

**FRENCH AND ITALIAN FEMINIST EXCHANGES IN THE 1970s:
QUEER EMBRACES IN QUEER TIME**

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION Politics of the Body and Sexual Communities: The French and the Italian Feminist and Gay Movements of the 1970s	1
CHAPTER I One is Not Born a Mother: Queer Abortions in Dacia Maraini's <i>Donna in guerra</i> and Annie Ernaux's <i>L'événement</i>	16
Women and Abortion in the 1970s	16
Annie Ernaux's <i>L'événement</i> : Writing Abortion, Killing the Mother	29
Writing Bodies from Testimony to Diary	35
A Compulsory Relationship	45
Suna's Queer Body	49
Writing Clandestine Abortion: Subverting Motherhood and Family	53
Suna's Coming out and the Politics of Privacy	55
Secret Desires, Secretive Masculinities	59
Vannina's Pederasty and Sexual Pedagogy	67
A Lesbian Embrace: Queering Maternal Nurture	72
CHAPTER II The Clitoris Diaries: Symbolic Excision and Female Sexual Autonomy in 1970s Italian Radical Feminism	79
Rediscovering Sexual Autonomy through Women's Bonds	80
Autocoscienza and the Emergence of the <i>donna clitoridea</i>	86
A Fiction of Self: the <i>donna clitoridea</i> between Diary and Theory	91
The Feminist Clitoris: Freud, Feminine Authenticity, and Sexual Autonomy	94
Inside the Group: The Clitoris as Phallic Signifier	103

The <i>donna clitoridea</i> between Semi-visibility and the Rejection of Lesbianism.....	112
CHAPTER III Revolutionary Embraces: Queer Excisions and Erotic Communism in the 1970s.....	125
Hocquenghem’s Desire and Sexual Difference	127
Ho(m)osexuality and the Hatred of Woman.....	132
When the Anus Meets the Lips or Phallus Resistance.....	138
Anal Retention: A Queer Feminist Issue	142
Queer Excisions and Failed Correspondences: Mieli, Pasolini and Lonzi	147
Envisioning a Queer Feminist Correspondence.....	157
CHAPTER IV The Laugh of the Lesbian: Fictive Gender and Emotional Materiality in Monique Wittig’s Fiction.....	166
Monique Wittig and Sexual Difference	167
Cixous/Medusa Comes to Writing: <i>Écriture Féminine</i> as <i>Écriture Butch</i>	172
Wittig and the Social Contract.....	179
Subjective Struggles and Material (De)construction: Elles, je, tu and the Lesbian Body	197
The Lesbian Body: A Concept that Mattered	201
Writing over the Woman’s Corpse: Lesbianizing Myths, Rewriting Culture	207
Embracing the Lesbian Body: The Experience of Emotional Materiality.....	211
CONCLUSION Cinema and the Sexual Politics of the 1970s: Swept Away by an Unusual Queer Destiny	222
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	230

INTRODUCTION

Politics of the Body and Sexual Communities: The French and the Italian Feminist and Gay Movements of the 1970s

In 2008 the French Women's Movement known as the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) celebrated its 40th anniversary. On this occasion, a group of women and feminists who made the history of the MLF published a collective work as a testimony of a cultural phenomenon that, in the words of its members, “a constitué l'événement le plus marquant de la seconde moitié du XXème siècle et [qui] a engendré une mutation de notre civilisation” (Fouque 7) [constituted the most incisive event of the second half of the twentieth century and engendered a mutation in our civilization]. In August 1970 a group of women including Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy celebrated women's suffrage in the United States by hanging a banner from the façade of the Arc de Triomphe asserting, “Un homme sur deux est une femme” [One man out of two is a woman], and “il y a plus inconnu encore que le soldat: sa femme” [There is someone more unknown than the soldier: it is his wife]. The women's movement was born in the midst of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles and many women who joined the MLF were already active in political movements against the war in Algeria and the war in Vietnam. The commemorative gesture in memory of the wife of the unknown

soldier thus symbolically links women's active political voice and their protest against colonialist regimes.

The MLF grew under the influence of the student movement, and the sexual liberation movement initiating some of the most important struggles for social and sexual democratization in France (Fouque 7-11). These struggles continued throughout the 1970s when a number of social reforms dramatically affected the bodies of single individuals and the body of the nation. Laws authorizing free abortion, laws persecuting sexual abuses, and laws legitimating equality between women and men at home and in the workplace are among these historical reforms. Social reforms of the 1970s reflected the endeavors of New Left organizations and their commitment to a new vision of politics and of change. The MLF was however not completely aligned with these organizations and started developing a radical critique of them, in particular of their sexism. In this respect the MLF was a movement of rupture. As French politics expert Françoise Picq recalls, "the MLF decided to be a completely spontaneous and democratic movement without any power structure or hierarchy" and "women were the objects and the subjects of their own struggle determining the means and the ends of their own liberation" (315). Personal and political autonomy was the MLF's unifying aim along with a few principles that Picq identifies with "male exclusion, rejection of hierarchy and leadership and independence from political parties" (316). Women's desire for political autonomy translated in the creation of a physical and symbolic space from which women could develop a critical consciousness of gender oppression and discrimination. Women thought and envisioned such a space in terms of a "révolution du symbolique" (Fouque 19) that Monique Wittig powerfully conveys and enacts through the pages of *Les*

guérillères (1969) in which a group of female warriors overthrows the symbolic order of patriarchy.¹

Despite the refusal of political affiliation in the form of a disengagement from institutional politics, the MLF had a crucial investment in social and political issues. Struggles against rape and over abortion and the rejection of compulsory motherhood all represent initiatives of the MLF. Soon divisions and splits both between the movement and the political institutions and among women within the movement itself became apparent. Picq sees in the divisive nature of the MLF the mark of the “French exception” in feminism, for “nowhere were the violence and divisions among political and feminist groups as absolute and destructive as in France” (319). Divisions were also internal to the MLF, which was diverse from social, sexual, and theoretical points of view.² The feminists of the movement came to a fragmentation in the mid-’70s. Following the split a new group named *Psych et Po* emerged around the leader Antoinette Fouque. Fouque, who refused to be labeled as a feminist, believed in the existence of an essential feminine difference [“féminitude”] which she condensed in the motto “on naît femme” [we are

¹ Regarding the creation of *Les Guérillères* and of the MLF Fouque writes that “Monique vient me rejoindre dans le Midi, à la Redonne, avec son copain de l’époque, qui revient du Vietnam où il a tourné un film sur le mouvement de libération avec Joris Ivens et Marceline Loridan. Il nous explique que là-bas les femmes prennent les armes. Monique me lit tous les jours ce qu’elle écrit, qui deviendra *Les Guérillères*. Et nous décidons de créer un groupe de femmes (Fouque 19). [Monique joined me in the South at the Redonne accompanied by her partner who had just returned from Vietnam where he had shot a movie on the liberation movement with Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan. He explains to us that over there women arm themselves. Each day Monique reads to me what she writes and that will become *Les Guérillères*. Hence we decided in the same breath to create a group of women against May ’68.]

² Frédéric Martel writes, “Le parcours politique de ces femmes est varié... certaines sont trotskistes ou maoïstes. D’autres ont milité dans un syndicat étudiant (l’UNEF)... certaines ont eu 20 ans sur les barricades de 1968, d’autres pourraient être leurs mères: elles ont milité lors de la guerre d’Algérie ou, plus tard, dans les comités de Vietnam” (Martel 42). [The political journey of these women is diversified... some are trotskistes or Maoists. Some others have been active in student unions... others have been on the barricades of 1968 for 20 years, others could be their mothers: they were militant during the Algerian war or later in the movements against Vietnam.] Picq also notes that many of them “often had mothers and grandmothers who were ahead of their times, with personal independence and cultural confidence” (315-316). Also many of them because of their lifestyle and personal choices affected and reflected an evolution of patterns of family life. They experienced “free union with or without cohabitation, single motherhood, recombined families, homosexuality” (Picq 316).

born women]. Thereafter the MLF became polarized between the women of *Psych et Po* following Fouque (among whom were Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) and others following Wittig.

The reasons for this divide may be found in the different meanings that Fouque and Wittig gave to the material and symbolic experiences of gender and sexuality. For Fouque the MLF was intrinsically and fundamentally an all-feminine experience of exchange (“movement homosexué”) (Martel 49). The need for this politics of feminine exclusivity resides, according to Fouque, in the inherent homosexuality of every woman, a component that women inherit from their relationship with their mothers. Female homosexuality, which is matrocentric and intrinsic to women, should remain invisible in order for homosexuality to be a tool of women’s political liberation. In other words, Fouque openly opposed lesbian visibility and was at odds with MLF members like Wittig, who embraced lesbianism both as a sexual orientation and as a political stance. Wittig and the women gathering around her were also preoccupied with issues of gender and class exploitation. For Wittig lesbianism was first and foremost a way out of the heterosexist confinement of women to an oppressed gender role. In general it seems that the homosexual or the lesbian question was one that profoundly divided the MLF, and the lesbian experience was an element of internal dissidence that modified and shifted alliances among women in the movement. I would say that the identity of the lesbian was not only a matter of personal and political identification, but one that revealed and determined the movement as such with its dynamics and its ruptures.

The MLF was also characterized by a certain level of cross-cultural and transnational dialogue. Within national borders the MLF had ties with the French gay

movement FHAR (*Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire*), which included, for a limited time, lesbians of the MLF. Due to the masculine orientation of FHAR, which historian Frédéric Martel calls “un théâtre de désir masculin” (56) [a theatre of masculine desire], the lesbians of FHAR progressively distanced themselves from this group. The so-called “Gouines Rouges” (Red Dykes) — this is the name that Christine Delphy ironically gave to lesbians — strove to differentiate themselves both from the overtly feminine orientation of *Psych et Po* and from the male-oriented atmosphere of FHAR while still remaining attached to the MLF. The lesbians of the MLF came then to embody a further break with the gay movement whose members were said to have been initially inspired by the women’s movement:

Le MLF a été l’inspirateur de notre mouvement à ses débuts et peut-être n’y aurait-il jamais eu de début si les femmes n’avaient elles-mêmes commencé. Nous en avons copié le style et le fonctionnement. Nous nous sommes appelés frères et sœurs. (Martel 52)

[The MLH inspired our movement in the beginning and perhaps we would have never had any beginning if women had not begun the movement. We imitated their style and their functioning. We called each other brothers and sisters.]

MLF and FHAR were different facets of a discourse of sexual liberation that proliferated in France between 1968 and 1972. Yet the dialogue between the two groups became more and more difficult due to the different emphasis that each group gave to the experience and the embodiment of sexuality and desire. In the words of feminist Marie-Jo Bonnet, gay men were far more interested in reproducing gendered roles and active/passive sexual dynamics than lesbians, who were instead trying to destroy them.³

³“Au FHAR... les garçons évoquaient les rôles actif-passif, alors que nous étions en train de détruire ces rôles” (Martel 56). After distancing themselves from the FHAR some lesbians like Marie-Jo Bonnet befriended the all lesbian group of the “Polymorphe perverses” which ironically plays with the Freudian

After initial enthusiasm their encounter became a site of as many conflicts as those between *Psych et Po* and Wittig. In this respect the configuration of the MLF resembles a series of encounters and exchanges that failed because of theoretical and experiential differences. The idea of encounter is a fundamental component in my dissertation and takes as a point of departure the actual exchanges between feminists and gays and develops them into a theory of embraces.

Another important encounter of the period was between the MLF and the Italian feminist movement. Like the MLF, the Italian movement of the 1960s and the 1970s was diverse in nature and constituted by a variety of different groups. From the end of World War II until the 1960s Italian neo-feminism was dominated by the UDI (*Unione delle Donne Italiane*), a women's group that had a strong political engagement that, according to historian Aida Ribero, had no equal in Europe (51). A distinguishing feature of the UDI was women's active participation in institutional politics and social activism. UDI strove to locate the reason for women's subordination in society and in the public sphere, rather than in the relationship between the sexes. UDI won some important battles in favor of women's social emancipation and equality, and launched campaigns for the recognition of housework, and for equality in agricultural jobs. They put the foundation for future changes in legislation on family rights, divorce, sexual education and abortion. Because of the involvement of UDI feminists in institutional politics, Italian feminism has had a unique tradition of "doppia militanza" (double militancy). In other words feminists were both involved in institutional politics and in feminist groups that, by the

idea of a polymorphous sexuality while also echoing one of the FHAR's principle of the free-flowing experience of sexual desire.

end of the 1960s, started organizing independently from political parties and made their own politics.

In the 1960s the social discourse of Italian feminism began to change due to the impact of the rising New Left. Some feminist vanguard positions emerged, including the Milanese groups of DEMAU (Anti-authoritarian demystification) and *Anabasi*, and the Rome-based group of *Rivolta Femminile*. As scholar Andreina Clementi points out in her article “The Feminist Movement in Italy,” these groups articulated “a rejection of Marxism [that] led to the vindication of feminine otherness and extremist separatism” (335-336). At the turn of the 1970s Italian feminism went from being a feminism of equality and emancipation to a separatist politics articulated by women for women and emphasizing sexual difference. As in France, in Italy women started denouncing the pervasive sexism of the New Left and began thinking that one outlet from oppression was the development of a personal consciousness of female oppression. Through the practice of consciousness-raising (*autocoscienza*), the women’s movement spread, assuming a more diffuse character across the North and South of the country: small workshops collectives were organized in major and smaller cities. In the words of Andreina Clementi,

the practice of “the small consciousness-raising group” aimed at these objectives; these groups were strictly separatist, and formed on the basis of sympathies, affinities and personal friendships...seized by an irresistible urge to eradicate signs of dependence, submission and indulgence. (336)

Alongside this practice was also an important promotion of education and information by various reviews and journals of the period, managed independently by women’s collectives: *Effe*, *Noi Donne*, *Sottosopra*, and *DWF* are a few titles. Although some of them like *Effe* were discontinued in the early 1980s, others are still published thanks to the

active contributions of several *Librerie delle Donne* (Women's Bookstores) or *Biblioteche delle Donne* spread throughout Italian major cities, in particular Milan, Bologna, Firenze, Rome, and Naples.⁴ Significant work on women's sexuality and women's issues such as abortion, prostitution, sexual abuse and maternity began to appear along with the translations of work of foreign feminists especially French and Anglo-American writers.⁵ In general the movement impacted the lives of thousands of women by giving them analytical tools that enabled them to create "a cultural independence" and achieve "epistemological revolutions" in Clementi's words (336). To be sure, one major revolution was the discovery of one's own body, which literally became a source of new knowledge and, even, for radical feminists like feminist Carla Lonzi, a site of theorization.

The body as an epistemological site is a crucial aspect of French and Italian feminist work of the 1970s. "Notre corps nous appartient" [our body belongs to us] was a very popular slogan that condensed the transformative spirit of the MLF and promoted the idea that any powerful and radical change starts from the body. The investment in the body is thus the common denominator of French and Italian feminism and also the reason for the double focus of my research on France and Italy. The French-Italian feminist connection was articulated through a series of encounters between some French and Italian feminists. These exchanges make for a productive trans-cultural dialogue that constitutes the cultural ground of my dissertation. A parallel dialogue took place in the same years between the gay movement and the feminist movement as I mentioned above.

⁴ Some of the material for my dissertation (both primary and secondary sources) can only be found in women's bookstores or libraries.

⁵ The work of Betty Friedan, Luce Irigaray, Juliet Mitchell, Anne Koedt, Adrienne Rich, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer informed the work of Italian feminists in the 1970s.

Psychoanalysis provided all these groups with analytical tools for rereading bodies and sexualities. But if the basis for the encounters between feminists and gays resides in their engagement with psychoanalytically-defined bodies, the “body” of psychoanalysis is also the text that Italian and French feminists and gays alike constantly challenge and reread. It is from these rereadings that new bodies emerge as epistemological sites not only of knowledge production □ “gaia scienza” in Mario Mieli’s words □ but also as performative sites of a new consciousness of gender and sexuality.

Consciousness-raising was a key factor in the production of the epistemological bodies of gays and feminists. As I note above, the French-Italian feminist connection was consolidated through the encounters between the French women of *Psych et Po* and some Italian feminists.⁶ Some scholars tend to associate French and Italian feminist discourse on the basis of their psychoanalytic component (i.e. Sapegno, Parati and West) which derived from the common practice of consciousness-raising. In Italy, this practice translated first in *autocoscienza* and then in *pratica dell'inconscio*. When doing *autocoscienza*, which Carla Lonzi initiated with her group of *Rivolta Femminile*, women used their personal experiences in the family to analyze and question the mechanisms of oppression and of gender role conformity within the family and as well as in society as a whole. The cultural analysis of these personal experiences aimed at providing women with a renewed consciousness of themselves, their bodies, and their sexual identity.¹ According to Teresa De Lauretis, *autocoscienza*, as political and cultural practice, was ultimately more significant in Italy for the development of feminist theory than in the US where “easier institutional access and a less gender-segregated history of white women in

⁶ The women of the Milan Women’s Bookstore documented a few of these encounters that took place in different Italian and French towns in their collective work *Non credere di avere diritti* (1987).

the public sphere favored the diffusion, much earlier on, of the sites and modes of feminist consciousness” (*Sexual Difference* 7).

Soon *autocoscienza* began losing its effectiveness due to the separatist ethos of the consciousness-raising groups. *Pratica dell'inconscio* instead began to spread as a new phase of consciousness-raising that corresponded with the encounter with the French feminists of *Psych et Po*. This practice stressed the importance of getting to know the repressed or the unconscious self as a necessary process of women's politicization. Historian Maria Teresa Sapegno emphasizes the role psychoanalysis played as the “fundamental intellectual structure of a political practice” and as the consolidating element of the Franco-Italian connection. I should note however that Italian feminists were already familiar with psychoanalysis even before encountering French women. However, feminists such as those of *Rivolta Femminile* viewed psychoanalysis with suspicion and claimed a certain critical distance from it. It is also true that Carla Lonzi, who was an assertive detractor of psychoanalysis, reappropriated Freudian concepts to build her own feminist theory, as I will discuss in my second chapter.

Both *autocoscienza* and then *pratica dell'inconscio* were conducive to the creation of spaces of exchange, complicity and solidarity among women. *Pratica dell'inconscio*, as historian Maria Teresa Sapegno describes, “opened up the possibility of a different relation among women, in which “sexuality [was] no longer imprisoned in masculine desire” (47-48). In France and Italy the practice and the politics of women's relations came to be associated with political homosexuality, a term that was at times preferred to feminism and to lesbianism, but that not all women embraced as mentioned above. Political homosexuality was a practice of female relationality that aimed to

creating and reinforcing alliances among women and their sense of a common consciousness of gender oppression. In her book *Movimento a più voci* Maria Schiavo recalls the transformative impact that political lesbianism had in Italy during the 1970s. She distinguishes between lesbianism as erotic practice and political homosexuality, “qualcosa di più mobile e sfumato” [something more dynamic and vague], which Italian women inherited from *Psych et Po* and Antoinette Fouque. “La leader di *Psych et Po*, che si rifiutava di definirsi femminista,” explains Maria Schiavo, “si appellava a un *féminisme minimum*, minimo, che permettesse di difendersi, di sopravvivere nella società del padre” (63). [The *Psych et Po* leader, who refused to define herself feminist, reclaimed minimum feminism which would enable women to defend themselves and survive in the society of fathers.] Hence political homosexuality put more emphasis on the reevaluation and the strengthening of women’s sense of self, agency, and subjectivity as opposed to a private sexual orientation and a masculine identification for women (116). In Italy political homosexuality à la Fouque, became another way to signify the political process through which women organized socially and politically out of a lack of structures of institutional support for women. Yet it seems that the adoption of political homosexuality as a structure of female support contributed to the dismissal of lesbianism as a sexual orientation and as a critical category, a fact that became source of tensions as I discuss in depth in my second and my fourth chapters.

French and the Italian feminist groups embodied the tensions between sexual and political categories in very productive and provocative ways. Looking at what these tensions produced is one goal of my dissertation.⁷ *Autocoscienza* was not an exclusively

⁷ Italian feminism still retains some features of 1970s feminism, much of which has been translated into the practice of “women’s relationality” (previously known as *affidamento*) among the feminists of the Milan

feminist practice. The Italian gay movement FUORI (*Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionari Italiano*), founded in Turin in April 1971, inherited *autocoscienza* from feminist groups, and it is through *autocoscienza* that gay and lesbians—the so-called “frocì rivoluzionari” [revolutionary fags]—came together to explore “l’intima problematicità ‘diversa’ che appartiene ai diversi” [the problem of “queer” intimacy that belongs to the “queer”] (Pezzana 8). As a practice that intersected body and discourse—literally implying to analyze discourse starting from the body—*autocoscienza* contributed to a queer feminist exchange while giving rise to new ways of thinking through bodies and embodying sexual categories. The complex intertwining of symbolic and material constructions of bodies constituted the privileged terrain for the articulation of a “politica del corpo” [body politics] whose queerness I investigate in my work.

La politica del corpo (1976) is the title of a collection of essays by feminist and gay thinkers who were active members of FUORI.⁸ Gays and lesbians of FUORI did a massive coming out to celebrate and assert their visibility in April 1972 during the International Sexology Congress held in the Italian city of Sanremo.⁹ They talked about the importance of “colore sessuale” [sexual color] and of “gioia omosessuale”

Women’s Bookstore and the feminists of the Diotima group. Italian feminists seem to be involved today in the cultural and historical recollection of the 1970s culture of feminism, which has become legacy for new generations of Italian feminists. Italian feminism is not the monolithic label French feminism has become in American academia. On the contrary, “Italian feminist theory, as itself a site of dialogue and difference, if not conflict, is anything but monolithic,” argue Parati and West, even though “the theories and practices that originated in Italy have deep ties with aspects of French feminism” (16). For instance Italian feminist theorists Luisa Muraro and Adriano Cavarero have benefited from the dialogue with Luce Irigaray and vice versa. Yet very often that dialogue has been limited to certain aspects of Irigaray’s theory, namely the mother-daughter relation, the idea of a maternal symbolic, and that of sexual difference, which circumvent other features of Irigaray’s thinking that Anglo-American scholars have emphasized, in particular sexuality.

⁸ Although FUORI is an acronym, the word “fuori” means “out.” Other gay groups such as FLO (*Fronte di Liberazione Omosessuale*) were present in Milan and Rome, and a journal FUORI gathered contributions from all these groups.

⁹ Gays and lesbians from France, Belgium, and Great Britain took part in this event thus reaffirming the transnational character of the gay movement. The gays boycotted the conference and the news of the boycotting was in the national press (Pezzana 22).

[homosexual joy], a term that Mario Mieli recuperated in his work to indicate the full and free expression of sexual diversity. In the introduction to *La politica del corpo* editor Alfredo Cohen refers to “politica del corpo” as a culturally and historically specific practice that challenged old paradigms of sexuality and made public, by means of *autocoscienza*, what was previously kept private and hidden. FUORI was also engaged in the analysis of oppression in situations that went beyond sexual matters. These included the experience of male and female prisoners, the question of abortion, and the issue of mental illness and the abolition of psychiatric hospitals. The body politics was thus a discourse that took marginal bodies as a site of politicization. Women were considered the initiators of this process of politicization since “la donna è protagonista...rivendicatrice della politica del corpo, di un corpo che è stato utero schiacciato” [women are the protagonists...they claim a politics of the body, a body that has been an oppressed uterus] (Pezzana 10). The “utero schiacciato” is thus the material and symbolic site from which a queer body politics of the 1970s began articulating bringing together feminists, gays and marginal subjects.

The body politics of the movements of the 1970s produced a heterogeneous body of work made of essays, pamphlets, diaries, journals, stories, and personal testimonies. My dissertation focuses in particular on feminist and gay theoretical and literary texts, including feminist diaries. It is by no means an exhaustive reading of feminist and gay work of the period, but rather a comparative analysis of a few authors¹⁰ (namely Dacia Maraini, Monique Wittig, Carla Lonzi, Mario Mieli, Guy Hocquenghem, and Luce Irigaray), whose work allows me to interrogate the complex intersection of bodies and discourses in the 1970s; to reread a particular cultural moment in the production of sexual

¹⁰ It is important to note that authors like Wittig or Maraini objected to the label “feminist.”

discourses through a queer feminist perspective; and to ask what kind of queer dimension these discourses produced before the queer came into being as a critical term. Some of the authors I selected use Freudian and Lacanian notions of sexuality, but their readings are not a simple endorsement of psychoanalytic concepts—castration, the phallus, the clitoris, anal retention, de-sublimation, the polymorphous perverse. They are instead deconstructive and critical rereadings of these constructs. The reading strategies that authors deploy provide them with a creative space from which they imagine new ways of embodying subjectivity that trouble gender and sexual lines. I myself use some of these reading strategies to articulate my own queer feminist methodology for reading gay and feminist texts together. The reading space of these embraces represents the moment of a preliminary cultural articulation of a queer feminist discourse in the 1970s.

In the 1970s the feminist and gay movements were the cultural spaces that reunited gays and feminists in spite of their historical disagreements. These spaces were also sites for production and proliferation of new discursive figures such as the “lesbian,” the “*donna clitoridea*,” and the “*transessuale*.” The authors I examine not only theorized, but also embodied the product of their theory, as in the case of Carla Lonzi and her “*donna clitoridea*,” or Mario Mieli and his/her “*transessuale*.” While theory was the body that feminist and gay thinkers envisioned and embraced, textual/sexual embrace is the methodological figure that I use to engage the encounters between feminist and gay bodies/texts. The embrace functions at different levels in my dissertation: as a queer feminist methodology through which I perform simultaneously a queer critique of feminism and a feminist critique of gay theory and as a queer mode of reading that looks at the theoretical embodiments of the 1970s not as the mere products of identity politics,

but as the subversive production of a discourse (queer ante-litteram) that speaks to the unstable and the fluid intersection of gender and sexuality. Furthermore my chapters and textual embraces work through a notion of queer temporality other than the linear cause-and-effect narrative that a number of queer theorists have characterized as hetero- or repro-normative. The queer temporality of my chapters is articulated through three temporal dimensions that translate into three different kinds of textual embraces. There is the time of the political movements of the 1970s, then the time of the embrace, which is produced through textual analysis. Finally there is the time of queer theory that, although some critics limit to the early nineties, can be traced back in time to the seventies and thus be read as queer time.

CHAPTER I

One is Not Born a Mother: Queer Abortions in Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra* and Annie Ernaux's *L'événement*

Women and Abortion in the 1970s

“Mon ventre m'appartient!” “L'utero è moi! E me lo gestico io!” In the early 1970s women and feminists shouted these slogans, demonstrating at university lectures and courts in Italy and France and proclaiming their right to decide the reproductive fate of their own bodies freely and unconditionally. In Italy slogans such as “Aborto libero e gratuito” [access to free abortion] punctuated women's demands that abortion be decriminalized, legalized, and made accessible regardless of class and economic status. Abortion was, in fact, until the mid-seventies, considered a crime in most European countries, due to the persistence of Fascist laws related to post-war natalist policies.¹¹ On January 17, 1975, France passed the long awaited “loi Veil,” which, for the first time since 1920, granted women the freedom to end their pregnancy “en situation de détresse” (Gauthier 18). In Italy, a constitutional amendment was passed in February 1975 that declared the

¹¹ In France a couple of laws ensured the persecution of women having clandestine abortion: one law of 1923 punished women with prison and a fine. In 1941, abortion was declared, under Pétain's régime, a crime against the State. In Italy the *Codice Rocco* of 1930 was among the crimes “contro l'integrità e la sanità della stirpe” [against the integrity and the health of the race]. According to Article 54 of *Codice Rocco*, the “stato di necessità” recites as the following: “Non è punibile chi ha commesso il fatto per esservi stato costretto dalla necessità di salvare sé o altri dal pericolo di un danno grave alla persona” (Ribero 273). [It is not subject to punishment whoever has committed the fact because of being forced by necessity to save oneself or others from the risk of serious damage to the person.]

“non punibilità dell’aborto terapeutico” [unpunishable status of therapeutic abortion.]

Those first reforms eventually resulted in a definite liberalization that occurred in 1979 in France and in 1981 in Italy. Since 1975, the preliminary changes in the legislation had put an end to the persecution of women who were tried for seeking abortions.

The struggles against the persecution of women began a few years earlier in France and in Italy. In 1971, 343 French women signed the manifesto of the 343 bitches (“343 salopes”), published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* declaring that they had had abortions. In 1972 in France, Gisèle Halimi, known as the “lawyer for women” (“avocate des femmes”) took on the defense of a working-class mother persecuted for having helped her fifteen-year-old daughter procure an abortion. This case made history as the Bobigny trial and constituted a turning point in the struggle towards the decriminalization of abortion in France, because it helped stir public opinion and make the bodies of aborting women a political matter.¹² In Italy, a similar case exploded in 1973, in Padova, where a young woman of modest origins, Gigliola Pierobon, was persecuted for self-induced abortion (“autoprocurato aborto”). On this occasion the *Movimento Femminista* declared war and gathered women who had performed abortions on their own to make an assault to judges during the trial. As a

¹² The “Manifeste des 343” reads in full: “Un million de femmes se font avorter chaque année en France. Elles le font dans des conditions dangereuses en raison de la clandestinité à laquelle elles sont condamnées alors que cette opération, pratiquée sous contrôle médical, est des plus simples. On fait le silence sur ces millions de femmes. Je déclare que je suis l’une d’elles. Je déclare avoir avorté. De même que nous réclamons le libre accès aux moyens anti-conceptionnels, nous réclamons l’avortement libre.” Among the women signing the manifesto were actresses, intellectuals, professionals, and militant feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig, Violette Leduc, Jeanne Moreau, Annie Leclerc, Catherine Deneuve, Gisèle Halimi, Marguerite Duras, and many others (Fouque 443). [In France each year a million women have abortions. They do it in dangerous conditions due to the secrecy to which they are condemned. This practice, if performed under medical control, is very easy. Millions of women are silenced. I declare that I am one of these women, I declare that I have had an abortion. As well as we claim free access to anticonceptionals we demand free access to abortion.]

result of this massive denunciation, this massive coming out of women with a history of abortion, Pierobon was acquitted.

According to the French manifesto, women's protests began at least in part because of the many clandestine abortions that endangered women in both countries.¹³ Other reasons were at stake, including women's desire for autonomy in making decisions about their futures and their bodies. The number of secret abortions was particularly high, according to feminists, among poor and working-class women. But those abortions had serious consequences for their bodies because of the carelessness of those performing abortions and the fact that abortions were sometimes self-induced.¹⁴ The way abortions were performed also reflected inaccurate or inadequate sexual education, to which the MLAC (*Mouvement pour le libre avortement et la contraception*) [Movement for free abortion and contraception] in France tried to respond. The MLAC was organized in 1973 to promote education about contraception and abortion.

At the time the question of abortion ignited several debates among intellectuals who were also invested on the issue of the State regulation of bodies and sexualities. Among them Pier Paolo Pasolini made a provocative intervention

¹³ In her book *Una questione di libertà: Il femminismo degli anni 70*, Italian historian Aida Ribero reports that the Ministry of Health counted 850,000 clandestine abortions per year while the feminist movement and the political parties, favoring legal intervention, counted 3 million a year (Ribero 273).

¹⁴ Ribero describes how Italian women handled their abortion through the so called "rimedi della saggezza popolare" [remedy of people's wisdom]. Her portrayal discloses the lack of information and education that would put in serious danger women's bodies and lives: "La grande maggioranza delle interruzioni volontarie della gravidanza avveniva clandestinamente, a opera delle donne stesse, che tentavano di abortire con i decotti di prezzemolo, con il chinino o sottoponendosi a faticosissimi sforzi fisici, o ancora, a opera delle "mammane" che, per una bassa ricompensa, usavano metodi primordiali (come introdurre nell'utero un corpo estraneo, ago da calza o sonda), non sempre efficaci e talvolta gravemente lesivi della salute. Solo le donne più abbienti, e con le necessarie conoscenze, potevano fare affidamento sull'intervento di un medico e, comunque, sempre in condizioni di clandestinità" (273). [The great majority of abortions were clandestine; they were carried out by the same women who would try to have abortions by means of parsley "decotti," with the aid of "chinino" or by straining themselves to exhaustion; abortions were also performed by women called 'mammane' who, in exchange for a sum of money, would apply rudimentary methods (such as introducing foreign bodies into the uterus of women, like needles or catheters), which were not always effective, but were at times very harmful to women. Only the wealthiest and knowledgeable women could they had put themselves in the hands of doctors, but always, most in a clandestine manner.]

reflecting on the link between abortion and the regulation of sexuality that caused angry reactions among feminists.¹⁵ Pasolini wrote that he was utterly traumatized by the legalization of abortion and defined it as a legalized homicide and “ecological move.”¹⁶ For him the legalization of abortion was simply an expression of the conformity of the progressive political class that saw abortion as a strategy to promote and reinforce the easy consumption of normative sexuality. He wrote, for instance, that the legalization of abortion is “una enorme comodità per la maggioranza perché rende il coito ancora più facile a cui non ci sarebbero più praticamente ostacoli (*Scritti* 124) [a huge convenience for the majority because it would make coitus easier and there would not be practically any obstacle to it.] The problem was, for Pasolini, that the campaign for the liberalization of abortion excused people and politicians from talking about the dysfunctions of coitus (heterosexual intercourse) and furthermore contributed to the perpetual misrecognition of the “sessualmene diverso” (the sexually different, the queer).

That coitus was to be reconsidered and critiqued was a valuable argument, as certain feminists recognized. However, Pasolini’s exclusive focus on coitus had the unfortunate consequence of leaving out the immediate victims of a repressive and unreasonable law. Not a single time does Pasolini mention the word “women,” except for a quick dismissive reference to anguished feminists. By avoiding the women’s bodies that were damaged and mutilated in clandestine abortions, Pasolini disavows both the material experience of women and the classist implications of clandestine abortion and displays, perhaps inadvertently, a subtle form of sexism that

¹⁵ His intervention appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* with the title “Il coito, l’aborto, la falsa tolleranza del potere, il conformismo dei progressisti” on January 19, 1975 and was later included in *Scritti Corsari*.

¹⁶ I claim that Pasolini uses the term “ecologic” in a rather ironic way to emphasize how clandestine abortions contributed to balance the system of reproduction by avoiding the risk of high demographic growth.

did not go unnoticed among some Italian feminists. Those women welcomed the liberalization of abortion as a freedom to question rigid paradigms of sexuality and reproduction, a questioning that Pasolini did share with feminists. A few days after Pasolini's intervention in the *Corriere della Sera*, on January 21, feminist journalist Natalia Aspesi responded to him. With courage and eloquence, Aspesi confronted Pasolini's opposition towards whoever "è convinto che l'aborto, pur restando una tragedia personale, una colpa, una privazione, una amputazione fisica, una ferita della coscienza, debba essere depenalizzato o richieda comunque una nuova legislazione non fascista" (Faccio 66) [is convinced that abortion, although remaining a personal tragedy, a guilt, a privation, a physical amputation, a wound of the consciousness, must be decriminalized or requires a new non-Fascist legislation.] For Aspesi, Pasolini's take on abortion was the reflection of an enduring taboo that the traditional alliance between Fascism and the Church perpetuated, thereby fostering suspicion about any form of sexual diversity and dissent.¹⁷ Aspesi thus urged Pasolini to reconsider his own misrecognition of women's bodies and experiences of abortion as linked to cultural suspicion towards the queer ("quell'odio per il diverso") and any minority ("ogni tipo di minoranza") that Pasolini himself invoked in his own article. Natalia Aspesi's feminist attack on Pasolini's queer male perspective on abortion addresses the dangerous consequences of Pasolini's implicit reproduction of normative discourses: on the one hand, Pasolini denied the physical and emotional pain involved in the experience of abortion, and on the other, he silenced the enforced regulation of bodies and sexualities, which he so sharply stressed in his intervention concerning queer sexualities.

¹⁷ Aspesi's skepticism concerning the Church was not an isolated case. In a slogan from the '70s some feminists attacked the Church for implicitly encouraging clandestine abortion for demographic reasons: "Il regime clericale fonda l'equilibrio demografico sull'aborto. Vuole l'aborto" [The clerical regime found demographic balance through abortion. The regime wants abortion] (*Effe* 13).

Pasolini also seemed unconcerned with the impact that social class had on abortion, although he was known for being very sensitive to class issues. Women's battles for free abortion brought to light the fact that abortion was a class issue before being an issue of sexuality (or of coitus), one reason why its decriminalization was considered so important. Legalization was not endorsed unanimously by all women. There were feminists, for instance, who considered legalization a further expropriation of women's bodies, as feminist historian Lia Cigarini explains in her book *La politica del desiderio*:

Quando abbiamo sostenuto, a proposito dell'aborto, la depenalizzazione invece che una legge che lo regolamentava, abbiamo detto una parola giuridica che esprimeva la volontà che non si legiferasse sul corpo della donna, senza appunto presentare leggi alternative. (86)

[With regard to abortion, when we supported decriminalization instead of a law that could regulate it, we spoke juridically to express the will that none could rule about women's bodies, without presenting alternative laws.]

In Italy the radical feminist group *Rivolta Femminile* acknowledged in their 1971 pamphlet "Sessualità femminile e aborto" that abortion was not to be considered a freedom, but a necessity. They therefore proclaimed free abortion ("la libertà di aborto") against a new legislation on it ("contro un nuova legislazione su di esso") (Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel* 67). The feminists' support of decriminalization did not necessarily take into account the different conditions that affected women deciding to have abortions. Feminist historical records show that women of all classes practiced abortion, but middle- and upper-class women could obtain it with far fewer risks, because they could afford better care. Some of those women traveled to countries such as Switzerland or Great Britain where they could receive an abortion legally. Abortion therefore remained a luxury for the few, but a peril for most. It was considered urgent to give voice to the stories of the clandestine experiences of

socially disadvantaged women in order to highlight the silenced effects of a law that, by its very presence, discriminated first and foremost against lower and working-class women.

The dispute between Pasolini and Aspesi underscores the complexity of the issue of abortion as one that cuts across material and symbolic experiences of sexuality, gender and class. The question of abortion gathered feminists and queers alike, perhaps because abortion revealed how bodies were and remain a complex site of material and symbolic constructions that goes well beyond the mere identification of gendered bodies. This complexity is reason to reconsider abortion not merely as a feminist or a women's issue. I think that the link that Pasolini makes between the regulation of sexuality and abortion is useful to understand and explore why abortion is not merely a woman's question or a feminist issue. In this chapter I investigate what it means to read abortion from a queer standpoint, thereby eliciting a perspective that may bring the feminist together with the queer and consider how abortion can have farther implications in the articulation of a queer feminist body politics. The queer was not a critical category among 1970s feminists, nor one that could have explicitly informed positions on issues such as abortion. Yet Pasolini's intervention reveals that debates on abortion prompted a reflection on the regulation of bodies, sexualities, and desires that is reminiscent of the poststructuralist trend that, in the early '90s, engendered the queer.

Women's battles for abortion and its consequent liberalization in the 1970s had some fundamental consequences in undoing long-standing assumptions and paradigms about gender and sexuality. For instance, women could question maternity and reproduction as a natural destiny for themselves following the footsteps of a whole generation of thinkers pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir. It is noteworthy that

both thinkers resisted being labeled “feminist,” but they both aligned themselves with women on the legalization of abortion. They were among the “343 bitches” who signed the manifesto to disclose their own abortion in 1971. Their political and social activism paralleled their theoretical engagement concerning women’s bodies and reproduction. For Beauvoir there was a lot that women could gain by withdrawing from a reproductive role: “Soustraite en très grande partie aux servitudes de la reproduction elle peut assumer le rôle économique qui se propose à elle et qui lui laissera la conquête de sa personne toute entière” (I, 209). [Now protected in large part from the slavery of reproduction, she is in a position to assume the economic role that is offered her and will assure her of complete independence (121).] Women’s real gain, once liberated from enforced maternity, was the perception of themselves as full subjects and persons. Contesting reproductive paradigms allowed women to access a domain of subjectivity that was previously considered a masculine domain.

If access to subjectivity signified, in Beauvoir’s view, women’s acquisition of a role within a masculine economy, for Wittig that access to subjectivity coincided with a radical re-consideration of women’s link to materiality. In particular, Wittig questioned the assumption that women are a “natural group” based on the material specificity of their bodies and their supposed ability to procreate. Wittig, unlike Beauvoir, does not deal explicitly with abortion. In her theoretical work *The Straight Mind*, she does nonetheless call into question the concomitant and mutual naturalization of motherhood and womanhood that the act of giving birth seals. Giving birth has traditionally been considered, explains Wittig, both “*the* female creative act” (11) and “what defines a woman” even in a matriarchal regime (10). As such, this act reproduces and legitimizes heterosexuality as a discursive regime based on the division of the sexes; moreover, it posits pro-creation as female (the creative

act is indeed female) while perpetually producing the category of sex on the premise of that “creative act.” In other words, Wittig views maternity not only “as the most palpable sign of *woman’s difference*” (Katz and Epps 426), but also as a socially constructed reality which has been naturalized through the material link between women and maternity:

For example, instead of seeing giving birth as a forced production, we see it as a “natural,” “biological” process, forgetting that in our societies births are planned (demography), forgetting that we ourselves are programmed to produce children, while this is only social activity “short of war” that presents such a great danger of death. (*Straight* 11)

Maternity as the capacity of giving birth thus assumes in Wittig’s view the form of a social activity and not a natural characteristic. Here it would be more appropriate to talk of maternity not exclusively in terms of procreation, but also in terms of nurturing. In this perspective maternity would be closer to motherhood as a social construct, a nuance that the terms “maternité” and “maternità” risk obfuscating. In her now famous book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Nancy Chodorow analyzes the way mothering has been reproduced across generations and transmitted from mother to daughter based on “the seemingly natural connection between women’s childbearing and lactation capacities” (3). The linear transmission of mothering along with the association between mothering and gender has been taken for granted, writes Chodorow, as a reinforcement of a gendered division of labor:

I argue that the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes. It is neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training. I draw on the psychanalytic account of female and male personality development to demonstrate that women’s mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. By contrast, women as mothers (and men as not mothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. (7)

Much in the same way as Wittig in *The Straight Mind*, Chodorow seems to suggest that mothering is the foundational process through which sexual difference is perpetuated. In her analysis of the social construction of mothering, which informs the mother-daughter relationship, Chodorow suggests how women “may come to mother” (4) in order to transform cultural and social perceptions of mothering. Chodorow’s account of mothering has not gone without criticism by those who saw in it “a paradigmatic case of problematic feminist theorizing,” as Chodorow explains in the preface to the second edition of her book (vii). In particular, one critic takes the book to task for “generalizing beyond the White western middle class and for assuming a heterosexual nuclear family form” (xi). While asking the question of why mothers are women, and analyzing why nurturing is strictly associated to female gender, Chodorow still remains within a gendered and feminist frame.

Instead Wittig seems to challenge the link between gender, procreation and mothering in the following exhortation:

As long as we will be “unable to abandon by will or impulse a life-long and centuries-old commitment to child-bearing as *the* female creative act,” gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than the mere control of the material means of this production: women will have to abstract themselves from the definition “woman” which is imposed upon them. (11).

