is evidenced by Kessler and McKenna’s findings in their overlay study (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 145-53), by the importance of breast growth to MTFs (male-to-female transsexuals) for achieving convincingly feminine self-presentations, by the importance of top surgery to many FTMs, including both many of us who never undergo genital reconstruction surgeries and many who do, for achieving convincingly masculine self-presentations. Presence or absence of breasts also plays a large part in producing and maintaining gender *identity* in transsexuals and in non-transsexual birth-assigned females who undergo mastectomy as treatment for breast cancer. Absence of breasts, in the latter case, can threaten an individual’s sense of herself as a woman, whereas absence of breasts can be crucial in producing and maintaining FTMs’ masculine identities.

Analyzing a passage from Colette’s *The Pure and the Impure* in which Colette suggests that lesbians might have their breasts removed “in this year of 1930,” Crowder argues:

Colette’s semifacetious suggestion that modern lesbians chop off their breasts illustrates a profound ambivalence toward the lesbian body as a female body. On one level, she implies that lesbian rejection of “femininity” is such a radical rejection of being female that it necessitates bodily mutilation—aimed at the breast since it is the only specifically female organ visible when a woman is clothed. On another level, Colette ties this act to behaviors (smoking cigars, working on cars) that we associate with masculinity, rather than with gender neutrality. Colette sees lesbians as rejecting femaleness, symbolized by the breast, and embracing masculinity, represented by cigars and cars. (Crowder 1993, 64-65)

Contemporary lesbian anxiety about whether or not butches will expose their breasts—during sex, at pride parades, at women’s music festivals, or as assertion of their right to use women’s rest rooms when challenged—is another facet of lesbian ambivalence about the relationship between the categories *lesbian* and *woman*. Pressure put on butches to expose their breasts reflects anxieties that butches are not women or are on their way to becoming men.

For butch refusal to ground and elicit this anxiety, presence of breasts must be a very heavily weighted characteristic of *woman*.¹²

3. Presence of reproductive organs (uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes) which allow for pregnancy to occur if the person engages in intercourse with a fertile man.
4. Presence of estrogen and progesterone in a balance with androgens within the “normal” range (as defined by endocrinologists) for females of one’s age group.
5. Presence of XX, or perhaps absence of Y, chromosomes.

Each of these five characteristics can vary somewhat independently, so no one of the five by itself is either necessary or sufficient for being within the category *woman*. An initial gender assignment, based on the absence of penile tissue, may be defeated by a number of nongenital characteristics. One is if chromosomal testing, done for some reason such as determining whether or not an athlete will be allowed to compete in women’s events in the Olympics, indicates the presence of a Y chromosome. Yet this specialized case does not show that chromosomes are the ultimate, essential bedrock of our culture’s concept *woman*, nor even that chromosomes are taken to be the most important of this cluster. Chromosomal testing is rare, even in cases of sex reassignment. Furthermore, insofar as MTFs fall within the category *woman*, most do so despite having XY chromosomes, despite lacking a uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes, and in some cases despite presence of a penis, though usually not without presence of estrogen in a balance with testosterone closer to that typical for women than that for men and sufficient to have caused some breast tissue growth.

6. Having a gender identity as a woman.

Do you feel yourself to be a woman? Then, according to this defining characteristic, you are. This characteristic is less heavily weighted by the dominant culture than are many others, though it is not entirely negligible, as is shown by the crucial role gender identity plays in definitions of and diagnostic criteria for adult gender identity disorder (the current diagnostic category under which transsexuals gain access to medically regulated technologies) and in transsexual experiences.

The next cluster of defining characteristics has to do with what traditionally have been called “gender roles.”

7. Having an occupation considered to be acceptable for a woman.
8. Engaging in leisure pursuits (including hobbies, club memberships, looser social affiliations, recreational activities, entertainment interests, and nonoccupational religious activities) considered to be accept-

able for a woman, and pursuing these in ways considered acceptable for a woman.

I have not specified the content of (7) and (8), nor will I do so for (10)-(12) below, so as to allow for embodiments of these criteria to vary in relation to intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, regional location, and other such modalities. (8) leads naturally to a defining characteristic similar to that which Wittig takes to be the essential defining characteristic of the category *woman*.

9. Engaging at some point in one's life in some form of sexual/affectional relationship with a man who is commonly recognized as heterosexual, whose life history is consistent with that placement of him, and who either self-identifies as heterosexual or who does not self-identify as gay or bisexual, and not later renouncing one's status as heterosexual.

I agree with Wittig that being heterosexual is part of what it is to be a woman. However, this is not the one and only defining characteristic of the concept *woman*, nor is satisfying this characteristic necessary or sufficient for being within the category *woman*.

I have formulated this defining characteristic with an eye to the "problem cases" I raised against Wittig's analysis. First, this defining characteristic is loose enough to include a variety of relationships other than marriage, including cohabitation and domestic partnerships between two and only two fairly clearly heterosexual people, but also including less normative forms of heterosexual involvement, including promiscuity, prostitution, and mistress-slave contracts. This defining characteristic can be satisfied by divorced women, widowed women, and single heterosexual mothers who are not participating currently and may not participate in the future in heterosexual relationships but who do not actively withdraw themselves from the category *heterosexual* in some way, for example, by coming out as lesbians. Still, it is strict enough about the type of participation in heterosexuality required that it does not apply to lesbians who participate in heterosexuality by voting or working in institutions that perpetuate heterosexuality. Further, this condition does not run into problems with categorizing dykes who engage in dyke-fag sex.

The next cluster of defining characteristics are ones that would often be taken to have to do with gender attribution by measures other than those that I have put into the first cluster (genitals, breasts, reproductive organs, hormones, and chromosomes), though some of these would be considered secondary sex characteristics by those who endorse a sex/gender distinction.

10. Achieving and maintaining a physical gender self-presentation the elements of which work together to produce the gender assignment "woman" in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with

whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. Such elements include attire, jewelry, cosmetics, hairstyle, distribution, density, and texture of facial and body hair, fingernail and toenail appearance, skin texture, overall body morphology and size, odor, facial structure, and vocal characteristics.

11. Behaving in ways that work together to produce the gender assignment “woman” in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. These behavioral cues include movements, posture, facial expressions, manners, decorum, etiquette, protocol, and deportment considered to be within acceptable ranges for women. For example, this may include degrees and styles of aggressiveness in communicating with others, and, more generally, how one uses and negotiates power in interactions with others. This also includes styles of verbal expression which are taken to reflect styles of thought: for example, women are more intuitive or emotional and less rational than men; women engage in less linear thought than men; women are more supportive and cooperative and less competitive in conversation than men, and so on.
12. Giving textual cues that work together to produce the gender assignment “woman” in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. Textual features include citing a continuous, unambiguous history as a woman who was a girl before adulthood, referring to an unambiguous future as a woman interrupted only by death, having only documents bearing the designation ‘F’ (for example, birth certificate, driver’s license, passport) or bearing no gender designation (for example, employee or student identification card, credit card) and bearing either no photographs or photographs consistent with (10), using, answering to, and having documents bearing only a name consistent with the assignment “woman,” using only feminine pronouns to refer to oneself whenever making third person singular pronominal references to oneself, quoting only others’ third person singular pronominal references to oneself which use feminine pronouns, and showing and displaying only photographs, drawings, or other pictorial representations of oneself which are consistent with (10).

Do people, including children and transsexuals, with whom you interact think you’re a woman? Do they think this all the time, unambiguously, and

without ever thinking about thinking about it? If so, according to (10)-(12), then you're a woman.

For those who wish to place or maintain themselves within the category *woman* negotiating this cluster of defining characteristics is "essentially a balancing act," says a stunning *Mademoiselle* article entitled "Are You Woman Enough to Wear Menswear?" This article illustrates the delicate balance, always stated in the imperative, between masculine clothes and a feminine face with a photograph textually purporting to juxtapose "the power of a polka-dot tie [and] the allure of a sensuous face," yet showing the model's cleavage.

Satisfaction of (10)-(12) is frequently a primary concern in the gender performativities of MTFs. This is also a common primary concern, though usually less consciously so, in the gender performativities of birth-assigned females who wish to stay within the category *woman*. The difference is not necessarily in the amount of effort required, but rather in the degree of awareness that one is engaged in such an effort and in the degree of awareness of the specific dangers failure would bring on.