What is exactly this task to which Wittig is calling women? Does Wittig mean that the ability to control the “material means” involves a more radical and complex elaboration of the bodies that we call women or men? By urging women to abstract themselves from the definition of “woman,” Wittig asks them to do away with a narrow notion of materiality and to disengage from an act–giving birth–that produces and reduces them to a “sex,” both materially and symbolically. Hence the “task” of women may be precisely that of exceeding the material and the symbolic limits of their gender.

In Wittig's theoretical imaginary the lesbian is the only subject that can perform such an abstraction of the category of sex, for the lesbian is the only subject that can stand beyond the category of sex. Hence, theoretically speaking, giving up procreation could translate into the simultaneous destabilizing of "woman" and "mother" and gesture to the creation of a new queer subjectivity and queer nurture. Relinquishing the act of giving birth is also what abortion is about, and it seems plausible to argue that abortion has a queer dimension to it on the basis of Wittig's contention. Wittig does not explicitly name abortion in the essay "One is not born a woman," yet her involvement in the issue and her materialist analysis of women and reproduction seems to evoke rather forcefully her position on abortion. Wittig does include her critique of "giving birth" alongside with the theorization of the lesbian. This rhetorical move prompts an association of abortion, the lesbian, and the critique of "natural" motherhood. In this chapter I will re-read Beauvoir's and Wittig's "one is not born a woman" as "one is not born a mother." This rereading allows me to argue for and interrogate the notion of queer abortion as a moment of creation that dislodges heterosexual procreation, in which female gender is linked to procreation and nurturing, and thus to re-appropriate creation as a fundamentally queer production. As a result, a broader queer notion of nurture replaces the gender-oriented and naturalized notion of maternity and mothering based on a strictly feminine material specificity.

Two literary texts will help me articulate the notion of queer abortion: one is *Donna in guerra* (1975) by Dacia Maraini and the other is *L'événement* by Annie Ernaux (2000). The first is often celebrated by critics as an accomplished feminist novel and an example of "écriture féminine," two denominations that Maraini does not embrace and that my own critical approach aims at problematizing. According to

Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, “Maraini does not call herself a feminist writer” neither does she claim a “female style” (11-12). Nonetheless, the gender specificity of Maraini’s writing, writes Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, cannot be negated for “her work *is* context bound, and that context is *essere-donna* (‘being-woman’), a practice of gender in culture” (12).¹⁸ Although Maraini does not call herself a feminist writer, *Donna in guerra* resonates with the vivid climate of 1970s women’s emancipation in Italy; abortion has a minor place in *Donna in guerra*, particularly if we consider that Maraini writes the novel, in the form of a woman’s personal diary, during the years of the feminist battles for the legalization of abortion. Maraini herself was involved in the question of abortion as evidenced by her interventions in the national press and her treatment of abortion in a good portion of her work.¹⁹ In an article appeared in *La Stampa* on February 26, 1975, Maraini writes:

La questione dell’aborto riguarda qualcosa di molto profondo e radicale nel rapporto donna-potere. L’aborto non è solo un fatto sociale, una ‘piaga di classe,’ ma il risultato di una cattiva relazione, di autorità da una parte e di sottomissione dall’altra, fra donna e struttura familiare. (Faccio 63)

[The question of abortion is about something very deep and rooted in the relation woman-power. Abortion is not merely a social matter, a ‘class plague,’ but the result of a bad relationship, of authority on one side and of submission on the other, a relationship between the woman and the family structure.]²⁰

Maraini embeds abortion into the question of women’s submission to the power of the family. *Donna in guerra* highlights the function that abortion has in changing both women’s positions within the family structure because abortion involves a choice that empowers women and destabilizes families.

¹⁸ Italics are in the original text.

¹⁹ Maraini’s texts that include treatment of abortion or miscarriage are *L’età del malessere*, *Il treno per Helsinki*, *Lettere a Marina*, *Voci*, *La donna perfetta* (a theatrical piece), and *Storia di Piera* (an essay).

²⁰ Translation is mine.

My second text, *L'événement*, is a first-person testimony of abortion published in 2000. It is deliberately removed from the 1970s feminist battles over abortion as the author explicitly claims no direct association with them. Abortion is the subject of Ernaux's text, the event ("l'événement") that occasions her writing and that makes the novel a unique cultural and historical contribution to the testimony of abortion. In Italy and in France few novels have taken abortion as one of their main subjects; none as the main one. Acknowledging the lack of narratives on the subject of abortion, Xavière Gauthier attributes it to the trauma and the shame that made abortion unspeakable for so many women. Telling the experience of abortion thus becomes "le devoir de mémoire" [a duty of memory] (89), a way to reestablish a historical memory that would be otherwise lost, or mutilated like the thousands of women's bodies struck by clandestine and illegal abortion until the 1970s. Gauthier actually quotes Ernaux's text as the only one courageously devoted to the subject of abortion. The fact that Ernaux's own testimony, published in 2000, comes so much later than her actual abortion (in 1963) suggests that, if doing "it" was still criminal, talking about "it" was strictly forbidden. The social and linguistic taboo that struck abortion has a more or less overt relationship with the taboo surrounding sexuality.²¹ Secrecy shapes not only women's relation to abortion, but also, as in *Donna in guerra*, the relation of some characters to their queer sexuality. The connection that secrecy produces between the narrative of abortion and the queer narrative is worth exploring for what it may tell us about its destabilizing effects within the narrative structure and the heterosexual discourse as a whole.

²¹ As a matter of fact, secrecy is an element that characterizes not only women's relation to abortion, but also the relation of certain characters to their queer sexuality—this is true for *Donna in Guerra*.

Annie Ernaux's *L'événement*: Writing Abortion, Killing the Mother²²

Ernaux's novel is particularly significant in its lucid portrayal of the circumstance that led to Ernaux's clandestine abortion. As we learn from Ernaux, at the time she became pregnant she was more interested in her personal development than in being a mother (she was a university student at the time). She uses the unreliable—and in this case ineffective—Ogino-Knaus method—the 1967 law Newirth authorizing the sale of contraception was not effected until 1972.²³ When she finds out that she is pregnant, Ernaux goes repeatedly to her gynecologist in the attempt to convince him that she does not want to keep the baby. The doctor evades the question of abortion and confirms to her that “tout allait bien” [everything went right]. Pregnant women with no money and no connections were an annoyance to doctors, explains Ernaux, since “elles les obligeaient à se rappeler la loi qui pouvait les envoyer en prison et leur interdire d'exercer pour toujours” (45) [they were forced to remember the law that could send them to prison and prevent them from practicing again]. As the doctor continues to circumvent the question of abortion, Ernaux is unable to communicate her needs openly. She is thus forced to think of tactics that can gain her access to abortion, with little or only a vague knowledge of how to do it. The doctor thus becomes the embodiment of a prohibition and a vehicle of non-communication that Ernaux strives to circumvent:

En sortant du cabinet, je me suis accusée d'avoir gâchée ma dernière chance. Je n'avais pas su jouer à fond le jeu qu'exigeait le contournement de la loi...Ni lui ni moi n'avions prononcé le mot avortement une seule fois. C'était une chose qui n'avait pas de place dans le langage. (59-60)

²² Translations of *L'événement* are mine.

²³ In 1967 France authorized contraception with the Newirth law, did not go into not effect until 1972. However, the impact of Catholic morality was felt among those women who continued to practice the only methods recognized by Christian orthodoxy, the Ogino-Knaus method and the *amplexus riservatus*.

[As soon as I came out of the doctor's office, I blamed myself for wasting my last chance. I had not been able successfully to play the game that was involved in the avoidance of law. Neither he or I pronounced the word abortion a single time. It was a thing that had no place in language.]

As a prohibited practice punishable by law, abortion is also governed by a linguistic prohibition. Ernaux is made to feel guilty and disempowered by the impossibility of even mentioning the subject of abortion. Ernaux's situation only confirms and reinforces what Gauthier points out in her historical study of abortion: abortion was a taboo and remained such for a long time. As a result, women did not talk or write about it. Its illegal status not only made the act unspeakable, it also stigmatized bodies of the aborting women who were discriminated against in hospitals, as we learn from the author. Ernaux eventually manages to circumvent the doctors and the law by turning to a "faiseuse d'anges" (or "avorteuse"), a woman who carry out an abortion for a fee. After a first failed attempt to insert a "sonde" [catheter], the "avorteuse" finally provokes Ernaux to have a miscarriage ("fausse couche") or an involuntary abortion.²⁴

The procedure of inducing a "fausse couche" often turned out to be dangerous and risky for women, especially for those women who, like Ernaux, could not afford more expensive and better abortive methods. Ernaux's own portrayal of herself between life and death has some very powerful narrative effects. After the "avorteuse" inserts the catheter in her uterus, Ernaux feels that she is alive again: "Il me semble," she writes, "que cette femme qui s'active entre mes jambes, qui introduit le spéculum, me fait naître" (85). [It seems to me that this woman who is operating between my legs, who inserts the speculum, brings me to life (85).] More important,

²⁴ The cheap methods of the "avorteuse" appear even in her request to Ernaux that she return the catheter to her for recycling.

the impression of being reborn is accompanied by the idea of having killed the mother: “J’ai tué ma mère en moi à ce moment là” (85) [I killed my mother inside of me at this very moment.] For the narrator becoming mother against her will was to follow into the footsteps of her own mother and to be destined for social failure:

J’établissais confusément un lien entre ma classe sociale d’origine et ce qui m’arrivait. Première à faire des études supérieures dans une famille d’ouvriers et de petits commerçants, J’avais échappé à l’usine et au comptoir. Mais ni le bac ni la licence de lettres n’avaient réussi à détourner la fatalité de la transmission d’une pauvreté dont la fille enceinte était, au même titre que l’alcoolique, l’emblème. J’étais rattrapée par le cul et ce qui poussait en moi c’était, d’une certaine manière l’échec social. (31-32)

[I vaguely established a link between my social milieu and what was happening to me. I was the first one to have accessed higher education in a family of workers and shopkeepers. I had escaped the factory and the store. However, neither my high school nor my college degree enabled me to avoid the fatal transmission of poverty of which the pregnant girl was, just like the alcoholic, the symbol. What was growing within me was, in a certain way, social failure.]

The link between maternity and her social milieu of origin haunts Ernaux’s tale of abortion. As part of her heritage, Ernaux was expected to become a mother and follow that physiological destiny, that natural vocation, as Simone de Beauvoir calls it ironically, which made maternity seem a natural choice to some women. However, Ernaux’s conception of maternity as social failure may already be the sign, in Ernaux’s view, that maternity is a constructed and compulsory identity for women. To a certain extent Ernaux seems to problematize the idea of maternity as women’s natural vocation, as Beauvoir did in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.²⁵

The circumstances of abortion only made Ernaux more aware of the prejudices and the social assumptions surrounding the women of her class. The “fausse couche”

²⁵ “La fonction reproductrice n’est plus commandée par le seul hasard biologique, elle est contrôlée par des volontés” (*Deuxième* II, 326). [The reproductive function in particular has no longer been at the mercy solely of biological chance; it has come under the voluntary control of human beings (484).]

provokes a dangerous hemorrhage which forces Ernaux to go to the public hospital, the Hôtel Dieu. The hospital was known for taking in women who could not afford the luxury of better care. Remarkable is the scene in which the Hôtel Dieu surgeon replies to Ernaux's request for an explanation of how he will treat her: "Je ne suis pas le plombier" [I am not the plumber], he says. Through this abrupt answer the doctor may imply that it is not proper of her to ask or that, being in a position of power and knowledge, he does not need to justify his act. "Cette phrase," comments Ernaux, "continue de hiérarchiser le monde en moi, de séparer, comme à coups de trique, les médecins des ouvriers et des femmes qui avortent, les dominants des dominés" (108). [This sentence continues to hierarchize the world inside of me, to separate, under a cudgel, the doctors from the workers and the aborting women, the dominant from the dominated.] On top of the pain of the actual abortion, Ernaux must bear the denigrating language of those who have the "droit des 'haut placés' à se mettre au-dessus des lois" (111) [right of the privileged to put themselves above the laws.]

What the material experience of abortion reveals to Ernaux is the language of power: the extent to which the society's rigid division into categories of class and of sexuality was reinforced by the use of language that made some appear more privileged and powerful than others. The body of the aborting woman is defined by the discursive mechanisms of domination, another facet of the way in which women's reproductive bodies have always been appropriated. The power of Ernaux's text is in showing how discursive domination is enacted on the bodies of women. Abortion is the context in which this domination becomes the more evident. Discursively, abortion impacts women's bodies as much as maternity does. Experiencing her own body as devastated and exposed to prejudices and social inequalities, Ernaux was suddenly reminded of her mother's body. Yet because abortion was the expression of her will

not to fall into a coerced maternity, Ernaux's abortion should not be read as a rejection of maternity once and for all. As she herself claims, years later she became a mother and thus felt prepared to "accepter cette violence de la reproduction dans [s]on corps et devenir à son tour lieu de passage des generations" (124) [accept this violence of reproduction in her body and become in turn the site of passage of generations.] Nonetheless, the choice of abortion, at a time in which it was illegal, enabled Ernaux to experience, through her own body, the discursive effects that came with the refusal to yield to a compulsory identity.

A considerable amount of time separates the narrative of the abortion from the feminist battles on abortion. This distance is functional to the telling of abortion:

C'est justement parce que aucune interdiction ne pèse plus sur l'avortement que je peux, écartant le sens collectif et les formules nécessairement simplifiées, imposés par la lutte des années soixante-dix...affronter, dans sa réalité, cet événement *inoubliable*. (25)

[It is precisely because no taboo weighs any more on abortion that I am able to face this *unforgettable* event in its reality, doing away with its collective dimension and the simplified formulas of the 1970s battles.]

Ernaux is finally allowed to describe her experience when abortion is no longer socially and linguistically a taboo. The feminist struggles to legalize it have become a chapter of history as well, and Ernaux can now narrate abortion with lucidity.

Perhaps the lucidity is simply the internal struggle to "résister au lyrisme de la colère ou de la douleur" [resist the lyricism of rage and of pain] (95), the effect of a rationalization of pain, and a rational detachment from the event. Lucidity is a constitutive part of Ernaux's narration of abortion. We say that someone is lucid and can recall things when we suppose one was previously in a shock or an altered state of mind that prevented one from remembering or speaking. Lucidity is Ernaux's effort to both recall and let go of that altered state in order to share her most intimate

experience with her readers. Hence lucidity can be seen as the narrative quality that can convey the experience of alterity and establishing its memory:

Il ne me semble disposer d'aucune certitude concernant les sentiments et les pensées, à cause de l'immatérialité et de l'évanescence de ce qui traverse l'esprit. Seul le souvenir de sensations liées à des êtres et des choses hors de moi m'apporte la preuve de la réalité. La seule vraie mémoire est matérielle. (74-75)

[It appears as if I could not be certain about any of my thoughts or my feelings because of the immaterial and evanescent quality of what traverses my memory. The memory of sensations linked with people and things outside of myself are a reality check. The only true memory is material.]

Lucidity is ultimately the memory that only bodies can convey: it is material memory. But since lucidity is related to the trauma of abortion, lucidity becomes specifically the language of the material memory of abortion. Lucidity, as a narrative quality of abortion, is the place where the symbolic and the material fold into each other.

Lucidity has also a destabilizing effect. In this tale of abortion it can be troubling because it performs the "killing of the mother" time and again. Yet the matricide through the writing of abortion disrupts not just a potential family, but a socially and symbolically valorized notion of motherhood. By her lucid narration of abortion as matricide Ernaux also shows herself more as an agent and less as a victim. Her agency comes from the destruction of a socially constructed body, that of the traditional mother. It is important to stress that such a textual destruction reads more as a deconstructive move towards the reproduction of a compulsory identity. It is by no means a way to radically differentiate and hierarchize the woman-mother from the woman-not mother. As I signaled above Ernaux will actually come to embody both by means of her possibility and her ability to make a choice. Ernaux's choice likewise comes from her ability to convey this destructive event through a creative form, the writing of her testimonial. As a result abortion is not merely the pretext nor the object of creation. It is the very subject of creation. Mentions of desire for

creation are scattered in the novel. Ernaux confesses that for some time she attributed her inability to write a novel to her fear of embody the intellectual, and the feeling of being “retenue par quelque chose de très ancien, lié au monde des travailleurs manuels” (50-51) [being restrained by something atavistic, linked to the world of manual workers.] This sensation increased during the short period prior to abortion in which that memory in her body felt like a mental impediment. Would Ernaux ever have become a writer had she not had an abortion? Perhaps a different choice would have entailed a different career for her, as she suggests. Abortion seems to have played a considerable role in shaping her activity as a writer.

Writing Bodies from Testimony to Diary

At the end of her testimony, the woman explains that abortion was ultimately a gift to share through writing, “car par delà toutes les raisons sociales et psychologiques que je peux trouver à ce que j’ai vécu,” she says, “il en est une dont je suis sûre plus que tout: les choses me sont arrivées pour que j’en rende compte” [because beyond all social and psychological reasons that may explain what I have lived, there is one of which I am more than certain : things have happened to me so that I may account for them.] Things have happened to her so that she can turn them into writing, thus giving them a discursive and collective dimension:

Et le véritable but de ma vie est peut-être seulement celui-ci: que mon corps, mes sensations et mes pensées deviennent de l’écriture, c’est-à-dire quelque chose d’intelligible et de général, mon existence complètement dissoute dans la tête et la vie des autres. (124-125)

[The true goal of my life can only perhaps be this: that my body, my sensations and my thoughts become writing, that is to say, something intelligible and general, dissolving my existence into the head and the life of others.]

The remarkable effect that writing abortion produces is that it transforms the aborting body into a shared experience. In this way a personal embodied experience becomes

the site of collective consciousness and identification (“mon existence complètement dissoute dans la tête et la vie des autres”). The inscription of abortion provide a space of solidarity with all women who, at different times and in different places, armed with fear and determination, went through the painful experience of abortion: “Des milliers de filles ont monté un escalier, frappé à une porte derrière laquelle il y avait une femme dont elles ne savaient rien, à qui elles allaient abandonner leur sexe et leur ventre” (77). [Thousands of girls have climbed stairs, knocked on a door behind which there was an unknown woman to whom they were going to entrust their sex and their wombs.] Perhaps similar to those women who consigned their bodies to the mid-wife’s hands and knowledge in the hope of “being reborn,” Ernaux projects onto her writing the excruciating moments of “the event,” allowing for a transition and a transformation to take place. Her text is the place of dissolution of those experiences and sensations, the site where her personal and intimate story collapses into the multiplicity of women’s voices once silenced and secreted.

Collective consciousness is a central theme of 1970s feminist movement. Abortion was among the most important issues around which women gathered, developing a sense of commonality and of self-consciousness regarding the control and exploitation of their bodies and their sexuality. Consciousness-raising was one collective practice that gave women better access to the understading of their bodies. Although widespread in Western countries, consciousness-rasing has some culturally specific elements. In Italy many women practiced *autocoscienza*. This consciousness-raising practice, which Italian women inherited and translated from the American version of the practice, helped women recognize, engage in, and come to

terms with forms of dependence and subjection within the family and within society.²⁶ *Autoscienza* consisted of a recollection and a sharing of the lived experiences of women in relation to the cultural assumptions surrounding their gender and their sexuality.²⁷ Moreover, women's organization into collective groups provided women with an alternative living source of emotional and material support to that of the family. One practice common in some women's groups was that of keeping a diary as an instrument facilitating self-analysis and discernment. Whereas *autoscienza* was mainly an oral practice among women, the diary was a written record of that oral practice. As such it constitutes an important cultural document of the years of the Italian feminist movement and a vivid record of the practice of *autoscienza*.

Donna in guerra is a fictional diary that records Vannina's coming to consciousness as a lower-middle class woman in the early 1970s, and becoming emancipated from a traditional image of womanhood and from a dysfunctional marriage. Vannina's diary starts in August 1970 while the narrator is spending her holidays with her husband Giacinto on a fictional island of Southern Italy. The narrator is a school teacher and a devoted wife to her husband, a mechanic. Her story is situated a few years before the struggles for the decriminalization of abortion began. Although apparently removed from that context (because the story takes place during a vacation on a fictional island), the story reflects the changing climate of those years in its representation of Marxist social movements, the critique of State violence, of working-class exploitation along with women's exploitation and

²⁶ Radical feminist Carla Lonzi is considered to be the creator of *autoscienza* in Italy. My second chapter is devoted to the vicissitudes of her group and of her theories in the 1970s.

²⁷ *Autoscienza* was not the only consciousness-raising practice, but it was certainly the earliest known in the first half of the 1970s. After the encounter with French feminists of *Psych et Po* some Italian women progressively disengaged from *autoscienza* and embraced *practica dell'inconscio* (practice of the unconscious), a psychoanalysis-driven method as I explain in my introduction.

oppression in a patriarchal regime. The women in the novel do not belong to any specific female group or collective; they nonetheless develop bonds of solidarity and complicity that take Vannina out of her initial isolation and disrupt her domestic routine. The author's attention to this kind of solidarity echoes Maraini's personal engagement within women's groups, which she welcomed as an outlet from an anguished isolation and as a source of inspiration for her work. In an interview with Ileana Montini, Maraini acknowledges the benefits that women's groups and *autocoscienza* brought to her:

Per me il femminismo è stato importantissimo, soffrivo d'angoscia, non so come dirti, di angoscia, di paura, di una specie di tristezza senza ragione: un senso di inesistenza. Il femminismo mi ha tolto questa angoscia. (112)

[For me feminism has been very important. I used to suffer from a *malaise*, I don't know how to explain, an anguish, a fear, a kind of sadness without reason: a sense of non-existence. Feminism took away this *malaise*.]

Io nei gruppi mi sono trovata bene, l'autocoscienza mi viene spontanea, forse perché c'è stato un lungo lavoro, io ho cominciato nel '68-69 con Rivolta Femminile. Poi il fatto di scrivere è stato molto utile per imparare a uscire da me stessa, a vincere certe cose. Pian piano sono uscita fuori da Rivolta Femminile, ho trovato altre femministe, ho fatto del lavoro di gruppo con il teatro. (114)

[I found myself at ease in the groups, consciousness-raising is spontaneous for me, perhaps because I worked a lot on it, I began in 68-69 with Rivolta Femminile. Then I found writing very useful in order to learn how to get out of myself, conquer my fears. Little by little, I came out of Rivolta Femminile, I met other feminists, I did teamwork with theater.]²⁸

The creative component of feminism is a crucial aspect of Maraini's feminism and one that she translates in *Donna in guerra* through the representation of Vannina's creative activity of writing a diary. This activity enables Vannina to establish her body not merely as an epistemological vehicle of her emancipation as a woman, but also as site of queer differences. In this regard Vannina's diary prefigures in part the

²⁸ Translations are mine.

formation of an Italian discourse of sexual difference, based not on “difference constructed from ‘biology’ and imposed as gender,” but on “symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning” (De Lauretis, *Sexual Difference* p.13). But that intricate relationship between materiality and symbolization that Vannina’s diary and body stage makes space for an unforeseen and unspoken queer dimension.

During her holidays Vannina starts recording in her diary the circumstances and encounters that punctuate her daily routine. Vannina writes things down objectively as an observer, without really questioning what she is observing and recording. Yet the facts and encounters she depicts eventually force her to question the state of apparent passivity and dependence in which she dwells, and to determine to make a change in her life. A few encounters affect the course of Vannina’s life: the acquaintance with matrons Giottina and Tota draws her into the picturesque world of their voyeuristic gossip about the rich people vacationing on the island. Then young Orio, with his innocence and tender masculinity, seduces Vannina out of her unfulfilling marital life. Finally, Suna, a rich disabled girl involved in a Marxist movement, opens Vannina’s eyes to the reality of women’s oppression and the misogynist environment they both inhabit. Little by little Vannina comes out of her sheltered life, taking several initiatives on her own, although in order to do so she goes against her husband’s will. One major initiative is that of joining the Marxist movement and taking a trip to Naples to follow the plans of the movement. This trip discloses to her the reality of women’s oppression and exploitation in the black market (women work under the table) thus revealing an important dimension of oppression that intersects with Vannina’s private subjection. After Vannina comes back from her trip, some members of the movement are arrested and put in jail. Vannina goes back to her earlier life, her work at home and at school, while Giacinto

attempts to convince her to have a child. Vannina resists Giacinto's efforts, and she grows even more distant from him. The relationship between husband and wife comes to a crisis when Vannina becomes pregnant and finds out that her best friend Suna has committed suicide. These two events represent a turning point in the woman's life as she finds the courage to undergo an abortion and leave eventually Giacinto.

The narrative of abortion takes up a very small part of the novel whose structure and content are quite intricate and heterogeneous. The novel opens and closes with the narration of two of Vannina's dreams. These dreams are very important narrative references in that they record Vannina's complex negotiation of inner changes. This is why the dreams are also crucial moments for the articulation of my argument. A closer look reveals that the novel has a circular structure in which the first dream anticipates the last one. I refer to this structure in terms of the abortive structure of the novel because abortion is presented in the novel and in the dreams simultaneously as the end of one life and narrative and the beginning of new ones.

From the beginning of the novel we are plunged into the monotonous rhythm of Vannina's uneventful life. Vannina constantly thinks of her duties as a wife and she performs them methodically and compulsively even during vacation time. Housework seems to be a spontaneous task to her, and it would go unnoticed if it were not for the insistent repetition of chores which punctuate the diary throughout: "Alle dieci mi sono messa a sparecchiare. Ho lavato i piatti. Ho sgrassato le pentole. Ho sciacquato i bicchieri" (4). [At ten I started cleaning the table. I washed the dishes, scoured the saucepans, rinsed the glasses (4).] Sentences like this one are almost redundant and show that, as Giancarlo Lombardi points out, "Vannina still remains, while on vacation, a woman defined by those duties that patriarchal society

demands of her” (95). Yet the fact that Vannina records these duties and perform them again through writing has the effect of exposing Vannina’s unconscious subjection to those domestic rituals. The act of writing then destabilizes Vannina’s subjection rather than reinforcing it. Moreover, the description of a bizarre dream intervenes to disrupt the monotony of housework chores:

Ho sognato che una talpa scavava un tunnel nel mio ventre. Mi sono svegliata con una fitta, un dolore sordo e fondo. Qualcosa di caldo mi bagnava le cosce. Ho cacciato una mano sotto la gonna. L’ho ritirata macchiata di sangue. Ho respirato a fondo per vincere quel senso di tensione al ventre. Non avevo voglia di alzarmi. Ho lasciato che il sangue colasse, dolce, tiepido. Dopo dovrò lavare la tela della sedia, mi dicevo. Dovrò strofinarla col sapone. Dovrò metterla ad asciugare. Dopo. Non avevo voglia di mettermi in piedi. Ho chiuso gli occhi. Il sole batteva vischioso e bruciante sulle gambe nude. Così comincia la mia vacanza: un rivolo di sangue benefico, la gioia di stare all’aperto, l’odore pungente del basilico. La scuola è lontana. Giacinto tornerà più tardi coi pesci. La casa è in ordine. Le camicie da stirare, il sugo da preparare, le pentole da pulire, sono rimandati a stasera a stasera. Ora non voglio pensare a niente. Sono contenta. (3-4)

[I fell asleep and dreamed a mole was digging a tunnel through my stomach. I woke with a sudden stab of pain. A dull intense ache was welling up from deep down inside me and something warm was wetting my thighs. I took a deep breath the overcome the tension in my belly. I didn’t feel like moving, I just let the blood trickle down my thigh, sweet and lukewarm. Later I shall have to wash the canvas of the chair, I told myself, I shall have to scrub it with soap, I shall have to leave it out to dry. Later. Just now I don’t want to stand on my feet. I close my eyes and the sun shines scorching and vicious on my naked legs. So starts my holiday. A reassuring trickle of blood, the joy of being in the open, the pungent smell of basil. School is long way away. Giacinto will come back later with the fish. I’ve tidied the house. This evening I’ll iron his shirts, prepare the sauce, do the washing up. Just now I don’t want to think of anything. I am content. I am happy (3).]

The dream begins with the image of a mole making its way into Vannina’s belly and ends with Vannina’s awakening in a pool of blood.²⁹ The image of the stream of blood in which Vannina sits with contentment is one that conveys the woman’s

²⁹ The English edited version translates “ventre,” which is actually “belly,” with “stomach”. I prefer however using belly or womb given the context of abortion and the fact that my analysis establishes a narrative link between the image of a mole digging into Vannina’s belly and the hands of the doctor digging into Vannina’s womb.

emerging desire for autonomy for some critics.³⁰ The physical manifestations of Vannina's body signal a process of consciousness-raising and of inner change. In this perspective the initial oniric figure of the digging mole is also significant, but it only can acquire its full meaning when put in relation to Vannina's retelling of her own abortion—which does not come until the end of the novel. The dream of the “digging mole” may serve as a kind of premonition that rhetorically links the beginning with the end of the novel.

The feeling that something is growing inside her grabs Vannina again towards the end of the novel. This time it is the foetus in her womb, the one she did not expect and that she discovered some weeks after Giacinto made love to her in her sleep. Vannina records feeling “una durezza nel ventre, qualcosa che tira e si arrotola” (261) [feeling of hardness in my belly, as if something was pulling and coiling in (274)], and from that moment on her story becomes that of the thousands of women who faced unwanted pregnancy.³¹ With no knowledge of how to get an abortion—a similar ignorance and lack of support characterizes Ernaux's story—Vannina turns to Rosa Colla, a colleague who had an abortion and was still suffering the consequences of the insufficient care provided to women who procured abortions.³² Vannina does not specify how Rosa had this abortion or whether it was a cause of emotional pain. The silence surrounding Rosa Colla's abortion is perhaps

³⁰ Elisabetta Properzi Nelsen, for instance, notes that “the existential story of the main character coincides with what she is undergoing physiologically during the course of her inner experiences and with the ordinary physical manifestations of the female body. It is in this sense that the diary of her vacation begins with a ‘rivolo di sangue benefico’ (4; a trickle of healthful blood), which marks her potential sense of freedom and happiness” (84).

³¹ Nor is Vannina's case the only one in the novel. Apart the aforementioned abortion of Rosa Colla, another woman, Marta, undergoes abortion in solitude and pain, comforted only by the cares of Suna.

³² Rosa is an odd and marginal character. She has no family and she lives in low income housing with a number of animals in poor hygienic conditions. One day she makes love with a homeless man, whom she had found and fed out of pity and sympathy. She discovers she is pregnant. The man disappears leaving her alone; Rosa decides to have an abortion, which forces her to bed with a hemorrhage.

one more instance in which women's real experience gets silenced. Rosa offers important support for Vannina's decision. She gives her the name of a doctor and lends her some money to help pay for the abortion.³³ Without Giacinto's support and approval, but with some money handy, Vannina finally finds the courage to go to a doctor to have an abortion. Vannina's words are here more powerful than any summary I could give of them:

Mi ha ficcato le mani dure, gelate nel corpo. Mi ha aperta, squarciata, raschiata a lungo con insistenza. Per il dolore brutale, selvaggio, mi mordervo le mani. Sentivo il sangue che sgorgava a fiotti dall'utero martoriato. Sono svenuta. Mi sono risvegliata. Passavano le ore, i giorni, gli anni, lo scavo non finiva mai. Tutto il male del mondo si era accumulato nel fondo del mio ventre, fra le mani metalliche del carnefice. (267)

[He thrust his hard, icy hands into my body. He opened me up, he ripped me apart and scraped me thoroughly. I bit my hands with clenched teeth to endure the brutal pain; I could feel the blood gushing out in streams from my tortured uterus. I fainted. I woke up again. The hours, the days, the years were passing by and excavation never finished. All the pain in the world had accumulated at the bottom of my belly, amongst the torturer's metallic hands (280-281).]

Reminiscent of Ernaux's narration, Vannina's words strikingly and lucidly portray the violence of the ironically named Doctor Petalo and the operation on the woman's body. Unlike his name (petal, in English), he is far from delicate. The "raschiamento" is a truly violent and hurtful procedure which the dream of the excavating mole anticipated only to make its description more poignant. Moreover the "raschiamento" describes the aborted woman for what she is: the victim of the cold hands ("mani metalliche") of a criminal doctor. The word "carnefice" is properly linked with killing. By criminalizing the doctor and his violent behavior,

³³ Rosa thus comes across as a woman socially different who has carved a space of autonomy for herself at a moment in which women were not socially organized in collectives, the "consultori" (free care centers) were not yet in place, and women had far fewer means of psychological and financial support.

Vannina's poignant tale subverts the myth that made aborted women into criminals, a characterization that served to reinforce the persistence of a legal prohibition. Here there is no foetus. There is only a woman in front of the doctor, a victim in front of a persecutor who savagely scrapes her uterus, caring only for the money he will make out of it. Maraini, by focusing on the martyrizing pain of the woman, manages to dehumanize the doctor and the institution he represents.

"Raschiamento," the operation of "scraping" the foetus off the uterus was an old abortive method. Its enduring practice among doctors signaled a lack of concern with women's health conditions, as Adele Faccio recalls in her book.³⁴ The practice of "raschiamento" was indeed known among women who experienced abortion and one that cannot be easily described, as Ernaux's testimony also reveals. Was the dream of the digging mole that excavates into Vannina's womb one way to represent the act of "raschiamento?" If so, it bridges the beginning and the end, thus forming the narrative circle I referred to above and revealing that abortion has a much greater influence in the economy of the narrative than we may think. But there is more at stake in reading Vannina's abortion. The foetus scraped off of Vannina's womb may also be read symbolically as the destruction of a woman's link to maternity as a biological destiny. I don't intend here to minimize the physical and psychological suffering involved in the decision and the act of abortion. I however would like to explore this moment as one representing the culmination of a process of

³⁴ "Invece per lo più sono insensibili, mal preparati, incapaci di aggiornarsi, se non altro sulle tecniche più attuali, aggrappati al loro maledetto raschiamento che distrugge l'utero delle donne almeno tanto quanto la lavanda alla candeggina di cui mostrano di scandalizzarsi tanto, legati ad un gioco di interessi che fa vergogna e disonora una categoria di persone che per molti versi meriterebbe più rispetto." (Faccio 21). [Instead (doctors) are for the most insensitive, not well-prepared, unable to stay updated with the more recent techniques, attached as they are to their damn method of scraping which destroys women's uterus at least as much as bleach of which they themselves seem to lament the use. They are tied to a game of interests, a political game which shames and dishonors a category of people who would deserve more respect for many reasons.]

deconstruction. Through it what is deconstructed is the cultural and social equation of woman and mother which is at once rejected and re-imagined. Ernaux's text is articulated around a similar rejection ('the killing of the mother'), but Maraini's text does more than reject the equation, it deeply disrupts the hetero-normative construction of sexuality.

A Compulsory Relationship

Vannina's resolution to undergo abortion is the outcome of a slow process in which Vannina has come to question her marital role as a form of submission not only to Giacinto, but also to socially accepted views of womanhood. In the beginning of the novel, and for a good part of it, what we know of Vannina is that she passively conforms to these views by acting in ways that reinforce traditional constructions of gender. She seems intent in performing duties among which there is the obligation to satisfy her husband sexually. In a number of passages Vannina yields to Giacinto's sudden sexual impulses such as the following:

Abbiam fatto l'amore. In fretta, come al solito, senza darmi il tempo di arrivare fino in fondo...Gli dico di aspettarmi. Mi dice che se non fa presto gli passa la voglia. Ha fretta di gonfiarsi...ha fretta di esplodere, come se indugiando potesse perdere qualcosa...Così io rimango a metà, ansante, contratta. Lui corre, inseguito dalla paura di non so che. Si afferra a me, frenetico, morde, si scuote, grida. Non so fermarlo, né acqueitarlo, né trattenerlo. Quando lo afferro è già scappato. Il liquido caldo cola sul lenzuolo. Sono presa da un rabbioso scoraggiamento. (11)

[We made love. Quickly, as usual, without giving me time to come properly. I tell him to wait for me, but he says that if he doesn't hurry he loses momentum and then he can't make it. He's in a rush to grow big. He's in a hurry to explode as if he'd lose something if he hesitated. So he rushes on, pursued by the fear of God knows what, he clings to me in a frenzy, bites, jerks, screams. I can't stop or restrain him, and when I grab him he's already come. The hot liquid trickles down on to the sheet. I come half-way panting and frustrated (11).]

The mechanical gestures of Giacinto are equaled only by the dissatisfaction of Vannina who has come "half-way." This passage recalls Pasolini's idea of

“dysfunctional” coitus as an unfulfilled sexual relationship, in which the couple plays roles in a coercive setting. The dysfunctional aspect of this relationship is apparent in its compulsory nature and in Vannina’s lack of full pleasure. Vannina’s docile submission to her husband’s desire is part of an attitude of passivity that she also reproduces outside her home. Evidence of it can be found for instance in Vannina’s inadequate response to her neighbors’ arrogance or in her servile attitude towards the petty requests of Vittorio, the leader of the Marxist movement that Vannina joins. Husband and wife will soon channel their unexpressed desires outside their marriage, defining a whole range of queer extramarital situations.³⁵ Vannina’s awakening sexual desires for the teenaged Orio and Giacinto’s close bond with Santino are examples of a queer dimension of desire and pleasure that questions the limits of the marital bond based on reproduction and intersects with Vannina’s growing political consciousness. The relevant space that the queer dimension acquires in the novel is also the space where Maraini’s feminism can dialogue with Pasolini’s queerness towards a re-articulation of the “sessualmente diverso” [the sexually different, the queer.]

As Suna comes into Vannina’s life, she alerts the woman to what she describes as her overly passive bent. She also insinuates that what really binds Vannina to Giacinto is not love, but a form of obedience:

- Scommetto che con Giacinto non ci vai per niente d’accordo.
- Sì invece.

³⁵ In a collection of essays called *La bionda, la bruna e l’asino* Maraini reflects on the nature of sexual pleasure and its not being exclusive to reproductive coitus. She seems to agree with Pasolini when she writes: “Il piacere sessuale non è limitabile al coito. Anzi scopriamo che a il nido nelle pieghe più impensate della nostra quotidianità: nel rapporto fra madre e neonate, fra padre e figli, fra fratelli, fra amici, fra colleghi, fra rivali, fra persone e fantasmi, persone e miti, persone e sogni, persone e cibo” (11). [Sexual pleasure cannot be limited to coitus. Instead, we find out that it can hide in the meanders of our daily routine: in the relationship between a mother and her baby, between fathers and sons, among brothers, friends, colleagues, rivals, among people and phantasms, people and myths, people and dreams, people and food.]

- Perché fai quello che vuole lui, ma questo non è accordo è passività ; sono sicura che Giacinto non ti accontenta in amore.
- Come fai a dirlo?
- Lo vedo da come ti prende il braccio quando viene al bar, lo vedo da come ti parla, da come ti guarda; mi dispiace dirtelo ma tuo marito di te non è innamorato per niente, ti vuole bene sì, ma pensa ad altro. (64)

[I bet you don't get on with Giacinto at all.
 You are wrong, I do.
 Because you do what he tells you, that's not getting on with someone, it's passivity. I am sure Giacinto doesn't satisfy you sexually.
 How can you say that?
 I can see from the way he holds your arm when you come to the Bar, I can see it from the way he talks to you, the way he looks at you. I'm sorry to tell you this, but your husband is not in love with you in the least. He's fond of you, maybe, but his mind's elsewhere. (64)]

Suna immediately understands that Vannina's acquiescence to her role can result in a lack of pleasure and desire, a reason why Vannina appears to Suna lifeless ("candela spenta," 64). With her sharp sense of consciousness, Suna helps Vannina to foreground the experience of marital sex and her marriage in general as compulsory. She thus plays a mediating role, nurturing Vannina's awakening consciousness. In this respect Suna and Vannina's bond prefigures one of the fundamental structures of the social practice of Italian feminism, the structure of "affidamento" (entrustment), as some scholars pointed out.³⁶ The main feature of entrustment is that of providing women a nurturing bond from a social, psychological and physical stand point. When seen in terms of entrustment, Vannina and Suna's relationship acquires a nurturing character that replaces and dislodges the traditional role played by biological mothers. In this sense entrustment is already a re-reading of motherhood that can produce some

³⁶ Scholars of Maraini have referred to Suna's and Vannina's relationship in terms of "affidamento" [entrustment]. Entrustment is a form of female alliance through mutual support that came into being in the 1980s and that the Milanese feminists still practice with the name of female relationality.

important queer effects for the characters in the novel, and not only the female ones, as I shall discuss shortly.

The relationship that binds Vannina to Suna has the effect of shaking Vannina from her passive state. Following Suna's footsteps, Vannina becomes more alert and more involved in public matters. She joins a Marxist student movement, to which Suna belongs, where women conduct interviews about female exploitation in the black market of Southern Italy. Here as well the women face the sexism of the group, whose male members display attitudes that reflect cultural assumptions about gender roles. For instance, Vittorio, who seems to welcome the presence of Vannina and Suna into the movement, at times uses Vannina for those tasks with which he does not want to be bothered. Vannina responds to his requests without questioning his authoritative position: "Volevo dire di no, ma mi sono lasciata andare alla dolcezza di dire di si, di farsi attenti, unili, di eseguire con remissività un incarico era quello che si aspettavano da me, era naturale, era il mio compito di donna" (108). [I wanted to say no, but I let myself be carried away by the pleasure of saying yes, of being ingratiating, carrying out a task without question it was just what they expected from me, naturally, it was my role as a woman (110).] Vannina's response is however symptomatic of her acceptance of what seems to be "natural" to women. When she says that obedience is what is expected from her, what is natural for her reveals that Vannina takes obedience and passivity as the distinctive marks of being a woman. As Vittorio tries to explain to Vannina the meaning of oppression, he interestingly denounces that same pernicious association between women and passivity only to reject it when it comes to his own position towards Vannina:

La passività ti fa complice, lo prendi in culo senza neanche saperlo, sei una vittima complice, qualcosa come una pulce che non può vivere senza il sangue del ricco. Poi sei una donna oltre tutto e le donne sono più portate alla

passività, al masochismo, un casino, dovrete fare un salto di qualità, difficile però, c'è da rompersi le gambe. (69)

[Passivity makes you an accomplice, it fucks you up without you knowing it, because you're not only an accomplice you are also a victim, you're a flea that can't live without the blood of the rich. Besides, you're a woman and women are even more inclined to be passive and masochistic, they are even more messed up. You need to make a qualitative leap, but it's not easy, you could end with both your legs broken. (69)]

Vittorio's explanation discloses that passivity is not merely the result of oppression but also a mechanism of complicity between the oppressor and the oppressed. For women to reject something for which they seem to be "naturally" more inclined implies doing violence to themselves. Does Vittorio mean that women should destroy what they are in order to overcome the social construction of their passivity? Interestingly Vittorio deploys the image of broken legs, which evokes Suna's disability. The image of disability is therefore an empowering one even in Vittorio's speech. I claim that the image of women's broken legs signify Suna's and Vannina's act of doing violence to their own bodies in order to denounce the violence of the system.