In a Wittgensteinian manner, Heritage explicates the balancing act, the continual production and maintenance of a gender self-presentation, which results in consistent, unambiguous, unconscious gender assignment of oneself to the category *woman*:

It is surprising to realize the extent to which gender differentiation consists of a filigree of small-scale, socially organized behaviours which are unceasingly iterated. Together these—individually insignificant—behaviours interlock to constitute the great public institution of gender as a morally-organized-as-natural fact of life. This institution is comparatively resistant to change. To adapt Wittgenstein's famous analogy, the social construction of gender from a mass of individual social practices resembles the spinning of a thread in which fibre is spun on fibre. (Heritage 1984, 197)

Application of this cluster of defining characteristics may sometimes be defeated by a contradictory but very clear classification according to the first cluster. I am unsure about whether or not application of this cluster may be defeated by another defining characteristic or a cluster of other defining characteristics. (10)-(12) are very heavily weighted in defining gender in our culture, for were we uncertain of our gender attributions very often, or if we were to discover or decide frequently that our gender attributions were incorrect, this would weaken our belief in the "natural attitude" toward gender more radically than such belief would be undermined in any way other than a profound disturbance in our ability to rely on (1)-(5). Indeed, if much diver-

gence were found in the classifications produced by these two clusters, this divergence would seriously undermine the “natural attitude.”

13. Having a history consistent with the gender assignment “woman” as produced by (10)-(12) which provides an unbroken line of descent from female infancy through girlhood to womanhood.

ARE LESBIANS WOMEN? REVISITED

Let me now return to the question: “Are lesbians women?” Anyone who expected an unequivocal answer has, I hope, abandoned this expectation. Before answering this question, I will take a brief detour back to the arguments. We have seen that Wittig’s analysis of the concept *woman* is beset by her fundamental misunderstanding of the *logical type* of definition with which our culture operates. In her latest novel, *Across the Acheron*, she briefly acknowledges that her view of the distinction between lesbians and women is overly simple. The first-person protagonist, Wittig, journeys through the rings of hell with her guide, Manastabal. In many of these rings, women—not lesbians, of course—instantiate completely one aspect of their oppression under the regime of heterosexuality; for example, in one ring they appear as slaves who don’t fight their leashes (Wittig [1985] 1987, 23-25), as appendages in another (44-46), and in a third ring they appear as two-dimensional creatures who, like playing-cards, cannot stand upright, in contradistinction to those “of the third dimension”: men (50-51). Just as the categories *mother* and *amazon* were kept distinct in *Lesbian Peoples* (Wittig and Zeig [1976] 1979), Wittig makes clear that the categories *woman* and *lesbian* are distinct throughout *Across the Acheron*.

With one exception. In one of several interludes in a limbo region, Manastabal confronts Wittig with this tendency. This particular limbo space is a lesbian bar. Here Wittig uses the same language for lesbians that she often uses in her theoretical writing: “I feel like getting up at each new arrival in order to meet her and congratulate her on being in such a place; or else I want to stand on the table and propose a general toast to *all the deserters, all the runaways, all the escaped slaves* assembled here” (Wittig [1985] 1987, 73-74; emphasis mine). She seems so satisfied in the bar that Manastabal comments on it.

Wittig is crestfallen at first, but after more tequila she challenges her guide: “How is it, Manastabal, my guide, that you attach so much credit to the intelligence of the damned souls, as in the case of the bicephalics? Personally I tend to think that only a certain degree of stupidity can explain why anyone stays in Hell” (Wittig [1985] 1987, 74).

Manastabal replies: “It’s just that your principle is: either . . . or. You don’t acknowledge any nuances. You see nothing complex in what constitutes the

basis of Hell. You assert that it must be destroyed and you imagine that you have only to blow on it" (Wittig [1985] 1987, 74).

A recent argument given by Crowder makes a mistake similar to Wittig's oversimplification. Although she endorses Wittig's conclusion, her own arguments pay scant attention to Wittig's underlying analysis of the relationship between the regime of heterosexuality and the categories of sex. Instead, Crowder focuses on "the lesbian body," arguing that this body "undermines the very categories of sex and gender themselves" by "deconstructing femininity in physical appearance." She cites male disguise, camp, and butch/femme role playing as examples of "the lesbian refusal to be women" (Crowder 1993, 66). Thus, Crowder notices that some U.S. lesbians do not embody characteristics (10)-(12). She disregards the facts that not every lesbian fails to satisfy (10)-(12) and that this cluster is also not satisfied by some nonlesbians who count as women by (1)-(5). Moreover, she fails to give any reason to believe that failure to satisfy these conditions alone implies that one is not a woman. I have argued that this view is mistaken, for characteristics (10)-(12) are neither necessary nor sufficient for being a woman. However, there is one way in which Crowder is on firmer ground here than Wittig: the conditions that Crowder argues that lesbians fail to satisfy are, I have argued, more heavily weighted than that which Wittig argues that lesbians fail to satisfy. Still, although Crowder endorses Wittig's view that "lesbians opt out of the heterosexual economy" (Crowder 1993, 66), she does little to indicate the underlying oppressive function of the distinctions (between *man* and *woman*, and between *sex* and *gender*) which she is critiquing.