Suna's Queer Body

Suna's active and demystifying attitude towards those cultural assumptions about women leaves a lasting impression on Vannina. Suna does not accept the easy association between women and passivity, perhaps because her disability has made her more combative. For what really hinders Suna's self fulfillment is not her disabled state, but a family situation which mirrors somewhat Vannina's conjugal dependence. She does not work and she is dependent on her father's money. Suna is subject to her *padre-padrone* (father-master) we learn, from whom she can escape only by finding herself a husband:

Io sono ricca sì, ma senti in che modo: I soldi li tieni stretti al cazzo mio padre, che mi dà un tanto al mese, come a una mantenuta dei coi suoi coglioni e basta, non guadagno, non possiedo niente, e non sono io che decido sul come e quando spenderli, non ho poteri, tiene tutto in mano lui il turco e sai cosa vuole? Che io mi trovi al più presto un marito per togliermi dalle scatole; ma con queste gambe non è facile. (73)

[Ok, I'm rich. But just listen how rich I am. It's my father who has all the money and he keeps it tightly tied to his balls. He gives me so much a month like a kept woman. That's how it is, I earn and own nothing, and it's not me who decides how and when to spend that money, I have no power whatsoever. The Turk holds everything tight in his hand, and do you know what he wants? He wants me to get myself a husband as soon as possible so that I'll be off his hands and out of the way. But unfortunately with these legs of mine it's not going to be easy. (73)]

Suna's father wants his daughter to find a husband in order to get her off his back, but her disability, in her father's eyes, can only gain her the attention of a man who is "boorish and ugly (73) ["bruttino e cafone" (73)]. This social prejudice that father shares makes her even more dependent on him: "Del resto se devo comprare un vestito, un paio di scarpe, un libro, devo chiederlo a lui, se voglio dieci lire, dico dieci lire da spendere come cavolo mi piace. Devo raccontargli un sacco di palle, devo sedurlo, devo blandirlo, devo accattivarmelo, e poi sentirmi in colpa per questo" (73). [So if I want to buy myself a dress, a pair of shoes, a book, I must ask him. And if I want ten liras, and I mean ten to spend as I want, without giving him an account of it, I have to tell him a pack of lies. I have to cajole him, win him over, and then feel guilty because of it (73).]

Rather than pitying herself because she doesn't have a husband, Suna disparages marriage as a form of servitude to which Vannina is subjected; Suna's rejection of marriage is thus one way of opposing her rich father's will, but also of escaping another compulsory situation. Unlike Vannina, Suna acknowledges her state of dependence and tries to circumvent it. She is not passive. She is outspoken and she does not hesitate to denounce forms of oppression. During a debate she has with

Vittorio, the leader of the Marxist movement, over the effects of internalizing social violence and oppression, she condemns the violence implicit in Vittorio's paternalistic tones towards women: she compares these tones to the violence of the state against the citizen. In this respect, Suna's outspokenness is a truly feminist form of social critique that takes gender as a tool of analysis.

Suna's analytical attitude towards the hidden gender dimension of social oppression may well be the reason why Suna is ill regarded by the locals who consider her a threat. Giacinto as well grows suspicious of his wife's bond with Suna. He confronts his wife on her decision to follow the comrades of the movement in Naples and holds Suna responsible for "corrupting" his wife:

Da quando siamo sposati è la prima volta che fai di testa tua.
Beh..
Che cazzo significa?
Non lo so
È la storpia che ti mette contro di me.
Perché ce l'hai tanto con lei?
La giudico per quello che è: una troia.
Ma perché?
Perché non è naturale; mi rompe i coglioni.
Che vuol dire naturale?
Che segue la natura
Cioè?
Per una donna la natura è una cosa dolce, femminile; quella non fa che parlare a vanvera e dire cazzate e rompere l'anima alla gente.
Io sono naturale?
Tu sì, fin' ora sì, ma ora proprio ora ti metti contro natura.
Perché decido di partire?
Tu di natura sei buona, calma, affettuosa, paziente, remissiva; oggi invece fai la stravagante, vai contro natura...
Tu di natura sei diversa, sei una donna vera, molto femminile e ora fai così solo per imitare quella mezza donna. (141-42)

[Since we got married this is the first time you've acted off your own bat.
Well...
What the fuck does it mean?
I don't know.
It's that crippled girl that's set you against me.
Why do you hate her so much?
Because I judge her for what she really is, a slut.
But why?

Because she isn't natural. She gets on my tits.
 What do you mean by "natural"?
 That follows nature's rules
 That is?
 A woman nature is something sweet, feminine, but that one keeps talking off
 the top of her head and getting on everybody's nerves.
 Am I natural?
 You are, yes, up to now you have been anyway, but now you're putting
 yourself against nature.
 Because I've decided to leave?
 By nature you're good-hearted, calm, affectionate, patient, submissive.
 Recently though you've been acting oddly, you're going against your nature...
 I know you so well, it's no use pretending: your real nature is quite different,
 at heart you're very feminine. But now you're acting like this just to imitate
 that runt of a woman. (144-45)]

Giacinto attempts to reinforce his authority over Vannina by upholding a binary view of what he thinks it is natural and unnatural in the behavior of a woman. The effect is also that of using Suna's disability ("storpia" is a derogatory term) as a way to demonstrate the unnaturalness of her behavior and discredit her as a woman. For Giacinto Suna is a "half woman" because she does not conform with his traditional gender views and because she encourages Vannina to go against his will. Here Giacinto understands "natural" in terms of "feminine," "sweet," "good." But all these attributes are also synonyms of submission and compliance or complicity as Vittorio puts it. The threat to Giacinto's authority is here taken as a pretext for the reaffirmation of a gender hierarchy which Suna's presence disturbs. Giacinto's derogatory appellation "mezza donna" sounds very different from Suna's own use of the expression "mezzo uomo mezza donna" with which she defines herself. Suna appropriates the expression, reclaiming it in a positive and critical way, that is to say, in a way that subverts commonly accepted views of gender and sexuality. In this respect I agree with Tommasina Gabriele who, in an article devoted to gender identity and subversive sexuality in Maraini, notes that Suna's bisexuality is an attempt to escape a binary system and the imposition of rigid categories of sexuality (246).

Whereas Giacinto uses “mezza donna” in a derogatory manner as he does with the term “storpia,” Suna reclaims both in a subversive style. As a consequence Suna’s disability can be read productively in conjunction with her own alternative construction of gender.³⁷

Writing Clandestine Abortion: Subverting Motherhood and Family

Giacinto also thinks that Vannina has become “less of a woman” because of her increasing expressions of autonomy. In order to re-establish a family order that seems compromised he confronts Vannina again about the necessity to be a mother:

Fai un figlio come vuole natura, pianta quel lavoro di merda di cui non te ne frega niente. Mica ti voglio costringere, sia chiaro, io voglio solo che ritrovi te stessa, amore mio, voglio che torni quella Vanna di prima, di quando to ho sposata, naturale, innamorata, dolce, timida, laboriosa, gentile. (246-47)

[But it’s natural to have a child, then you can give up that shitty job you’ve never liked. I don’t want to force you into it, Vannina, of course not, I only want you to find yourself again, my love, I want you to go back to what you were before, when I married you, so natural, so spontaneous, so much in love, sweet, shy, so hardworking. (259)]

Giacinto seems to think that, by becoming a mother, Vannina will get back to her previous docile self, her supposed “natural” bent. By being a mother, she will become “natural” and “feminine” again, as Vannina defiantly notes in her diary soon after finding out she is pregnant: “Giacinto mi spia. Con il figlio lui pensa che tornerò la donna dolce, remissiva, disponibile, arresa di prima” (261). [Giacinto is spying on me. He is waiting for a sign of change. With a child he believes I’ll become the sweet, submissive, ever-available woman I was before (274).] Vannina’s remark stresses the way in which maternity and passivity are strongly intertwined and, in Giacinto’s view, natural to a woman. But the relationship to maternity and passivity

³⁷ Although this is beyond the scope of this chapter, I think that a more in-depth analysis of Suna’s disability can enrich the reading of the novel.

must be undone in order for a woman like Vannina to forge a new sense of self within society. Abortion eventually enables Vannina to question both maternity and passivity as a woman's "natural" self natural. Here again a dream becomes the metaphorical space that describes Vannina's transition from one life to another, and from one self to a different one. The dream, which occurs right before Vannina's abortion, actually prefigures its painful experience and offers a poignant portrayal of a woman's survival.

This delicate moment of a woman's surviving abortion is one that Maraini witnessed herself through her political and intellectual engagement in the issue, and her own personal abortion:

Io ho avuto degli aborti, ne ho avuti due procurati e uno naturale, ma fino a tre anni fa non avrei mai, neanche confessato di avere abortito una volta, lo nascondevo accuratamente, perché mi sembrava una delle cose più vergognose della mia vita. (Montini 111)

[I had abortions, I had two self-procured ones and a miscarriage, but up to three years ago I would not have even confessed having had abortion. I hid it carefully because I considered it to be one of the most shameful experiences of my life.]³⁸

Although Maraini did not talk about her own abortion she wrote about abortion in general. The personal and political experience of abortion has had a large impact on Maraini's writing.³⁹ In particular she analyzed it in the context of women's position in a web of power relations. In *Un clandestino a bordo* Maraini explains how abortion exemplifies a complex relation between institutions and the regulation of bodies and sexuality:

Le Chiese, gli Stati, i poteri costituiti hanno sempre reclamato a sé la regolamentazione del corpo sessuato: come e quando accoppiarsi, come e quando figliare. Il controllo della riproduzione è la più antica preoccupazione di ogni legislatore. (29)

³⁸ Translation is mine.

³⁹ In her book *Multitude of Women* Italian scholar Stefania Lucamante has a very interesting and thought-provoking chapter on the relationship between Maraini's writing and the issue of abortion.

[Churches, States, and constituted powers have always reclaimed the regulation on the sexualized body: how and when to copulate, how and when to reproduce. Control of reproduction is the most ancient preoccupation of any legislator.]⁴⁰

In an intervention I mentioned in the introductory section to this chapter, Maraini stresses abortion as the result of a bad relationship between women and authority within the family (Faccio 63). Vannina's opposition to Giacinto's views of what is "natural" for a woman, including maternity, is first and foremost an opposition to a "bad relationship" which is symptomatic of a dysfunctional and compulsory family and heterosexual order. Vannina's decision to have an abortion will have a dramatic effect on that order and, more generally, on the construction of the "natural" mother and the "natural" woman. Suna's lesbian embodiment, her expulsion from the Marxist movement and her suicide are determining factors in Vannina's decision and in her critical destruction of a naturalizing link between woman and mother.

Suna's Coming out and the Politics of Privacy

Vannina has just learned of the death of her best friend Suna, a fact that plunges her into a deep state of depression. A month before Vannina finds out she is pregnant, Suna writes to her that she has been expelled for having come out as a lesbian and having entertained a relationship with Mafalda, another member of the group. Suna is expelled because she is not considered a true revolutionary subject because of her disruptive interest in matters of sexuality.⁴¹ Vittorio discredits Suna's

⁴⁰ Translation is mine.

⁴¹ Suna's expulsion as lesbian is emblematic of the situation of many lesbians in the movements in the 1970s. As it appears in the 1974's issue of *FUORI Donna*, lesbians complain of the accusation of lesbianism on the part of male members who use the label of lesbianism in a derogatory and exclusionary sense.

arguments about lesbianism by confining the question of sexuality to the private and reiterating that sexuality and sex are not political issues. Women can make love with each other provided that such love be kept secret, a tacit agreement into which the same Mafalda is coerced:

A tutto questo Mafalda reagisce in modo ambiguo che mi fa venire mal di pancia: in segreto dà ragione a me, in pubblico fa dei discorsi severi sulla disciplina di gruppo e sulla morale del movimento che non va tradita. Le ho chiesto se intende continuare a fare l'amore con me. Ha risposto che pensa di sì; ma in segreto. (260)

[In the face of all this Mafalda reacts in an ambiguous way which gives me belly-aches. Secretly she tells me I am right, publicly she makes strict speeches about group discipline and the Movement's morality which should never be betrayed. I asked her whether she's going to carry on making love with me. She answered yes, she thinks so, but secretly. (273)]

Mafalda's silent complicity with the homophobic views of the movement and her ambivalent behavior suggest the extent to which women participate in the cultural constructions of their gender and their sexuality; the male members of the group embrace those constructs in the name of an ideological cause. However, Mafalda's complicity with those constructs gains her the sympathy of the group members and the possibility of integration into their circle. But her integration is double-edged, since it depends upon a subtle exploitation of women like Mafalda on the part of the male members ("senza di lei non sanno dove mettere le mani, l'organizzazione la porta avanti lei" (260) [without her they wouldn't know what to do, she is the one who takes charge of organizing everything (273)]. Suna is after all in a similar situation. The main reason why Vittorio and other members insist on her participation is because she can finance the movement. It seems that Suna's expulsion on the premise of her sexual orientation covers up the financial interest of the group and its gendered exploitative logic.

I emphasized earlier the sexism implicit in Vittorio's paternalistic tones towards the women of the group. It is worth noticing that Vittorio's revolutionary views are totally embedded into a sexist frame both publicly and privately—Vittorio marries a woman who is completely devoted to him and submitted to his will. His views accurately reflect the sexist character of the conventional discourse of the 1970s Marxist movements, which feminists such as Monique Wittig and Carla Lonzi strongly criticized for their failure to consider and promote women's interests. Suna's expulsion therefore brings to the fore the tensions between the Marxist discourse on working-class oppression (that misrecognizes the gender dimension of such oppression), feminist discourse, and queer sexuality. In Maraini's novel not only is gender exploitation dismissed because it serves the Marxist agenda of the group, queer sexuality is also excluded. Whereas Lonzi focuses mainly on gender, Maraini highlights the inextricable relation between gender and sexuality in conditions of oppression. The group targets Suna's and Mafalda's lesbianism because of a general suspicion concerning homosexuality. Imitating Vittorio's speech, Suna reveals what homosexuality is for him: "L'omosessualità," explains once Vittorio, "fa parte della marmellata borghese, non ci sarà posto per sdolcinatezze del genere" (187). [Homosexuality is a symptom of bourgeois shit, there won't be space for mawkishness of that sort (195).] Vittorio sees homosexuality as a form of bourgeois weakness, una "sdolcinatezza" (mawkishness) to be kept under control. It must remain private and secret. "Sdolcinatezze" is a word that mockingly refers to a sort of overt feminine romanticism. As such it is a derogatory term that enables Vittorio to discard homosexuality as something feminine and inferior; he thus reproduces a heterosexist understanding of queer sexuality based on a hierarchy of the sexes.

Suna's ejection from the group can be read as an attempt to construct a normative body based on what is proper revolutionary morality. Vittorio tells Suna that she is not a true revolutionary subject, given her interest in women's causes. Ironically mimicking Vittorio's statements, Suna says that "la disciplina non so dove sta di casa, dico quello che penso, non ho senso politico, la strategia non la capisco, mi interessa solo alle disgrazie delle donne" (261). [I don't even know what discipline is, I say what I think, I don't have any political sense, I don't understand a damn thing about strategy, I only care about women's misfortunes (274).] For all this Suna is considered a "maniac" and a "write-off" (274), but her irony appears as a veiled or not-so-veiled critique of the relation between women and politics. Suna's expulsion actually contributes to denouncing the dangerous exclusion of women from the public and the political sphere and to publicize women's concerns.

The episodes of Vannina's abortion and Suna's expulsion offer a social and political denunciation of the mechanism of gender oppression and of patriarchal code of privacy. In an interview with Ileana Montini Maraini explains that "riservatezza" used to guarantee the masculine power in patriarchal cultures and it was associated with the private dimension. "Il '68" she states, "ha portato a compimento la rottura della riservatezza come valore e caratteristica della vita femminile, del ghetto delle donne; garanzia e indice della loro emarginazione" (83-84). [1968 has effected the rupture of privacy as a value and characteristic of women's life, of a ghetto of women; it both guaranteed and was the sign of their marginalization.]⁴² Suna comes to break this association that Maraini describes between women and discretion. Suna is expelled from the Marxist group because she is in a lesbian relationship and her overt love for women seems to disrupt in the views of the groups, the cohesiveness of

⁴² Translation is mine.

the group. The figure of the lesbian reveals the intersectional component of sexual and gender discrimination which the lesbian emblematically embodies.

The novel's sexual politics are not limited to Suna's lesbian affair, but include other non-normative expressions of desire. The novel sketches a whole range of queer encounters, through prostitution, pederasty, male companionship, whose inscription plays both as counterpoint to and as tacit endorsement of the idea of patriarchal privacy. I will focus here on three relationships: the one between Vannina and Orio, that of Orio with Hans, the German pederast who vacations on the island, and that of Giacinto and Santino. Those encounters gesture at a space in which such diverse narratives as abortion and queerness may be put into dialogue to produce a narrative of queer abortions.

Secret Desires, Secretive Masculinities

Suna's role is not merely that of disturbing the association between women and secrecy, as described by Maraini; it also exposes the relation between men and secrecy, a relation that has been underestimated by critics of Maraini. Suna initially approaches Vannina on the premise that she wants to know more about Santino Pizzocane who is a good friend of Giacinto. Suna is attracted to Santino, a young man who comes from a patriarchal family, is unemployed and spends most of his time fishing with Vannina's husband. Raised in a family where his father and his brothers embody a violent virility, Santino is constantly diminished by his father who calls him "uno sfaticato, senza spina dorsale" (31) ["a loafer, he's got no backbone" (31)]. Because of his mysterious and not quite virile temper, Suna sees him as a half man half woman an identity she claims for herself. Santino and Suna have a relationship that resembles prostitution. In order to keep him at her side Suna buys him the things he cannot afford. But Santino remains evasive about his feelings towards Suna who

begins to suspect that Santino is actually attracted to men. While approaching Vannina on the subject of Giacinto, Suna hints at a possible attraction of the man for Giacinto and viceversa, a reason that would explain Giacinto's lack of attention towards Vannina. When Vannina mentions to Giacinto that she has met Suna, Giacinto carelessly dismisses her: "Ma lui non era incuriosito per niente dal mio incontro con la ragazza paralitica. Continuava a occuparsi dei suoi pensieri segreti, opachi" (59). [He wasn't at all curious about my encounter with the disabled girl. He continued to occupy himself with his own secret thoughts (59).]

Suna asks Vannina not to mention anything to Giacinto about her suspicion. Suna's precaution may have to do with the secrecy that surrounds men's private selves in the novel, as if masculine desires were to be kept hidden and protected. Vannina is nonetheless often perplexed by Giacinto's moodiness and pensiveness: "Ha qualcosa nella pancia che gli gira, lo succhia" (89) [he's got something stirring inside him that's swallowing him up (90).] Giacinto seems happy only in company of men. In those moments he is cheerful, "diventa ragazzino" [becomes a boy], he rediscovers his own nature ("la sua natura è quella,") [that's his nature (90)]. By contrast, when he is with Vannina, he plays the husband's role, which results often in the defensive and fearful attitude of someone who is insecure and seeks protection. Vannina's commentary on her sleeping husband is quite evocative: "Giacinto dorme. Se ne sta rannicchiato tutto nudo sul letto, nascondendo il sesso fra le ginocchia. La schiena curva, la testa incassata fra le spalle, le gambe piegate esprimono un'accanita difesa. Di che cosa, non lo so" (6). [Giacinto's asleep. He's curled up naked on the bed, hiding his genitals between his thighs. His hunched back, his head deeply set between his shoulders, his bent legs, all express a tenacious self-defense. Against what, I wonder (6).] Giacinto's fearful posture during sleep is also accentuated by the

gesture of covering his genitals, the most vulnerable part of his body and his masculinity. Giacinto's gesture of protecting his vulnerable zones evokes to me Suna's precaution about revealing Santino's hidden desires. Such an evocation suggests that silence and secrecy are discursive markers of some masculine bodies in the novel. Moreover, secrecy is also a defining element in the novel's depiction of some masculine bonds that exceed and disrupt the heterosexual narrative.

The day following Suna's and Vannina's first encounter, Vannina is in her apartment when her husband and Santino come back from fishing; Giacinto is visibly happy because he has a lot of fish in his hands. However, we also learn that this is not what Giacinto always feels upon returning with fish, especially when Santino is not with him. Fishing is not only a diversion for Giacinto, it is also a time to bond with Santino. Fishing is instead an occasion for Giacinto to instruct Santino on how to use the fishing tools and how to clean fish:

Giacinto tratta Santino come un bambino. Gli insegna a usare il fucile, la maschera, le pinne; gli pela i pomodori, gli pulisce il pesce. Santino non si offende; neanche quando Giacinto gli dice che è un ignorante. Sorride, incassa la testa nelle spalle con un gesto contrito e dolce. Beve il vino a piccolo sorsi e quando manda giù un sorso più grosso, si porta la mano alla gola strizzandogli occhi. Non parla quasi mai. Mangia lentamente portandosi il cibo alla bocca con movimenti delicati e calmi. (18)

[Giacinto treats Santino like a child. He teaches him how to use the gun, the mask, the flippers; he peels his tomatoes for him and fillets his fish. Santino doesn't take offence, not even when Giacinto tells him how stupid he is. Instead he smiles and sinks his head down between his shoulders with an air of contrition. He drinks his wine in small sips and when he swallows a slightly larger sip he lifts his hand to his throat and blinks his eyes. He hardly ever speaks. He eats slowly, bringing the food to his mouth with calm, delicate gestures. (18)]

Fishing acquires a specific social and symbolic value for Giacinto for it is an activity in which Giacinto mentors Santino and transmits some skills to him. Moreover, Giacinto's caring attitude towards Santino resembles that of a father for a son and it is

furthermore in contrast with the unaffectionate and unloving behavior of Giacinto towards Vannina and of Peppino Pizzocane (Santino's father) toward Santino.

Santino's and Giacinto's bond, in spite of the unequal roles, describes a complicity among men that is nurtured less through words than through silences and gestures. The bond is so strong that Giacinto is jealous of Vannina when she speaks to Santino or tries to draw Santino out of his enigmatic silence.⁴³ The nurturing nature of the men's bond also echoes Vannina's and Suna's bond and thus shows how homoeroticism may serve the purpose of reinforcing one's sense of self. Entrustment is not merely a strategy of bonding and mutual nurturing among women and feminists, but also a queer masculine one. Manhood is not a given, but is nurtured as much as womanhood can be. This kind of nurtured and nurturing masculinity is in striking contrast with the display of violent virility on the part of Santino's brothers, a form of virility Santino opposes through his silences and his secret complicity with Giacinto. The difference between the female bond and the male bond is that while the second exists in the shadow of marriage and because of it, the first constantly threatens marriage by exposing the inequalities of Vannina's and Giacinto's marital relationship. The women's bond is powerful precisely because it threatens to make public all forms of exploitation, even those carried out privately, as I discussed above. At the same time, the silent existence of male desire can be read alongside Giacinto's supposed inability to fulfil Vannina, and Santino's evasive response towards Suna's personal and sexual approaches.

⁴³ Although their companionship does not explicitly translate into sexual attraction, it is nonetheless erotic. It portrays a form of nurturing eroticism that is very much reminiscent of Pasolini's bonds with his peasant students in *Atti Impuri*. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, I would find very interesting to do a queer feminist reading of Pasolini's first homoerotic novels, which include *Atti Impuri* and *Amado Mio*. *Atti Impuri* is a coming of age tale that recalls Pasolini's years in the countryside of Northern Italy where he spent his days teaching young peasants, whom he fancied.

Giacinto's queer masculinity is further addressed in a passage which Vannina records without any commentary. While she and her husband are having a walk Giacinto stops and lingers before the shopwindow of a store, attracted to its queer allure:

Giacinto si è fermato un momento davanti al Pussy Pussy Bang Bang. Degli slips a fiori rosa svolazzavano sull'albero di una nave di cartone, a mo' di vela. I due proprietari stavano dietro la vetrina, malinconici, vestiti con eleganza, bene abbronzati, ben pettinati, a guardare la strada vuota. (43)

[Giacinto stopped for a minute in front of the Pussy Pussy Bang Bang shop. Some pink floral slips fluttered from the mast of a cardboard ship, like a sail. The two owners stood behind the shopwindow, tastefully dressed, perfectly suntanned, well combed, gazing with melancholy down the empty street. (43)]

While the text does not explain why Giacinto stopped in front of the store, the reader's attention is unequivocally drawn to the queer image of the pink slips fluttering like a sail and the two men "tastefully dressed, perfectly suntanned" behind the window. The pink slips and the two fashionable men evoke an idea of queerness which is only suggested through images, but not overtly spoken. Giacinto's stopping in front of the windowshop makes him for a moment ("un momento") part of this queer scenario. The man's silent complicity in this queer scenario may be an invitation to read Giacinto's masculinity as a queer but undisclosed one.

Interestingly, Giacinto's queerness finds a place of inscription within a feminist narrative, an element that contributes to looking at masculine bodies in Maraini's novel as the product of a feminist writing. This element can only demonstrate the extent to which Maraini's supposed feminist and feminine writing is already queer insofar as it reflects on the intersecting construction of feminine and masculine bodies around desires.

Male homoeroticism is not limited to the portrayal of Giacinto's masculinity and his bond with Santino. It also includes a representation of male-to-male

prostitution in which the young locales engage for money. Among them are Santino and his brothers, as we find out from the confession that Orio, Santino's teenage brother, makes to Vannina. Orio's confession does not disclose a random event, but an extensive male homoerotic practice otherwise silenced.⁴⁴ What is intriguing to me is that the silent component of queer masculinity—whether in the form of male nurturing or male prostitution—can find a space of inscription in Vannina's narrative and through women's words. This fact makes of Maraini's novel not so much a feminist novel, but a novel that explores the material and symbolic links between differently gendered and sexed bodies.

In Maraini's novel the young brothers of the Pizzocane's clan turn to prostitution to make up for unemployment in the area and the lack of financial support from their father. Supposedly, male hustling is a secret activity, as opposed to that of the "belli" who flaunt their bodies for women in the village main square. The gain made through homoerotic prostitution remains secret. Yet such secret complicity among men provides some money to the unemployed youth of the island while representing an outlet for gay men and pederasts who often belonged to privileged milieux. Here's how Orio talks about Hans, an older tourist from Germany who seeks out young boys:

Quando veniva a scuola, mica veniva sempre, aveva paura dei miei fratelli che se lo vedevano, lo stangavano, ma anche loro pure l'avevano fatto però con lui.
-- Che cosa?

⁴⁴ Orio's story is reminiscent of an episode of Pasolini's *Ragazzi di Vita* which recounts the adventures of Ricchetto and his gang from the outskirts of Rome. These jobless young men who do not have jobs survive on little tricks, thefts, and prostitution. When approached by an older man for sex, Ricchetto recalls that, after World War II, young men used to sell their bodies to older strangers. While Ricchetto declines the proposal, his friend Alduccio, who walks around singing "zoccoletti, zoccoletti" (little sluts, little sluts) agrees to go with the "froschio" [fag], an attitude which, in Ricchetto's eyes, makes Alduccio look like a woman (204). Orio's story bears resemblance to that of Alduccio and Ricchetto.

-- Farsi toccare il pesce a pagamento, Gigi gliel'ha pure messo di dietro però a isso gli piacciono i ragazzini piccoli e quando crescono non li guarda manco più' lo chiamano "ricchionaccio," gli buttano le pietre addosso, ma quando uno ha bisogno di soldi ci va. (101)

[Whenever he came to school. He did not come everyday because he was scared of my brothers in case they saw him and beat him up. But they've done the same to him though.

-- The same what?

-- Let him feel their cocks for money. Gigi even gave it to? him from behind. But Hans only likes little boys, once they grow up he doesn't even deign to look at them; they call him a ugly pouffe and throw stones at him, but the moment they need money they go with him. (103)]

The German man looks for prostitutes to satisfy his pederastic desire, a desire which the hustlers punish by insulting and lapidating him. Gigi's form of prostitution serves to reinforce the hustler's position as a masculine one—he is the one who penetrates—while diminishing that of the queer man who likes being penetrated. In a way, Gigi embodies the 1970s type of the *maschio doppio* [double male] described by Mario Mieli. The *maschio doppio* was the label for a man who publicly passes as straight, but who engages in homosexual prostitution. Even more specifically, this individual belongs to the proletariat, but does "business" with upper-class men who, in turn, hide their sexual preferences for fear of social stigma.⁴⁵ Maraini's Gigi is a *sottoproletario*

⁴⁵ Si tratta dei 'maschi doppi' e di tutti quegli eterosessuali di sesso maschile che, malgrado affermino costantemente la loro eterosessualità, hanno piuttosto di frequente o addirittura in continuazione rapporti omosessuali. Molti di questi *maschi* vivono ai margini del 'mondo omosessuale' in senso stretto, di cui divengono e—spesso —i *boia*: sono le 'marchette,' i 'ragazzi di vita,' ovvero tutti i giovani proletari che si prostituiscono ai gay e che i giornalisti del capitale (e delle sinistre del capitale, soprattutto) chiamano oggi 'sottoproletari,' per evitare di riconoscere nelle loro azioni e nel loro 'stile di vita' un'espressione specifica del *proletariato* soggiogato dal sistema...Il sistema li frega doppiamente: infatti, oltre a castrarli fin dalla nascita economicamente e socialmente, dà loro gratificazioni palliative legate al privilegio fallico, gratificazioni che li inducono a comportarsi in modo funzionale al dominio del capitale. (Mieli 164). [There are many other homosexuals far more repressed as far as their homosexuality goes, and particularly their homosexuality. These include the 'double males' and all those male heterosexuals who have often had, or still have, homosexual relations, even while constantly maintaining their heterosexuality. Many of them live at the margins of the homosexual 'world' proper, on which they become parasites and—often—executioner. These are the hustlers, or all those working-class youths who act as prostitutes to gay men, and whom the journalists of capital (and its left-wing in particular) class as sub-proletarian so as to avoid recognizing in their actions and 'lifestyle' a specific expression of the proletariat in thrall to the system...the system cheats

and a *maschio doppio* whose sexual activity is both a form of sexual diversion, and one of the ways in which the men, who are “socially and economically castrated,” to use Mario Mieli’s expression, can make their living. In the prostitution activity of the *maschio doppio* the economic component displaces and covers homoerotic desire.

Like Gigi, Santino and Orio have taken turns with the old man, but the fact that Santino has made lots of money may suggest that he has accepted to being penetrated, an act that can earn up to twenty thousand lire. Playing the “feminine” is more lucrative, a reason why the hustlers are willing to accept such erotic position. Orio admits that he himself has allowed the German man to penetrate him. In his case, though, the brothers use this episode to tease him about his presumed lack of virility; they then coerce him into having intercourse with a German female tourist so that he can prove he is a real man. As Orio cannot get it up, he gains the reputation of the impotent among his brothers. The brothers’ response to Orio’s presumed lack of virility mirrors the gender education they have received in the family. Their father says of Orio that he is “lay about” and “good-for-nothing,” (*Woman* 30) like his mother. From his first appearance in the novel, Orio is feminized: in the house he is the only male son who helps out with domestic tasks that usually fall to his mother. Peppino Pizzocane uses Orio’s resemblance to his mother only to discredit his young son while, by contrast, he cherishes the other brothers who follow in his footsteps and embody a different form of virility. The fact that Orio needs to “prove” his virility to his brothers through a “test” is the result of a gender education that has very dramatic consequences for the brothers’ attitude. Obsessed with proving their own virility, they assault a woman who is bathing in the sea and rape her. Virility is therefore

them in two ways. Besides castrating them economically and socially right from birth, it gives them palliative gratifications that lead them to behave in a way that is functional to the role of capital (150).]

associated, in the father and the brothers' view, with abuse and violence against women, the "feminine," or the queer.

Orio's confession to Vannina assumes a strategic purpose in the novel that plays out in the complex relation between desire and masculinity: on the one hand, the confession uses the hidden world of male homoeroticism to disclose the social reality of male prostitution; on the other hand, it emphasizes the tension between contrasting models of masculinity, a patriarchal violent one and a queer domestic one. It also shows that these two types of masculinity can coexist, and that queer masculinity can silently emerge within the frame of a more violent virility which contains it through repression. But queer masculinity does not necessarily undermine the status of violent virility insofar as it remains a private issue, and never becomes a political tool.

Vannina's Pederasty and Sexual Pedagogy

Very different is the function that Vannina's secret encounters with Orio play. She meets him during a dinner at Santino's house and from that moment on she will feel strangely attracted to this figure of a boy who is not quite a man yet. Vannina is immediately struck by Orio's resemblance to one of her male students, Fidelio. Orio is a solitary teenager who does not like school so much and who tries to earn some money by selling old comics and, as I discussed above, through prostitution. He is sick with a disease that doctors cannot name, an element that adds to the mysterious allure of the character. Once Vannina accidentally comes across Orio on the street and the boy offers to help with her groceries. The occasion is the pretext for a seduction initiated by Vannina. In this occasion Vannina shows a different side of herself, that of an active seducer, a quality that is in striking contrast to her submissive sexual attitude with Giacinto: "L'ho preso per mano e l'ho portato dietro la tenda, sul letto ...L'ho spogliato. Gli ho fatto saltare con un colpo il berretto di lana blu. Gli ho

sfibbiato la cintura dalle grosse borchie d'oro" (102). [I took his hand and led him behind the curtain to the bed. I undressed him. With a flick I knocked off his blue woollen beret. I unbuckled his belt with his gold studs (104-105).] Orio makes no attempt to resist Vannina's seduction and instead let himself be led by Vannina's expert hands. Vannina's and Orio's erotic encounter provides the frame for another encounter, that of Orio with the German pederast, which Orio recalls in this occasion. The intertwining of these two narratives offers an insight into Vannina's experience of gender and sexuality, an experience which I would not hesitate to define as queer because it inscribes a woman's desire through the modality of queer masculine desire and viceversa.

Unlike the encounter with the German man, here Orio is the object of seduction and lets himself be played upon. In both cases Orio is taking the passive position, but what is interesting is that Vannina's position in the role of the seducer turns her into an active subject of eroticism. Pederasty is an erotic expression that grants the sexual agency and pleasure denied to her within her marriage. But since pederasty in the novel is also generally associated with queer men, the nt novel suggests that Vannina appropriates a queer masculine form of eroticism in order to discover her sexual agency as a woman. While Orio's passive erotic bent with the German man is publicly derided by his brothers, it acquires here a different connotation in light of Vannina's growing sexual awareness.

There is yet another subversive aspect to Vannina's pederasty, an aspect that markedly differentiates Vannina's seduction from male pederastic prostitution. Interestingly, the episode of Orio's seduction takes place in Vannina's house. Vannina is aware that Giacinto may show up at any minute. In spite of this possibility, she continues her work of seduction, even hoping that her husband will

come back. But Orio leaves right before Giacinto's return. As Giacinto comes back from his daily fishing, Vannina challenges him by confessing that she has just made love to Orio, which upsets Giacinto because, he states, he does not want to know anything about what is going on with Vannina: "Con la verità mi ci pulisco il culo, non mi va di essere tirato per i capelli in questo amore che non capisco e non voglio capire, possibile che non hai un po' di pudore" (104). [Stuff that up your arse. Don't drag me into this affair of yours. I don't understand it and don't want to understand it. Haven't you even a little bit of shame? (106).] Giacinto is bothered not so much by the fact that Vannina has made love to a boy, but rather by Vannina's lack of discretion ("un po' di pudore") with regard to sexual matters. She takes further advantage of the situation to tell her husband what is wrong with their own relationship: "E il sesso? Noi due facciamo l'amore così male insieme...tu quando fai l'amore pensi solo a te, di me te ne fregghi; Orio con tutto che è un ragazzino, ha avuto più attenzione per me" (104). [What about sex? You and me make love so badly together...when you make love you only think of yourself, you don't give a damn about me. In spite of being only a boy Orio showed me more consideration than you ever do (106).] Repeating Suna's argument, but making it her own this time, Vannina confronts her husband about the nature of their love, pointing out the inadequacies of their relationship.

Vannina's encounter with Orio and its confession have then the effect of revealing the dysfunctional character of the marital couple. Unable to defend himself against Vannina's "truth," Giacinto hits her using violence to reinforce his threatened authority. Giacinto's reaction is only the sign that Vannina has struck a chord. Although he comes back to hug her, his aggressive reaction shows that Vannina's revelation has somehow destabilized his assumptions about marriage and marital

relationships. Giacinto's vulnerability surfaces in relation to Vannina's argumentation, revealing a sense of threat that Giacinto feels in his position as husband and as authority within the family.

This episode also differentiates the meaning of Vannina's pederastic seduction from that of the old German man. Whereas for the male pederast, prostitution is an outlet for queer desires that are socially unacceptable, for Vannina, pederasty becomes a form of outright protest against the dissatisfying role of woman and wife. In this respect, Vannina's pederasty has something in common with Suna's coming out as a lesbian in that both are forms of denunciation of gender and sexual oppression and exploitation. Vannina's and Suna's queer embodiments (as a pederast and a lesbian) are strategic moments in which women speak up and break with the silence that preserves and even encourages oppression. An episode preceding Suna's coming out portrays Vannina dealing with an appalling case of gender violence in her classroom. A group of young men immobilizes a female schoolmate as they mime a scene of rape:

Due bambini tenevano Maria Stella per i piedi e per le braccia, mentre altri due le erano montati sopra. Uno se ne stava sdraiato su di lei e si torceva in mosse ridicole ed esagerate, spingendo avanti e indietro il sedere...L'altro stava a cavalcioni sul collo della bambina in modo che i suoi pantaloncini andassero a schiacciare la faccia di lei. Si dimenava, rosso e sudato gridando: Succhia succhia puttana. (255-256)

[Two boys were holding her (Maria Stella) by the feet and arms while two others had climbed on top of her. One was sprawled on top of her, wriggling with ridiculous, exaggerated movements, pushing his bottom back and forth... the other was astride the little girl's neck so that his shorts were pressed against her face. He too was wriggling, red in the face and sweating, and as he wriggled he was shouting: "Suck it, go on, suck it, you whore. (268-269)]

Although this violence is far from being an isolated episode in the novel, what this particular passage strongly puts forth is that violence is a behavior based on imitation. The kids reproduce attitudes that they have witnessed and that are culturally

embedded, as the novel suggests elsewhere (for instance in the sexual assault that Orio's brothers carry out). The fact that it is an imitation does not diminish its gravity. What is equally disturbing is also the response of Maria Stella who comes out of the assault "sorridente e compiaciuta" (256) [gleeful and satisfied (269)] after Vannina has intervened to separate the boys from the girl. Maria Stella's reaction is evidence of the extent to which certain gendered behaviors are unconsciously encoded and taken as normal, something we have seen at play in Vannina's attitudes. Perhaps Vannina identifies with Maria Stella, a good enough reason for her to take the staging of rape as a motivation for a sex education lesson. Calm, but determined, Vannina explains the meaning of the word "stupro" (rape) and ask the girls in the class to explain the passivity of Maria Stella's and the other female schoolmates vis-à-vis the male assault: "Non sarà perché pensano che i maschi hanno diritto di fare queste cose?" (257). [Was it perhaps because they think the boys have a right to do these things? (270).] To which the girls cannot but answer that this is the way boys do things with girls sexually: the former always dominate and the latter are subdued ("la femmina fa la donna e sta sotto, il maschio fa l'omo e sta sopra") (257). [The girl does the woman and stays underneath, and the boy does the man and stays on top and fucks her (270).] As this exchange unravels, the girls mix up the meaning of love, sex roles, and domination, showing that they are far more sensitive to gender role expectations than to feelings.

The girls' attitude mirrors Vannina's acquiescence to gender expectations in the beginning of the novel. There it is Suna who questions Vannina's acceptance of gender norms and behaviors within marriage. Now empowered, Vannina highlights the importance of feelings and of love: "L'amore è una cosa che si fa in due, con dolcezza, con tenerezza, senza prepotenze e tutti e due devono essere contenti" (257-

58). [Love is something that two people share with gentleness, with tenderness, and without bullying, and both people should be happy (270-71).] Vannina teaches her students the value of love as an act that gives mutual pleasure and happiness. This pedagogy of love adds a nuance to her own practice of pederasty as if her seduction of Orio was indeed one way for her to love Orio and to teach him a lesson of love that opposes the violent lessons of his brothers on sex and virility. Vannina's pederasty is at once a form of pedagogy and an act of love—as ancient pederasty between men was. In this perspective Vannina's relation to Orio is germane to that of Giacinto and Santino. In both, erotic desires have a nurturing effect and a pedagogical value.

A Lesbian Embrace: Queering Maternal Nurture

Suna's lesbianism and Vannina's pederasty provide a frame for re-reading the final dream of *Donna in guerra* and also for reinterpreting two acts that mark the end of the novel: Suna's suicide following her expulsion from the political group, and Vannina's abortion. Both are, in a way, forms of expulsion. The fact that they are closely situated in the text gestures at a possible connection. Yet such a connection would be problematic in that it could cast Suna symbolically as Vannina's unwanted foetus. This is not what the novel suggests, I think. Rather, with Suna's expulsion (also the one self-inflicted through suicide) Maraini takes an exclusionary act and turns it into a constructive moment of critique and denunciation. We may say that the narrative inscription of abortion plays a similar function. For it stages how a woman's body, surviving a very dramatic experience, can become a site of reconstruction and regeneration, which in turn opens up a whole new discourse of womanhood. This transformation acquires symbolic significance in the narration of Vannina's second dream, which occurs in between Suna's suicide and Vannina's

abortion. Suna's suicide is also the trigger of the dream as Vannina has fallen into a deep state of depression following the loss of her friend.

The woman dreams that her body takes a flight from the ground becoming lighter and lighter ["ho sognato di volare," "il corpo leggero e contratto," (265)]. The flight is soon interrupted by an abrupt and vertiginous fall:

Ero presa dalla vertigine ed ecco di colpo perdevo le forze. Cominciava la caduta. Cercavo disperatamente di rimanere a galla ma il corpo rotolava irrefrenabilmente verso terra, la gola stretta, il ventre sconvolto. (266)

[Then all of a sudden I lost my strength, the air offered no more support beneath my body. My fall started, I could feel myself being sucked down towards the earth by a piercing force. My body plunged to the ground, my throat tightened and my stomach churned. (279)]

One cannot help seeing in this flight Vannina's desire to break free from a material condition that encumbers her (clearly her pregnancy) as a force that pulls her obstinately to the ground. Vannina falls back into the ground with a ravaged belly ["ventre sconvolto"], an image that recalls the idea of abortion, which Vannina is about to undergo.⁴⁶ Moreover, Vannina's traumatic fall suggests not only pain, but literally a comatose state bordering death:

Ho urtato contro la terra dura, fangosa. Sono rimasta lì immobile, svenuta. Ero morta. Avevo le membra a pezzi, il sangue si spargeva attorno a me. Ero senza occhi, senza bocca, disfatta. Ma qualcosa continuava a vivere. Ho provato a tirare il fiato. Ce la facevo ero salva. (266)

[I hit the hard muddy ground. I lay there motionless, unconscious. I was dead. My limbs were in pieces, my blood spread around me. I had no eyes, no mouth, I was crushed, destroyed, wiped out of existence. But something was still alive. I tried to draw breath. I could. I was safe. (279)]

Vannina's dream becomes here a tale of survival, the story of a body that finds itself alive amidst blood and destruction. The dream is revelatory for Vannina who wakes up and finds the courage to have the abortion. Seeing abortion from the point of view

⁴⁶ I think that here a literal translation of "ventre" would be more appropriate given the fact that what encumbers Vannina is her pregnant belly.

of survival may give us a different insight into understanding the second part of Vannina's dream, in which Suna reappears.