Calhoun's arguments are different from Wittig's and Crowder's in that she appeals to three distinct defining characteristics of the concept *woman*. Drawing on Wittig's insight that the categories of sex are the results of the regime of heterosexuality, which requires that there be "two sexes/genders so that sexual desire can be heterosexualized" and that "sex/gender map onto reproductive differences" (Calhoun 1994, 566), Calhoun argues that "individuals who violate the unity of reproductive anatomy, heterosexual desire, and gender behavior fall out of the domain of intelligible gender identity" (566-67), that is, categorization as *woman* or as *man*. From this she immediately concludes, "At best, lesbians are not-women" (567).

Anatomy and gender behavior certainly do link some lesbians to the category *woman*; but there are vast differences among lesbians in regard to attributes of anatomy and gender behavior, which Calhoun's account neglects. Nonetheless, the point important to Calhoun's justification of her conclusion is that she relies on a *unity*, a relation of "coherence and continuity" (Calhoun 1994, 566; quoted from Butler 1990, 17), of the defining characteristics on which Calhoun focuses. Calhoun is right to notice that these characteristics work together (along with other characteristics she fails to mention) to produce and reproduce culturally intelligible gender embodiments. But

Calhoun's stress on unity misunderstands the logical type of our dominant cultural definition of gender, for it takes as necessary each of the defining characteristics: if you do not have one of three properties, then you do not have a unity of those three properties. This emphasis on unity requires far too little for inclusion within the category *woman* to be an accurate formulation of our dominant cultural conception of gender, for it excludes from the category *woman* any person whose reproductive anatomy alone or whose gender behavior alone does not conform to (1)-(5) or (10)-(12). Since Calhoun does not clarify the terms "reproductive anatomy" and "gender behavior," she is open to the same kind of counter-arguments as Wittig, although the specific problem cases would differ. I will not engage these apparent counterexamples, but will only list a few: postmenopausal women, women who have had hysterectomies, infertile women "of child-bearing age," heterosexual women who insist on egalitarian or open marriage contracts, heterosexual women with nontraditional occupations, heterosexual academic women who do not defer to their male colleagues in department meetings, and so forth. Further, Calhoun overlooks differences in the *weighting* of the different defining characteristics of the concept *woman*.

Are lesbians women? Some are, some are not, and in many cases there is no fact of the matter. There are many differences among lesbians as to which of the defining characteristics of *woman* they satisfy, which they do not satisfy, the extent to which they do satisfy those characteristics which they satisfy, and the extent to which they fail to satisfy those characteristics which they do not satisfy. No lesbian satisfies every defining characteristic of the category *woman*, since every lesbian fails to satisfy condition (9); yet, even in regard to this condition, the degree to which lesbians fail to satisfy it differs. But many lesbians do, fairly clearly and to a fairly great extent, satisfy each of the other defining characteristics. There is no principled reason to say that such lesbians are not women, given that they satisfy the most heavily weighted defining characteristics for being in that category, they satisfy all but one of the characteristics, and that characteristic which they do not satisfy is not one among the most heavily weighted.

WITTIG'S CONTRIBUTIONS

I would like to close with a few words about Wittig's enormous contributions.

She opened the way for understanding the straight mind, by showing up as myths the notions of dimorphic sexual difference upon which heterosexuality as a political regime is founded, and which in turn founds the oppression of those classified as women within its discourses. She is right, I think, to locate the category (and, hence, the categories) of sex, as well as their occupants, as material and cultural *products* of the regime of heterosexuality, just as it

produces those who are not contained within the categories of sex *as such* by excluding them from these categories. From her theoretical work we can draw the invaluable conclusion that the category (and categories) of sex function to perpetuate the regime of heterosexuality, which, in turn, enables (though it is neither necessary nor sufficient for) the oppression of those it classifies as women. Yet, we must also understand this sort of functional primacy as distinct from definitional primacy, for the actual classification of human beings within the category of sex does not work exactly as Wittig thinks.