Suna comes into the dream after Vannina has fallen and has survived, in order to give her friend her crutches as a sign of support. While reaching to the crutches, Vannina also receives from her friend another unexpected gift:

Volevo baciarla per ringraziarla...Mi sono chinata, ma al posto della sua faccia ho trovato il suo sesso: una conchiglia bianca di marmo all'interno rosso, palpitante. Dalla conchiglia sgorgava un fiotto di latte dolcissimo. Ho accostato le labbra; ho bevuto di quel latte che sapeva di alghe marine e bevendo sentivo che mi riempivo di di forza, di coraggio. (266)

[I wanted to kiss her to thank her...I bent down but instead of her I found her sex: a white marble shell with a red pulsing interior. From the shell poured out a stream of very sweet milk. I brought my lips close to it: I drank some of that milk which tasted of seaweed, and as I drank I felt it was filling me up with strength, with courage. (280)]

As she approaches Suna to kiss her, Vannina actually finds her vulva. She begins sucking milk from it in a striking image that collapses a lesbian cunnilingus with a nurturing act. Whereas several critics have seen in it a metaphor of maternal nourishment, it appears to me rather as an allegory that displaces the topos of breastfeeding and maternal nurture. Milk does not come from the traditional source of maternal nurture, the breasts, but it pours like vaginal secretions from the sexual organ of another woman. The vaginal secretions, fluid of pleasure, are a counterpoint to the blood gushing from Vannina's uterus during the "raschiamento" as the fluid of pain. Rhetorically then we can see a shift from the uterus, symbolizing womanhood through maternity, to the vulva, symbolizing womanhood through sexuality. Moreover, the site of nourishment is displaced from breasts to vulva. The nurturing figure and nourishment itself are also different: Suna is the nurturing figure and the

fact that she identifies herself in queer ways has also some queer implications for the way we look at the substance that nourishes Vannina.⁴⁷

After sipping Suna's nourishing liquid, Vannina feels reinvigorated and ready to get up and walk on her feet: "Poi ho puntato le grucce contro le ascelle; mi sono alzata. Le mie spalle gracili erano diventate robuste, sicure. E camminavo, senza gambe, andavo avanti leggera" (267). [Then I thrust the crutches under my armpits: I stood up. My frail shoulders had become sturdy and I found myself walking without my legs, walking alone lightly without any strain (280).] Vannina wakes up with the impression that her body is now lighter and freer. That sensation, in contrast with the initial sensation of heaviness, will accompany her through the choice of abortion and later of separation from Giacinto. Lightness is already the mark of a new Vannina, liberated at once from an unwanted pregnancy and from the ties of a relationship she finds more dutiful than pleasurable. Although painful and dramatic, abortion is nonetheless the foundational moment of Vannina's agency and autonomy. "Ora sono sola e ho tutto da ricominciare" (269) [I am alone and I must start everything again from the beginning (282),] says Vannina to herself, shutting the door to Giacinto and to her previous life. As Elisabetta Properzi Nelsen points out, abortion provides Vannina with an opportunity for self-affirmation. In Vannina's choice of abortion resides the moment of her liberation and self-creation. Although Vannina has elsewhere shown that she can make choices of her own in her life (for instance in the relationship with Orio, in the sexuality class, in the trip to Naples) abortion seems the very event that proves once and for all that Vannina is the agent in her own life. On this point, Nelsen writes, "It is as though the writer saw in the decision to have an

⁴⁷ Suna does not of course use the word *queer*, but she certainly embodies a queer language throughout the novel by means of her bisexual identifications, her lesbian life-style, and her disability.

abortion one of her protagonists' few opportunities for self-affirmation as *authors*,⁴⁸ and she shows that in it is in the decision not to reproduce that Vannina can recreate herself (88). For this critic, Vannina's abortion is emblematic of how a woman can create a new language for herself by starting from a bodily experience, just as Hélène Cixous theorized in *Le rire de la Méduse*. Nelsen devotes her article to the analysis of Maraini's *écriture féminine* and she inserts her into the tradition of those French writers and intellectuals who used writing to affirm a woman's sense of autonomy and authorship. However, Nelsen embraces the concept of *écriture féminine* quite uncritically in the case of Maraini and the French writers, even attributing it to a thinker like Wittig who was overtly against sexual difference and *écriture féminine*. Her reading has the unfortunate consequence of eliciting, without naming it, a queer component (deconstruction of reproduction) of these narratives only to push it aside in favor of an exclusive feminist frame.

In the texts of Annie Ernaux and of Dacia Maraini, abortion provides a narrative moment of rupture from a traditional notion of mothering. The queer nature of this rupture is differently characterized in each text. In Ernaux's testimony the queer dimension comes from the re-writing of abortion which allows Ernaux to take control over her body and reaffirm agency through narration. Moreover, the narration of abortion consists of a shift from procreation to creation, a transposition which reconfirms Ernaux as a writer through the socially and culturally destabilizing image of the matricide. In *Donna in guerra* the aborting body of Vannina engenders a new language of self-affirmation that is inscribed through the symbolic and material shift that Suna and Vannina's embrace represent. This new language departs from traditional maternity which the uterus symbolizes. Hence the language that permeates

⁴⁸ Italics are mine.

Vannina's diary makes of the diary not so much a space governed by heterosexual procreation, as one characterized by the queer creations which the vulva symbolizes. If abortion is the transformative event that affects Vannina's language, queer abortion seems an adequate definition to refer to the discursive production of bodies that re-conceptualize mothering and nurturing as queer. What Maraini offers is a radical reformulation of mothering and nurture that responds on the one hand to Wittig's exhortation to relinquish procreation as the female creative act that inscribes the category "woman;" on the other hand, it rereads and problematizes mothering as exclusively female and heterosexual. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow points us to the cultural assumption that only women can mother, the view that women want to mother and that men are excluded from mothering based on a link between gender and lactation. However, this association results in an exclusion of other nurturing possibilities, such as women's fathering or men's mothering, that are per se already queer. Vannina's dream is constructed around the link between women and breast-feeding, except that this connection is subverted to describe a new and powerful symbolization of gender and mothering. As the dream seems to suggest, the transition from the uterus to the vulva symbolizes and prefigures a different way of embodying nurture which is not exclusive to women, and does not follow a straight line from mother to daughter. Rather, it includes men (Giacinto's homoerotic bond), lesbians (Suna's bond with Vannina), or even allows for a reinscription of woman's nurture in queer masculine terms as in Vannina's female pederasty. These queer subjectivities provide powerful readings into pressing issues of prostitution and class, of gender and sexual oppression, and of social constructions of violent virility. They should help us see Maraini's writing not exclusively as a form of feminist or feminine writing, but also as a fundamentally queer writing in its subversion of

heteronormative structures and its inscription into abortion and non-reproductive sexuality.

Finally, the notion of queer nurture as developed in Maraini's text gestures to the development of a discourse and a practice of Italian feminism first through the feminist collectives in the 1970s and *autocoscienza*, and later through the *pratica dell'inconscio* and entrustment. My next chapter will problematize the practice of *autocoscienza* and the socio-symbolic experience of female-to female bonds as a homoerotic and socially-segregated form of nurturing experimented in the group of *Rivolta Femminile* and theorized in Carla Lonzi's diary.

CHAPTER II
**The Clitoris Diaries: Symbolic Excision and Female Sexual Autonomy in 1970s
Italian Radical Feminism**

Il femminismo mi si è presentato come lo sbocco possibile tra le alternative simboliche della condizione femminile, la prostituzione e la clausura: riuscire a vivere senza vendere il proprio corpo e senza rinunciarvi, ritrovare una completezza, un'identità contro una civiltà maschile che l'aveva già resa irraggiungibile.

[Feminism appeared to me as the possible outlet among the symbolic alternatives of the feminine condition, the prostitute and the nun: managing to live without selling one's own body or without renouncing it, finding a sense of plenitude and of identity against a masculine civilization that has made it unattainable.]

□Carla Lonzi, *È già politica* (1977)

Donna in guerra ends with the powerful image of a sexual embrace between two women which, I argue is a queer rereading of maternal nurture between two women. This embrace in its allusion to queer nurture seems to prefigure the homosocial practice of women's groups in the 1970s whose main goal was to provide women with the emotional, psychological, and social support that the traditional family could no longer provide. In talking about women's groups Maraini uses the metaphor of the "ventre materno" (womb) as if the affective bonds that women developed and nurtured within groups were a form of protection reminiscent of the symbiotic bond between mother and child. Yet Maraini also notes that the refuge women found within groups, and in the company of other women, was not based on a given or spontaneous form of solidarity. Solidarity needed to be built and the group experience was hardly ever harmonious and consolatory:

Molte donne chiedono al gruppo o al collettivo in cui militano di farsi “ventre materno”, rifugio, grotta. Ma la grotta in cui ci si ripara risulta in realtà animate da fantasmi crudeli. “La solidarietà è tutta da costruire, non nasce bell’e fatta solo perché siamo donne.” Insomma il gruppo non dà consolazione ma scontro, consapevolezza, malessere. La presa di coscienza è spinosa e difficile. (*La bionda* 86)

[Many women expect the groups and the collectives in which they are political activists to become womb, refuge, shelter. But the refuge in which women find a shelter is eventually filled with cruel phantasms. “Solidarity must be completely built, it is not a given simply because we are women.” In the end the group does not give consolation, but confrontation, awareness and *malaise*. Consciousness-raising is a thorny and difficult issue.]

This chapter explores the difficulty and ambivalence of women’s bonds in the feminist groups as recalled through the personal diary and the theoretical work of Carla Lonzi, the leader of a radical feminist group known as *Rivolta Femminile*. Her narratives are articulated around the theme of the rediscovery of the clitoris as an allegory of the rediscovery of sexual pleasure and the creation of an all-feminine space of socio-sexual autonomy. This space reveals itself as a much more complex site of negotiation for Lonzi and her comrades and one that led Lonzi to identify the limits of the identitarian claims—what she calls feminine authenticity—in the formative Italian years of feminism and of female collectives.

Rediscovering Sexual Autonomy through Women’s Bonds

One fascinating way 1970s feminists performed a cultural critique of sexuality was by reinventing a language of their own which was utterly physical and conveyed the urgency of bodily discovery. They started imagining their bodies from the sites where they were negated and they reclaimed sexual organs as a way to express their renewed sense of self. The process of reinventing language and bodies took several forms such as journals, manifestos, diaries, pamphlets, novels, theatrical pieces, and even song collections. There exists an online corpus of “canzonieri femministi”

(feminist song collections), whose rich and varied repertory reveals the most pressing issues for women and feminists at the time.⁴⁹ Among them are abortion, motherhood, mother-daughter relations and even prostitution. One song, in particular, caught my attention: “La leggenda di Clotiride” (The legend of Clotiris). If one happens to misread this title, like I did, it is probably not coincidental. It is perhaps one of those Freudian slips that make us say inadvertently what we did not mean to or simply what we cannot say. It is not merely a failure of reading, but a failure of consciousness that suddenly releases something hidden or veiled within oneself. Who knows if Fufi, the anonymous woman who composed the lyrics had not intentionally played with the word, precisely to produce such unforeseen effect?⁵⁰

In the 1970s Fufi was part of the *Movimento Romano Femminista*, a movement that, in her view, had been the only one to develop a mature discourse on female homosexuality and support the idea that feminist discourse and lesbian discourse were intersecting.⁵¹ When interviewed by two French feminists, Maryvonne Lapouge and Michèle Causse, she preferred not to disclose her identity. After I read her story and heard the song I kept thinking of her as the mysterious “*donna clitoridea*,” the woman of the clitoris who, as she herself explains, was uncomfortable with speeches. She nonetheless expressed herself by writing songs

⁴⁹ Some of the titles and the lyrics can be found online at www.ildeposito.org/archivio/canti. The repertory of lyrics constitutes the feminist soundtrack through which women performed their own stories or accompanied their public protests. A quick glance at some of the titles tells us the nature and the extent of women’s engagement with their condition of oppression (“*Cara Madre*”/“Dear Mother”, “*Aborto Sacrificio*”/“Abortion Sacrifice,” “*Onirica*”/ “Oniric,” “*Il Complesso*”/ “The Complex,” “*Prostituzione*”/ “Prostitution”).

⁵⁰ The woman’s story figures in a collection of French interviews conducted by Maryvonne Lapouge and Michèle Causse with Italian feminists. The French feminists put together this collection as they felt that voices of Italian feminists or Italian women writers were still unheard and unknown among other European women. Interestingly French women then partially became the vehicle for the cultural spread of Italian feminism.

⁵¹ “Nous parlons avec autant d’aisance de l’avortement que de notre homosexualité. Après tout le discours porte sur la sexualité non reproductrice toujours discriminée, mise au pilori” (Lapouge and Causse 424). [We talk about abortion as freely as we do about homosexuality. After all both discourses are about non-reproductive sexuality which is always discriminated against and ridiculed.]

and becoming the official lyricist of a Roman feminist group.⁵² Fufi tells the interviewers that the song was quite controversial at the time among men and women. If it gained the attention of the national press as a song “qui exaspère les hommes” [that upsets men (Lapouge and Causse 422),] it also created discomfort among the same feminists who felt ashamed. Why was this song so shameful? The song tells the story of Clotiris, a creature in between a goddess and a flower who lived in the woods and used to know bliss and be moved to tears by it. Suddenly she fell asleep and remained in a state of unconsciousness for a long time (“Elle connut un long sommeil douloureux/On l’enferma, on interdit la porte à son tendre amour.”/ “She went through a long and painful period of sleep/Love was forbidden to her.”) During this time a lot of babies were born, but their lives, bereft of love, ended up spoiling Clotiris’s woods. Until the day in which Clotiris was brought back back to life and consciousness by a woman’s blissful kiss that gave her back that pleasure she has long forgotten.

As we read through the lyrics, Clotiris unmistakably represents the clitoris, and her story is an allegory of the rediscovery of women’s pleasure through the encounter with a woman.⁵³ Interestingly, during the rehearsal of the song, one of the

⁵² In the interview, the woman confesses that writing and performing songs was a way to break the silence, and to deal with her own discomfort with words and speech.

⁵³ Following is the full text of the song of which I am reporting the French translation included in the work of Maryvonne Lapouge and Michèle Causse on Italian feminist writers, thinkers and activists: La légende de Clotiris raconte [The legend tells that]
 Que la jeune fille était mi-déesse mi-fleur [Clotiris was a young girl half-goddess and half-flower]
 Certains croyaient en elle voir l’orchidée [Some thought that she was an orchid]
 D’autres juraient qu’elle avait la couleur de l’azalée. [Some others swore that she had the colors of an azalea.]
 Elle vivait dans un bois au creux d’un buisson [She used to live in a bush in the middle of the woods]
 Entre de morbides parois d’herbe aux chantres [Sheltered by soft walls of grass]
 Elle ne buvait que l’eau de l’amour [She used to drink only love water]
 Avec qui savait la lui offrir. [From who could offer it to her.]
 Chaque fois qu’elle s’abandonnait à la joie [Each time she would experience bliss]
 Chaque fois qu’elle fronçait les sourcils [Each time she would frown]
 Perlaient des gouttes de rosée colorées [Pink-colored drops fell like beads]

male sound technicians called Fufi up to ask her to repeat the song. He mistakenly called the song “the song of the thyroid,” a fact that Fufi explained with the cultural shame surrounding the “clitoris” and any other explicit reference to women’s sexuality and bodies. The question and the quest of pleasure and sexual autonomy permeated women’s language at the time. It transformed the way women talked about themselves and their bodies. The feminist journal *Effe* which appeared between 1973 and 1982 often featured women’s popular slogans regarding issues of abortion, contraception and sexuality. The use of body punctuated women’s slogans (written and chanted) such as “col dito, orgasmo garantito” [sure pleasure with fingers.] Body language and gestures would also emphasize oral expression. Some of the slogans became controversial, like Fufi’s song on the clitoris and were criticized in national newspapers and magazines. The reason for such controversial responses was that slogans were breaking through a traditional association between female sexual organs and social taboos and as a consequence they were deemed vulgar or inappropriate even among some women.⁵⁴ Social and linguistic taboos surrounding sexuality

Et l’air résonnait de douces mélodies [And the air was filled with sweet melodies]
 Mais comme dans toutes les fables [But as in every fairy tale]
 Le bonheur aussi, à ce qu’on dit, déserta Clotiris [We are told that Happiness abandoned Clotiris]
 Elle connut un long sommeil douloureux [Who fell into a long painful sleep]
 On l’enferma, on interdit la porte à son tendre amour. [She was imprisoned, and her tender love was forbidden to see her]
 A l’insu de Clotiris naquirent des millions d’enfants [Clitoris ignored that millions of babies were born
 Qui tous étaient égaux [They were all the same]
 Qui tous manquaient d’amour [All loveless]
 Et poussés par la fureur ils abîmèrent son bois [Filled with anger, they spoiled Clotiris’s wood]
 Mais le doux baiser d’une femme [But the sweet kiss of a woman]
 Venue sûrement de la lune [Coming from the moon]
 Fit fondre en un long abandon sa longue souffrance [caused Clotiris to leave behind her sorrow]
 Et le vent chanta à nouveau l’amour [And Wind whistled the song of love once again]
 Ce baiser, elle s’en souvint à jamais [Clotiris for ever recalled that embrace]
 Et se mirant dans un croissant de lune, [And while looking up at the crescent moon]
 Elle le raconta aux étoiles qui en devinrent plus éclatantes, [she told it to the stars that became brighter]
 Elle le raconta à la vie qui se mit à reflourir. [She told it to Life that began flourishing again.]

⁵⁴ In one issue of *Effe* (3:1975) a contributor raises the question of the discomfort that the use of the word “uterus” created. The contributor stresses that male members of collectives and social

interested Italian feminists, right around the time in which the Shere Hite Report began to circulate in the United States.⁵⁵ The Hite Report, like no other work before, helped to disentangle some enduring myths about female sexuality while emphasizing the existence and the importance of female pleasure, hitherto uncharted territory. The Hite Report, based on survey on sexuality across the US, came as a shocking revelation and its success went beyond US borders. It was translated and edited in Italy by major editor Bompiani in 1977.

Before its appearance in Italy, radical feminist Carla Lonzi had detected the problem of understanding women's pleasure and sexuality in a culture that "mantiene ferma l'interdizione del clitoride" [maintains a taboo on the clitoris (*Sputiamo* 72)]. This prohibition, explains Lonzi in her *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1970) is the symbolic act of placing a taboo on the clitoris by misrecognizing it as an autonomous sexual organ. The clitoral taboo is responsible for producing a cultural denial that hinders women's access to sexual pleasure outside of penetration and therefore outside of reproduction. In response to the cultural denial of women's sexuality some feminists, belonging to the radical group *Rivolta Femminile* led by Carla Lonzi, began calling each other "donne clitoridee" (clitoral women or women of the clitoris). Naming other women by their clitorises sealed a crucial moment of women's recognition of their common

movements thought this word should only be used scientifically and saw no link between it and the notion of maternity. The contributor ironically points out that perhaps the same men would have had no problem in seeing slogans such as "it's my penis and I use it as I please" because such affirmation would have been self-evident at the time, at least for some.

⁵⁵ In 1972, US sociologist Shere Hite shook the world with her report which, for the first time, debunked all myths surrounding female sexuality, namely that women orgasm through penetration. One of the aims of the report, as Hite highlighted in the 2004 edition, was indeed to show that "it is not that women have a problem sexually, but that society has a problem accepting and understanding women's sexuality" (Hite 12). Hite's biggest contribution was in presenting sexuality not as biological, but as socially and culturally constructed through the proliferation of myths. Hite had also the merit of showing that different performances of sexuality existed besides coitus and that "the constant glamourization of the vagina" was nothing but the "a resistance towards a redefinition of sex called for by women." (13)

social and sexual oppression and the start of a process of consciousness-raising that would empower them as autonomous subjects. Interestingly, Lonzi defined the cultural erasure of women's sexuality with the term "clitoridectomy." The same term is used by Dacia Maraini to indicate a denial of women's autonomy, and the intimate link between pleasure and autonomy. The recognition of the right to pleasure, explains Maraini to Ileana Montini "significa sottrazione all'autorità maritale, fraterna patriarcale" (118) [it means to withdraw from marital, fraternal and patriarchal authority]. The term "clitoridectomy" is, however, too controversial because of the implications it has assumed for non-Western feminists in the analysis of actual genital excision.⁵⁶ Suffice it to say that Third World feminists have largely criticized the ways Western feminists conceive of clitoridectomy as a concrete practice of genital cutting. In particular, according to some Africanists, Western feminists often casts clitoridectomy as a culturally and geographically remote practice that encourage the perpetuation of pernicious binaries such as "modern" vs. "traditional."

Talking about clitoridectomy is as delicate as it is important in the context of 1970s Italian feminism. As Maraini acknowledges, this phenomenon may not be that culturally remote, after all, for those Italian feminists; it can help one make sense of the cultural context in which a new sexual consciousness emerged. In this chapter I investigate how clitoridectomy was performed at a symbolic level in Italian sexual culture. This symbolic practice, which I am redefining through the term of

⁵⁶ In the introduction to the anthology called *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood* Stanlie James and Claire Robertons aim to dispel Western misconceptions surrounding the controversial practice of female genital cutting, which has too often resulted in a colonialist construction of the practice and its related culture. The authors warn readers about the variety of practices that the term "clitoridectomy" too generically conceals and the different geographical locations in which it is performed, including Western countries. They explain for instance that clitoridectomy is also referred to as infulation or excision according to the portion of female genitalia removed. It can go from the tips of the clitoris to include the labia majora and minora. Such operation is accompanied by different cultural motivations.

“discursive excision” became the ground for a feminist response to the sexist culture of the 1970s and the inscription of a queer feminist identity, the “*donna clitoridea*” which embodies a particular standpoint vis-à-vis heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality. My chapter is thus divided into two parts: I begin by exploring how Lonzi constructs the clitoris and the “*donna clitoridea*” against a backdrop of psychoanalytic views of female sexuality (Freud and Reich). I maintain that the most powerful use that Lonzi makes of the clitoris lies not in its discovery, but in her veiled use of the clitoris as a phallus that is as instrument of control within the communitarian experience of feminism. Of course, here the term phallus is reminiscent of the much discussed Lacanian phallus, principle of authority, dispenser of identity, but it also keeps a distance from it. The much celebrated clitoris helps more shed light on the complex power dynamics that subtended the experience of *autocoscienza* in a particular radical feminist group showing that women’s relations were, after all, not exempt from those same power dynamics. In the second half of my chapter, I deal with Lonzi’s refusal of an assimilation of radical feminism into lesbianism as the exclusive model for reading women’s sexual autonomy and female relationality. I read such a rejection as a form of feminist closeting that redefines her sexual autonomy in terms of a strategic semi-visibility. Ultimately the clitoris, apart from disclosing a new universe of female sexual autonomy, records the struggles and the tensions that women, and in particular Lonzi, had in giving voice and representing a queer subjectivity.

Autocoscienza and the Emergence of the donna clitoridea

The “*donna clitoridea*” was first and foremost a theoretical product of one trend of Italian feminism called *autocoscienza*. In spite of its theoretical nature, the “*donna clitoridea*” made its fortune beyond the female collectives. Young women

were spreading this appellation, which can also be found in a cult novel from the period, *Porci con le ali* (1975) [Pigs with Wings].⁵⁷ The protagonist of this novel participates in female collectives where women practiced *autocoscienza*, a reflective practice for which Lonzi and the women of *Rivolta Femminile* were credited. *Autocoscienza* became a privileged occasion for women to construct a space of sexual and social autonomy, a space which they deem more authentic and more faithful to their inner self. Lonzi coined the term *autocoscienza* to translate the North-American practice of consciousness-raising.

At the time in which women began *autocoscienza* Italy was equally impacted by the persistence of patriarchal values and the impact of Marxist discourses in the rising political power of the left. Those discourses, Lonzi explains, were not less traditional or less sexist. Carla Lonzi's main work, *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let's Spit on Hegel] is an engagement with the implicit sexism of Marxism. According to Lonzi, "far rientrare il problema femminile in una concezione di lotta servo-padrone quale è quella classista è un errore storico" (24) [assimilating the women's question in a master-slave narrative such as the classist narrative constitutes an historical error] since Marxism only contemplates a masculine organization of society.⁵⁸ In order to avoid such paradox it was necessary for women to envision an alternative communitarian space where they could gain a different and empowering awareness of themselves outside of traditional family roles. In *Sputiamo su Hegel* Lonzi targets the family as the main site of women's oppression.⁵⁹ In her personal diary (*Taci, anzi*

⁵⁷ In this work, a female teenager Antonia, struggling with hormones and cultural changes, calls herself "donna clitoriderea." Antonia herself takes part in *autocoscienza*, a form of consciousness-raising which represented at once an expression of political dissent and a moment of self-affirmation through self-analysis.

⁵⁸ All translations of Lonzi are mine.

⁵⁹ Lonzi instead pleads for the abolition of the institutions of marriage and family seen as the conclusive moment of women's captivity within that sexuality: "La donna è sottoposta tutta la vita alla dipendenza economica prima della famiglia del padre poi di quella del marito. Ma la sua liberazione

parla) she also points to the family as the cultural perpetrator of a code of “riservatezza” (privacy) that constrained women into domestic spaces and prevented them from making alliances with other women. Lonzi’s radical critique of the family comes after a decade of debates and struggles during which the cultural and legal notion of the family underwent significant changes.⁶⁰ *Autocoscienza* made possible a cultural transition from family to community that affected women’s social and cultural growth, but also contributed to a transformation of the notion and the experience of family as well.

The process of growth that occurred with *autocoscienza* also entailed some social and political limitations that become clear into when considered in the larger context of the women’s movements in Italy. *Autocoscienza* groups represent the first wave of 1970s Italian feminism.⁶¹ In the first wave a trend called “femminismo autonomo” coincided, in Maria Schiavo’s words, with “un modo di far political nuovo, non gerarchico, lontano dalla lotta politica” (*Liberazione* 4 Feb. 2005). [A new mode of making politics, non-hierarchical, removed from institutional political struggle.] Another slogan from the period illustrated the need for a different conception of politics which equated separatism, freedom and autonomy: “Siamo separatiste per essere autonome. Siamo autonome per essere libere” (*Effe*). [We are separatist in order to be autonomous. We are autonomous in order to be free.] Not all feminists fit this model of aggregation. Some women were at odds with separatist

non consiste nel raggiungere l’indipendenza economica, ma nel demolire quell’istituzione che l’ha resa più schiava e schiava più a lungo degli schiavi” (45). [Women’s financial dependence on the father and later the husband is a means of perpetuation of the institution that keeps women in a state of subjection. Her liberation does not consist of gaining financial independence, but of demolishing the institution that has made her more subject than slavery.]

⁶⁰ The changing landscape surrounding the family culminated in the 1975 approval of the “nuovo diritto di famiglia.” A new legislation that established the equality of husband and wife over children and family possessions. The right-wing party (Unione Democratica Italiana) won the battle to have the legal reform of the family right was approved (Riberio 269).

⁶¹ I am following Anna Rossi-Doria’s periodization of 1970s feminism.

trends as they endorsed the political agenda of governmental leftist groups in issues such as abortion. This militant feminism worked within a specific political frame and an existing discourse while “femminismo autonomo” made its own discourse, distinct from mainstream political agenda. “Femminismo autonomo” and within it, *Rivolta Femminile* made use of *autocoscienza* to reinvent its own political discourse. De Lauretis argues that *autocoscienza* left feminist thought “in a bind” due to its relatively privatized and exclusive nature. In other words, “if it valorized women’s interactions with one another and the sharing of personal experience by conferring upon the latter an unprecedented social significance and analytical power,” *autocoscienza* severed an important link with the larger world leaving unfulfilled the “need for immediate political effectivity” (*Sexual Difference* 6-7). *Autocoscienza* and separatism progressively lost their effectiveness also because of their exclusionary politics. Dacia Maraini criticized *Rivolta Femminile*, Lonzi’s radical feminist group that she deemed “asocial and mystical” (Lapouge and Causse, 38).⁶² To judge from the arguments of De Lauretis and Maraini, *autocoscienza* was just not enough to provide women with the adequate tools to act in the social and political arena. The discrepancy between the two trends of feminism and some distrust on *autocoscienza* were among the reasons why, by the late seventies, Italian feminists turned to their French sisters, in search for conceptual tools as other critics have noted. Why reject a theoretical experience of feminism to then embrace a different one? One sure thing that arises from De Lauretis’ discussion of *autocoscienza* is that it was a practice that had both a theoretical and a political value. It is therefore important to rediscover its

⁶² Maraini soon disengaged from it preferring a different form of feminist critique and engagement. Maraini saw herself as an activist, and she engaged in feminist protests, in the fight for abortion, against domestic exploitation.

political, social and theoretical relevance by examining the work that resulted from *autocoscienza* and feminist separatism.

The most interesting creation of the years of *autocoscienza* is the “*donna clitoridea*,” a theoretical figure that lies at the intersection of the theoretical, the sexual and the social. As such it seems to reflect all the characteristics of the “*pensiero autocoscienziale*.”⁶³ The theory of the “*donna clitoridea*” has also been underestimated by the same Italian critics who prefer focusing on other aspects of early feminism. For instance, there has been instead increasing attention paid to the work of Carla Lonzi, the radical feminist, the very creator of the theory of the clitoris. The renewed interest on Lonzi’s work in Italy shows that her ideas are nowadays still culturally relevant, and speak to Italian feminists more than ever before.⁶⁴ An art critic, wife, and mother of a son, Lonzi separated from her husband and abandoned her career to found the group of *Rivolta* as she embraced feminism as a cultural mission. Among the leading principles of her theory of feminism there are a few I would like to investigate in this chapter: one is Lonzi’s refusal of cultural mediation,

⁶³ Philosopher Maria Luisa Boccia uses the word “*pensiero autocoscienziale*” in her analysis of Lonzi’s “*existential*” feminism, in the book *L’io in rivolta. Pensiero e vissuto di Carla Lonzi* (1990). In the introduction Boccia defines the “*pensiero autocoscienziale*” [autocoscienza thought] as “*intreccio tra sessualità e cultura*” [intersection of sexuality and culture] recognizing in such intersection the potential and the power of *autocoscienza* for women. That singular ability of “*mettere in concetti un vissuto personale e singolare*” [transform into concepts a singular and personal experience] is the value of *autocoscienza* that “*transcende il vissuto senza disancorarsi da esso*” [transcends experience without disengage from it (8).]

⁶⁴ Critical essays on Lonzi in Italy and in the US are still very rare, the exceptions being *Non credere di avere diritti* (1987), the book of the Milan bookstore feminists, and of Maria Luisa Boccia’s monography. The Milanese feminists have made available online a few pieces concerning Lonzi’s work, reflections and conversations on Lonzi’s diary and her theoretical pamphlets. In one of these articles, Giovanna Providenti recognizes Lonzi the merit of having looked at the cultural issues of the 1970s “*su un altro piano*” [from a different standpoint.] She stresses specifically the issues of women’s sexual and cultural oppression even within the leftist ideologies, the concern with abortion and with women’s sexuality “*che va ricercata nella scoperta di una femminilità più completa e non complementare all’uomo*” (Providenti 1) [to be found in the discovery of a more complete femininity, non – complimentary with the man’s.] In Providenti’s article, the focus is not much on pinpointing a theory of self and femininity in Lonzi, but rather to reflect on the process of “*liberazione*” undertaken by Lonzi with her diary and the experience of feminism.

expressed in her uncompromising relation with masculine culture; the other is her claim to have discovered a feminine authenticity crystallized in the notion of “*donna clitoridea*.” Lonzi deploys those ideas, and in particular the notion of authenticity, in two kinds of work, the theory and the diary. It is therefore important to understand the “*donna clitoridea*” both as the construction of Lonzi’s theoretical writing and as the embodied product of her personal accounts of women’s subjectivity and relationality.

A Fiction of Self: the *donna clitoridea* between Diary and Theory

Lonzi’s diary entitled *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* [*Be quiet, rather speak, a feminist diary*] was edited by *Rivolta Femminile*. It documents Lonzi’s experience of feminism during and after the period of *autocoscienza*, covering a time frame that goes from 1972 to 1977. In her diary, Lonzi recalls not only the relational experience with other women, but also her past years in Catholic boarding school, her upbringing, her problematic relationships with her sister and her mother, her maternal experience, her abortion, her intellectual and artistic life, and the relationships she had with different women and men, above all Simone. Dreams and poems complement the daily accounts accompanying the phases of her work and thought, which were prematurely interrupted by Lonzi’s death due to cancer in 1982 at age 51. The diary is also interspersed with mentions of Lonzi’s reading. Among them are several references to the writings of the mystic Santa Teresa de Avila and the diaries of Anaïs Nin. Lonzi’s diary is a crucial document as it portrays the simultaneous emergence of Lonzi’s consciousness and the multiple and discordant voices of the women who participated with her in the making of a female community. Lonzi’s diary, as a reflection of the years of *autocoscienza*, is the converging point of women’s experiences and the place where Lonzi’s theoretical ideas could be tested

and even performed. Yet the diary is also the record of Lonzi's personal effort to achieve the feminine authenticity of the "donna clitoridea." Therefore it should be read as a fiction of self which constantly puts to trial the notion of self authenticity that it is meant to offer. Lonzi's theoretical work and her diary seem to have an intersectional dimension that makes it impossible to investigate the "donna clitoridea" without examining the tensions that the two narratives produce. Lonzi's "donna clitoridea" ultimately materializes in a space where the diary becomes theory and theory turns into fiction.

It is 1972 when Lonzi begins her diary with the reflection on a revelation of women's similarity, their supposed specularly:

Un'altra donna, clitoridea, mi ha riconosciuta come donna, clitoridea, intanto che io la riconoscevo negli stessi termini. Questo è accaduto nella primavera del 1972. Adesso so chi sono e posso essere coscientemente me stessa (*Taci* 13).

[Another woman, "clitoridea," has recognized me as "clitoridea" while I was recognizing her in the same terms. This happened in the spring of 1972. Now I know who I am and I can be consciously myself.]

With these words Lonzi marks the beginning of a new era for some women. It is in the sudden intuition ("improvvisa intuizione") of another self, that a new subjectivity is revealed to her and other women of the group. These women have names in Lonzi's diary: they are Sara, Ester and Marion and they all address each other with the epithet "clitoridee" as with a nickname, a recognition code. With this epithet women come to recognize each other as similar and are able to dig into their previous experiences and share them with others as to build a different and renewed awareness of themselves. Before this revelation, this mutual recognition, women like Lonzi felt isolated, plunged into "la cultura del pene," a notion Lonzi coins and explains in her *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1971). In this essay Lonzi inaugurates a

discourse of female sexual autonomy, which other Italian feminists, notably the Milanese ones, refer to as sexual difference, to distinguish it from an idea of sexual equality that assimilates women into a masculine frame. But the Milanese feminists do not talk about the rediscovery of the clitoris on which Lonzi's difference is based, a rediscovery that is problematic from a theoretical, a sexual and a social point of view.

Why the clitoris? Because it is a specifically female body part long erased from masculine culture, "la cultura del pene," that furthermore denies women the desiring use of the clitoris in the name of reproduction. Theoretical engagement "with" the clitoris becomes at once the site of the critique of the "cultura del pene" and the blissful experience of recreating a space, albeit discursive, of female sexuality and pleasure. Dismissing the theoretical aspect of Lonzi's work may mean disavowing the pleasure that theory may have given her as well. For Lonzi's essay is built on a variety of sources that speak to her knowledge of and curiosity about matters of female sexuality. Her analysis spans psychoanalysis (Freud, Reich) anthropology (Kinsey, Masters, Johnson), Marxism (Engels), and zoology (Morris). In her essay Lonzi clarifies that the taboo regarding the clitoris is responsible for the misrecognition of it as an organ of pleasure tantamount to the penis. This misrecognition serves to produce a "coincidenza imposta" [forced coincidence] between male penetrative pleasure and vaginal pleasure. In Lonzi's terms, when a woman thinks and acts as if her vagina was the *only* site of pleasure—when in fact it is the site of reproduction—her thought merely reflects a male-oriented paradigm of pleasure, which is the sign of a "forced coincidence." As a result of this coincidence, a dominant sexual model emerges, coitus, a model of complementarity between the sexes; this complementarity works to the detriment of women's experience of

pleasure: “Nell’uno dunque il meccanismo del piacere è strettamente connesso al meccanismo della riproduzione, nella donna meccanismo del piacere e meccanismo della riproduzione sono comunicanti, ma non coincidono” (77) [For the man the mechanism of pleasure is strictly intertwined with reproduction, for the woman the mechanism of pleasure and that of reproduction are linked, but they do not coincide.] In other words, the emphasis on coitus results in the obliteration of the clitoris as the autonomous organ and site of pleasure for women, who therefore find themselves constrained into an exclusive model of vaginal sexuality.

The Feminist Clitoris: Freud, Feminine Authenticity, and Sexual Autonomy

In *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* Lonzi sets out to break through the constructed sexual coincidence between vaginal sexuality and male pleasure by first discarding the very idea of “coincidence,” and then by theorizing instead a sexual “equivalence” between penis and clitoris. This rhetorical move is meant, on the one hand, to open up for women the possibility of a non-reproductive and pleasurable form of sexuality; on the other hand it intends to foreground the social constructedness of a sexual model solely based on masculine pleasure. Thus turning from vagina to clitoris enables Lonzi to both emphasize pleasure and critique reproduction. Putting an emphasis on pleasure will in other words allow women to rescue the clitoris from that “ruolo secondario e transitorio nella sessualità femminile” (81) [that secondary and transitory role in female sexuality]. The shift from vagina to clitoris should also constitute a return of women to their “nature” since women, Lonzi writes, are always already “clitoridee.” Only by virtue of a psychosocial adaptation (“adattamento psicosociale”) are they trapped into the vaginal mode of sexuality. The clitoris becomes then the equivalent of the penis as an autonomous organ of pleasure: “Il sesso femminile è la clitoride, il sesso maschile è il pene” [The female sex is the

clitoris, the male sex is the penis], writes Lonzi. Once the woman has rediscovered the libidinal autonomy of her organ, she can finally feel liberated from the vaginal aim (“finalizzazione vaginale”) which submits her to men. This liberation is, for Lonzi, the premise for women’s sexual and social freedom. Even though the rediscovery of the clitoris represents in Lonzi’s mind a moment of rupture with the masculine culture of sexuality, her gesture of liberation, that begins with a declaration of sexual equivalence between clitoris and penis, is less a rupture than an alliance with a heterosexist understanding of sexuality.

That the clitoris is the equivalent of the penis was not Lonzi’s original invention. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Sigmund Freud points to the clitoris as “the leading erotogenic zone in female children,” which he understands as being “homologous to the masculine genital zone of the glans penis” (86). Because of this analogy, Freud sees no difference between the young female’s and male’s experience of pleasure, at least in the pre-pubertal stage. Freud’s remark on the erotic excitability of the clitoris during the pre-pubescent stage has at least a couple of consequences for the representation of female sexuality: first of all, it marks a distinction between the highly erotic stage prior to puberty and the repressive phase of puberty itself in which girls are supposed to renounce clitoral sexuality in favor of a “more mature” vaginal sexuality; second, it justifies girls’ renunciation of clitoral pleasure as “a stimulus to the libido in men.” In neither case is there question of whether girls do actually renounce their clitoral activity or whether the practice of vaginal activity must necessarily exclude the other.

Freud’s treatment of the clitoris and the sexual transition of women from clitoris to vagina provoked a backdrop of responses on the part of feminists in the 1970s. The interest of these feminist responses lies in their powerful and subversive

rereading of psychoanalytic female sexuality. It is the case of French feminist thinker Luce Irigaray who critiques the Freudian equivalence in one of her famous works, *Spéculum de l'autre femme* [Speculum of the Other Woman] (1974). In the section entitled “La tache aveugle d’un vieux rêve de symétrie” [Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry] Irigaray points out that the Freudian construction of the girls’ sexuality conforms to a masculine paradigm of masturbation. For Irigaray the sexual equivalence between the boy’s little penis and the girl’s penis/clitoris is the ultimate Freudian ruse to reaffirm a universal masculine paradigm of pleasure. As a result of inscribing the girl in the masculine onanistic model, according to Irigaray, Freud subsumes the girl into a discourse of the same. Hence Freud’s insistence on the girl’s self-pleasuring act is merely functional to the reinforcement of a masculine model of sexuality and the further disavowal of specifically feminine sites of female pleasure:

Tandis que ‘le vagin essentiellement féminine, n’est encore découvert par aucun des deux sexes.’ Et pas plus les lèvres d’ailleurs, aucune des lèvres, ni la vulve, très accessible pourtant, et dont la sensibilité n’a pas pu ne pas être découverte par la fillette. Par les soins de la mère, par le frottement des langes ou des culottes, par la main à la recherché du ‘petit penis’. Le plaisir obtenu par le toucher, la caresse, l’entr’ouverture des lèvres, de la vulve, pour Freud, n’existe simplement pas. (*Spéculum* 29-30)

[The “truly feminine vagina is still undiscovered by both sexes,” just like the lips, and the vulva, though all of these are so perfectly accessible that the little girl cannot fail to have discovered their sensitivity. Whether through her mother’s ministrations or through the rubbing of diapers or underpants, or when her hand searches for the “little penis.” The pleasure gained from touching, caressing, parting the lips and vulva simply does not exist for Freud. (29)]

Freud thus dismisses the multi-facted, multilayered, polymorphous character of that female sexuality that, for Irigaray, finds expression in the contact of the woman with all parts of her body. Dismissing other female erotogenic parts is just like giving the clitoris a phallic name. Moreover, Irigaray does not see “why the clitoris should have to yield its ‘sensitivity’ and hence its ‘importance’ to the vagina” and she adds tha

“the two organs are in no way interchangeable, but rather contribute, along with others, and with specific sensitivities, to woman’s sexual pleasure” (30).

A similar position to women’s sexuality was that of Germaine Greer, who, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), critiques all radical feminism that sees in the clitoris the ultimate liberation of women’s sexuality and libido. She argues that “if we localize female response in the clitoris we impose upon women the same limitation of sex that has stunted the male’s response” (43). Greer is not against a rediscovery and a practice of clitoral pleasure as long as it does not preclude other forms of sexuality. She writes that “women must struggle to keep alternatives open” (44) and she elaborates a sexual paradigm, that of the female eunuch, which stands at the crossroads of different preexisting and envisioned representations of sexuality. Whereas the word *eunuch* alludes at a subject with no sexual organ (as women in psychoanalysis), the attribute “female” is “the indefinite term... which retains the possibility of libido” (69). What we begin to perceive in the essay of Greer, at least, is the discomfort with the emphatic insistence on formalizing women sexuality around an anatomy—Irigaray did the same with the labia—and the question of the (in)commensurable and non-quantifiable aspects of female pleasure.

Although female pleasure is certainly not strictly localized or circumscribed to anatomical parts, there certainly seems to be a problem in the link between sexuality and clitoris. This problem may stem from the sexual connotations that Freud gave to the clitoris itself. Not only does Freud ignore the gender specificity of female eroticism, but he also goes as far as depicting the girls’ renunciation of pleasure during puberty as the repression of “a piece of masculine sexuality” (Freud 87). He thus interprets girls’ erotic drive as a masculine feature. The masculinization of the clitoris is perhaps in part responsible for the association between the clitoris and the

lesbian, a link that existed prior to Freud's analysis of the clitoris, as Valerie Traub demonstrates in her essay "The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris." "From Anne Koedt to Thomas Laqueur," she writes, "critics have elucidated the strategies whereby Freud attempted to reconcile women's physiology with a heterosexual imperative" (Traub 188), but one consequence of Freud's disavowal of the gender specificity of eroticism, argues Traub, has been the re-production of the structural link between clitoris and lesbianism (clitoris = penis = lesbianism) that obscures the complexity of lesbian erotics.⁶⁵ Traub urges the feminist reader to see how an easy celebration of anatomy reinforces cultural and historical paradigms of sexuality rather than challenging them. For, taking anatomy in order to represent identity, and therefore using a logic of metonymy, may only occlude the historical construction of the subject that the anatomy purports to describe.⁶⁶ The alleged link between clitoris and lesbian is even more important if we consider that the "donna clitoridea" is constructed on the basis of a strategic rejection of lesbianism to which I will later return.

Freud's presence in Lonzi's diary, through anatomical allusion, is somehow uncanny as Lonzi herself claimed to have rejected Freudian theory. Was Lonzi's

⁶⁵ Traub proceeds to demonstrate how such link has structured lesbianism around a psychomorphology of the clitoris; however, only with Freud was such association pathologized "to resecure the direction of female desire toward men, toward reproduction" (189). The important contribution of Traub's article to a queer feminist investigation does not derive, in my opinion, from the critique of Freud's colonizing set of equivalences, but rather, from the critique of some feminist counter-responses (i.e. Irigaray, Butler, MacKinnon, and Dworkin) to Freud's system of sexual analogies: "In the critique of Freud that pervades contemporary *lesbian* scholarship a logic of reversal structures analytic resistance to the psychoanalytic narrative; rather than pathologize...the equation between the lesbian and the clitoris, many critics and theorists celebrate this analogy as the enabling truth of lesbian existence" (190).

⁶⁶ Greer had already mildly undertaken that critique in the 1970s except that her critique of radical and clitoral feminism seemed to be directed to the re-evaluation of a heterosexual model especially when she says that "the cunt must come into its own" and that "women must humanize the penis, take the steel out of it and make it flesh again" (318).

adoption of the Freudian sexual model a simple endorsement of a psychoanalytic construct? Could it represent instead a critical engagement of it? If so what discursive effects does Lonzi's adoption of Freudian anatomy produce on the articulation of sexual autonomy and feminine authenticity? One fundamental corollary of Lonzi's sexual equivalence is the construction of the "donna vaginale." The idea of the "donna vaginale" circulated among the feminists of *Rivolta*. As we learn from Lonzi's diary, women debated over the two paradgms of "donna vaginale" and "donna clitoridea," taking sides, questioning and testing their validity. The debate over those two identificatory sites caused tensions and disagreements within the group and, as I shall demonstrate, resulted in the binary and somehow rigid opposition to the "donna vaginale."

Who is the "donna vaginale" and what role does she play in Lonzi's theory and diary? From a theoretical perspective, the "donna vaginale," is one important target of Lonzi's critique of the "cultura del pene." She is strictly associated with it in Lonzi's argument. While "la donna vaginale" Lonzi explains, "è considerata quella che manifesta una giusta sessualità" (*La donna* 83) [the vaginal woman is considered the one who manifests a correct sexuality], the "clitoridea" is often depicted as the immature, the masculine and even the frigid according to psychoanalysis. The "donna vaginale" is the expression, the embodiment of the "cultura del pene" and therefore she is the woman who, through a "giusta sessualità" [proper sexuality] is complicit with the rules of patriarchy. In other words, the "donna vaginale" is the traditional model of femininity against which Lonzi opposes a new model, the "clitoridea" "che non ha accondisceso alle suggestioni emotive dell'integrazione con l'altro, che sono quelle che hanno presa sulla donna passiva, e si è espressa in una sessualità non coincidente con il coito" (84) [who has not accommodated the

emotional influences of the integration with the other (the man), those influences that attain the passive woman. The clitoridea expresses herself through a sexuality that does coincide with coitus]. Based on this contrasting definition, the “vaginal” also appears to be a passive woman, assimilated into a heterosexual model, the coitus. In a few lines, Lonzi manages to lump together all the features of the “vaginal” in order to reject them (passivity, assimilation, integration). By means of this rhetorical move Lonzi may more easily affirm an authentic and new model of femininity away from the traditional one, namely the maternal model: “La donna non è la grande-madre, la vagina del mondo,” she writes “ma la piccola clitoride per la sua liberazione” (118) [The woman is not the big-mother, the vagina of the world, but the little clitoris of her own liberation.] One distinctive feature of the “clitoridea” lies in her “authenticity.” The word *authenticity* and the attribute *authentic* appear very frequently in the diary to describe Lonzi and other women’s ontological status within the group and in relation to culture and society. The Milanese feminists have lingered on the notion of “authenticity,” considering it a crucial and productive moment of Lonzi’s “percorso di liberazione” [path to liberation] (Providenti). My sense is that both the Milan feminists and Lonzi leave the term unquestioned thus ignoring the problems involved in the radical feminists’ effort to occupy that space of authenticity. Rather, engaging the notion of “authenticity” and what it does is important for better elucidating what the “percorso di liberazione” was really about.

One way we may read the meaning of “authentic” with regard to the construction of the “clitoridea,” is that the “authenticity” of the “clitoridea” derives from the refusal to imitate or accommodate men (the masculine discourse) at the sexual or social level: “Autenticamente l’una ha rivendicato se stessa: estraniandosi l’altra ha simulato sul piano del piacere e ha ambito i traguardi dell’uomo sul piano culturale

e sociale” (85) [One has authentically vindicated herself : by othering herself the other (the vaginal) has simulated on the level of pleasure and she has attained men’s goals on the cultural and social level.] Between the two identificatory models, there is a sexual difference, which is also fundamentally a social and a cultural difference. This difference makes the vaginal woman socially integrated, so to speak, as opposed to the autonomous “clitoridea.” The latter, like Carla Lonzi, dwells in feminism and finds in it her *raison d’être*:

Con il femminismo, la clitoridea esce dal pozzo e si guarda attorno, vuole fare a meno dell’autodifesa, vuole ! Vuole ! Non ne ha più bisogno, anzi tende a manifestarsi, a introdurre un’autenticità nel mondo che non sia quella di chi collabora ciecamente alla propria schiavitù. (*Taci* 33)

[With feminism the “clitoridea” comes out of her well and looks around herself, she wants to get rid of self-defensive mechanisms, she wants! She Wants! She does not need them anymore, or better she tends to manifest herself, to introduce an authenticity in the world which is not that of those who blindly cooperate to their own slavery.]

As this quotation reveals, the “clitoridea” is not completely out of the social circuit; she instead wants to come out in the world and take part in it operating from a different standpoint, that of authenticity. The “clitoridea” is then the woman who, by the very choice of feminism, has entered a dimension of authenticity. This newly discovered authenticity is also the dimension of a woman who refuses to be complicit with the masculine world and with categories of oppression. By withdrawing from the system and choosing “authenticity,” the “clitoridea” provokes a crisis, a break into that system in order to free both men and women from relations of oppression: “Nella crisi della cultura vaginale promossa dalla donna clitoridea, avviene la presa di coscienza che libera la donna della sua inferiorità e l’uomo della sua superiorità” (33). [In the crisis of the ‘cultura vaginale’ brought about by the “clitoridea,” a

consciousness arises that frees the woman from her inferiority and the man from his superiority.]

In order to denounce such power imbalances between men and women (which are considered natural), “la clitoridea” also comes to reproduce a disparity between herself and “la vaginale,” which translates into terms of power dynamics. In my view, such a dichotomy stems from the way the “clitoridea” uses the notion of authenticity to distinguish herself from the “vaginale”: “Il fatto che sia la donna clitoridea non deve inferiorizzare la donna vaginale poiché essa trova in questa circostanza l’occasione per riconoscere la clitoridea, dunque per fare quell’atto di autenticità che la mette alla pari con l’altra” (34) [The fact that it is the “clitoridea” must not put the “vaginale” in a position of inferiority since she finds in such circumstance the chance to recognize the “clitoridea,” therefore to perform that act of authenticity that puts her on equal terms with the other woman]. If the “clitoridea” is the authentic woman, then the clitoris plays as that which signifies the space of authenticity that the “clitoridea” occupies and embodies. The “donna clitoridea” was not perhaps intended as the rejection of vaginal femininity, a rejection which Lonzi herself deems counterproductive. Yet, Lonzi’s insistence on the passive vaginal absorption of male paradigm of pleasure may have inadvertently contributed to the reinforcement of a “passive” vaginality, against Lonzi’s intention to not replicate a paradigm she disputed: “Finché l’aut-aut è: identificazione nella vagina o nel rifiuto della vagina siamo nella logica della vaginalità, cioè nella logica di un’identificazione della donna che sostiene l’identificazione dell’uomo nel fallo” (*È già politica* 19). [As long as the either or is: identification with the vagina or its refusal we are in the logic of vaginality, that is in the logic of an identification of the woman supports the equivalence between man and phallus.] Authenticity is however a territory full of

traps for all women who want to inhabit it as such. This is one reason why I began to think of the clitoris not merely as sexual signifier, but as a possible social signifier around which women's relations were (and could be) structured and organized. Better said, I realized that the clitoris may work as an allegory for the female social relations within a radical group and also as an allegory of Lonzi's own complex relation with society and culture. The question is to what extent did the clitoris replace the phallus as traditional social signifier and to what extent did it destabilize it?

Inside the Group: The Clitoris as Phallic Signifier

Leafing through the pages of Lonzi's diary is like navigating the complex space of women's relations within *Rivolta*. In the narrative and relational space of the diary, attaining authenticity and embodying the "clitoridea" were a process that entailed tensions and disagreements, ruptures and reconciliations. It also involved lying and dissimulation, self-illusion and self-deception. Lonzi herself sheds doubt on her sense of authenticity, which she realizes, cannot quite be reached. She laments for instance that "è proprio la mia pretesa di autenticità a rendermi irrealizzata nel mondo" (40) [my pretension of authenticity makes me feel unfulfilled in the world], and deems the search of authenticity the cause of her unfulfilling role in society. Elsewhere she writes: "Ho fiducia nella mia autenticità a cui è collegato però il mio senso di impotenza a esprimerla con gli altri" (123). [I trust my authenticity to which is however linked my sense of impotence in expressing it with others.] "Autenticità" goes hand and hand with a vague sense of dissatisfaction and the inability to communicate. The eagerness of the beginning is soon replaced with a growing sense

of frustration about the way women relate to each other in the group.⁶⁷ Lonzi confesses that “essere due clitoridee non significa capirsi” (412) [being two “clitoridee” does not mean to understand each other]. That idea of “risonanza,” of mutual recognition that brought together women is at once the asset and the limit of *autocoscienza*, according to the Milanese feminists. “L’autenticità era assolutizzata” (Libreria delle Donne 27) [Authenticity became an absolute principle] at the expenses of the same relations that little by little started to deteriorate. The embodiment of the “clitoridea,” as an authentic form of subjectivity based on the rejection of the “vaginale” is not merely a rhetorical strategy; it becomes an exclusionary modality of relation within the group.⁶⁸ In other words, whereas authenticity should have worked as a positive value, it turned out to be a detrimental mechanism. For instance, the desire for authenticity is so ingrained in Lonzi and other women that they seem to take as impostors all women who cannot be completely and authentically “clitoridee.” It is the case of Ida who, after swearing on her clitoris, got pregnant and decided to live with a man. Because of her choice she was criticized and rejected in spite of the fact that Lonzi herself, even before feminism, had a man and a son. What to make of this exclusionary practice among women and what does this exclusion have to do with Lonzi’s role within the group?

Lonzi, who was also the leader of the group, writes that she was made to feel guilty by other women who saw in her both a mother and an older sister. Either of

⁶⁷ The women of the group appear in the diary with pseudonyms. Interestingly the only woman who appears with her real name is Dacia Maraini whose contact with the group is not clear. Maraini claims that she took part in it, but soon detached herself from it. Lonzi says that the group did not like Maraini’s pretension to show up and tell the women what to do. This last episode is related by Lonzi in her diary.

⁶⁸ I must nuance my argument clarifying that the “donna clitoridea” was not perhaps intended as the rejection of vaginal femininity. Lonzi’s insistence on the passive vaginal absorption of the male paradigm of pleasure may have inadvertently contributed to the reinforcement of a “passive” vaginality, against Lonzi’s own stated intention to not replicate a paradigm she disputed.

these roles that Carla embodies before them are experienced as the expression of a dominating and stifling authority. Elsewhere Lonzi notes that the real tragedy of the relationships among women is the relationship mother-daughter. She furthermore stresses the dramatic aspect of seeing those relationships reflected in the groups' dynamics. Her relationship with Sara, in particular, is depicted as being that of a daughter in need of a mother: "La mia condizione è proprio quella della madre con la figlia: non vuole dipendere da me, ma ricorre sempre a me" (410) [My status is really that of a mother with her daughter: she does not want to depend on me, but she always runs to me.] She elsewhere laments the perceptions that other women had of her as a mother or older sister: "Ero incompresa nel mito che le altre si facevano di me" (23). [I was misunderstood because of the myth that other women created around me.] Little by little, throughout the pages of the diary feminism turns into a battlefield: "Le donne si distruggono tra loro, si tolgono forza, si accusano, si rivelano nemiche" (624) [Women destroy each other, take away each other's strength, accuse each other, end up being enemies], while denouncing a state of mutual dependence that stifles women's sense of autonomy and ability to emancipate from culturally imposed roles: "Nella relazione affettiva la dipendenza è reciproca e a tutti e due è difficile trovare la propria autonomia" (427). [In the emotional relationship dependence is mutual and it is difficult to find one's own autonomy.] Lonzi bitterly reflects on the nature of women's bonds speaking to the drama of sisterhood: "Vedo un meccanismo a catena, una gigantesca consequenzialità di suggestione-mito-liberazione, bisogno-adesamento-rigetto che tremo dalla paura letteralmente" (607) [I see a mechanism, effecting a sequence of influence-myth-liberation, need-approach-rejection. I tremble with fear.] To make things more complex is women's ambivalent positioning towards Lonzi and Lonzi's ambivalence vis-à-vis her group

comrades. Women seek her out in search of support. This supportive role flatters the woman when she can see herself as the mediator of women's raising consciousness:

A me piace molto essere lo strumento della liberazione di un'altra e mi commuove saperlo mentre lei ancora non lo sa. Sentire questo passaggio che si compie in lei, potere essere testimone e diligente esecutrice... voglio essere quell'eccezione che le può permettere di avere un senso di sé più consono a come l'avrebbe avuto se altri non l'avessero avvilita...questa funzione di tramite è dove io mi riconosco. (551)

[I really liked being the instrument of another's woman liberation, and I am moved to know of it while she still ignores it. I feel this transition that takes place within her, I am the witness and the diligent executioner of it...I want to be that exceptional being that allows her to have a more adequate sense of herself that she would have had she not been diminished...I recognize myself in the very function of mediator.]

In her effort to be "testimone e diligente esecutrice" [witness and diligent executioner] Lonzi grants herself the right to invade the private territory of other women while still preserving hers. Lonzi offers as an example and episode in which she expresses her desire to read other women's diaries, but she is reluctant to sharing her own. She even takes notes of a dream in which she prevents a woman from looking at her diary. She also describes her own diary as "una specie di rapporto segreto"[a kind of secret report] which may be reminiscent of a practice during her years at a Catholic boarding school that sometimes Lonzi recalls in the diary. Lonzi is like any other teenager in boarding schools who were accustomed to the practice of writing a diary, but given the regime of control in which such schools held students it is not surprising that the sense of privacy and secrecy would become stronger. The sense of secrecy is so acute that Lonzi wonders how much of her diary can be released for publication. At the same time, she is intrusive with regard to other women's diaries and uses her knowledge of the diary to get to know what others think of her and the group. What are women's responses to Lonzi's attitude?

At times they fear her because they consider her “in gamba nel mondo maschile” (167) [capable in the masculine world.] Or they flat out reject her as the masculine dominating element of the group. Ester for instance accuses Lonzi of assuming a dominating role within the group, to which Lonzi responds:

Il mio sfacelo con un tipo di amiche non è finito. Con Ester posso solo tacere: ce l’ha con se stessa e non lo sopporta, scarica la sua rabbia e la sua impotenza su di me. Adesso dice quello che non ha mai detto, che era impensabile: e cioè che nel rapporto con lei io ero l’uomo e lei la donna. Così ritorna l’accusa della vaginale alla clitoridea, non finirà mai nemmeno con il femminismo. (267)

[My disaster with a certain kind of friend is not over. With Ester I can only be quiet: she is mad at herself and she cannot take it, she blames her rage and her impotence on me. Now she says what she never said, what was unthinkable: that in my relationship to her I was the man and she was the woman. This is how the accusation of the ‘vaginale’ to the ‘clitoridea’ returns and not even feminism will put an end to it.]

Interestingly the dichotomy “vaginale”/“clitoridea” returns here to signify the presumed masculinity of Lonzi, a masculinity that is rather phallic and understood in terms of inequality among women! It is precisely in the dichotomy between “vaginale” and “clitoridea” that Ester finds a way to reveal Lonzi’s own oppressive use of sexual categories. Those categories are even extended to the relationships among women where one is perceived as the superior (the man) and the other the inferior (the woman). Trapped in this pernicious dichotomy, in a perpetual dialectic between herself and other women, Lonzi comes to a different understanding of feminism and women’s liberation: “Quando dicevamo ‘liberazione’ non sapevo che anch’io ero un ingombro/così sono stata respinta/proprio da quelle che amavo” (544). [when we said ‘liberation’ I did not know that I was myself encumbersome/so I was rejected/precisely by those women I loved.] Noticing that “il femminismo è sfociato in una bolgia di rivalità” (871) [feminism has resulted in a bunch of rivalries], Lonzi concludes that women’s relationships are not necessarily exempt from a logic of

power and competition, a logic to which she somehow willingly or unwillingly contributes.

The episode I am about to relate may help explain the atmosphere of competition among women. In Lonzi's interview with Michèle Causse, Lonzi was asked whether she felt that the experience of the group was castrating.⁶⁹ Causse is perhaps more aware than Lonzi of the rhetorical nature of her own question. Why would she hint at castration had she not thought that castration described, at least in part, the dynamics of the group? Lonzi eluded the question, and ignored the possibility that her feminism could be read in terms of domination. Or she simply wanted to prevent people from drawing conclusions about the complexity of female relationality. Evading the question about castration, Lonzi emphasizes instead the transitory nature of the communitarian relations and then jumps into voicing her disillusion with the experience. It began as "une oasis où je croyais en avoir fini de souffrir" [a oasis where I thought all my suffering could end] and transformed into "tourbillons de souffrances" (372) [spirals of pain]. How that painful change became possible remains unexplained. Is it perhaps due to the castrating experience of the group? Is it because the *autocoscienza* experience was somehow itself a form of female amputation, a symbolic castration? Earlier I mentioned that Lonzi qualified "clitoridectomy" as a culture that denies women access to sexual pleasure and autonomy. Interestingly, Lonzi maintains that the clitoral taboo is comparable, on a symbolic level, to the clitoral excision suffered by girls in some African countries, a parallel that she sketches in *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*. The analogy with African cultures was intended to translate into Italian culture the patriarchal wound inflicted by a colonizing gesture. Yet, this analogy does not work well,

⁶⁹ "Le groupe ne serait-il pas un peu castrateur"? (Lapouge and Causse, 371) [Isn't the group a little castrating?]

precisely because in her attempt to symbolize a literal practice, Lonzi fails to ground her analogy into a more coherent cultural discussion. Lonzi pushes her analogy a step further by quoting the translation of a song of an African woman performing excision on girls, with no reference to specific sources and no discussion of the practice:

Una volta eravamo camerate,
Ma ora vi dò ordini
Perché sono un uomo—vedete
E ho in mano il coltello
E vi opero.
La vostra clitoride che custodite sì gelosamente,
Io la strapperò, la getterò a terra,
Perché sono uomo oggi. (*La donna* 78)

[Once upon the time we were female mates
But now I give you commands
Because I am a man—you see
With a knife in my hand
I operate on you
Your clitoris that you guard so jealously
I will rip it off, and throw it on the ground
Because I am a man today.]

The reason Lonzi gives for such a quotation is to establish a parallel between the violence of the rite and the constructed symmetry between male orgasm and vaginal sexuality [forced coincidence], a coincidence that “non ha riscontro in nessun altro tipo di colonizzazione” (77-78) [does not find any equivalent in any other type of colonization]. Yet to me, the decontextualized voice of the female exciser does not so much bring attention to the question of female pleasure, but to the position of the excisor *vis-à-vis* the excised girls. Who really is the woman who, brandishing her knife to operate on the girls, can feel like a man? Is there any relation between the anonymous and remote woman seizing a castrating weapon and Lonzi symbolically getting ahold of women’s clitorides (diaries) in the group? After I read Lonzi’s diary

the analogy between the two women struck me as somehow plausible.⁷⁰ Lonzi's reappropriation of a decontextualized image may be simply, in my view, a site of phallic identification and desire for Lonzi. If that were true, we might read the experience of radical feminism with the pervasive dichotomy clitoridea/vaginale (reinforced by forms of exclusions and intrusions) as a form of symbolic excision (or of female castration) which does but reaffirm an idea of female relations as always already being phallic.

Perhaps also, this experience of feminism as eminently phallogocentric also lies in Lonzi's own understanding of "cultura del pene." The "cultura del pene" is what nowadays we may call phallogocentrism or the organization of culture around fixed identity categories. The fact that Lonzi uses the term penis to indicate the phallus may suggest that for her the penis and the phallus are synonymous. In Italian the two terms can be used interchangeably to talk about the male sexual organ. The conflation of the terms however provokes a confusion through superimposition of a symbolic term (phallus) and a material term (penis). Lonzi's conflation of the two terms, which is already a linguistic and cultural fact, is not without theoretical consequences. One consequence is that Lonzi inadvertently reproduces the ambivalent slippage between phallus and penis, which Lacan, according to Judith Butler, creates to construct the signification of the phallus as symbolically linked with the penis and, therefore with masculinity. The relation that phallus and penis entertain is purely symbolic, explain Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, since "the phallus symbolizes the penis, and insofar as it symbolizes the penis, retains the penis as that

⁷⁰ With regard to clitoridectomy it would be helpful to remember that in certain cultures clitoridectomy was performed as an initiating ritual of empowerment for girls and the creation of secret societies. Conversely its disappearance signaled a lessening of women's power within these cultures and the transition to "more democratic forms of women's power" (Stanley and Robertson 12).

which it symbolizes; it *is* not the penis” (83). Lacan is responsible for establishing a symbolic relation of necessity between penis and phallus because “the phallus is fundamentally dependent upon the penis to symbolize it” (83). However, given the discursive and semantic conflation of penis and phallus in Lonzi’s theory, the penis already appears as phallus and thus as a masculine signifier. It is not merely that which symbolizes it. It is the phallus with all the powerful discursive implications that may assume. If in Lonzi’s theory the clitoris is equal to the penis and the penis symbolizes the phallus, then we may ask whether the clitoris, by virtue of this equality, does not come to symbolize the phallus, thus replacing the penis, in its symbolizing power. By recognizing that the penis *is* not the phallus, Lacan also creates, in Butler’s view, the possibility for the detachability of the phallus that is the possibility that the phallus be invested symbolically onto parts other than the penis. Lonzi may be seen as performing the detachability of the phallus linking it to the clitoris rather than the penis, thus divesting the penis of its own symbolic power. In Lonzi’s view, the clitoris produces a new culture of sexuality where the penis no longer coincides with the phallus as the following quote suggests:

La donna clitoridea, affermando una sessualità in proprio il cui funzionamento non coincide con la stimolazione del pene, abbandona il pene a se stesso. Tutto ciò che riguarda il pene non viene più a coincidere con l’espressione del dominio. (*La donna* 111-112)

[The clitoridean woman relinquishes the penis by affirming her own sexuality whose functioning does not coincide with penis stimulation. Everything that pertains to the penis does not come to coincide with the expression of domination.]

Lonzi seems to think that embracing a sexuality that can do away with the penis is sufficient to eliminate the supposedly oppressive nature of the link penis/phallus. Yet by merely detaching the phallus from the penis and attaching it to the clitoris does not help Lonzi to see the dangerous implications of the phallic use of her clitoris. In fact,

in light of the tense female dynamics of the group we can use the equivalence clitoris = phallus to understand how the clitoris might have indeed worked in a phallic way within the context of women's relationships. When I say that the clitoris can work in phallic ways I am referring both to the way Lonzi may have used the "clitoris" as a tool of control and domination over other women. She thus embodied a masculine model of sociability that her theory was meant to discard. In the interview with Michèle Causse, Lonzi insists on women's necessity to move away from all cultural influences, thus rejecting all those authorities "da cui si può essere tentati di trarre la propria identità" (*È già politica* 105) [upon which one can be tempted to base her own identity]. Although Lonzi claimed no ideological influence, the ambivalent logic of the discovery and containment of the clitoris, which pervades the diary, may reveal the ideological connotation of the clitoris. Lonzi's masculine identification, which I mention above, may simply represent a position that a woman, grown up in the "cultura del pene," can embody even in her relationship with other women. I do not want, however, to oversimplify the nature of the female bonds in radical groups, but I would like to understand Lonzi's role also in terms of her complex relation with the cultural reception of female sexual autonomy and feminist separatism.

The *donna clitoridea* between Semi-visibility and the Rejection of Lesbianism

In Butler's essay "The Lesbian Phallus," the detachability of the phallus has important consequences for the ways in which women relate to psychoanalytic constructions of gender embodiment since

to argue that certain body parts or body-like things other than the penis are symbolized as 'having' the phallus is to call into question the mutually exclusive trajectories of castration anxiety and penis envy. Insofar as women might be said to 'have' the phallus and fear its loss. They may be driven by castration anxiety (*Bodies* 84).

Insofar as Lonzi might be seen to have a clitoris/phallus she may be not merely the symbolic castrator within the group, but also be the subject of castration anxiety. It is not irrelevant that Lonzi could play a powerful and dominating role within the group that was somehow faltering her outside the group. Lonzi made some radical choices for women at the time, even for middle-class women like herself. She was married and had a son. She also had an established career as art critic, which she then relinquished, along with motherhood, to embrace feminism as a cultural mission.⁷¹

Numerous are the passages in which the woman wonders whether she has been a bad mother to her son. The choice of feminism came as a new course of life for a woman that was determined to break away from cultural conventions and culturally-prescribed roles.

Somehow that radical choice caused insecurities regarding her social visibility. On October 31, 1975 she feels discomfort in seeing her major work *Sputiamo su Hegel* on display at a women's bookstore in Rome. She thus comments, "La dimensione pubblica non è per me" (1148) [the public sphere is not for me].

Later, in a letter to a friend (Matilde in the diary) she reinforces the same idea of fear of visibility:

Io mi trovo bene dove sono: questa semi-clandestinità mi è molto congeniale e anche questa fase di femminismo...e ho proprio il dubbio che tutti i vantaggi di cui mi trovo a godere siano in diretta relazione con questo stato di misconoscimento di cui non posso dire che bene. (1152)

[I am comfortable where I am: this semi-clandestine state suits me as well as this phase of feminism...I am almost sure that all advantages I am benefiting from are are linked with this state of misrecognition that I cannot but praise.]

⁷¹ Lonzi's choice is reminiscent of choice of the protagonist of an Italian feminist pioneering text of the beginning of the 20th century, *Una donna*. In it a middle-class woman unhappy with her marriage decides to leave her husband and son to forge a career as a writer and live by her own means. The difference is that Lonzi never really managed to live on her own means but benefited from the support of her lover.

Lonzi thus privileges a state of semi-clandestinity as the most beneficial for her. This semi-clandestinity may be seen as an expression of a feminist disengagement with culture, the very trait of Lonzi's radical feminism. Lonzi and other women's disengagement did not go without problems even within the group. Lonzi's desire for privacy seems to have raised tensions among the women of her group surrounding the creation of an Italian women's press on the model of the French *Éditions des femmes*.⁷² Eventually a few women from *Rivolta* created the "casa editrice fantasma" (ghostly press) in order to remain faithful to their "active cultural absence." Among the mission statements of the women's press were the "insofferenza a inserirsi nel meccanismo distributivo" (*È già politica* 95-96) [discomfort with mechanism of distribution] and "insofferenza per gli inevitabili contatti diplomatici con esponenti della cultura" (95-96) [discomfort towards inevitable official contacts with members of the official culture]. Due to this discomfort with cultural assimilation, the women reserved themselves the right to use this ghostly editorial space to respond to cultural attacks from the press and "stampare anche libri di cui sia rimasto unicamente un titolo, una pagina, un rigo, una parola" (95-96) [to put into print books of which only a title, a page, a line, a word remained]. In light of the case of the feminine press, I have come to understand Lonzi's praise of semi-clandestinity not merely as a defense of privacy, but as a particular discomfort with the assimilation of radical feminism into a mainstream cultural discourse: "Adesso c'è una smania di consacrazione del femminismo, anzi un atteggiamento promozionale da parte della società" (103) [Nowadays there is an urge to consecrate feminism, even a promotional attitude on the part of society.] This social urge to assimilate feminism is not paired with a deep understanding of its reasons, its implications and its effects: "La società ha cominciato

⁷² This women's press should have had the name of "Compiuta Donzella" after a Renaissance female poet whose work was ignored.

ad accettare le premesse del femminismo senza coglierne l'evoluzione da cui quelle premesse risultano chiarite" (32). [Society has begun to accept the premises of feminism without understanding the evolution from which such premises are clarified.]

Lonzi's dissatisfaction with the social acceptance of feminism stems from the conviction that society dismisses the critical role that feminism plays for women while casting off a considerable part of it. In a letter to Julia Kristeva, Lonzi speaks of "l'altro femminismo, quello di cui non si parla, di cui non si può parlare perché parla da sé, e che vive nei focolai del riconoscimento fra donne" (1107) [the other feminism, the one which is not talked about, cannot be talked about, because it speaks for itself, the one that carves a private space out of women's mutual recognition]. Invoking this "other" feminism as hers, Lonzi also accuses those "volenterose che intendono renderli competitivi, perciò visibili, mentre è l'occhio altrui che deve cambiare" (1107) [laborious women that would like to make feminism competitive and visible, whereas it is the perspective of society towards it that must change]. Among those "laborious women" against whom Lonzi points her finger are well established female writers such as Natalia Ginzburg and Dacia Maraini.⁷³ She also

⁷³ On December 3 1975, Lonzi writes that Dacia Maraini's *Donna in Guerra* has been published and defined "romanzo compiutamente femminista." But Lonzi does not agree with such definition precisely because the novel has been published by "l'editore severo Einaudi" "Dacia non è mai stata di Rivolta. Non ha partecipato neppure al Manifesto che ha raccolto il primo nucleo, ancora eterogeneo di Rivolta. Al contrario siamo state noi a respingerla in un'assemblea alla casa della cultura di Roma quando aveva cercato la nostra adesione su un trattatello di regole per conseguire l'emancipazione, che iniziava, se ben ricordo "Donne è Bello", e proseguiva elencando tutto ciò che avremmo dovuto imparare per essere alla pari con gli uomini, dal fare gli affari al fare la guerra. Cercava di capeggiare la situazione approfittando del caos e adesso cerca di approfittare dello stesso caos per cambiare le carte in tavola" (*Taci* 1175). [Dacia has never been part of Rivolta. She never even took part in the making of the Manifesto around which the first heterogeneous nucleus of Rivolta gathered. On the contrary, we rejected her during a meeting at the House of Culture in Rome when she sought us out to sign a small treaty for women's emancipation. This treaty, if I recall correctly, started off with "Woman is Beautiful," and proceeded with a list of all things we should have learned in order to be equals with men, including business and war. She tried to become a leader taking advantage of the chaos and now she is trying to profit of the same chaos in order to lay one's cards on the table.]

attacks Elvira Banotti, another feminist who founded a group bearing the same name as Lonzi's group (Vanda in the diary). Banotti apparently sold to the Italian press the idea that *Rivolta Femminile* was calling for a theory of lesbianism. Lonzi and the women of her group blamed this woman for having come out to publicize the story on sex and encouraged the Italian press to define *Rivolta Femminile* as a group of lesbians. On this occasion (April 1975) Lonzi reports on her diary that Vanda has taken to the extreme consequences the "teoria clitoridea" only to have the work of the group discredited by the press. Lonzi and the other women used their writings to publish their reactions to the woman who misrepresented *Rivolta* and their theory in public. In response to the Italian press misrepresentation of *Rivolta*, the group expressed the following point:

Rivolta Femminile, come gruppo, non ha fatto scelte ideologiche che vincolino l'autenticità individuale, quindi non ha teorizzato il lesbismo come "nuovo strumento di guerriglia," né come "arma di liberazione." (114)

[Rivolta Femminile, as a group, did not make ideological choices that could constrain the individual expression of authenticity, therefore we have not theorized lesbianism as a "new instrument of guerrilla" or as a "weapon for liberation."]

Lonzi and the women in *Rivolta* see lesbianism as an ideological trap, a cultural choice that would constrain rather than liberate women: "Dopo aver scritto la donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale sono rimasta confusa nel constatare che veniva preso sia nel senso di una normativa sessuale sia nel senso dell'omosessualità programmatica" (*È già politica* 23). [After having written the "donna clitoridea" and the "donna vaginale" I was perplex about founding out that my essay was taken either in the sense of a proposed sexual model or of a programmatic homosexuality.] Lonzi's uttered reservation about "coming out" seems to depend largely on a fear that her

ideas may be misconstrued at the expense of the value of their personal experience: “Non posso sopportare di essere stata presa come una teorica” (*Taci* 1234). [I cannot stand stand to be mistaken as a theorist.]

Lonzi’s resistance to imposed categories here seems quite in contradiction with her own categorical distinctions between “clitoridea” and “vaginale.” Lonzi is at once resistant and subject to the use of rhetorical categories for defending an identity or warding off the risk of being labeled. The result of this contradiction, which also informs the narrative structure of the diary, is a constant oscillation between a desire for clandestinity and a sudden urge for visibility which can ascertain Lonzi’s existence as woman and as feminist: “Ho desiderio di diventare cosciente della mia presenza e di uscire dalla tentazione di stare fisicamente in un angolo...nasce ex-novo il mio bisogno di diventare visibile e di accertarmi che lo sono” (1231). [I wish to become conscious of my presence and of relinquishing the temptation to be physically in a corner...there returns my need to become visible and to ascertain my visibility.] In this respect, the diary’s narrative delineates the identity of the “donna clitoridea” or the radical feminist as an apparitional figure which lingers at the threshold of visibility, but one that is never really and completely visible and thus culturally intelligible. Interestingly, Lonzi’s ambivalence towards self visibility manifests in repeated and failed attempts to reach and find her own clitoris. Lonzi reports several dreams in which she seems to struggle to identify this body part:

A un tratto sono senza risorse e vado alla ventura: in un vicolo coperto da volte antiche, chiedo a una donna se mi vuole come domestica. Acconsente, vado con lei. Saliamo su una scala esterna e sul pianerottolo all’aperto lei si sdraia mollemente e si tira su i vestiti: appare un sesso maschile, grassottello come di un ragazzino non ancora sviluppato. Io però cerco di raggiungere la clitoride, forse nascosta lì sotto, ma non trovo niente e comunque non mi viene bene, mi stanco. C’è Ester, insieme a altre. Io sto sulle mie, lei mi guarda, alla fine qualcosa provoca il mio buon umore e comincio a ridere. Ester ne approfitta per mettermi confidenzialmente un dito in bocca. (367)

[Suddenly I am short of resources and I venture out: in a narrow street covered with ancient arches I ask a woman if she wants me as her maid. She agrees and I go with her. We go up an external stair and on the floor she lies down in open air lifting up her clothes: a male sexual organ appears, chubby like that of a young boy. I nonetheless try to reach her clitoris, perhaps hidden underneath it, but I cannot find anything and I am not good at it anyway, I get tired. Ester is there with the other women. I keep to myself, she looks at me, in the end something stirs a good feeling in me and I start laughing. Ester takes advantage of it to put her finger in my mouth confidentially.]⁷⁴

The clitoris is still veiled, hidden behind the presence of an encumbering penis that prevents Lonzi from finding it. Lonzi's recognition that "she's not good at it" might be a symptom of her own internal struggle for visibility and her inability to come to terms with her own identity. It is precisely in the oscillation between clandestinity and visibility that the "donna clitoridea" may be culturally interesting. I am also wondering to what extent Lonzi's inability to reach her own clitoris and her ambivalent desire to remain "closeted" may be connected with her open rejection of lesbianism and her desire to keep the "donna clitoridea" and the lesbian as distinct subjects. Thus her uttered difficulty in handling the clitoris may as well represent her attempt to find in the clitoris a symbolic space of articulation of a queer subjectivity that is not necessarily lesbian.

Between 1974 and 1975 Lonzi devotes parts of her diary to a reflection on her sexual orientations that reveal the woman's ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis surfacing homoerotic feelings. The diary thus turns into a confessional narrative, or at least into an exploration of emotions that create discomfort. In rereading parts of her diary Lonzi thinks back at the nature of her relationship with Sara, one of her dearest comrades in *Rivolta*. This reflection leads Lonzi and the reader to an unforeseen dimension of women's collective life. In the years of *autocoscienza*, Sara and Carla

⁷⁴ The question mark after the pronoun *her* indicates the linguistic ambiguity of the passage where it seems that Carla Lonzi may also be talking about her own clitoris given the fact that in Italian no possessive is used, but a definite article to indicate the possessor of the body part.

had a very close relationship, which Lonzi describes, at times, like that of a daughter to a mother. I recount above the mixed feelings that Lonzi had when she discovered that women's bonds were often reproducing familial relations in a destructive manner. For this reason I wonder whether interpreting women's emotional bonds as a repetition of the mother-daughter dyad is at all productive as it can negatively affect the development and the expression of those ties in ways that depart from that original relationship. The link daughter = mother may be a pernicious mode of reading female to female relationality.⁷⁵

It is not coincidental that Lonzi assimilates the clitoris to the daughter's little truth, thus equating the clitoris with the daughter and the vagina with the mother. Her investment in the clitoris binds her to an eternal dialectic between herself (the daughter) and the vaginal woman (the mother) or between herself (the women's group mother) and the daughters (Sara and others). In parts of her diary, then, Lonzi perceives mother-daughter bond as *the* structuring bond among women with the disastrous effects earlier recalled; in other parts, Lonzi can also retrace the complicity among women with a different emotional quality, a queer quality: "Rileggo il mio diario qua e là e ho questa impressione: che il calore delle mie

⁷⁵ In her essay on the psychomorphology of the clitoris, Traub demonstrates that the refusal of the girl to relinquish her affective bond with the mother is another important corollary to Freudian theory of clitoridian sexuality so that "lesbians fail to follow the dictates of culture, narcissistically remaining attached to anatomy and mother" (189). What Traub brilliantly uncovers behind the pair clitoris/lesbian is the presence of another pernicious pair, mother/daughter, which the construction of clitoridian sexuality à la Freud reproduces. From the 1970s on, Italian feminists have been quite invested theoretically in the mother-daughter relationship, a bond that has even structured the relations among the women of the Diotima group (through the practice of entrustment) and has represented the founding model for Italian feminism (see Luisa Muraro's *L'ordine simbolico della madre*). It is not the scope of my chapter to investigate the feminist and heterosexist implications of the reproduction of a maternal model within feminism; but I would like to highlight that one possible danger has been that of obscuring lesbianism as an emotional, social and political bond among women that has nothing to do with the mother/daughter relationship.

giornate era la presenza di Sara dentro di me” (983). [I am rereading my diary here and there and I have the following impression: the presence of Sara in me warmed up my days.] This warm sensation becomes more acute in a dream in which Lonzi speaks of her attachment to Sara in homoerotic terms: “Siamo molto amiche, c’è un’intesa quasi omosessuale tra noi, viene fuori con una dolcezza prima sconosciuta” (1028). [We are close friends, there is a bond that is almost homosexual between us, it comes out with tenderness thus far unknown.] Obviously the emotional quality of the bond, which the group internal struggles suffocated in the first part of the diary, re-emerges here to redefine Carla’s relationship to Sara from a different perspective. Lonzi’s involvement in the relation surfaces as a feeling that is *almost* homosexual, but not quite. There is a provocatively queer connection to be made between Lonzi’s programmatic rejection of lesbianism and the almost acknowledgement of her own homosexual feelings. This connection foregrounds a palpable tension already noticed between visibility and secrecy. On the one hand, Lonzi takes pride in declaring that “nel femminismo è scoppiata l’omosessualità ma non nel nostro gruppo” (820) [homosexuality has broken into feminism except in our group]. On the other hand, she finds herself dreaming about her homoerotic complicity with Sara, and even more explicitly, about making love with a woman: “Faccio l’amore con una ragazza, prendo l’iniziativa, sono arrivata al suo sesso, era tutto molto eccitante e naturale. Penso ‘è questo, dunque, ho spiccato il salto’ provo un moto di liberazione” (842). [I am making love with a girl, I am taking the initiative, I reached her sex, everything was so natural and exciting. I think ‘this is it, I took a leap’ I feel liberated.] The dream becomes the space for the “natural and exciting” disclosure of a homoerotic feeling.