Wittig further opened up the conceptual space for believing that some human beings have escaped the categories of dimorphic sexual difference which found the heterosexual regime, and for seeing this as a possibility for ourselves. This possibility, in turn, has given us greater justification for pursuing gender proliferation as one promising strategy in overthrowing the heterosexual regime. It loosens the stranglehold, coming from both the dominant culture and also from some versions of cultural and radical feminism, of nonconsensual gender on those birth-designated females who have felt profound discomfort at being in, being placed by others within, or proclaiming themselves to be within, the category *woman*. Wittig's theoretical work has enabled a better development of our understanding of the ways in which queer gender performativities trouble the heterosexual regime. As Harmony Hammond writes, "In her shift away from a definition of lesbian identity based on gender to one based on sexual preference, as well as her deconstruction of sex, gender, and the lesbian body (in order to (re)member it), Wittig, like Foucault, anticipated and influenced much of today's rich discourse around the body and sexuality" (Hammond 1994, 105-6).¹³

Yet Wittig's emphasis on the material may serve as a useful corrective to some current trends within queer theory. As Rosemary Hennessey writes:

This way [Wittig's] of conceptualizing lesbian implies that the formation of resistant subjectivities will require more than changing discourses and constructions of the subject. In this sense Wittig's resistant subject puts pressure on the overriding emphasis in queer theory on sexuality as discursively constructed and/or as an expression of bodies or pleasures. We can look at how her concept of subjective cognitive practice as a class issue can redirect our thinking about sexuality, identity, and resistance. If we understand the prevailing categories of sex as integral to an economic, political, and ideological order, becoming "queer" can be seen as "a new subjective definition" that has to be undertaken by every one of us. This is not a subject position based upon biology or sexual object choice or issuing from a utopian "elsewhere" so much as a critical perspective that opens up

ways of thinking about sexuality in both straight and gay culture. (Hennessey 1993, 971-72)

Gendering ourselves in ways that challenge the “natural attitude” toward gender threatens the regime of heterosexuality, and so also the oppression of women. But simply engaging in gender play, sexually or in public acts of self-presentation, is not as subversive as some contemporary queer politics and theory would have it. To shift *ourselves*, our subjectivities, our embodied gender performativities, to shift our own gendered beings in response to the dominant scheme’s responses to our gender threats, we need the greatest degree of theoretical specificity possible. This theoretical specificity is lessened by focusing on only one aspect of the dominant culture’s gender scheme, as Wittig does and as do queers who think that looking queer or playing queer is all it takes. To paraphrase Manastabal’s admonition to Wittig in the Limbo Bar, you have to do more than blow at one piece of it to blow it away. Nonetheless, this theoretical specificity can be increased by foregrounding, as Wittig does, the functions of the category of sex to uphold the heterosexual regime and, in turn, to enable the oppression of women as such.¹⁴

NOTES

1. See Butler (1990, 4-5) for an alternative formulation of this problem.
2. Shane Phelan writes: “What comes to the fore, then, is not truth but strategy. If we ask why certain metanarratives function at certain times and places, we find that the answer does not have to do with the progress of a unitary knowledge but rather with shifting structures of meaning, power, and action” (Phelan 1993, 767). While all this may be true, it is still possible and important to say that some accounts of the contents of these metanarratives are true, others false. This, of course, is different from saying that the metanarratives themselves are true or false. Nonetheless, it is both possible and important to argue that many of these metanarratives are false.
3. Kate Bornstein profitably applies SM consensuality/nonconsensuality discourse to gender (Bornstein 1994, 121-25). Susan Stryker gives a useful analysis of the nonconsensuality of gender as “the founding condition of human subjectivity,” “the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable” (Stryker 1994, 249-50).
4. I thank Regina Lark, Cindy Stern, and Ali Whitmer for discussions of the functions of “real” and “not real.”
5. “Binary” is Butler’s term, not Wittig’s. Yet I believe it is accurate here, for Wittig often writes of the oppositional nature of the definitions of *woman* and *man*, and also that the regime of heterosexuality includes exhaustivity of these two categories. Although analytic philosophers use “binary relation” simply to mean *two-termed relation*, it has a different meaning in this context. Here, binary distinctions are distinctions between two categories which are defined oppositionally and which apply exhaustively within their domain. Not every two-termed relation between two people who are members of such categories can be a binary relation in the relevant sense, however, else

any individual woman and any individual man would be in binary relation(s) to each other.