Lonzi projects the emergence of queer feelings onto other people as in the following dream: “Abbraccio un tale con amore, una tenerezza inspiegabili, dolcissimi” (973). [I hug a man with inexplicable love and sweet feelings of tenderness.] This oniric vision, for instance, is followed by a reflection on the *man*’s homosexuality, “una parte di me che ritrovo dopo tanto tempo, pena e fatica” (973) [a part of me that I recover with difficulty after a long time]. Lonzi also acknowledges the presence of a homoerotic desire that subtends some of the bonds among women. The diary, as the place of homosociality, is also functional to the inscription of emerging homoerotic feelings and Lonzi’s struggle to understand them. Although Lonzi rejects the lesbian label she nonetheless engages in reflections on how to become homosexual: “Per diventare omosessuale occorrono due condizioni: una disponibilità interiore completa e poi non ricordo bene, ma doveva essere l’abbandono al piacere, no, più che l’abbandono è la coscienza non tacerselo più” (961). [To become homosexual two conditions are needed: a complete willingness and then. I can’t recall well, but it must *have* been yielding to pleasure, or rather, to consciousness, in other words not to hide it to oneself.] This passage skillfully mixes notions that are dear to Lonzi’s articulation of “*donna clitoridea*”: pleasure, consciousness, and dissimulation. The three come together here to signify Lonzi’s complex relation to sexuality, and her resistance to labelling desire into definite categories. Avoidance becomes therefore strategic in her approach:

Mi accorgo quanta parte del mio pensiero e del mio comportamento era adibita a schivare o a mimetizzare l’espressione diretta di me: anche nel femminismo e negli scritti femministi mi mantenevo in incognito. (13)

[I realize how much of my thought and my behavior were meant to avoid or hide the direct expression of myself to the extent that in my approach to feminism and in my feminist writings I was keeping myself incognito.]

Lonzi felt that feminism and her feminist writings were the place of self-avoidance, the space where the self does not properly express itself, but lingers in *incognito*:

Non ho più paura dell'omosessualità perché non rischio più la perdita d'identità, la soggezione, la dipendenza da un'altra simile a me. Posso cogliere la differenza nella somiglianza e non temere la differenza. (963)

[I do no longer fear homosexuality because I do not risk losing my identity, I do not risk being subjected to someone else, being dependent on someone similar to me. I can see the difference in the similarity and no longer fear that difference.]

In Lonzi's understanding of homosexuality there was an assumption that women may live, under the banner of homosexuality, bonds of subjection and dependence. In other words, women would just replicate the heterosexist relations they had experienced within the family. We can understand Lonzi's rejection of lesbianism as a fear that lesbianism may be subsumed into a heterosexist frame (relation of dependence) and thus result in a further loss of identity for those women who desire women.

There is yet another intriguing aspect about Lonzi's articulation of queer sexuality or female queerness. I am referring to her double fascination with masculinity and with male homosexuality. It is not a coincidence that, at one point, Lonzi states that being a feminist fulfills a need for reconciliation with the masculine side of oneself ("bisogno di riconciliazione con l'aspetto maschile in sé" [930]). Without going into further detail here I should just anticipate that from this ambivalent site of masculine identification Lonzi interpellates Pier Paolo Pasolini, speaking to him like a brother to a brother: "Pasolini è il fratello interdetto, il maschile che la donna può sentire parte di sé" (93). [Pasolini is the proscribed brother, the masculine that the woman can feel as part of her own self.] What is that strange sense of solidarity and brotherhood that Lonzi feels towards Pasolini? This is a question I want to pursue in the next chapter dedicated to the queer connections

between gay theorists and feminists in the 1970s. This investigation will also complicate my present discussion of Lonzi's rejection of lesbian denomination and her readings of gender. My next chapter will engage Lonzi's failed attempt to reach out to Pasolini's own queerness. I will analyze a few letters contained in Lonzi's diary and addressed to Pasolini as they represent the space for Lonzi's inscription of her own feminist and queer masculinity. I conceive of this envisioned but failed correspondence as an unforeseen queer relationship.

I started this chapter with a song, "La leggenda di Clotiride" that portrays the sudden discovery of female homoeroticism and sexual autonomy as part of the socio-symbolic practice of *autocoscienza*. The sudden and unforeseen appearance of Clitoris behind Clotiris was the object of social discomfort in the masculine culture of the 1970s, in which women experienced their sexual emancipation with feelings of unease and shame: "La femme a rapidement accès au discours révolutionnaire, théorique mais elle a la plus grosse difficulté à mettre en pratique son désir et à le communiquer" (Lapouge and Causse 425). [Women have rapid access to the theoretical revolutionary discourse, but they have the most difficulty in putting into practice their desire and in communicating it.] The discovery of the clitoris signals the creation of a culture of sexual autonomy that represents an alternative response to the "cultura del pene" and its disavowal of women's sexuality as a discursive excision. While the clitoris signified a site of a new consciousness, it furthermore pointed to the tensions, the desires, the contradictions, the endeavors and the limits of a separatist discourse of feminism and female relationality. Lonzi's theoretical work and her diary powerfully condense all these dynamic aspects of the culture of radical feminism. To the extent to which the "donna clitoridea" embodies this heterogeneous reality, it is far from being a unified and stable identity label. Lonzi's diary as the

narrative inscription of the “donna clitoridea” can thus be read in multiple ways: as a fiction of a self struggling and ultimately deconstructing the presumed authenticity it was meant to embody; as a testimonial of the power dynamics that structured the life of a female group; c. as the creation of a queer feminist subject based on the simultaneous rejection and rereading of a sexual narrative that links the clitoris to lesbianism. Perhaps the unforeseen queer component of the “donna clitoridea” (the “soggetto imprevisto” as Lonzi calls her) lies in the liminal space of semi-visibility that distinguishes her at once from the “donna vaginale” and the lesbian. It was from that liminal space that the “donna clitoridea” engaged and broke off (to use Monique Wittig’s terminology) the heterosexist order of the “cultura del pene.”

CHAPTER III

Revolutionary Embraces: Queer Excisions and Erotic Communism in the 1970s

Guy Hocquenghem's 1970s motto that, seen from behind, everybody is equal is witty and provoking. Just as provocative is his revolutionary theory in favor of a libidinal investment in the anus as the newly rediscovered space, physical and symbolic, of free-flowing undifferentiated desire. In his motto and his theory, which the late gay French thinker laid out in his major work *Le désir homosexuel* (1972), Hocquenghem envisioned an alternative way of experiencing sexuality and sociality that he called "communisme érotique."⁷⁶ To those familiar with queer theory and its French influences Hocquenghem's name is perhaps not new. A translation of *Le désir homosexuel* began to circulate in the US with an enthusiastic preface by queer author Jeffrey Weeks and Michael Moon who considered Hocquenghem one of the pre-cursors of queer studies US-style. Perhaps also the similarity between Hocquenghem and US queer theory derives from a common Foucaultian heritage. Hocquenghem's text is chronologically anterior to the publication of *La volonté de savoir* (History of Sexuality vol.1) and anticipated some of Foucault's main concerns. Hocquenghem's theoretical sources are wide and diversified and encompass Freud and post-Freudian theorists Deleuze and Guattari among the others. Hocquenghem

⁷⁶ A few years later in Italy Mario Mieli reappropriated this term and notion to theorize his own peculiar version of "comunismo erotico." I will deal with his work later in the chapter.

has been object of critical attention, namely on the part of gay male critics, including Bill Marshall and Larry Schehr.⁷⁷ Feminist critics have, however, largely ignored his work. I intend to fill this gap left by feminist and queer criticism by offering a queer feminist reading of *Le Désir Homosexuel*. My reading of Hocquenghem's work provides me with a theoretical frame within which to engage the discursive tensions that surrounded definitions of sexuality and gender identity in the Italian and French gay and feminist movements of the 1970s. The practices and discourses that originated within these movements constituted a body of texts and of theories that used body parts as a place for theorizing. The theories that derive from such an engagement with the body are the objects of investigation and critique of this chapter.

By drawing connections and contrasting with the feminist creation of a gender-specific dimension of sexuality and desire and the gay theoretical stance on the gender undifferentiated character of desire, I emphasize the implicit heterosexism of some 1970s gay and feminist theory. The first part of this chapter is devoted to a feminist queer critique of Guy Hocquenghem's construction of a universal undifferentiated mode of desire located in the anus; it continues into a contrastive reading of Luce Irigaray's female homoerotic utopia focused the labia and of Hocquenghem's sexual utopia around the anus. The second part of the chapter expands on the previous chapter's discussion of Carla Lonzi's notion of symbolic clitoridectomy with Mario Mieli's "educastrazione" (educastration) in order to interrogate the inscription of female queerness through the modes of male queerness. I characterize this gay and feminist discursive mode in terms of queer discursive excision and I expand on the theoretical construction of the "donna clitoridea" (ch. 2)

⁷⁷ A collection of essays titled *Désir Hocquenghem* appeared in 2009 in France.

by engaging Lonzi's reading of her own queerness through a failed correspondence (literal and metaphorical) with Pier Paolo Pasolini's homosexuality.

Hocquenghem's Desire and Sexual Difference

In *Le désir homosexuel* Hocquenghem argues that there cannot be such a thing as a homosexual desire since desire cannot be categorized. Desire simply exists regardless of categories of sexuality: "Désir homosexuel: ces termes ne vont pas de soi. Il n'y a pas de subdivision du désir entre homosexualité et hétérosexualité. Il n'y a pas plus au sens propre de désir homosexuel que de désir hétérosexuel" (Hocquenghem 24). [Homosexual desire: the expression is meaningless. There is no subdivision of desire into homosexuality and heterosexuality. Properly speaking, desire is no more homosexual than heterosexual (50).] Hocquenghem considers the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual desire an "arbitrarily frozen frame" (50) ["découpage arbitraire" (24)] "a manufactured product of the normal world" (50) ["une fabrication du monde normal" (26)]. More importantly, anticipating Foucault, he conceives of desire as the production of a repressive mechanism (a mechanism that operates equally in the State's institutions and within the family) which seeks to isolate and determine proper and improper manifestations of desire. The result is a constant persecution of the public manifestation and practice of homosexual desire, of which, according to Hocquenghem, all regulatory institutions are suffused:

On trouvera la plus grande charge d'homosexualité dans les machines sociales particulièrement anti-homosexuelles: l'armée, l'école, l'Église, le sport, etc. Au niveau collectif, la sublimation en question constitue le moyen de transformer le désir en désir de répression. (58)

[We find the greatest charge of latent homosexuality in those social machines which are particularly anti-homosexual—the army, the school, the church, sport, etc. At the collective level, this sublimation is a means of transforming desire into the desire to repress. (72)]

It is the desire for repression that engenders the categorization of desire.

Hocquenghem holds the post-freudian theorists responsible for the simultaneous discovery of desire and its control. However, Freud himself was the first one to have envisioned desire, in his theory of sexuality, in a way that extends beyond sexual difference (the polymorphous perverse). By claiming that “le désir ignore les découpages scientifiques” (64) [desire ignores scientific divisions (75)], Hocquenghem sets out to demonstrate how desire escapes categorization by its very nature. He does so by returning to that bodily place where the discharge of libido is most controlled in society: the anus. In phallic terms, the anus is the “siège d’une production mystérieuse et personnelle, la production excrémentielle” (98) [site of a mysterious and private kind of production: that is, excremental production (98)]. It is therefore proper that men should keep their anuses under control. In fact the control of the functions of the anus ensures a correct sociability and a normative sexuality, organized around the phallus, the only dispenser of pleasure and desire.

By recognizing the anus as the major site of the repression of desire and of social organization, a repression he calls “anal sublimation,” Hocquenghem urges the subversion of the phallic construction of desire precisely by “de-sublimating the anus.” De-sublimating the anus means extending universally its use to a libidinal one, which is, for the theorist, contemplated only by male homosexuals. The anus should thus go from being a secretive site of shameful discharge to the public site of the free-flowing desire, which prefigures in turn, a return to a polymorphous perverse model of sexuality. If, as he says, seen from behind everybody is equal, everybody should consider the erotic importance of the anus in destabilizing the phallic constraint over sexual categories and the experience of desire. Is anal de-sublimation and the extended libidinal use of the anus enough to get rid of categories of desire? Is

Hocquenghem's anus really so indiscriminate and equal as he sets it out to be? My suspicion is that by universalizing the anus and claiming the undifferentiated nature of desire Hocquenghem fails to recognize that desire does not pre-exist its cultural and discursive constitution and is not exempt from sexual and social differentiation.

Hocquenghem's claim that desire knows no difference lies precisely on

Hocquenghem's insistence that desire can transcend categories when in fact desire and its categorization, as his book paradoxically shows are simultaneously constituted.

However, by acting as if desire were not to be impacted by social and sexual difference, Hocquenghem produces some interesting theorizing points at least from a feminist standpoint.

Since the beginning of his work, Hocquenghem himself categorizes desire, and thus excludes some people from the experience of it:

On partira ici de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler 'l'homosexualité masculine'. Non que la différence des sexes aille de soi: elle sera finalement mise en cause. Mais l'organisation du désir que nous subissons est fondée sur la domination masculine, et c'est d'abord la construction imaginaire œdipienne de l'homosexualité masculine qu'on désigne sous le terme de "homosexualité." (23)

[We shall start with what is commonly known as 'male homosexuality.' This does not mean that the difference in the sexes goes without saying; on the contrary, it must in the end be questioned. But the organisation of desire to which we submit is based on male domination, and the term 'homosexuality' refers first and foremost to the imaginary Oedipal construction of male homosexuality. (49)]

The subjects excluded are the women who do not participate in the economy of desire so strictly linked with the construction of male homosexuality, in Hocquenghem's view. Why then set up the goal to demonstrate and construct an idea of undifferentiated desire if some categories are excluded? Isn't a quick dismissal of female desire an implicit way to recognize (without knowing it) that desire can and should be differentiated? Or is simply the reiteration of a misogynist view that denies

women access to desire and pleasure? The simple dismissal of women from the economy of desire is in contradiction with the theorists' claims.

Hocquenghem's dismissal of female desire is not coincidental. It is rooted in the cultural dynamics of FHAR (*Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire*) and in the discourse of sexualization of desire post 1968. Fresh from the events of May '68, Hocquenghem became the charismatic leader of FHAR. This radical movement of both female and male homosexuals attempted to create a new language to convey its chief goal: a social revolution through the sexualization of society. Members of FHAR viewed the Oedipal structure of society and the control of sexual relations imposed by capitalism as obstacles to the free-flowing expression of desire. The FHAR, which French sociologist Frédéric Martel qualifies as a "cocktail de paradoxes et d'écœntricit " (36), produced in its short life (1971-1974) two manifestos: *Rapport contre la normalit * and *Trois milliards de pervers*, both appearing in the journal *Recherche*. According to the same Martel, despite the initial fervor of FHAR members, the impact of the movement on the history of the period is hard to determine. With time FHAR became more of a "backroom en pleine lumi re" in which sex took over political and social aims. But that FHAR remains in the cultural memory of many in France and Europe is a significant fact. On the one hand, the movement represented a confessional phenomenon, according to Martel, the site of "la parole multiple" (37). On the other hand, it successfully achieved the entrance of the personal into the political: making homosexuality a public matter, FHAR created a public space where sex and language collided to convey a form of cultural opposition

to frozen heterosexual identities.⁷⁸ It was in this effervescent climate of cultural, social, and sexual exchange that Hocquenghem wrote *Le désir homosexuel*.

The climate of exchange within FHAR did not come without its tensions. FHAR included both male and female homosexuals, but their coexistence was far from harmonious. The lesbians of FHAR were concerned with the different rhetorical and social use that some male homosexuals at FHAR made of desire, which reinforced rather than questioned female oppression. Lesbians accused their male comrades of focusing exclusively on male desire.⁷⁹ Tensions eventually led to a split within FHAR, along the lines of sexual difference and the experience of sexuality: “Guy Hocquenghem reconnaît que la dérive libidineuse du FHAR a été une source de désaccord. Certaines lesbiennes accusent précisément l’homosexualité masculine d’être un concentré de machisme” (Martel 57). [Guy Hocquenghem recognizes that the libidinal drift of the FHAR has been a source of disagreement...certain lesbians accuse male homosexuals of being overt misogynists.] A couple of facts are at stake here: on the one hand there was the unwillingness of male homosexuals to conceive of women as desiring subjects; on the other hand there may have been a dismissal of the feminine component of gay subjectivity which I will later explore through Mieli’s notion of “educastrazione.” Both of these phenomena accounted for the persistence of phallogocentrism, even among gay men like Hocquenghem who claimed to exist and theorize beyond sexual difference.

⁷⁸ “Ni identitaire, ni réformateur, ni antidiscriminatoire, le FHAR a choisi un mode révolutionnaire refusant l’assignation des homosexuels à une identité: ton que ne sera pas toujours conserver le mouvement homosexuel en France” (Martel 39) [FHAR is neither identitarian, nor reformist, nor antidiscriminatory and has chosen a revolutionary mode that refuses to inscribe homosexuals into identity : the French homosexual movement will not always be able to preserve such a mode.]

⁷⁹ They even went as far as attacking the Gazolines—a group of effeminate men—for performing what the lesbians thought were essentialized feminine roles.

Ho(m)mosexuality and the Hatred of Woman

I mention above that Hocquenghem excludes women's desire from his own work on the premise that the capitalist economy is concerned with the repression of male homoerotic desire. One can surely recognize in this argument Luce Irigaray's notion of *ho(m)mo-sexualité*—formulated after her readings of Lévi-Strauss—that she used to explain the lack of cultural representations of women's desire. In *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977) Irigaray coins the term to describe heterosexuality as the circulation of repressed male homoerotic desire in which men exchange women and women are only the commodities of this sublimated exchange. Feminist scholars have criticized hom(m)osexuality for its implicit heterosexism, but a more pointed criticism, it seems to me, is not so much that the idea that the desiring economy is male-oriented, but that the all-female economy that Irigaray envisions for women, a rediscovery of their own multiple libidinal dimension, is no less hegemonic or phallogocentric than the ho(m)mosexual exchange network.⁸⁰

Since for Irigaray women are unrepresentable in the phallic economy, she sets out to imagine a different and alternative economy of desire and pleasure in which women become at once subjects and objects of the exchange. The figure that Irigaray uses to signify and identify this alternative all-female dimension is the vaginal lips, impenetrable locus of female *jouissance*, and site of women's perpetual contact with themselves and their own bodies (as the physiognomy of the labia suggests). Critics'

⁸⁰ In *Lesbian Utopics* Annemarie Jagose critiques Irigaray's extradiscursive construction of a female homosexual symbolic as opposed to the phallogocentric all-masculine economy of the same which she calls hom (m)o-sexuality. Targeting Irigaray's attempt to reimagine a notion of true and authentic femininity using a body part, the vaginal lips, strategically positioned as an outside, and her presumed project to undermine the logic of sameness and difference on which traditional notion of the masculine and the feminine are constructed, Jagose shows that Irigaray in fact ends up reproducing the same logic she is purporting to critique.

positions differ with regard to how Irigaray's discursive strategies work towards essentializing femininity. For example queer scholar Annemarie Jagose takes the labia as an instance of the representation of female homosexuality. However she considers problematic the association between the latter and a bodily surface, the lips since such an association implicitly casts the lesbian outside of language and representation. In Jagose's view, Irigaray's discursive move contributes to recreating the binary between a male homosexuality (as identity, an inside) and a female one (as non identity, an outside). Irigaray collapses, Jagose contends, the notions of homosexuality and hom(m)osexuality showing that female homosexual is merely a female reversal of a phallic economy of the same. Less radical are the critiques of Naomi Schor, Judith Butler, and Rosi Braidotti. These three insist on seeing Irigaray's construction of a particular feminine and her "parler-femme" not merely as an imperialist reappropriation of the logic of sameness, but a subversive mimicry (or mimesis) of it. For Schor, the strength of Irigaray's work is in its demonstration that women always already speak within a masculine and misogynist language. Yet they simply do it from a specific particular standpoint. The rhetorical construction of the labia has never been prediscursive or extradiscursive, but a smart and subversive manipulation of the phallus. While agreeing with this last interpretation of Irigaray's work, my concern is not to dispute the construction of a specifically feminine dimension in Irigaray, but rather to put it into contact with another theoretical elaboration of language and desire that should allow me to deconstruct the presumed universalist and heterosexist construction of Hocquinghem's anus. Feminist and queer approaches will help me in my three main goals: first to expose the misogynist construction of the anus, second to demonstrate the theoretical specularly of the two organs, labia and anus, and third to reterritorialize the anus as a possible queer

feminist site of opposition to a heteronormative construction of gender and sexuality. I will argue that all these parts are intimately embedded in a common discourse of opposition to a model of sexuality and desire that is based on reproduction.

For Hocquenghem, the anus is still a prohibited site of desire and pleasure for many, even among homosexuals. He contends that the desiring use of the anus, if not exclusive to male homosexuals, is at least central to male homosexuality: [“S’il n’est exclusif, l’usage désirant que fait l’homosexualité de l’anus est du moins principal” (98-99).] “Les homosexuels,” he continues, “sont seuls à faire un usage libidinal constant de cette zone” (98) [Only homosexuals make such constant libidinal use of this zone (98).] Given Hocquenghem’s own definition of homosexuality as exclusively male, he also restricts the desiring use of the anus to gay men. This discursive strategy becomes evident in his association between anal desire and homosexuality (99). Yet this association between male homosexuality and the anus is also responsible for a certain phallic construction of the homosexual as a *femme manquée*, a construction that Hocquenghem disputes in his work.

Within the phallogocentric system, explains the theorist, the phallus dispenses the identity that homosexuals are considered to lack. More specifically, what homosexuals lack is “woman,” the sexual object that makes heterosexuality the normal and complete sexuality:

L’homosexualité sera donc définie par son manque. Elle ne constituera plus l’une des spécifications hasardeuses d’un désir polyvoque, mais sera posée comme haine de la femme en tant que seul objet sexuel social. L’hétérosexualité est “pleine” face à une homosexualité qui manque l’objet essentiel du désir. (67)

[Homosexuality is thus defined by its lack. It is no longer one of the accidental specifications of a polyvocal desire, but is assumed to signify hatred of woman, who is the only social sexual object. Heterosexuality is “full,” as opposed to a homosexuality which lacks the essential object of desire. (77)]

In relation to heterosexuality, “woman” is the *only* desirable object, socially accepted; therefore in relation to homosexuality, “woman” is a *missing* object. In relation to the “woman,” instead, homosexuals are devoid of an object or else, “l’accès de la femme est fermé à l’homosexuel du fait de son histoire familiale” (68) [the homosexual is denied access to woman because of his family history (78)]. This lack of “woman” explains why homosexuals develop a sadistic posture towards women (“haine de la femme”) as they fear the sense of lack that women recall and the homosexuals’ inability to access or to penetrate women (impotence). Yet such inability can also correspond to the homosexuals’ refusal to comply with an order of heterosexual reproduction that women may evoke. Within this order, being in relation to the Phallus means to be either object or subject, Woman or Man. Where to place homosexuals? Homosexuals are constantly reduced to the status of objects, continues Hocquenghem. They are, in a sense, feminized. This reduction of the homosexual into an object also results in the perception of homosexuals as “fake women” as the following passage exemplifies:

La soudure entre les comportements et le choix se traduit ici par la transformation de l’homosexuel en substitut de femme, puisqu’il tente de se constituer en objet du désir hétérosexuel alors qu’il en est le sujet “naturel”. Qu’un homme efféminé ne soit pas nécessairement une “femme” dans l’acte sexuel ne change rien à cette construction arbitraire mais solide. L’homosexuel est un “leurre” de femme, une image d’image, puisque la femme n’est elle-même constituée en seul objet sexuel que par le jeu de l’imaginaire. (134)

[The soldering together of behavior and choice is expressed in this case by the transformation of the homosexual into a substitute woman, through his attempt to constitute himself as an object of heterosexual desire when he is actually its ‘natural’ subject. The homosexual is an artificial woman, the image of an image, since the woman herself is constituted as the sole sexual object only through the play of the imaginary. (120)]

Here Hocquenghem invokes women to explain how the homosexual passes as a counterfeited woman, the image of an image, “un leurre de femme,” an idea that

seems to anticipate more recent notions of gender identity. However, what Hocquenghem rejects is the idea that a homosexual may simply be a substitute for a woman, or an object, specifying that an effeminate man is not necessarily a woman in the sexual act. What may Hocquenghem have meant by that statement? In my understanding Hocquenghem means that a homosexual, precisely because of a lack of better representation, cannot simply be taken as the passive recipient, the vaginal man, the sexual object. But such a categorization occurs because everything needs to be redeployed in terms of subjects vs. objects, within the schema of an Oedipal sexuality. As a consequence, the homosexual man is essentialized and ends up being defined as the woman he is not, as the woman-object he does not have. Because of this supposed lack, the gay man is supposed to become, always in phallic terms, a woman-hater. Yet, I don't think Hocquenghem is the woman-hater that phallic representation would want him to be. He is less annoyed by women than by their objectification, which also burdens definitions of gay identity.

This is where the anus comes into play. Hocquenghem proposes its desiring use in an effort to circumvent the reproduction of normative sexual categories and the essentialization of homosexuality. Building simultaneously on Freud, Deleuze, and Guattari, he aims to overthrow the exclusionary construction of Oedipal sexuality (based on object choice and indirect experience of pleasure) and replace it with anal pre-oedipal sexuality (based on the direct and non-exclusive connections of organs). The rhetorical strategies he sets in place are quite interesting, but questionable. While discussing the process of desublimation and the active function of the anus, Hocquenghem warns his readers *not to confuse the vagina with the anus*. He clearly states, "L'anus n'est pas le substitut du vagin: les femmes en bénéficient aussi bien que les hommes" (106-107). [The anus is not a substitute for the vagina: women have

one as well as men (103).] However, this reasoning is built on an impossible sexual analogy between mismatched and contradictory elements: it puts together an internal element, traditionally conceived as site of penetration (the vagina) with a surface element (the anus). The latter, although it may be penetrated, is also somewhat resistant to it. Moreover, the combination between an outside and an inside reproduces a dichotomy that Hocquenghem is actually attacking, the one between public and private. Wouldn't the rectum be the equivalent of the vagina? Are not the labia the equivalent of the anus? Why should Hocquenghem establish such an odd analogy only to later reject it? From a strictly feminist point of view, the analogy with the vagina has the unpleasant consequence of considering only one type of female sexuality, namely the vaginal and reproductive one, although the gay theorist acknowledges that women are not sexually unfamiliar with the anus. By focusing on the vagina, Hocquenghem neglects a form of sexuality and desire that finds its expression in the vulva, a non-penetrative and non-reproductive site of female desire and pleasure. We may say that the theorist's dismissal of a vulvo-morphic dimension of female sexuality corresponds to a denial of one particular, but not exclusive mode of lesbian desire and sexuality. This dismissal might be due to Hocquenghem's exclusive focus on the anus to construct desire beyond categories of gender and sexuality as he himself reiterates: "La rencontre avec le désir est d'abord l'oubli de la différence sexuelle" (149). [To encounter desire is first of all to forget the difference in the sexes (130).] As a consequence, his theory of desire remains blind to its obliterating and exclusionary effects. Perhaps Hocquenghem's neglect of the female vulvomorphic libidinal dimension may also hint at his own inability to envision sexuality outside penetration, which goes against Hocquenghem's own idea of a polymorphous or polyvocal sexuality and desire. What would it mean to restore

sexual difference into Hocquenghem's theory of desire? How would Hocquenghem's queer approach dialogue with a feminist one?

When the Anus Meets the Lips or Phallus Resistance

Looking back at Hocquenghem's own confusion, what Hocquenghem actually confuses is vagina and vulva, the other sexual "outsider" upon which Irigaray builds her all-female economy of desire. Hocquenghem's confusion has a couple of productive discursive effects: one is that it constructs the anus, unlike the vagina, *not* as a site of penetration, but as one that can resist penetration and thus rejects the possibility of reproduction. What if the anus were to be put, so to speak, side by side with the vulva and the vaginal lips? The fact that Hocquenghem did not consider the physical proximity between anus and vulva may be further evidence that his corporeal paradigm is male-centered.

In Irigaray's essay "Quand nos lèvres se parlent" ["When Our Lips Speak Together"] the labia/lips evoke both an all-feminine eroticism and an alternative discourse of femininity. The lips/labia are a vehicle not so much of words, but of desire. Irigaray is suspicious of the language that represents phallic enunciation by means of separating, categorizing and quantifying. The word ("le mot")—which we may think of as Word—is "oubli des lèvres" (*Ce sexe* 208), while the lips represent the resistance to speaking someone else's word—the masculine word. Irigaray thus envisions a space of desire configured through the image of labial embraces that, by virtue of a shared materiality, convey a language of undivided female love and shared desire ["je t'aime: corps partagé" (206)] [I love you: body shared, undivided (206)]. Lips, as they touch, become inseparable and create a barrier that resists the penetrating power of the word and makes them mute to it:

Tu/je ne sommes ni ouvertes ni fermées. Ne nous séparant jamais, simplement: *un seul mot* ne peut être prononcé. Être produit, sorti de nos bouches. Entre tes/mes lèvres plusieurs chants, plusieurs dire, toujours se répondent. Sans que l'un, l'une, soit jamais séparable de l'autre. (208-09).

[We–you/I–are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: *a single word* cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other (209).]

Between them barriers do not exist, but a constant movement of closure and disclosure, of free exchange. Lips are no longer there to delimit a threshold between inside and outside; they do not represent a feminine cast off; they simply make borders meaningless, creating the unbound space of extension:

Embrasse-moi. Deux lèvres embrassant deux lèvres: l'ouvert nous est rendu. Notre "monde". Et le passage du dedans au dehors, du dehors au dedans, entre nous est sans limites. Sans fin. Échanges qu'aucune boucle, aucune bouche, n'arrête jamais. Entre nous, la maison n'a plus de mur, la clarrière de clôture, le langage de circularité. Tu m'embrasses le monde est si grand qu'il en perd tout horizon. (209)

[Kiss me. Two lips kissing two lips: openness is ours again. Our "world." And the passage from the inside out, from the outside in, the passage between us, is limitless. Without end. No knot or loop, no mouth ever stops our exchanges. Between us the house has not wall, the clearing no enclosure, language non circularity. When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears. (210)]

The limitless space is the overextended space that the labial embrace produces. The embrace thus becomes the site of exchange between inside and outside, in which "l'érection, ce n'est pas notre affaire" (212) [erection is no business of ours (213)]. Therefore penetration may not be required or desired.

Penetration is not there to define a kind of womanhood and create a rupture, so to speak, between virginity and non-virginity. "Il n'y a pas, *entre nous*, de rupture entre vierge et non vierge" (210) [*Between us*, there's no rupture between virginal and nonvirginal (211)] continues Irigaray, "pas d'événement qui nous rendrait femme" (210) [no event that makes us women (211)]. There is only a language of desire

devised and experienced “pour sortir de leurs cloisonnements, quadrillages, distinctions, oppositions: vierge/déflorée, pure/impure, innocente/avertie” (211) [to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions, and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced (212)]. Moreover, embracing lips and labial contacts suggest to Irigaray a movement not of sudden thrusts, and violent incorporations of women, “enviolé[es] dans leur (des hommes) langage” (214) [absorbed once again in their violating language (215)] but of perpetual exchanges, “sans limites ni bords, que ceux de nos corps mouvants” (216) [without limits or borders except those of our moving bodies (217)].

Only within a phallic language of desire are dichotomies (virgin/impure, subject/object, etc.) kept in place. Those are the same dichotomies that by use of his desiring anus, Hocquenghem would like to efface as well. We may thus realize that lips and anus have more in common than meets the eye. We may thus remedy Hocquenghem’s confusion about the analogy between the anus and the vagina by seeing the anus as more like the lips, that is, not much as the site of penetration, but as one resisting penetration or in which “penetrative” categories do not make sense. By limiting desire to the surface of the male body, Hocquenghem rejects a possibility of penetration much in the way Irigaray denies access to the female body through the paradigm of the lips. This unexpected analogy may help us see behind the anus and the homosexual male desire not so much a hatred for the woman, but rather a rejection of the category of the feminine as penetrable and exchangeable object (imposed both on the gay man and the woman).

By means of sexual opposition to penetration, anus and lips can touch, producing an unexpected queer contact. Metaphorically speaking, a queer embrace between the anus and the lips allows us to see a few things: first of all that anus and

lips are sexually and theoretically specular insofar as they both constitute an alternative language to the discourse of penetration, which we may call embrace. The embrace describes a discourse of bodily surfaces that meet without recurring to penetration. This language of the embrace is a language that, making insignificant the articulation between inside and outside, multiplies the possibility of connections and intensifies desire. Third, the paradigm of the anus-lips embrace also eliminates both the idea of “access,” originated in a dichotomy inside/outside, penetrated/penetrator, and the idea that there is a “woman” (as objectified category) to access in order to reproduce. This point leads to the second part of my argument that explores the rejection of a discourse of reproduction.

In *Le désir homosexuel* Hocquenghem notes that there exists an anal orgasm that does not involve ejaculation (99), a sexual factor traditionally linked with the possibility of reproduction. Oedipal sexuality is postulated on the necessity of penetration and ejaculation, factors leading to reproduction. The vaginal representation of womanhood implicit in the phallic model that Hocquenghem reproduces is responsible for both the objectification of women and the construction of homosexuality as failed reproduction.

Ainsi “la femme” qui n’a, par ailleurs, en tant que telle aucune place dans la société, désignée comme *le seul* objet sexuel social, est aussi *le manque* attribué à la relation homosexuelle. Celle-ci...[est] la relation qui a manqué la reproduction. (Hocquenghem 68)

[Thus “woman,” who otherwise, as such, has no place in society, who is referred to as the *only* social and sexual object, is also the absence attributed to the homosexual relationship...in which reproduction is absent. (78)]

In the Oedipal construction, as we may see, the homosexual relation is threatened by the lack of woman as agent of reproduction. The homosexual relation is meaningless by virtue of its non-reproducibility: “Le désir homosexuel est l’inengendrant-inengendré, la terreur des familles en ce qu’il se produit sans se reproduire” (113).

[Homosexual desire is the ungenerating-ungenerated terror of the family because it produces itself without reproducing (107).] Lack, if lack there is, is the failed reproduction of the family and of the Oedipal structure. Again, the inability of the homosexual to access woman is not so much a sign of impotence, as it is a rejection of reproduction that gets circumscribed through the anus, which does not even need to ejaculate in order to come! That the lips closing on each other may suggest a similar anti-reproductive move is evident. However, I would like to look at how the anus itself, and not the lips, may play into the construction of a feminine and feminist rejection of reproduction. The feminist anus will thus read as a queer instance of opposition to a compulsory reproductive model. I will demonstrate this opposition through a closer reading of Freud's so-called anal phase. When looked at in a queer embrace, Hocquenghem's and Freud's anuses produce quite different narratives of sexuality and gender identity.

Anal Retention: A Queer Feminist Issue

Le désir homosexuel contains an in-depth description and argument regarding the emergence of gay selfhood as a shameful moment of identity loss of self-forgetfulness. Hocquenghem compares this moment to the one at which the child accidentally defecates in his pants because of a lack of control of his bodily functions. The control over bodily functions is important in phallic terms, explains Hocquenghem, insofar as it prefigures and even symbolizes the individual's ability to maintain a "proper" social status. "Savoir 'se retenir'" clarifies the theorist, "ou au contraire donner les excréments est le moment nécessaire de la constitution du soi-même" (Hocquenghem 101). [The ability to hold back or to evacuate the faeces is the necessary moment of the constitution of the self (99).] By contrast, the inability or the refusal to retain one's bodily excretions, which in French gets translated with

“s’oublier” [to forget oneself], “c’est risquer de joindre au travers du flux des excréments l’indifférentiation du désir” (101) [is to risk joining up, through the flux of excrement, with the non-differentiation of desire (99)]. If retention is then associated with identity, non-retention is paired with non-identity, with the possibility of free-flowing desire. This explanation reflects Hocquenghem’s own particular reading of Freud’s episode of anal retention. How does Freud himself frame such occurrence?

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud contends that feces retention is a crucial moment in children’s development. It is also a pleasurable one due to the effects of the muscular contractions brought about by the stimulation of the mucous membrane of the anus. Whereas Hocquenghem’s account of the retentive phase is interpreted as a moment of subjection to rules of self-discipline and self-formation, Freud’s tale of retention contains elements of conflict, opposition and self-affirmation. According to Freud, by retaining the feces, the infant is “naturally not concerned with dirtying the bed, he is only anxious not to miss the subsidiary pleasure attached to defecating.” However, pleasure is not simply derived from the physiological effects of retention, but also from the child’s opposition the social environment’s expectations:

The contents of the bowels have other important meanings for the infant. They are clearly treated as a part of the infant’s own body and represent his first “gift”: by producing them he can express his active compliance with his environment, and, by withholding them, his disobedience. (Freud 52)

As it appears from the statement above, the relation of the individual to retention or production is exactly the opposite of what Hocquenghem describes to us. Withholding is not an act of propriety, but an affirmation of one’s disobedience in defence of personal property. Hence what is pleasurable here is indeed the possibility of opposition that the act of retention carries as well as the preliminary sense of

subjectivity involved in the protection of self-production. The opposition expressed through retention is, I argue, the condition of self-consciousness in contrast and not in compliance with the parental and familial environment of the child. When talking of the infant, Freud attributes a male gender to his infant subject and so does Hocquenghem, assuming that anal retention is a male question. Is the anus misogynist? Not exactly. In fact if one looks even more closely at Freud's male gendered anus, one can already perceive that this anus does not ignore sexual differences. According to Freud, bowel contents are a "gift," the child's own creation that the child may decide to give away (to the parents, supposedly) or to keep. Yet, "from being a gift," continues Freud, "they [the feces] later come to acquire the meaning of baby—for babies, according to one of the narratives of childbirth are acquired by eating and are born through bowels" (52). This strategic interpretation of baby feces enables Freud to gender the process of retention in terms of a female process of reproduction. Hence one can read feces retention also as an allegory of reproduction. If retention, as Freud argues, is disobedience, what the girl disobeys through anal retention is the social expectation that she will eventually deliver those baby-feces and thus that she will reproduce. In other words, by retaining her feces, the girl constructs a sense of self in opposition to maternal expectations (not merely to her own mother, but to the idea of being a mother). I may go as far as saying that the girl, by withholding, questions the female natural duty of re-producing. More generally then, this feminist reading of the anus has queer implications in that it enables us to see in the Freudian construction of the anal phase the preliminary resistance to normative construction of femininity.

My scepticism with regard to Hocquenghem's idea of liberating desire from the constraint of sexual categories stems precisely from the fact that there is a need to

understand how categories have been used to shape desire and to show differences in the way one desires. What is questionable is the way in which the notion of desire is used and manipulated to force, enforce and reproduce normative representations of it. As Hocquenghem acknowledges in his book, it was after Freud that representations of desire reinforced normative and reproductive notions of it: “Ce retour à la sexualité comme essentiellement reproductrice, épisodique chez Freud, devient systématique. Au désir comme production est substituée la sexualité comme reproduction, la famille” (Hocquenghem 67-68). [This return to an essentially reproductive sexuality, which is merely épisodique in Freud, becomes systematic. Sexuality as reproduction (the family) takes over from desire as production (77).] The discourse on desire was replaced by a discourse on the control of desire in the name of sexual reproduction. What the Freudian account of female retention evidences is that the control of reproduction starts theoretically at the anal phase with the discipline of the female body through the control of her excretions. The girl, however, escapes such a control by means of retention. If not purely pleasurable or erotic, the anal desire of the girl finds its expression in her ability to decide when and how she will give or retain the faeces. The importance of considering categories of sexual and gender difference in the discussion of desire speaks to the fact that desire is always already morphed into a specific body, the gay male body of Hocquenghem or the lesbian body of Irigaray or the Freudian body of retention. Desire as a discursive product does not escape phallic discourses, but coexists within it in productive and subversive ways. Desire is not amorphous; it is constantly reshaped and reformulated into one category or another.⁸¹

⁸¹ This notion illustrated in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Edipe*: “Le désir ne manque de rien, il ne manque pas de son objet. C'est plutôt le sujet qui manque au désir ou le désir qui manque de sujet fixe; il n'y a pas de sujet fixe que par la répression” (34) [Desire does not lack anything, it does not lack its object. Rather desire does not have a subject, it lacks a fixed subject; only repression produces fixed

What the sexual and theoretical articulations of Irigaray and Hocquenghem warn us against are the dangers of freezing desire into a universalizing mode that is unaware of its exclusionary implications. Seeing the possible connections about the desiring economies of feminists and queers allows me to see at a distance how the attempt to produce alternative forms of desire was already evidence of the polymorphous or rather multifarious nature of it [“Le désir émerge sous une forme multiple” [Hocquenghem (24)] [Desire emerges in a multiple form (50).] However, when using the term *polymorphous*, I am reminded of the limits that the uncritical use of the Freudian theory of the polymorphous perverse may have had in the 1970s. Hocquenghem took the polymorphous phase of pre-Œdipal sexuality as one that could pre-exist a normative expression of sexuality, thus reinforcing the dichotomous view of sexuality. Hocquenghem’s appropriation of the *polymorphous perverse* risks reconfirming the hegemony of heterosexuality rather than discarding it. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that whereas desire does not pre-exist discourse it actually contributes, in the 1970s, to a substantial theorization of desire that proliferates its discursive forms. Only in that sense can we talk about a sexual and social polymorphism, a theoretical polymorphism of desire that did not go beyond, but was carved out of the discursive manipulations of phallic categories.

Irigaray and Hocquenghem theorized sexual bodies according to a non-penetrative and non-reproductive model. The anal and the vulvic models of sexuality emphasize an idea of surface pleasure. Like Irigaray Carla Lonzi was interested in the construction of a theoretical and a sexual non-reproductive body which she envisioned through her “*donna clitoridea*.” However in Lonzi’s theoretical model the

subjects.] (Translation is mine). For Deleuze desire is not articulated in terms of lack, but its repression is.

non-reproductive sexual subject of the “*donna clitoridea*” stems from clitoridectomy and is embedded through lack. The construction of the “*donna clitoridea*” is dependent upon what I call a discourse of excision that is both a rejection and a re-reading of the psychoanalytic model which constructs femininity and sexuality through absence. Discursive excision seems to be the common ground of some of the Italian feminist and gay discourse of the 1970s.

Queer Excisions and Failed Correspondences: Mieli, Pasolini and Lonzi

While the gays and the lesbians of FHAR were disputing over sexual matters and lesbians were addressing gay with accusations of misogyny, in the 1970s Italian gay thinker Mario Mieli (1953-1982) promoted his “*gaia proposta*” [gay proposal]⁸² in the Italian gay movement: “Non fate più all’amore con i maschi, fate all’amore tra donne, facciamo l’amore tra noi.” (198) [Stop making love with men, let women make love with one another, and with us (191).] This slogan, which Mieli recites in a chapter of his book *Elementi di critica omosessuale* titled “Women and Queens” was an invitation for all women and feminists to overcome the tensions that divided gay men and feminists (lesbians and straight alike) in the 1970s sexual movements. Mieli sought new alliances, new friendships among gays and women, friendships that could rehabilitate the repressed feminine component in every man, whether gay or straight. A gay friendship had for Mieli the potential of helping men to uncover their inner and repressed femininity and enable women to actually manifest their sexuality outside of a heterosexual frame. That a gay man with a taste for transvestism might be attracted to femininity is not surprising; that a queer feminist could actually be drawn to masculinity does not come as a surprise nowadays, especially after the marvelous

⁸² The adjective “*gaio*” is literally joyful. Here it has been reappropriated by Mieli to refer to gays.

contributions of Judith Butler on the lesbian phallus and of Judith Halberstam on female masculinity. But that a radical Italian feminist from the 1970s may be fascinated with queer masculinity is perhaps still difficult to understand in the gender segregated context of Italian radical feminism and in the absence of a cultural paradigm for queer sexuality. Yet, when a radical feminist such as Carla Lonzi, as discussed in the previous chapter, gets out of her feminine enclave to connect with Pier Paolo Pasolini's most intimate self, it is worth interrogating what that contact may produce for feminist thought. This is precisely my task in the second half of this chapter.

One important element that shaped Lonzi's feminism was the notion of symbolic clitoridectomy. I would like to return to this notion and refer to it as the discursive excision of a woman's queer sexual dimension that is subject to the double erasure of homophobia and misogyny. Lonzi's diary *Taci anzi parla* once again can help us elucidate what such discursive excision paradoxically contributed to the construction of the "donna clitoridea" as a theoretical embodiment of female queerness. As I pointed out in my second chapter, the diary, which represented a lively document of the years of *autocoscienza*, was, for Lonzi, not merely a confessional tool or a vehicle of self-analysis. It also described Lonzi's ambivalent relationship with the public and a tension between public disclosure and a desire for clandestinity. Hence Lonzi's queer dimension, as the expression of a different sexuality, is also impacted by her complex relationship with public exposure. Queerness remains crypted in Lonzi's diary with no other discursive access than a failed correspondence with Pasolini's queerness. The point, however, is not so much to acknowledge the double standard of the repression of female sexuality, but rather to understand the kind of queer dimension this symbolic castration produced in light

of the fact that Lonzi rejected the label of lesbian as discursively and sexually constraining (see chapter 2). I argue that Lonzi's attempt to make a connection with Pasolini's homosexuality is a queer move that is grounded in the common space created by the intersection between Lonzi's clitoridectomy and Mieli's "educastrazione." These two instances of discursive excisions are both the product of the 1970s discourse of sexual liberation that bridged gays and feminists in spite of their apparent contrasts.

In 2002, major editor Feltrinelli reissued Mieli's ground-breaking theoretical work, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, which was originally an undergraduate thesis. The recent edition features important critical contributions by Italian, French, and American intellectuals including Teresa De Lauretis who praises the queerness of the work.⁸³ Mario Mieli was a militant intellectual who took up an active role in the 1970s gay and lesbian movement FUORI (*Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano*). The flamboyant side of Mieli's homosexuality and his taste for drag and transvestism did not go unnoticed in intellectual circles. His book, which analyzes the discursive construction of homosexuality in twentieth-century culture, has more than one aspect in common with Hocquenghem's *Le désir homosexuel*. The most striking commonality is the idea of the universality of desire and the anus as a symbolic locus of sexual liberation. However, whereas Hocquenghem is critical of the use of the term "homosexual" as reminiscent of a binary and heteronormative construction of homosexuality, Mieli appropriates the term "homosexual" to found his theory of gay emancipation. Mieli's work, witty and irreverent, departs from Hocquenghem's in a few culturally significant aspects: the critique of the position of

⁸³ Mario Mieli's is becoming better known in the Anglo-American world thanks to a translation of *Elementi di critica omosessuale* titled *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique* and some critical pieces by Bill Marshall and Derek Duncan. Mieli is also author of queer fiction.

the Catholic Church vis-à-vis homosexuals,⁸⁴ his original theories of “transessualità” and “educastrazione,” and his attention to women as important agents in the making of “comunismo erotico.” Mieli also pays particular attention to the role of both gay and women’s movements in the 1970s that fight “affinché la diffusione dell’omoerotismo cambi qualitativamente l’esistenza e la trasformi da sopravvivenza in vita” (Mieli 30) [because the diffusion of homoeroticism will qualitatively change our existence and transform mere survival into life (37)].⁸⁵ The intersection between the two movements finds a cultural justification in that some Italian homosexuals like Mieli engaged in an analysis of their personal experiences inspired by the feminist groups of *autocoscienza*. As Gianni Rossi Barilli evidences, gay groups appropriated the feminist theoretical practice of *autocoscienza* and developed a gay theory from the re-elaboration of the personal (Mieli 304). Of all those elements I shall retain two that are discursively and theoretically intertwined: the theoretical project of a “comunismo erotico” and the idea of educastration.

Unlike Hocquenghem, who excluded the question of women’s desire at the onset of his work, Mieli is persuaded instead that the homosexual question is “un mare magnum [che] sconfinava senz’altro in quell’oceano della questione femminile” (Mieli 7) [a great sea that overflows the ocean of the woman question].⁸⁶ He thus acknowledges the intersectional dimension of feminism and queerness and the common aim of the making of a new sexual alliance that he calls erotic communism:

Ho sottolineato l’importanza della liberazione dell’omosessualità nel quadro dell’*emancipazione umana* : infatti, per la creazione del comunismo, è condition sine qua non, fra le altre, la completa disinibizione delle tendenze

⁸⁴ Let’s not forget that the Catholic Church has always played an important role in the repression of overt forms of queer sexuality and in the regulation of sexuality.

⁸⁵ I am using the English translation of Mieli’s work by David Fernbach.

⁸⁶ This passage as well as the last is contained in the “Premessa,” an introductory part by Mario Mieli that was not included in the English translation by David Fernbach (1980). I therefore give my own translation of this passage.

omoerotiche, che solamente libere possono garantire il conseguimento di una comunicazione totalizzante tra esseri umani, indipendentemente dal loro sesso. (8)

[I emphasized the importance of the liberation of homosexuality within the frame of human emancipation: as a matter of fact, for the creation of communism, one necessary condition among the others is the complete release of the homoerotic tendencies, that once liberated can guarantee that a totalizing communication among human beings can be achieved regardless of their sex.]⁸⁷

Mieli's erotic communism presupposes the universal existence of a natural homoerotic tendency which can only manifest itself if every individual is emancipated from the cultural repression of the inner homoerotic drive. For Mieli each person loves, regardless of gender divisions, and has therefore a great erotic capacity towards same sex people. This capacity, which Mieli names "transessualità," has nothing to do with surgical reassignment. It is germane to bisexuality as it describes a subjectivity based on the coexistence of elements of both sexes and the possibility of navigating a spectrum of gender identifications:

In questo libro io chiamerò *transessualità* la disposizione erotica polimorfa e "indifferenziata" infantile, che la società reprime e che, nella vita adulta, ogni essere umano reca in sé allo stato di latenza oppure confinata negli abissi dell'inconscio sotto il giogo della rimozione. *Il termine "transessualità" mi sembra il più adatto a esprimere a un tempo, la pluralità delle tendenze dell'Eros e l'ermafoditismo originario e profondo di ogni individuo.* (19)⁸⁸

[I shall use the term trans-sexuality throughout this book to refer to the infantile polymorphous and undifferentiated erotic disposition, which society suppresses and which, in adult life, every human being carries within him either in a latent state, or else confined in the depths of the unconscious under the yoke of repression. Trans-sexuality seems to me the best word for expressing, at one and the same time, both the plurality of the erotic tendencies and the original and deep hermaphroditism of every individual. (25-26)]

The problem for Mieli is that, since childhood, each individual has been subjected to an erotic mutilation ["mutilazione dell'Eros"], educastration, practiced in the family

⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁸⁸ Mieli's italics.

and in society to encourage an exclusive practice of sexuality and love. This cultural castration has contributed to the denial of a psychic hermaphroditism and the homoerotic tendencies that characterize the deepest sexual tendencies of each individual.⁸⁹ More important, the enforcement of a monosexuality is concomitant with the disavowal of the intrinsic femininity that is natural to each man, whether gay or straight. Mieli defines this disavowal in a couple of ways: “misconoscimento della donna *in sé*,” that is, the disavowal of the biological woman, and “misconoscimento della *donna in sé*,” that is the rejection of the “woman” that inhabits every man.⁹⁰ Both forms of disavowal create a condition of estrangement vis-à-vis femininity that is responsible, in Mieli’s view, for men’s sexism and the renunciation of gay desire. As a result, educastration works in a couple of different ways: towards the mutilation of “transessualità” as the potential to live fully one’s own sexual inclinations and towards the mutilation of male femininity.

The cultural type that “educastrazione” produces, according to Mieli, is the “criptochecca” [cryptofag], a straight man whose virility conceals an inner and repressed feminine component. The intriguing aspect of educastration from a feminist point of view, is the complete invisibility of women and women’s sexuality. Or rather, women do appear, but through the attire of a male transvestite who performs his femininity, it seems. Quoting the words of an Italian feminist Mieli writes: “La femminilità sarà così un uomo travestito, dopo di che una donna può far ritorno per un effetto di raddoppiamento di questo travestito e imitare il pederasta che ha imitato la femminilità. Donna, continua a non essercene” (27). [Femininity will be a male transvestite. Afterwards a woman can return as the double of a transvestite

⁸⁹ Mieli seems to use “hermaphroditism” as synonym of bisexuality.

⁹⁰ At some point, in an argument that resonates with Butler analysis of gender identification through the psychic dynamics of mourning and melancholia, he even hints at the fact that hyper-virility may be the very sign of the extent of the homoerotic repression.

and imitate the pederast who imitated femininity. A woman is still non-existent.] Quoting a feminist essay from the journal *L'Erba Voglio* (26, 1976), Mieli understands femininity in terms of male transvestism. Hence male transvestism becomes the only way through which women can inhabit and reclaim their own feminine identity.⁹¹ The question of womanhood or of female sexuality is displaced by a variety of terms such as “femininity” and “transvestim” that prefigure more recent notions of gender construction and performance and are obscured by an even more obscure reference to pederasty as the site of sexual imitation. All these terms, charged with a complex and individual critical history, also have the effect of reducing the question of women’s sexuality to a *nowhere* or assimilating it to a transvestite’s performance of gender and sexuality. This fact, along with Mieli’s citation of feminist work may be crucial for a queer feminist reading of Mieli’s work.

Mieli’s citation of feminist theories is an important rhetorical move that indicates that “transessualità” was performed by Mieli even at a theoretical level. In other words, Mieli was performing the feminine part of himself by appropriating feminist speech, a move which made his queerness a very feminist construction. The English translation of *Elementi di critica omosessuale* omits the part of Mieli’s quotation that describes how women’s gender identity is merely re-appropriation of femininity in drag. David Fernbach’s omission of Mieli’s feminist citation is an unjustified rhetorical excision that does a disservice to Mieli’s theory of “transessualità.” It also inadvertently reinforces what Mieli critiques through his notion of educastration, that is the castration of the feminine component in every man.

⁹¹ This translation is mine because the English edition omitted this part of Mieli’s quotation of the Italian feminist journal. This part is also omitted from the notes.

The importance of Mieli's feminist citations is stressed by feminist scholar Simonetta Spinelli who recognizes how much Mieli's theory is indebted to feminism:

Mieli conosceva le teorizzazioni femministe. Citava in continuo gli scritti delle femministe milanesi che apparivano sul periodico "L'Erba Voglio". Le sue analisi sul collegamento tra subordinazione femminile, finalizzazione della sessualità alla riproduzione, oggettualizzazione della donna, e l'impotenza camuffata da virilismo violento...ricalcava molte analisi dei collettivi femministi. (Spinelli 314)

[Mieli knew feminist theories. He would always quote the articles of the Milanese feminists that appeared in the journal "L'Erba Voglio". His analyses on the connection between women's subordination, reproductive sexuality, women's objectification and male impotence masked through violent virility...reiterated many of the analyses done by the feminist collectives.]

Unlike Hocquenghem's work, which reduces the question of desire to the gay men's anus, Mieli's theory speaks, instead, to a feminist audience because Mieli spoke through feminist words. In this sense Mieli may be said to perform a sort of queer feminist theory in drag or a lip-sinking of feminist theories. For instance Mieli called upon women for he considered them precious allies and companions in his theory of erotic emancipation: "Ma a me preme ricordare come il conseguimento della transessualità passi necessariamente attraverso il movimento delle donne e la liberazione completa dell'omoerotismo" (Mieli 20). [I must add that the achievement of trans-sexuality can only follow from the work of women's movement and the complete liberation of homoeroticism (38).] Mieli cannot conceive of any erotic emancipation, any change to the discourse of gender and sexuality, without women. Their cultural and historical appearance also depends on their specific sexual contribution to the movement, which Mieli acknowledges once again through the words of a feminist: "Storicamente le donne non esistono ancora e scopo del movimento è farle apparire, storicamente come luogo differenziato" (28). [Women,

historically, do not yet exist, and the goal of the women's movement is to give women a specific historical reality (35).]

The gay activist interestingly attributes the social misrecognition of women's sexual autonomy to the double mechanism of misogyny and homophobia that operates to repress gay desire and "transessualità" even among gay men.⁹² More acutely, Mieli establishes a striking analogy between his educastration and the "occultamento della clitoride" in the attempt to provide a theoretical common ground between his gay theory and feminism:

L'educastrazione consiste, oltre che nell'occultamento della clitoride, nella repression del desiderio omosessuale e della transessualità, della dimensione erotico-esistenziale intera della donna. Bisogna che la (trans) sessualità femminile sia violentemente repressa perché la donna possa apparire femminile, atta alla sottomissione al maschio e ai soprusi della sessualità che è l' 'unica vera'. In base alla Norma, la sessualità femminile non deve esistere se non in quanto sottomessa. (231)

[Educastration consist not only in the concealment of the clitoris, but also in the repression of homosexual desire and trans-sexuality, of woman's whole erotic existence. Female (trans)-sexuality has to be violently repressed so that the woman can appear 'feminine', can be subjected to the male and to the insults inflicted on her by his sexuality, the 'only true sexuality.' On the basis of the Norm, female sexuality cannot exist except as something subordinate. (221)]

Mieli understands the "Norma" as the rigid distinction between the active masculine and the passive feminine, and thus sees clitoridectomy as the erasure of an active female sexuality which he refers to as "transessualità femminile." His notion of "transessualità femminile," in connection with clitoridectomy, echoes Carla Lonzi's theory adding some nuances to it. Educastration and clitoridectomy can work for all those "transessuali" who are "perseguitati dalla società che non ammette *confusione*

⁹² "La donna, dunque, è doppiamente soggetta al maschio: poiché l'uomo le impone la propria virilità (quale condensato di desiderio omosessuale alienato) e la propria femminilità" (27) [the woman, then, is subject to male in two ways: the man forces on her both his masculinity (a condensation of alienated homosexuality) and his own 'femininity' (35)].

tra i sessi” [persecuted by a society that cannot accept any confusion between the sexes] and “tendono a ridurre la propria effettiva transessualità a monosessualità apparente” (20) [tend to reduce their effective trans-sexuality to an apparent monosexuality (27)]. As a result, according to Mieli, the female “transessuale” will chose virility and feel like a man and the male “transessuale” feels like a woman by virtue of choosing femininity.⁹³ Mieli claims that such mechanisms are at work even among the feminists who harbor prejudices vis-à-vis gay men and their effeminacy (201). In particular Mieli seems to be skeptical about the spread of the “nuova omosessualità” among feminists since “essa ostenta una maschera ‘omo,’ che serve in realtà a (s)velare l’autentico desiderio gay latente e soprattutto il desiderio eterosessuale cosciente che la sottende” (204) [it boasts a ‘homo’ mask, but this actually serves to (un)veil the genuinely latent gay desire, and above all the conscious heterosexual desire that wears the mask (197)]. While Mieli accuses feminists of veiled homophobia he also detects in that homophobia the feminists’ inability to reconcile with their “transsexual” bent.

Mieli’s arguments reiterate the oppositions that governed the uneasy alliance between feminists and gays in 1970s Italy. This desired alliance, which was destined to fail or at least to create ruptures within the movements, is the problematic terrain on which I would like to read Lonzi’s attempt to reach out to Pasolini in order to define her own queerness. We may look at this connection as a “transsexual” alliance

⁹³ Those forms of male and female transgenderism are not to be confused with homosexuality since transgenderism does not coincide, in Mieli’s view, with a homosexual orientation of the transgender individual. However, this distinction seems to contradict Mieli’s idea that “educastrazione” is at once a gender and a sexual castration. In other words there is no castration of the opposite gender inside of oneself without castration of a gay desire and vice versa.

à la Mieli that enabled Lonzi to queer her own feminism while queering Pasolini's gayness. In a way, had Lonzi written her letters to Mieli instead of Pasolini, she would have perhaps been able to fill a need for a queer communication, or better said, a queer correspondence, which instead remained unfulfilled. Conversely, the fact that Lonzi was not responsive to Mieli's call to feminists contributed to a mutual sense of misrecognition. This fact only emphasizes the idea that both feminists and gays participated in the discursive excision that shaped their experience of queerness. Imagining what that correspondence would have been like and answering those unanswered letters would allow me to restore a symbolic connection among queers.

Envisioning a Queer Feminist Correspondence

Carla Lonzi's interest in Pasolini's sexual identity is proven by a number of letters— included in the diary □ that Lonzi wrote to Pasolini between July 1974 and the moment of his death on November 1975. Lonzi is attracted to his “richiamo alla diversità” [call to diversity (736)], a diversity that Lonzi deems authentic. She also feels that, like her, Pasolini has been misunderstood by society and has not found his fit : “Anche noi,” she says referring to her group “siamo vittime di nient'altro che di un'impossibilità a trovare rispondenza al nostro modo di ‘nominare le cose’ e di farle accettare come presa di coscienza” (Lonzi, *Taci anzi parla* 745). [We also have been victims of an impossibility of finding a correspondence between our way of naming things and have such things accepted as signs of a new consciousness.] I will linger on a few instances in which Lonzi attempts to establish a communication with the gay intellectual, which may be described both in terms of a miscommunication and a missed communication. Pasolini apparently never answered Lonzi's letters, thus precluding the possibility of a communication between the queer and the feminist. Moreover, we are unsure of whether Lonzi sent these letters or whether the letters

were simply the product of her musings. Why would a radical feminist, who defends the existence of an authentic feminine subjectivity, turn to a gay man in search for an alliance on the basis of a new consciousness? I would like therefore to repeat here what I did with Irigaray and Hocquenghem and create a space of contact between two intellectuals on the basis of an emerging queer consciousness. What makes Lonzi's experience of feminism intriguing to me is her veiled fascination with masculinity and, more specifically, with queer masculinity.

Throughout the years of *autocoscienza*, and even afterwards, Lonzi entertains a very intimate relation with Simone (art critic Piero Consagra in reality). References to and influences of this relationship are all over the place in Lonzi's diary, attesting to the importance of that connection at several levels, especially at the emotional level. Lonzi relates in great details the sexual encounters of this relationship, in which she experiments her sexuality in various forms that often do away with penetration. In some cases, the eroticism of the couple is expressed in terms of mutual masturbation. In general, Simone seems to respond to some of Lonzi's erotic preferences and even be a mediator of her sexual discovery. For instance, it is Simone who suggests to Lonzi that she may be attracted to both men and women, disclosing a homoerotic disposition to which Lonzi does not easily concede. While advancing the possibility that Lonzi may be attracted to women and making a case for it, Simone comments on a presumed gender duality in Lonzi's mind, a tension between her masculinity and her femininity: "Simone dice invece che la donna con il pene è una mia proiezione, la mia paura di essere maschile" (816). [Simone says instead that the woman with a penis is a projection of mine, my fear of being masculine.] Simone reads Lonzi's homoerotic feelings through the inscription of a form of female masculinity represented by the "donna col pene" [a woman with a

penis, a phallic woman], an image that threatens Carla. The woman's tensions find some sort of release through her dreams: "A me è capitato di sognare che la ricerca di un'intesa con una donna si interrompeva nella scoperta di un sesso maschile sotto le sue vesti. La mia sensazione era di paura, di disagio" (816). [I happened to dream that I was seeking an intimate connection with a woman; but the sight of a masculine sex underneath her dress interrupted this contact. I felt fear and discomfort.] The dream, apart from releasing a tension, is a vehicle of Lonzi's own sexual queerness. The dream ostensibly displays Lonzi's fear of knowing that another woman may have and use a penis in their relationship. This fact also alerts us to Lonzi's reluctance to being penetrated not merely by a man, but by another woman, which in more contemporary terms, could describe the attitude of the untouchable and impenetrable stone butch. The stone butch is, according to Judith Halberstam, the transgendered woman who likes pleasing her partner, even through penetration, but does not want to be touched. That Lonzi rejects penetration is obvious. Less obvious is whether she wants to penetrate or even please another woman. As a matter of fact, at one point Lonzi even admits to herself: "Ho paura di scoprirmi una donna con il pene...una paura mortale" (910) [I am dreading to discover myself as a woman with a penis...a mortal fear.] Lonzi's penis phobia seems to be in contradiction with her idea of sexual equivalence (already explored in the previous chapter) by which the clitoris, according to a Freudian analogy, is identified with the woman's penis and the clitoris describes woman's self-pleasuring activity. This penis phobia may translate Lonzi's uneasiness with embodying a penetrative position. Yet, fear being the "natural" ally of desire, I am tempted to see behind the fear, the expression of an actual desire to be a penetrator. When this fear is paired with Lonzi's difficulty in displaying her own clitoris—a difficulty acknowledged in the previous chapter—it would be safe to argue

that Carla Lonzi's fear may signify her reluctance to recognize her inner masculinity or to identify the clitoris as a masculine attribute. Lonzi's ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis her masculinity creates a tension that is at the heart of the articulation of her feminism, a feminism that resists the association with lesbianism—as seen in the previous chapter. Hence what kind of queer sexual dimension does this penis phobia tease out of the feminist in the light of a rejected lesbianism? This is where I find it useful to reconnect Lonzi with Pasolini using the oniric imagery that Lonzi's diary contains. In one of her recurring dreams Lonzi imagines seducing Pasolini out of his timidity:

Sono con Pasolini, so che è omosessuale, mi appare timido . Ma io trovo degli argomenti che lo sciolgono poco a poco, faccio la calza e sono molto calma. A un certo punto mi aiuta a passare un gomito tra di fili di lana, cosa che mi sembra un gesto d'intesa fra me e lui. Dopo di che diventa addirittura euforico, parla e parla. Provo un estremo bisogno di conquistarlo e sono certa di riuscirci. (918)

[I am with Pasolini, I know he is a homosexual, he appears timid. I engage him in some topics that gradually put him at ease, I am knitting, and I am very calm. At one point he helps me weave a bundle into the wool threads which appears to me a gesture of complicity between me and him. Afterwards he even becomes euphoric, he keeps talking. I really feel an urge to conquer him and I am certain that I will succeed in it.]

The woman's seduction of Pasolini translates for me into an attempt to get him out of his timidity which is also, in the above passage, strictly linked with Pasolini's homosexuality. In order to seduce Pasolini, Lonzi uses some mysterious "argomenti" [topics] that make him feel at ease with a woman, while involving him into a traditionally feminine task (knitting). What intrigues me, even more, is Lonzi's desire to seduce Pasolini in a markedly feminine realm (weaving, knitting) thus outing, so to speak, his feminine side. It is precisely in the seduction of the feminine Pasolini that Lonzi may succeed in inscribing her own queerness that is by appealing, as a woman, to the misrecognized part of femininity that is kept at bay in the gay man.

In other words, the attraction of Lonzi towards Pasolini is exquisitely queer in that it connects the woman's femininity with the gay man's femininity. In this sense we may look at this connection as a lesbian connection.

Behind Lonzi's seduction of Pasolini is also the desire to break through Pasolini's "sfiducia della donna" [distrust of women]⁹⁴ and the disavowed sexist component of the gay man: "Con Pasolini ho questo in comune: che lui come uomo ha cercato di affermare il suo diritto erotico a essere penetrato, io come donna a non esserlo" (942). [With Pasolini I have in common the fact that as a man he has sought to affirm his erotic right to be penetrated, I as a woman I have claimed the right to not be penetrated.] The effort to establish a connection with Pasolini results in an interesting stereotypical construction of gay and lesbian identity around the question of accessibility and penetration. Lonzi interprets male homosexuality in terms of a feminized desire to be penetrated. This is of course an assumption on the part of Lonzi who can only guess at Pasolini's sexual preferences. This deliberate reading of male homosexuality as the affirmation of the right to be penetrated has, in my view, a specific purpose. This purpose is that of signifying a model of impenetrable femininity, one that is much closer to either the masculine allure of the stone butch portrayed by Halberstam, or to the impenetrable masculinity of Hocquenghem's queer anus. At this point I am wondering if it would have been more fruitful for Lonzi to attract Pasolini's attention not by appealing to his closeted femininity, but to his anally resistant masculinity. This is what Lonzi does when she imagines speaking to Pasolini like a brother to a brother except that she recognizes that it is "rischioso per un uomo essere chiamato fratello da una donna" (1164) [risky for a man to be called brother by a woman], perhaps because fraternity is an affair between men. Pasolini

⁹⁴ I understand "sfiducia" as another way to define Pasolini's mysogynist bent (see chapter 1).

reveals himself to be unprepared to recognize the brotherhood with a woman [“sei anche impreparato al mio riconoscimento” (957)]. Ultimately what Pasolini misrecognizes, according to Lonzi, is Lonzi’s proximity as a queer woman to his queer masculinity or his male queerness. It is plausible to argue that this misrecognition may be the result of what Lonzi considers Pasolini’s sexism, a sexism that contributes to the further dismissal of female sexuality. However, we should not forget that Lonzi and Pasolini’s connection was the product of Lonzi’s fantasy and Lonzi’s dreams, and therefore should be treated as a narrative fiction. In other words, Lonzi’s identification with Pasolini and his inner femininity can be seen as a queer reading strategy, through which Lonzi reads her own queerness, and her own feminine and feminist diversity. It is also impossible to determine whether Lonzi’s failed correspondence was indeed real or whether it was fruit of Lonzi’s own narrative construction. Yet this narrative construction, through the diary, seemed to represent for Lonzi one way to inscribe her own queerness at a time in which there was no such a term to define the sexually different other than lesbianism, an identity label that Lonzi openly rejected. We may look at Lonzi’s construction as a fake dialogue with the other, a discursive modality through which Lonzi refused to engage in a real conversation, preferring a state of semi-clandestinity or invisibility that characterized her radical feminism through her diary practice (as I discussed in my previous chapter). In this perspective the failed correspondence can translate not so much a state of isolation, but a different tactic for the inscription of the queer.

Queerness was, it seems, a matter of missed communications in 1970s discursive exchanges between feminists and gay men. What those missed exchanges failed to highlight was the fact that queerness came to be constructed as and through discursive excisions whether we talk of clitoridectomy or of eduction. It is

precisely in the missing correspondence between the “*donna clitoridea*” and the “*transessuale*” that we find a ground for understanding how both figures emerged against a cultural landscape that was at once sexist and homophobic. Symbolic clitoridectomy and eduction are the intertwining dimensions of a larger cultural phenomenon, discursive excisions that points to the intersectional dimension not only of categories of gender and sexuality, but also of queer and feminist approaches. In particular, the notion of discursive excision translates Lonzi’s and Mieli’s difficulty of containing their specific embodiments of gender identity within the conventional frame of masculinity and femininity. More importantly, Mieli’s insistence that “woman” does not exist, and that women merely reappropriate the gender of transvestites is a preliminary indication of the fact that gender does not belong to biology, but lies firmly on its constructed-ness.

Whereas Mieli’s and Lonzi’s queer theories may find a common ground in the theories of clitoridectomy and eduction, Mieli and Lonzi remain different pertaining issues of visibility and the public embodiment of their theories. For Mieli embodying “*transessualità*” means being able to display the “other” within, the repressed feminine; queerness must therefore become evident and visible through transvestism. For the sense of community, like a famous slogan circulating in the 1970s recited “*El pueblo unido è meglio travestido*” [el pueblo unido is better when it is transvestite] can only be created when gay people also dress up according to their inner sexual inclinations, their erotic dispositions. Whereas the mode of the “*transessuale*” is that of ostentation and visibility, the tactic of the “*donna clitoridea*” is one of invisibility and clandestinity. But it seems, instead, that Lonzi radicalized the association between femininity and privacy, hid tactically into an invisible space and thus inadvertently contributing to the missed communication between gays and

feminists in the era of erotic communisms. And yet the gay and the feminist worlds come into contact at the very moment in which Mieli theoretically embodies his “trans-sexual” queer mimicking the words of a feminist and Lonzi identifies with queer Pasolini through the semi-clandestine pages of her diary. By opening up to gay theories of “transessualità,” a queer feminist such as Lonzi could frame her queerness within a broader context that would combine her radical feminism with the gay proposal of Mario Mieli. Perhaps Mieli’s *Elementi* was a call for feminists to come out and share the political space and language of “transessualità” as the emerging dimension of 1970s queerness. For this is what “transessualità” is ultimately about, as Teresa De Lauretis also states: “L’esperienza di un corpo o di un desiderio non conforme alla norma socialmente prescritta [che] cerca un linguaggio per dirsi, scava lo scibile per capirsi, foggia parole nuove per nominarsi” (Mieli 262). [The experience of a body or a desire that does not conform to the prescribed social norm and searches for a language of self-expression, dig into the body of knowledge to get to know itself, forges new terms of self-definition.]

I would like to see “transessualità” as the revolutionary language of embraces, which my title recalls and my chapter reconstitutes through the weaving of theories that have been disconnected, but had so much in common. The embraces I create between Irigaray and Hocquenghem or Mieli and Lonzi are the material and symbolic contacts that body parts, such as the anus, the clitoris and the labia, produce when the feminist and gay theories of the 1970s connect in order to forge a discourse of erotic communism. The “transsexual” embraces—I am using *transsexual* in Mieli’s sense—are envisioned spaces of sexual alliance, the theorizing spaces from where gays and feminists elaborated a socio-symbolic dimension of the queer starting from a provocative re-reading of the sexual bodies of psychoanalysis. Whereas the Italian

trans-sexual alliance is postulated on a discourse of excision, the French trans-sexual connection between Irigaray and Hocquehgem is based on a common resistance to a discourse of penetration and of reproduction. Both these trans-sexual alliances speak to the intersectional component not only of feminist and gay theories, but also of issues of gender and sexuality.

In this chapter I deal with the productive tensions that characterized the practices and discourses of the feminist and the gay movements, some of which were reflected in the theoretical work of Irigaray and Hocquenghem, Lonzi and Mieli. Yet the French feminist movement known as the MLF, like the Italian one, was far from cohesive. Disagreements and splits with regard to notions of sexuality and gender existed among the members of the MLF which shaped not only their experience as a group, but also their theoretical and their fictional work. The following chapter is partly devoted to the encounter between the fictional work of Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig and the material and symbolic dimension from which Wittig's lesbian emerged to question a construction of subjectivity through the sexualized and the gendered body.

CHAPTER IV
**The Laugh of the Lesbian: Fictive Gender and Emotional Materiality in
Monique Wittig's Fiction**

Il n'y a pas de place pour elle si elle n'est pas un il? Si elle est elle-elle, ce n'est qu'à tout casser, à mettre en pièces les bâtis des institutions, à faire sauter la loi, à tordre "vérité" de rire.

[There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.]

– Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975)

“Elles disent que les vulves sont désormais en mouvement. Elles disent qu’elles inventent une nouvelle dynamique” (*Guérillères* 180). [They say that the vulvas are henceforth in movement. They say that they are inventing a new dynamic (126).] The exhilarating image of the marching vulvas immortalizes for me Monique Wittig’s novel *Les guérillères* (1969). Wittig’s fiction offers a vision of what the world would look like if women were to overthrow the language of phallogocentrism and society were to be liberated once and for all from the categories of sex. Written in the aftermath of May ’68, amidst the enthusiastic emergence of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (also known as MLF), *Les guérillères* not only predates the visionary experience of 1970s feminism, but emphasizes the need to get rid of old narrative forms and calls for radical invention. Numerous critics have seen in this work the fictional materialization of some of the ideas that Wittig later developed as a theorist in the collection of essays, *The Straight Mind*. As Linda Zerilli puts it, “the amazing achievement of *Les guérillères* is not to demonstrate (with concepts or

arguments) but to lead before the eyes (with images and metaphors) the radical reformulation of the heterosexual contract” (Shaktini 80). Wittig’s fiction is not so much a reformulation of the heterosexual contract, but a fictional invention based on the undoing of masculine discourse. This double move of undoing and reinvention is the greatest achievement of the war of the *guérillères* whose main target is a system of representation in which women are naturalized in eternal difference through the perpetuation of the category of sex. Reinventing a new discourse through fiction is one of the ways in which Wittig attempts to make “the category of sex obsolete,” that is to envision a space in which words such as sex or heterosexuality or male/masculine or female/feminine would be transformed and redeployed symbolically and semantically.

Monique Wittig and Sexual Difference

The inventive and visionary nature of *Les guérillères* rests on Wittig’s ability to work and rework the structures of language in depth and disentangle their ideological implications. This linguistic work was a feature that Wittig had in common with other French feminists in the 1970s such as Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray. Later their names came to be associated among American scholars with theories of sexual difference and of “écriture féminine.” Although Wittig was an active member of the MLF, and contributed to its history and its development—for instance she collaborated with Colette Guillaumin and Christine Delphy in the development of a materialist feminist approach that can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir—she always vehemently opposed both the notion of sexual difference and that of “écriture féminine.” Wittig believed that the idea of a feminine specificity, of a feminine difference in discourse is a product of masculine discourse and it is dangerously complicit with a heterosexual view that should be questioned and not

promoted.⁹⁵ Difference can be found at the very heart of discourse as one of its functioning mechanisms as “les guérillères” cry out, “Ils t’ont tenue à distance, ils t’ont maintenue, ils t’ont érigée, constituée dans une différence essentielle” (*Guérillères* 146) [The men have kept you at a distance, they have supported you, they have put you on a pedestal, constructed with an essential difference (102).] The problem for Wittig is that difference, as the cry of “les guérillères” implies, is an essential feature that reproduces the dominant masculine discourse instead of questioning it. Wittig’s conviction finds evidence in her implicit link between the image of erection (“ils t’ont érigée”) and the masculine representation of feminine difference as an oppressive product of phallic discourse. Wittig responds to the pernicious association between sexual difference and masculine discourse in a couple of different ways. In *The Straight Mind* she literally calls for a destruction of sex/gender on the part of women: “This is why we must destroy it and start thinking beyond it if we want to start thinking at all, as we must destroy the sexes as a sociological reality if we want to start to exist” (8). Women, who are the sole sexual category [“only *they* are sex, *the* sex” (8)], are also those who can affect the destruction of sex/gender by “breaking off” the heterosexual contract that perpetuates itself on the existence of such category:

Now when I say, let us break off the heterosexual contract per se, I designate the group ‘women’. But I did not mean that we must break off the social contract per se, because that would be absurd. For me we must break it off as heterosexual. (35)

One ought to understand the meaning of “breaking off” not so much in terms of a literal destruction, of a symbolic move that questions the

⁹⁵ In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler maintains that what distinguishes Wittig from Irigaray is that Wittig’s idea of the category of sex is only feminine and that such a category is used to justify oppression and a system of reproduction.

heterosexist nature of such a contract and reinvents discourse at the same time.⁹⁶ This move coincides with a moment of discursive destabilization that I think of in terms of an undoing. Such a move gestures at the creation of a new language for thinking subjectivity and bodies while exposing the pernicious functioning of sex/gender in discourse. In *The Straight Mind* Wittig also identifies the space beyond sexual categories with the lesbian, an highly conceptual, but also a material category that is strongly embedded in the historical and cultural context of Wittig's critique of Marxism as I will later explore: "Lesbian," she writes "is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex" (20).⁹⁷ The postulation of a lesbian ontology "beyond" the categories of sex has encountered the resistance of some scholars who see in the extra-discursive status of the lesbian an essentialist, ahistorical and even utopian product (Fuss; Jagose).⁹⁸ De Lauretis is among the scholars who have re-

⁹⁶ Inspired by Rousseau's social contract, Wittig adds that "if there is something real in the ideas of Rousseau, it is that we can form 'voluntary associations' here and now, and here and now reformulate the social contract as a new one" (45). Of course, Wittig addresses women with her "we," urging them to break away from that ungraspable reality of heterosexuality, by making more tangible connections, more adequate associations.

⁹⁷ It is worth quoting the full passage: "Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex, because the designated subject 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 corvee, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children etc.) a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual." Wittig borrows the concept of servitude from Colette Guillaumin's "sexage", a blending of "sexe et esclavage" which foregrounds the social contract through which "men as a class appropriate women physically" (Griffin-Crowder 492).

⁹⁸ In her essay "Monique Wittig's Anti-essentialist Materialism," Diana Fuss takes a stance against the pitfalls of Wittig's constructionist and anti-essentialist construction of the lesbian subject. She exposes Wittig's anti-essentialism as a dangerous position in which the "lesbian" as "cultural construction" is in contradiction with the "lesbian" as a "harmonious category," as it is presented by Wittig. Her lesbian, specifies Fuss, is both ahistorical and amaterial as it erases the "the real material and ideological differences between lesbians" adding that "what Wittig ought to be talking about is not lesbian culture, but lesbian cultures, not the 'lesbian body' but lesbian bodies, not lesbian sexuality but lesbian sexualities" (43). In a recent article that appeared in a special issue of GLQ devoted to Monique Wittig, Brad Epps and Jonathan Katz responds to Fuss's essay by pointing out that Wittig's essentialism is totally of Fuss's making. In the same issue, Diane Griffin Crowder attributes queer theorists' accusation of Wittig's essentialism to a basic misunderstanding of Wittig's materialism and her notion of sex-gender system.

evaluated Wittig's "lesbian," emphasizing instead its political and cognitive value.⁹⁹ Expanding on De Lauretis' understanding of the lesbian, I set out to interrogate the relation between Wittig's making of the lesbian as a discursive category and the undoing of the sex/gender system, a relation which I define figuratively through the laugh of the lesbian.¹⁰⁰ This expression is a deliberate allusion to *Le rire de la Méduse* (1975), an irreverent essay by Hélène Cixous, often considered a manifesto of "écriture féminine." In it Cixous urges women to find a place in writing and discourse and to use their femininity and their material experience as source of creation. Unlike Cixous Wittig finds the exercise of sex/gender harmful to women in discourse, a reason why she opts for its discursive overthrow.

The theoretical opposition between Wittig and Cixous has a history of its own that is rooted in the debates concerning the proper objects and the proper subjects of feminism. In other words, French feminists were divided on issues such as who was and was not entitled to speak as feminist in the feminist movement. In an essay entitled "Wittig la politique," Marie Hélène Bourcier writes that those quarrels had to do with "the intellectual rupture of lesbian politics from French hetero-feminist thought" (Shaktini 191). Bourcier further recalls a shouting match between the two that took place in New York at the Modern Languages Convention in 1978, and ended with Wittig's famous assertion "Lesbians are not women": "During the

⁹⁹ In "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," De Lauretis acknowledges the necessity of the lesbian denomination for reimagining a different social construct that alone can question the violence and the enforcement of the gender category. As such, it is a category beyond or outside discourse, but one that is very much implicated in the making of social discourse and that contributed to refueling the feminist debate.

¹⁰⁰ I am aware that "undoing gender" is a citation of an existing theoretical terminology and the title of a book in which Judith Butler reconsiders her positions on gender vis-à-vis the theoretical and social uses of the term "sexual difference." In particular she suggests that sexual difference, a longtime contested term, often associated with European trends of feminism, may become a more fluid, productive and inclusive term that it has ever been. Since Wittig has been one of the most strenuous opponent of the term, her lesbian may surprisingly play as the figure that revitalizes the discourse of sexual difference, by destabilizing it.

conference, Hélène Cixous declared that French women who like women do not use the word *lesbian* because it bears negative connotations. Wittig cried out, “Which France? This is a scandal!” (189). The episode appears to be emblematic of the uneasy position of lesbians in the MLF during the 1970s. The feminist quarrels eventually resulted in a “delocalization” of lesbian politics that brought Wittig to the US.¹⁰¹ As long as lesbianism was reduced to a private question and its Political value was misrecognized, there could be no political place for lesbians. Such was Wittig’s answer to French feminists, after which ended the “political love story” between the French feminists and Wittig (193).

It is not my intention to reanimate such debate here, but merely to complicate the terms of this historic opposition to initiate a dialogue between Wittig and Cixou and their fictions of gender and sexuality. This dialogue will help me interrogate the relation between Wittig’s lesbian and the discourse of sexual difference and thus elucidate the critical importance of Wittig’s lesbian. My word play with the title of Cixous’ famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” is meant to establish a queer parallel between Cixous’s feminism and the theory and fiction of Wittig who who was utterly at odds with the term *feminist*, for its proximity with the word *woman*, problematized over and over by Wittig. Such a parallel will work as a pretext for me to argue that the emergence of the lesbian in Wittig’s fiction and theory does not exclude, but rather entails a radical reformulation of a discourse of sex/gender in spite of her famous rejection of the category of woman; on the other hand, the parallel will enable me to queer, so to speak, the feminist positions of Cixous, who brushed the

¹⁰¹ Bourcier further recalls an episode that took place in New York at the MLA in 1978, and ended with Wittig’s famous assertion “Lesbians are not women”: “During the conference, Hélène Cixous declared that French women who like women do not use the word *lesbian* because it bears negative connotations. Wittig cried out, “Which France? This is a scandal!” (189). The episode appears to be emblematic of the uneasy position of lesbians who wanted to make politics in France with a lesbian denomination.

“lesbian” aside in the name of feminism. The point is to understand and perhaps imagine how Cixous/Medusa and Wittig/Lesbian could have met and embraced each other’s views at some point, and how that encounter could have produced an unforeseen queer dimension.

This embrace between the Medusa and the Lesbian shall be the occasion to re-read the political love story between Wittig and French feminism and between the lesbian body and sexual difference as the ground for rethinking bodies and materiality in ways other than difference and sex/gender. My chapter will be divided into three parts: in the first part I will explore and engage Cixous’s fiction of “écriture féminine” as the textually performed metamorphosis of “écriture féminine” into what I name “butch écriture;” in the second I will analyze *Les guérillères* as an instance of “écriture féminine” and the feminizing of Wittig’s fiction in spite of her rejection of the category of “woman;” finally, I will re-read *Le corps lesbien* as a textually performed disintegration of sexual materiality gesturing towards a a lesbian materiality not through sex/gender but through emotions. Among the questions I am pursuing in the chapter are the following: what does it mean to think the body outside categories of gender? How does the lesbian body relate to those categories? If it is not possible to read the lesbian body within the categories of gender, are there suitable parameters or perspectives through which it is worth reconsidering lesbian materiality and what are they?

Cixous/Medusa Comes to Writing: Écriture Féminine as Écriture Butch

Le rire de la Méduse is a creative piece that mingles theory and poetic narration. It is perhaps as experimental as Wittig’s fiction. Some critics have taken it as a manifesto of “écriture féminine” (feminine writing) despite Cixous’s own assertion that it is impossible “to define a feminine practice of writing” (*Laugh* 883)

[“il est impossible de *définir* une pratique féminine de l’écriture” (45)]. Cixous insists nonetheless on the necessity for women to write, and talks of the inscription of a woman’s style (44/882), attacking critics and writers “disposing of sexual difference” (883) [“évacuant ainsi la différence sexuelle” (45)]. To theorists such as Wittig, who claim that writing is a neutral place Cixous responds by deliberately sexualizing fiction and even claiming for it some effects of irreducible femininity: “Il y a, il y aura de plus en plus fort, et vite maintenant une fiction qui produira des effets de féminité irréductibles” (45) [There is, there will be more and more rapidly pervasive now, a fiction that produces irreducible effects of femininity (883).] What are then those irreducible effects that Cixous claims for herself and all women who write? What kind of women, what kind of femininity does writing produce?