6. Problem cases Cheshire Calhoun lists are “the heterosexual celibate, virgin, single-parent head of household, marriage resister, or the married woman who insists on an egalitarian marriage contract” (Calhoun 1994, 563). Another problem case arises for Wittig when we ask whether or not gay men (in common parlance) count as men on her view. Rosemary Hennessey notices this problem but, misunderstanding it as raising the specter of lesbian separatism, dismisses it (Hennessey 1993, 97). Harry Hay offers arguments for the conclusion that gays, as well as lesbians, escape the categories of sex, based on concepts of subject-object and subject-subject consciousness (Hay 1987; Hay in Thompson 1987; Hay in Thompson 1994).

7. I do not use “dyke” and “fag” here simply as synonyms for “lesbian” and “gay man.” These terms indicate culturally located genderings of sexual practices and desires which often take primacy over gender of object choice, thus are not exact synonyms and may not be coextensive terms.

8. This quote from Halberstam, as well as my analysis of the personal ad from *Venus Infers*, points out a crucial methodological lesson, namely, anyone who wants to think clearly about gender in relation to sexuality in our culture needs to be conversant in the discourses used and continually re-created by those who are *forced* to move well beyond the categories available in the dominant culture discourse about sex, gender, and sexuality. Queer and transgendered discourses are produced by those of us who cannot communicate about our gendered sexual desires and practices without creating new languages, languages much more specific and more richly nuanced than those available to us from the dominant culture and from feminist, lesbian or gay cultures. Queer gendered sexual practice far exceeds theory right now; indeed, my own practices far exceed the conceptual tools available to me now. However, queer community-based discourses are ahead of theory now. Here’s the lesson, in a nutshell: if, minimally, you don’t understand the personals and other sexually explicit expressions of desire in queer and transgendered sex radical/leatherqueer publications (including homegrown ones), you don’t understand the margins, the edges, of our dominant cultural expressions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Continuing to appropriate bell hooks’ analogy out of context (hooks 1984, vix), if you don’t understand gendered life on the edge, you don’t understand gendered life at the center.

9. Shannon Bell argues that many feminist theorists “have tended to appropriate feminine difference in the [canonical, masculine] texts [they have studied] solely as difference in relation to the male subject. They have neglected the inscription of difference within the category ‘woman’ (the maternal body/the libidinal female body) found in the texts. Consequently, they have privileged the reproductive in the couple maternal/sexual that has come to delimit the female” (Bell 1994, 21). Based on this analysis, she develops the view that prostitutes are “the other within the categorical other, ‘woman’ ” (2). Although Bell is right to criticize feminist theorists who have misunderstood the category *woman* by neglecting non-reproductive representations of *woman* and women, she distorts cultural constructions of this category by insisting that it is always constructed by binary pairings, rather than allowing for multiple, non-binary exemplars of ways to be a good woman and a bad woman.

10. For one list of a multiplicity of such strategies, see Rich ([1980] 1983).

11. I leave vague the dominant cultural attitude toward causal structuring of the defining characteristics of *woman*. Probably the most common belief is that presence of XX, or absence of Y, chromosomes causes many of the remaining twelve defining characteristics to be present. Yet this is highly contested. I thank James Bogen for drawing this to my attention.

12. This point comes to the fore in Judith Halberstam's reading of Sergio Toledo's film *Vera* (Italy). A girls' reformatory director challenges Vera Bauer and other young butches: "Okay, you're so butch, let's see your pricks." Bauer's girlfriend Clara says it's "not fair" for Bauer to have sex with her unless they are both naked, but when Bauer strips to an undershirt and Clara tries to touch Bauer's breasts, Bauer runs out of the room. Halberstam remarks that Bauer "is surrounded by people who must see her dick if they are to approve her masculinity, or her breasts if they are to prove her masculinity is simply a facade" (Halberstam 1994, 221-25).

13. I thank Frances Pohl for bringing Hammond's article to my attention.

14. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Society for Women in Philosophy/Pacific Division, the Philosophy and Women's Studies Field Groups at Pitzer College, the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Los Angeles, and the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Northridge; I am grateful for comments I received on those occasions. Participating in a Los Angeles area feminist theory/queer theory discussion group has helped my thinking on the topics I discuss in this paper; the following have participated in that group: Karen Barad, Mary Crane, Ann Ferguson, Robin Podolsky, Jennifer Rycenga, Bergeth Schroeder, Laurie Shrage, Kayley Vernallis, and D. D. Wills. Anonymous *Hypatia* referees' reports were also useful in preparing my final version of this essay.

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