One of Cixous’s main ideas is that writing for women is maternal or filial, in the sense that it is embedded into women’s special and primordial connection with their mothers, their mothers’ touch and tongue:

Dans la parole féminine comme dans l’écriture ne cesse jamais de résonner ce qui de nous avoir jadis traversé, touché imperceptiblement, profondément, garde le pouvoir de nous affecter, le *chant*, la première musique, celle de la première voix d’amour, que toute femme préserve vivante. (44)

[In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. (881)]

As writing is deeply connected with the mother and the rhythms that connection generates, writing also constantly renews the feeling of that connection. Although this association can easily crystallize women’s writing around the image of the mother-daughter bond and link femininity to maternity uncritically, I believe it also resists and disturbs such an uncomplicated association. For, the “mother” Cixous presents is not the mother figure socially codified:

La femme n'est jamais loin de la "mère" (que j'entends hors-rôle, la "mère" comme non-nom, et comme source des biens). Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait-de-mère. Elle écrit à l'encre blanche. (44)

[A woman is never far from "mother" (I mean outside of her role functions: the "mother" as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink. (881)]

Cixous's "mother" is not a name, meaning that it is not a role, a figure, a social category; Cixous's "mother" is a metaphor as she herself puts it (44); as a metaphor it is already something else; "mother" is "othered" in something like the nurture and the inspiration ("sources de biens") that pours out like milk and turns into ink for writing. Wittig would perhaps derogatively note that Cixous's use of the "maternal" exploits certain female biological features (like maternity and breast-feeding) only to fit and promote the idea that "woman is wonderful."¹⁰² However, Cixous's re-appropriation of the "maternal" has an interesting discursive effect: as Cixous's "maternal" is not quite the "mother," that "not quite" transforms the way we think of the "maternal" In this respect the "maternal" is a re-reading of the "mother," but I should clarify how Cixous's maternal rereading works.

In *Le rire* Cixous urges women to seize language and discourse and write themselves with it and into it. Language appears not so much as the discourse into which women are passively woven, but the tool with which they can conquer a place in history and culture. While describing what writing should and must do for women, Cixous also does something intriguing with her own writing:

Il faut que la femme s'écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps. Il faut que la femme se mette au texte—comme au monde, et à l'histoire—de son propre mouvement. (39)

¹⁰² In Wittig's view, Cixous appropriation of the image of the mother and of maternal feeding would perhaps fit into the feminist motto "woman is wonderful" which "retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us" (*Straight* 13).

[Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (875)]¹⁰³

Cixous depicts women's writing as an active and creative movement. The sexual allure of the passage is noteworthy. Cixous translates the woman's urge to write with the image of a woman (the writer) who approaches the female text through the act of writing ("il faut que la femme écrive de la femme"). The act of writing therefore turns into a textual intercourse between two women who come to writing and "come" through writing ("que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture"). Cixous's invitation to writing contains a sexual allusion that is already queer in that it pictures the act of writing not merely as a female act, but as the female-to female embrace that takes place through writing. In other words "écriture féminine" is the place of a lesbian embrace.¹⁰⁴ In this perspective what do we make of the white ink that flows through the pages of women's textual intercourse? Is it not the pleasurable effect of women's embrace? If so, women's coming literally and metaphorically overwrites the mother's milk to become source of goods, and of nurture. But since the coming is an effect of a queer embrace, then nurture is always already queer, but of a queerness that is embedded into the "maternal" and that can produce a new text.

Cixous herself was not stranger to queerness when she talked of women's relation to writing, even prior to the invention of the critical term "queer." When she co-authored *La jeune née* with Catherine Clément (a collaborative writing in which

¹⁰³ I am using translation of *Le rire de la Méduse* by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen appeared in a 1976 issue of "Signs."

¹⁰⁴ The queer embrace in Cixous's essay has an allure similar to the queer "maternal" embrace in Vannina and Suna's lesbian oniric encounter (see chapter 1).

two women literally come to writing) Cixous identified fiction and creative invention with homosexuality:

Mais qu'il n'est pas d'invention d'autres Je, pas de poésie, pas de fiction sans qu'une certaine homosexualité (jeu donc de la bisexualité) fasse en moi œuvre de cristallisation de mes ultrasubjectivités. Je est cette matière personnelle, exubérante, gaie masculine, féminine ou autre en laquelle Je enchante et m'angoisse. (154)

[There is no invention of any other I, no poetry, no fiction without a certain homosexuality (the I/play of bisexuality) acting as a crystallization of my ultrasubjectivities. I is the exuberant, gay, personal matter, masculine, feminine or other where I enchants, I organizes me. (84)]

What Cixous meant by homosexuality is very different from the identity category we may think of nowadays. Here homosexuality is more like the playful effect of the writing subject. It is the discursive product of the performative fictional "I" that switches back and forth between gendered positions. Cixous's queer bent is in her recognition that writing is a performative process in which a subject, intent in the process of creation, can embrace different gendered and even sexual positions. When Cixous writes that there is no invention without homosexuality she perhaps means that creation entails a certain amount of queering and that gender performances are part of this queering.

Cixous does not simply theorize a queer fiction. She also performs it in the eye of the reader of *Le rire*. If on the one hand she queers maternal nurture by writing (through) a lesbian embrace, on the other hand she dislodges the all-female and feminine nature of the encounter. She does so precisely by playing with the genders of the writer and the text. The gender performative effects thus produced are worth discussing. As I argued above, the act of writing, as presented and performed by Cixous's text, is a motion that evokes the active move of putting oneself into a text. The lesbian/textual intercourse that opens *Le rire* can thus be read as a text in which

one woman (the active subject/the writer/the masculine) plays the butch and the other plays the *femme* (the text written/being forged/ the feminine). I am tempted to think of her creation in terms of a butch creation, an image that would defeat the notion of a feminine writing. It would defeat it in the sense that writing would no longer be associated with the woman's biological body, but with her performative body, which can be masculine, as I have shown earlier.

The active side of Cixous's sexual performance is not the only performative effect of her writing. Later in the essay, Cixous fancies an attack on language as a blow-up scene which blends a "blow-job" with a penetration:

Il est temps qu'elle disloque ce 'dans', qu'elle l'explose, le retourne et s'en saisisse, qu'elle le fasse sien, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elle, que de ses dents à elle, elle lui morde la langue, qu'elle s'invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans. Et avec quelle aisance, tu verras, elle peut depuis ce 'dans' où elle était tapie somnolente, sourdre aux lèvres qu'elle va déborder de ses écumes. (49)

[It is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you'll see with what ease she will spring forth from that "within"—the "within" where once she so drowsily crouched—to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam. (887)]

In this sexually charged passage, language is the masculine tool which Cixous performs a blow-job ("le prenant dans sa bouche") that is shortly followed by penetration ("lui rentre dedans"). Similar to the initial passage that describes a female homotextual intercourse in which the writer is butch and text is *femme*, this passage positions once again the writer in the penetrative position, but this time what changes is the gender of the text, which is no longer feminine but masculine. As a consequence, Cixous may be said to embody a queer masculine position before a masculine text. Wouldn't that process produce a male homo-textual intercourse? The writer, woman-penetrator who can produce at once a feminine and a masculine text

butches up so to speak the woman who comes to writing, forcing her to assume a masculine position vis-à-vis her own writing. In the introduction to the English edition of *La jeune née*, Sandra M. Gilbert translates this performative process as follows “Woman may come to writing, constructing an erotic aesthetic rooted in a bisexuality that is a delight in difference, in multiplicity, in continuous awareness of ‘the other’ within the self” (xv). Calling for a bisexuality of writing, Cixous understands fiction as the coming together of “self” and “other,” of “feminine” and “masculine,” the making of a bisexual or even a transgendered dimension.

Given the highly performative nature of this “écriture,” I wonder what is feminine about it after all if the female writer behind the text constantly comes undone through the fictional and sexual performances of a woman writer? What has emblematically become over the years the manifesto of “écriture féminine” is in fact a form of “butch écriture” that lends itself more to gender performativity than to a particular representation or rendition of femininity. The myth of the Medusa that lies behind the text thus acquires distinctive queer traits. According to the legend, Medusa, guardian of the goddess Athena (a queer relationship per se) would turn all men who dared gazing at her into stone. This myth can be interpreted as a queer one in that Medusa strikes whoever attempts to penetrate her with his gaze. The irony involved by Cixous/Medusa, however, is not only that Medusa makes herself impenetrable to men, but that she turns penetration back upon its head and becomes the penetrator herself, like the woman-writer of *Le rire*.

In the history of the debate between partisans and non-partisans of sexual difference, Wittig was, as I recalled above, the one who stood up against Cixous, and confronted her concerning definitions and uses of categories of gender and sexuality. In a way, Wittig was the one who dared to gaze at Cixous/Medusa like those men who

turned into stone.¹⁰⁵ What I want to do here is to reinvent a scene in which Wittig's "marching vulvae" in *Les guérillères* parade in front of Medusa's gaze, and brave a gaze that, I argue, is queer. How would that queer gaze affect the meaning of *Les guérillères* and their fictional struggle to transform discourse?

Wittig and the Social Contract

Les guérillères (1969) is a work of fantasy whose experimental urge echoes the transformative impetus and the revolutionary accents of the French feminist movement. The revolutionary aspects of the novel are apparent in the fictional structure that shatters all parameters of linear narration. *Les guérillères* unfurls through a series of fragments divided into three parts, each one marked by a circle at the center of a blank page, or a list of names belonging to heroines, goddesses, and female legendary figures from the present and the past. The text is conceived of and put together backwards so that the beginning, which corresponds to the emergence of a new order, is actually the result of the war led by *elles* against masculine discourse, which appears only at the very end. Such structure already forces us to pay attention to the process of discursive re-invention that subtends the fiction whose utopian endeavors have at times been misread by critics. In their brilliant article "Monique Wittig's Materialist Utopia and Radical Critique," Jonathan Katz and Brad Epps hold some queer and feminists scholars, such as Diana Fuss, responsible for producing Wittig's utopianism. According to Katz and Epps Wittig's utopianism derives from a misunderstanding of Wittig's theory of social reality and transformation.

The relevance and the originality of Wittig's work lie in a call for a radical re-invention of society and subjectivity that has affinities with Marxist thought and its

¹⁰⁵ While rejecting the category of "woman" for lesbians Wittig does not embrace that of "man" either, precisely as a result of her refusal to wed the notion of sexual difference.

reformulation among theorists of the Frankfurt school such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Mark Horkheimer. In this respect I find it useful to provide the synthetic yet accurate account that Epps and Katz provides of those affinities:

Wittig's insistence on materialist analysis; her attention to economic and political as well as linguistic and discursive forms of domination; her back-and-forth engagement of the particular and the universal; her deployment of a negative and positive hermeneutics of ideology and utopia; her defense of concrete subjectivity (albeit without the psychologistic vocabulary of Marcuse); her suspicion of pragmatism, empiricism, evidence, and "common sense"; her refusal of resignation in the face of a profoundly "unhappy" social reality (more stalwart, though, than that of Adorno); her "yearning for [another] normative totality" against and out of the oppressive normative totality of the here and now; her creative reworking of myth as a mnemonic or, better yet, an anamnestic device against the naturalized myths of the status quo; and, last but not least, her repeated critical invocation of Marx and Engels: all suggest, ever so subtly, the possibility of viewing the Frankfurt School critique of Marxism as offering a historically intermediate "bridge" between Marx and Engels and a materialist thinker like Wittig. (436-37)

Theorizing within the historical frame offered by the Frankfurt school, Wittig retains of Marx and Engels the idea that social reality and social categories are not a natural given, but an "imaginary formation." For Butler, Wittig is "a classist idealist for whom nature is understood as mental representation" (*Gender* 159) and for whom the split between the material and representation does not make sense or appears as a product of the straight mind. Indebted to post-Marxist thought, Wittig also embraces subjectivity as a valuable category that Marx and Engels deride as bourgeois and individualist, and she plays it against Marxism itself. I shall provide here a few of Wittig's points of contention with the Marxist theories of social contract and oppression in order to later explore how Wittig's fiction intervenes both as an exposure of the discursive mechanisms of oppression implicit in the reproduction of sexual categories, and as a powerful device through which to perform discursive transformations.

In her famous collection of essays *The Straight Mind* Wittig engages a Marxist understanding and construction of the social contract. For Wittig, the social contract has been constituted as strictly heterosexual, that is to say, based on the assumption that the social division of individuals into sexual categories is natural; accordingly women are a “natural” group so defined by their material specificity (namely the capacity of giving birth). As a target of Wittig’s theory and fiction, heterosexuality designates not so much a private relation between men and women as it is both a deeply rooted political institution and an ideological formation. In Wittig’s view, heterosexuality has been collapsed with the notion of social contract to the point that the former has become a “goes without saying” whereas in fact it is merely “an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality” (40). The unquestioned heterosexual nature of the social contract has resulted in a naturalization of material traits:

What we believe to be a direct and physical perception is but a mythic and sophisticated construction, an “imaginary formation” that reinterprets physical traits (in themselves as indifferent as any others but marked by the social system) across the web of relations in which they are perceived. (He/she is seen as *black*, and so he/she is black; she is seen as a *woman*, and so she *is* a woman. But before being seen in this manner, it was necessary for them to be *made* black, women). (11-12)

Traits like sex and race are there for what they appear to be. They are perceived as natural and inherent to bodies, but that perception is something already constructed. It is an artifact. Understanding sex as a natural characteristic of women ensures the discursive reproduction of heterosexual categories and their oppressive exercise,

for there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society. (2)

The simultaneous creation of oppression and sex cannot be more striking than in language, which is, Wittig contends, “the first, the permanent, and the final social contract” (34). Social contract and language being coincidental and practically identical, what occurs at the social level is always already inscribed into language. Not only does language bear the signs of social construction, it is indeed the very place of social construction. It should not be surprising that the war of *Les guérillères* is ultimately a war on language. Re-inventing language through fiction becomes one goal to act upon a discourse that is so enmeshed with sex that it “goes without saying.” If one aim of the fictional war of *Les guérillères* is to disentangle the alliance between discourse and sex, it does so by exposing the constructed link between women and materiality, and by stressing what I would call with Butler the fictiveness of gender and all gendered representations. Building on Butler’s argument that sex/gender is a fictive category in Wittig, that is a category produced through fiction, I will show that Wittig takes advantage of the fictiveness of sex/gender to navigate and blur the divide between theory and fiction, material and discursive, feminine and masculine, feminism and queerness, and extends our understanding and use of notions such as materiality and discourse.

I have used thus far the terms sex and gender interchangeably. My choice is not coincidental, though I am aware that the distinction and the refusal to distinguish sex and gender has been a contested terrain among feminist and queer theorists alike. In particular while commenting on Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion “One is born a woman, rather becomes one,” Butler argues that this assertion has itself urged a radical reformulation of the gender and sex distinction which has revealed productive in more than one respect: “This radical reformulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different

genders, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two” (*Gender* 142). In other words, Beauvoirs’s assertion has served as basis for thinking gender as both a discursive and a performative construction that questions the rigid duality of sexual difference. However, in Wittig’s theory of sex/gender, Butler sees “no distinction between sex and gender” for “the category of ‘sex’ is itself a *gendered* category, fully politically invested, naturalized, but not natural.” When I refer to sex/gender with this graphic modality of the slash, I intend to signal Wittig’s own working at the time across the divide between the two, a move that was specifically occasioned by Wittig’s grappling with the French meanings of the word “sexe” and its English translation with “gender.” She nonetheless works across the translational divide to make her own theory of gender, one that has intrigued and inspired critics. But gender in Wittig’s work travels not merely across languages, but also across disciplines, back and forth between the social and the linguistic. Wittig argues that “gender is the enforcement of sex in language, working in the same way as the declaration of sex in civil status” (*Straight* 79). As a discursive mark, gender is primarily for her a grammatical and philosophical category of thought whose existence has never been questioned in grammar. As a matter of fact, grammarians rely on sex to explain gender as “fictive sex” as if gender was merely the discursive name for sex, something material, tangible and more real. Gender is fictive and sex is real. Except that in Wittig’s understanding sex is already an “imaginary formation,” a product of the straight mind and thus its fictiveness can be reinterpreted as an artefact.¹⁰⁶ The fact that fictive is a derivative of “fiction” is not coincidental here,

¹⁰⁶ It is the American feminists, according to Wittig, who have “extrapolated the term *gender* from grammar to superimpose it on the notion of sex” (77). Agreeing with this move Wittig acknowledges the political nuance that such extrapolation has brought to the understanding of heterosexuality as the social contract. I would add that one sure consequence of this extrapolation is that the linguistic, the philosophical, the sociological and the political are dimensions that get intertwined in the very use of

but can help us also look at gender as descending from fiction. In a way we do not want to separate gender/sex from its linguistic dimension because that dimension is what may enable us to envision gender in fiction, that is, in a dimension where things and realities are made through and because of words. Perhaps envisioning gender as a matter of fiction was part of Wittig's endeavour in *Les guérillères* in order to show that gender has a transformative character and can be changed through fiction. I think I would not be mistaken if I say that Butler herself, in line with Wittig, sees no real distinction between sex and gender nor any causal relationship between the two categories. That intriguing overlapping of sex and gender is also one that allows me to think about the complex and inextricable links between the material and the conceptual understanding of subjectivity in Wittig's fiction. In this perspective I build on Butler's interpretation of Wittig's materiality when she argues that Wittig "refuses the distinction between an 'abstract' concept and a 'material' reality and that language works in a material way to construct the world" (*Gender* 151). I take Butler's assertion as an invitation to see how Wittig's fiction (literally her own body of thought) comes from the inextricable and complex relations between the material and the conceptual.

Les Guérillères: Feminaries, Fictive Gender/Sex and Symbolic Attacks¹⁰⁷

A privileged target of *les guérillères* is the wide array of images produced in masculine discourse with women's bodies. All those images make up the

the word "gender." Thus gender, once expropriated from its linguistic dimension, becomes a multi-layered and multi-functional category that acts upon language and that is acted upon.

¹⁰⁷ Wittig's translations of *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* are by David Le Vay. In order to be faithful to Wittig's criticism of the term "women," and to my own reading of Wittig, I made a few interventions into the translated texts. Every time Le Vay translates "elles" with women, I restore the original "elles." I also restore "j/e" instead of *I* in order to reproduce and maintain the idea of the split subject that Wittig originally conceived.

“féminaires” (feminaries), sorts of female encyclopedias gathering knowledge about women in images of women’s genitals and body parts. Moreover, the image of the vulva as a ring is referenced in the text and can be associated with the circle that punctuates the fiction physically occupying a whole page of the novel: “Elles disent que Clémence Maïeul a souvent dessiné sur le sol l’O qui est le signe de la déesse, le symbole de l’anneau vulvaire” (55). [Elles say that Clemence Maïeul often drew on the ground that O which is the sign of the goddess, symbol of the vulval ring (27).] The vulvar ring thus shapes the text and the action of *les guérillères* who celebrate goddesses through the same vulvar ring. By means of such an analogy between the vulva and the circle, the fiction itself seems to be shaped around an implicit reference to women’s genitals that we find in the feminaries as well. Women’s genitals are the objects of a number of rhetorical procedures. For instance they provide opportunities for comparisons: “Elles disent que le clitoris a été comparé à un noyau de cerise, à un bourgeon, à une jeune pousse, à un sésame décortiqué, à une amande, à une baie de myrte, à un dard, au canon d’une serrure” (42). [Elles say that the clitoris has been compared to a cherry-stone, a bud, a young shoot, a shelled sesame, an almond, a sprig of myrtle, a dart, the barrel of a lock (32).] In those images women’s genitals are associated in part with natural elements, a rhetorical technique that emphasizes femininity as inherently natural. Is this rhetorical move a simple reiteration of the equation women = nature or is the text doing something with this equation? If we look at other descriptions contained in the feminaries we may notice the insistence on details about the shapes and the parts of women’s genitals. In the following passage the clitoris is taken to task and dissected in a way that is reminiscent of anatomical descriptions in scientific books:

Elles disent que dans le féminin le gland du clitoris et le corps du clitoris sont décrits comme encapuchonnés. Il est écrit que le prépuce à la base du

gland peut se mouvoir le long de l'organe en provoquant une vive sensation de plaisir. Elles disent que le clitoris est un organe érectile. Il est écrit qu'il bifurque à droite et à gauche, qu'il se coude, se prolongeant dans deux corps érectiles, appuyés contre l'os pubien. L'ensemble est une zone érogène intense qui irradie tout le sexe en faisant un organe impatient au plaisir. (28-29)

[Elles say that in the feminary the glans of the clitoris and the body of the clitoris are described as hooded. It is stated that the prepuce at the base of the glans can travel the length of the organ exciting a keen sensation of pleasure. Elles say that the clitoris is an erectile organ. It is stated that it bifurcates to right and left, that it is angled, extending as two erectile bodies applied to the pubic bones...The whole constitutes an intensely erogenous zone that excites the entire genital, making it an organ impatient for pleasure. (23)]

Here the resemblance of the clitoris with the penis is evident through the choice of words such as “gland,” “encapuchonnés,” or “prépuce.” This vocabulary seems to recall the analogy between clitoris and penis that psychoanalytic discourses have reinforced in order to provide a representation of women’s sexuality and pleasure within a masculine rubric. In chapter two I analyzed how such an analogy informed Carla Lonzi’s theory, constituting both a strategy of creation, but also the discursive limits of her theory of sexual difference and her practice of feminism. One question arises with regard to the use of sexual organs and body parts to signify femininity in the feminaries: how is Wittig’s fiction departing from that discourse of sexual difference that used the labia and the clitoris as pretexts for the creation of a feminine language? How can Wittig claim in theory that she rejects all affinities with the sexual difference feminists when in fact she seems to be using a sort of “écriture féminine” in her text? Isn’t Wittig reproducing the essentialist move that she purports to critique? Isn’t she reiterating a dominant discourse of anatomy?

In a way Wittig may be said to feminize the text by returning to images of femininity and literally shaping the text out the vulvar ring. Yet if we look more closely at some passages and even to the use of language we may note that her supposed “écriture féminine” is already a linguistic destabilization of writing and

discourse, an expression that Butler herself deployed to engage the fictional overthrow of sex.¹⁰⁸ Yet the overthrow of sex cannot be oversimplified in an easy formula of gender destruction. This is why thinking the space of fiction as a moment of destabilization may offer a more useful elucidation of Wittig's call for gender destruction. How is such destabilization achieved through fiction?

I believe that the key to understanding gender destabilization is found in effects of the rhetorical tactics deployed in fiction. Two key tactics are repetition and the constant use of indirect speech. *Elles* access representations of women's bodies by reiterating what has been said about women, as in a passage portraying labia:

Elles disent que le féminaire divertit les petites filles. Par exemple trois sortes de nymphes y sont mentionnées. Les nymphes naines sont triangulaires. Ce sont, accolés, deux replis étroits. Elles sont presque invisibles parce que les lèvres les dissimulent. (41)

[Elles say that the feminary amuses the little girls. For instance three kinds of labia minora are mentioned there. The dwarf labia are triangular. Side by side, they form two narrow folds. They are almost invisible because the labia majora cover them. (31)]

The use of indirect speech "elles disent que" as opposed to "il est écrit" (in the passage on the anatomy of the clitoris) may signify an opposition of *elles*' speech to masculine discourse and its apparent neutrality. By repeating masculine discourse, *elles* do not simply mimic it, but also redeploy it in a way that somehow destabilizes its original meaning and its presumed naturalness. But naturalness in discourse has been established, in the first place, through "a set of acts repeated over time," through

¹⁰⁸ In a chapter of *Bodies That Matter* titled "Subversive Bodily Acts," Butler looks at Wittig's fiction and theory as the places where Wittig "calls for a radical reorganization of the description of bodies and sexualities without recourse to sex" (145). One of the fundamental move for such radical reorganization, is the overthrow of the category of sex through a destabilization of language, says Butler.

“locutionary acts which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 147-48). The performative impact of the indirect speech and of repetition is however crucial in showing how language works upon bodies and how those bodies, namely those of women, can work on those naturalizing effects. The speech acts in the fiction do the opposite of what Wittig claims in “The Mark of Gender” where she contends that whenever women speak, they enter a linguistic domain in which, as women, they are deprived of agency and authority. The phrase “elles disent que” is persistent in all those passages and it is both a consequence and a cause of *elles*’ act of reading and re-reading representation of women in the feminaries. Speech acts are here instances of repetition and re-reading through which *elles* can critically appropriate the content of the feminaries. Repetition works as a reappropriation of natural images of femininity. But reappropriation does not erase those images; it overemphasizes them, making the link between women and bodies ever more apparent. Hence when Wittig argues that gender is “harmful to women in the exercise of language acting as a denial at the very moment when one speaks” (*Straight* 80-81), she also uses her fiction to show how women can neutralize the harm that gender can do, by reiterating and thus exposing those images that are meant to harm. Wittig’s fiction does not erase sex, but redeploys it in order to reveal its very constructed-ness and naturalness at the intersection between the conceptual and the material levels.

Yet there is more than repetition to Wittig’s fiction. *Elles* also refer to the images in the feminaries as symbols that are part of an outdated culture. The symbolic reference allows us implicitly to read the feminaries as a man-made symbolic system. Symbol is also a term particularly relevant to my analysis. *Le Petit Robert* gives the following definition for it: “Object ou fait naturel de caractère imagé

qui évoque, par sa forme ou sa nature, une association d'idée spontanée avec quelqu'un d'abstrait ou d'absent." [Object or natural fact of the character image which evokes, by means of its form and nature, a spontaneous association with something abstract or absent.] Symbolizing something or someone means therefore not only to objectify, but also to naturalize and make abstract at the same time. When women are symbolized they enter a symbolic dimension that makes them, by means of a "spontaneous" association between their bodies and nature, abstract and absent. The problem is that this "spontaneous" association is always already constructed. The term symbol then seems adequately to address that equation between women and nature that Wittig destabilizes in theory. In fiction as well, *elles* make a similar operation. Seemingly uttering a rallying cry, *elles* say that those symbols must disappear ["Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire et doit disparaître" (102)] [They say that any symbol that exalts the fragmented body is transient, must disappear (72)], and *elles* must stop exalting vulvas ("cesser d'exalter les vulves") in order "to break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture" (72) ["rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte" (102)]. *Elles* do so first by refusing to recreate conventional images: "Elles ne créent pas dans leurs discours des figures conventionnelles à partir de ces symboles" (86). [They do not in their discourse create conventional figures derived from these symbols (61).] For instance, *elles* refuse to reiterate women's representation through the image of the lack of penis: "Je refuse de marmotter après eux les mots de manque de pénis" (152-53) [I refuse to mumble after them the words lack of penis (106).] The refusal to reiterate is a rejection of a mimicking gesture ("marmotter"). Yet in such rejection, there is a reiteration of that same language. The repetition here somehow dislodges the essentializing gesture of the masculine language, it does not endorse it.

Instead irony and reversal come in its place: masculine images replace the feminaries to become objects of ridicule, as in the sequence where *elles* chase after a male prisoner turning his sex into a series of laughable comparisons: “Elle est ta verge/vergette/ batogue baguette/ broche brochette/ verge de plomb” (152). [It is your rod/cane/staff/wand/peg skewer/staff of lead (106).] Here it is not the vulva, but the penis that comes under attack, and *elles* subvert the rhetorical strategy of the feminaries whereby women’s vulvae are taken as symbols for femininity. When this procedure is turned against men it immediately shows its disempowering effect since the male prisoner appears entrapped not so much by his female persecutors, by the metonymic chain of signifiers that define his masculinity through his penis. His entrapment is a linguistic effect, just as the call of les *guérillères* against symbols is an attempt “to disinter the subject from layers of linguistic entrapment” (Katz and Epps 442).

In turn, vulvae cease to be objects of comparisons or metaphors, or to be hidden behind naturalistic images. They are simply exposed to the sun so that “le soleil s’y réfléchisse comme dans un miroir” (24) [the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror (19)]. The sun’s exposition is so glaring that it “makes the eye turn elsewhere, unable to stand the sight” (19) [“les yeux se fixent ailleurs n’en pouvant supporter la vue” (24)]. Hence the attention is both centered on and deflected from sex. Sex is no longer the focus, but stays out of focus because of its unexpected glaring effects. Putting sex out of focus is perhaps another strategy of *elles*, along with repetition and ironic reversal. Sexual references are very much in sight but, having lost their functions as metaphors and symbols they are no longer in focus. The double movement of the discursive exposure of sex and its being out of focus is conducive to the process of radical re-invention: *elles* can finally invent a brand-new

world or a brand-new fiction made of stories that *elles* recite to entertain themselves. The feminaries thus become texts to be read for the amusement and the distraction of *elles* [“elles disent que le féminin divertit les petites filles” (41)]. I believe that it is precisely in the moment of re-reading and in the component of amusement that resides the power of Wittig’s fiction and its reinvention.

The act of rereading the feminaries for amusement is inscribed as a moment of invention: *elles* take turns and write on the blank spaces of a “grand registre” that lacks chronological order. Sometimes what is written in the register is read out loud and shared among the readers. Among the rewritten stories are the Snow White story and the legend of the Medusa, to name just a couple. These fairy tales are radically reinvented as to bear very little or no resemblance whatsoever with the traditional versions of the stories. In the tale of Sophie Menade, the wise madwoman, Sophie’s hairdo speaks through the mouths of her thousand snakes among which figures Orpheus who tries to entice Sophie-Eve to eat the apple which will give her wisdom. Here Sophie is a figure resulting from the blending of at least four other recognizable ones: Eve, Eurydice, the Menade and the Medusa, all mythical figures created by men. Yet the collapsing of the four into one makes for another completely new figure that has nothing to do with the others; her specificity is that she plays as a re-reading of all of them. In the retelling of the Snow White story, Scarlett Rose (Rose Écarlate) pursues Snow White in the woods. In the pursuit, Scarlett Rose laughs so hard that she falls down and then shouts at Snow White, threatening to beat her with a stick if she does not stop. Scarlett Rose keeps repeating the same refrain “tu n’en as pas!” (you don’t have any) referring to sacred ancestors. But here Snow White, oblivious of her past and indifferent to tradition, could not care less for her ancestors. Brandishing the stick, Snow White turns around and beats Rose with a stick reducing

her/it to what she/it really is, the image of a “grosse racine, rose comme une rose rose” (65) [a stout root, pink as a pink rose (48)]. The character of Snow White is very unlike the one we hold in our memories. The only thing the two have in common is perhaps a name.

What is at stake in the re-reading of those fairy tales? For one thing there is a relationship with the past symbolic system or rather, a rejection of such a relationship. Like the oblivious Snow White, *elles* act as if they cannot remember: when *elles* attempt to remember their origins and their beginnings, the act of remembrance is impossible: “Elles disent que le temps où elles sont parties de zero est en train de s’effacer dans leurs memoires” (38). [*Elles* say that the time when they started from zero is in process of being erased from their memories (27).] The refrain of Scarlett Rose “tu n’en as pas” (you do not have any!) may as well refer to the past and to the refusal to associate with past symbols and stories. But what kind of past is a past built on a fairy tale? It is a past of representation, a past of fiction, and as such it is a fictive past. Being past fictive, *elles* can give themselves the liberty to re-invent what was already invention, changing the features of those fairy tales at leisure.

Re-invention may lead *elles* to create figures that are unfamiliar or de-familiarized from any past figure of femininity. The grotesque image of Iris Our, the laughing dead woman is worth mentioning because, among the others, it captures the de-familiarizing gesture of *elles* vis-à-vis the symbolic. Iris lies dead with an artery cut open producing with her mouth “un gargouillement qu’on peut attribuer à la deglutition du sang” (56) [a gurgling attributable to the swallowing of blood (41)]. Here the “gargouillement” is also confused with the sound of laughter, which causes Iris’ death agony to be confused with laughter. Is the agonizing Iris laughing at a dead culture which her body incarnates? Iris Our is an enigmatic figure indeed, more

than the hybrid Sophie Menade, and the unrecognizable Snow White whose names, at least, give us a clue. Iris Our is not a recognizable figure from traditional fairy tales. She seems to be there as a figure for reading the rewritten fairy tales via the laugh. With her laughter Isabelle Our reminds us of the fictive nature of those representations and the possibility that fiction has to de-familiarize women from those representations. In the examples of these fairy tales fiction becomes the form of writing that uses and transform traditional figures to reinvent the present and produce new unexpected figures.

Fiction also carries out what for Wittig is one fundamental function of writing: “every writer should take words one by one and strip them of their everyday meaning in order to be able to work, with words, on words” (*Straight* 43). Situating invention not in the act of signifying, but in that of divesting words from their meaning, Wittig thus understands that “a writer must first reduce language to be as meaningless as possible” (72) in order to invent. Making language meaningless in the process of invention may involve indeed stripping words of all the layers of signification, of unburden language of its symbolic burden. Moreover, if we agree with Wittig that “language has a plastic action upon the real” (78) we can also understand the attack of *elles* on language as an attempt to wrest discourse from its conventionally rigid forms; in other words, by acting upon language, *elles* reveal that language is plastic, bendable, and modifiable and not a rigid system, with all the phallic allusions this attribution may have. Fictional re-invention is one place in which language and gender can simultaneously be destabilized and transformed for it is in the exercise of language that women can act upon gender representations as Wittig herself suggests.

Rather than following critics and even translators who qualify *Les guérillères* as a fiction about the overthrow of sex, we might more appropriately follow Wittig’s

thinking and look at the destabilizing effect that her fiction produces. Such a destabilizing move, which the war of *elles* represents, is performed and achieved through a variety of rhetorical tactics. These include repetition and re-appropriation, reversal and rereading. All those tactics do not quite do away with gender; they simply overemphasize and expose the discursive associations between women and nature, and the representation of women through their bodies and their sexual organs. Constant repetition and rereadings constitute a reappropriation of images that also reinvents them by undoing their forms and their contents. The destabilizing effect of fiction is particularly evident in the retelling of the fairy tales in which the new heroines bear only a remote resemblance to the originals. Aside from destabilizing the original narrative, the new stories also defamiliarize the reader from those originals.

Defamiliarization can be another way to name the process of undoing forms in Wittig's fiction. Defamiliarizing readers or provoking a shock in the reader was indeed one of Wittig's goals while composing her fiction: to judge from her own words fiction and defamiliarization go together. Wittig starts *Les guérillères* by inserting an unfamiliar subject pronoun *elles*, who are the sole inhabitants of the fictional space after *ils* have been swept away. As Wittig suggests in "The Mark of Gender," *elles* is not meant to be a female pronoun, but rather to carry the universal value that *ils* has always had within discourse: "*Elles* is a pronoun that gets used very little in French where 'ils' acquire a more general meaning that also includes *elles* while in fact erasing it. As a result, *elles* never stands for the general and is never the bearer of a universal point of view" (*Straight* 85). One should be careful not to confuse *elles* with "women," which would subvert Wittig's discursive attempt to universalize the pronoun and its referents. What is even more surprising is the fact

that *elles* make their own kind of war by expropriating one of the most masculine activities. In her critical reading of Wittig, Butler points out that works of literature such as Wittig's function for minorities as the discursive strategy that helps "preempt the position of the speaking subject in its invocation of the universal point of view" (*Gender* 152). What we see at work in the *elles* war is supposedly the attempt on the part of *elles* to preempt the speaking position and thus appropriate what has been traditionally gendered masculine. Yet in *elles*' appropriation of the masculine discourse of war, gender becomes a laughable matter: "Elles disent que la guerre est une affaire de femmes. Elles disent n'est-ce pas plaisant?" [They say that war is an affair for women. They say, is this not laughable? (180).] The adjective "plaisant" in the original version is more than pleasant or gratifying; being "plaisant" linked with the word "plaisanterie" (joke), it makes the idea of a female war into a joke.¹⁰⁹ It is gender that contributes this nuance to war, for war has been traditionally and universally represented as masculine. The expropriation of war from the masculine domain does not so much "feminize" war, or universalize it in a different way; rather it makes the gender attribution visible and laughable. Except that the war led by *elles* is already very different from the war we may have in mind; hence the ironic effect of the *elles*' war is that it de-familiarizes us from the very concept of war while *elles* perform it. The rereading of war and the subjective transition from *ils* to *elles* produce an unforeseen effect which recalls that provoked by the image of the male prisoner entrapped in the metonymy of his own sex ["Elle est ta verge/vergette/batogue/baguettes/brochebrochette/verge de plomb" (152)]. Yet, in spite of Wittig's claim that *elles* is universal and ungendered, I continue to perceive

¹⁰⁹ David Le Vay translates "plaisant" with "gratifying." I propose instead the use of the attribute laughable in order to maintain a relation with the noun "plaisanterie" (joke in English) and to justify laughter as the destabilizing/undoing practice of the *guérillères*.

elles as a feminine pronoun; the novelty of it lies for me in the transitive property of the subject position from *ils* to *elles*, one that can put the whole question of gender into a different light, provoking unexpectedly hilarious effect. The defamiliarizing strategy of Wittig's fiction does not come without laughter, an effect that prompts me to ask how laughter intervenes as an *après coup* tactic, and as the very effect of destabilization and fictive undoing.

The assault to masculine language is a central preoccupation of *Les guérillères* and *Le rire de la Méduse*. It is through laughter that Cixous fancies this assault will be carried out: “à mettre en pièces les bâtis des institutions, à faire sauter la loi, à tordre “vérité” de rire” (49) [to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ (888)]. Laughter does not cause but rather signifies the moment in which the “truth” is broken into pieces. Which truth? Whose truth? Can truth be located in the masculine system of representation that we take as true, as natural? Who laughs at this truth? The Medusa does, she who is the mythical figure that just earlier amused us and *les guérillères* with the de-familiarized and de-familiarizing look of Sophie Menade. As an estranged product of Wittig's fictive undoing, the Wittig's Medusa of Wittig is different, from the fictional point of view, from the Medusa of Cixous. She is quite a different subject, the effect of the transformation she herself enacts and imposes onto other people, according to the legend.

The legendary Medusa has the power to transform male human essence into stone, something solid and unchanging. What if the Medusa were to direct her gaze to Wittig's “lesbian?” Would the fact that the Medusa directs her gaze to men implies that Wittig's lesbian should be assumed to be a man and turned into stone? The particular gender effect occasioned by such encounter may be troubling for Wittig

who, in spite of her claim that “lesbians are not women,” would perhaps cringe at the idea that her lesbian is taken for a man: “To refuse to be a woman, however, does not mean that one has to become a man” (*Straight* 12). Hence in Wittig’s anti sexual difference logic, being a lesbian amounts not only to a rejection of “woman,” but also of “man.” Wittig’s rejection leaves me wondering about alternatives for conceptually embracing bodies and subjectivities. Wittig’s sceptical attitude towards an easy endorsement of sexual categories for making sense of the lesbian has opened up for us the possibility of expanding our criteria for reading bodies and subjectivities. In a passage of *Les guérillères*, *elles* utter another of their rallying cry: “Elles disent, si je m’approprié le monde que ce soit pour créer des rapports nouveaux entre moi et le monde” (107). [They say, if I take over the world, let it be to forge new links between myself and the world (154).] We may think of *les guérillères’* cry as the urge to find new relations among subjects other than those described by gender. Perhaps the theoretical figure of the lesbian and the fiction of *The Lesbian Body* are one way to think relations between subjects and bodies otherwise. I will thus turn to the fiction of *Le corps lesbien* to examine how the text can constitute this possibility for an alternative reading of materiality as it pertains to lesbianism.

Subjective Struggles and Material (De)construction: Elles, je, tu and the Lesbian Body

Le corps lesbien came out in 1973, a few years after *Les guérillères* and after disagreements among members of the MLF had, led to a major split within the French feminist movement. One may wonder whether *Le corps* remotely bears signs of those internal splits. One answer may be found in the subject pronouns of the fiction whose dynamics describe two very different struggles: the love struggle between *j/e* and *tu*,

the lover and the beloved; and the struggle between the loving couple and *elles*.¹¹⁰

The presence of *elles* in the fiction is striking and reminiscent of the warriors of *Les guérillères*. It seems, however, that *elles* have a different function in *Le corps*. Given the internal tensions in the MLF, I am inclined to think of *elles* as all the French feminists united under the banner of the MLF. A communitarian subject entrusted with a collective value in *Les guérillères*, *elles* seem to have lost that collective endeavor in *Le corps*. In the latter, *elles* dwell in a separate dimension from *j/e-tu*, who also appear estranged: “Elles courent sur la plage et se poursuivent. Elles sont à peine visibles à présent. Tu es seule comme j/e le suis avec toi face à face” (71).

[*Elles* run and chase each other on the beach. Now they can barely be seen. You are alone as I am with you face to face (67).]¹¹¹ Here the distance of *elles* makes *elles* barely visible, and contributes to foreground not only the separateness of *j/e* and *tu*, but also their solitude vis-à-vis the group: “Tu n’es dans aucun groupe. J/e te cherche. Tu n’apparais pas” (91). [You are not in any group. J/e seek you. You do not appear (84).] The dis-appearance of *tu* may as well signal the fact that *tu* is lost in the group or rather that she does not belong to any group. How can we interpret the couple’s solitude, their sense of no belonging, of homeless-ness? Were I to take the dynamics of the MLF into account, I would read the distance between *elles*, *j/e* and *tu* as reminiscent of the rupture between hetero-feminists and lesbian feminists which I earlier mentioned, a schism that makes them unfamiliar to each other. *Elles* also have a destructive function towards *j/e*, a destruction to which *j/e* lends her body: “Elles me détruisent avec une minutie si parfaite qu’on ne trouve plus de moi cendres sur la terre

¹¹⁰ There is yet another meta-narrative struggle that involves the author/Wittig and the fictional matter to be forged, to which I return shortly.

¹¹¹ All translated passages are taken from *The Lesbian Body* translated from French by David Le Vay. Every time Le Vay translates “elles” with women, I will restore the original “elles” to be truthful to Wittig’s critical stance about the term “women.” I will also restore “j/e” instead of *I* in order to reproduce and maintain the idea of the split subject that Wittig originally conceived.

traces dans les mémoires” (150). [J/e cry out let them do it if they dare let them destroy m/e with such perfect meticulousness that no ashes of m/ine will remain on the earth or traces in the memory (132-133).] It is as if *j/e* was asking *elles* to destroy her body and leaving no trace of it. This gesture may also be emblematic of the conceptual rupture among French feminists in the MLF concerning women’s bodies and feminist matters that resulted in a rejection of the lesbian matter.

The encounter between these two subjects, *elles*/hetero-feminists and *j/e* lesbian is one of estrangement and self destruction. I recalled earlier that division among feminists occurred due to the lack of social and political recognition of lesbianism within the MLF. Another issue at stake was Wittig’s own skepticism towards the denomination “feminist:”

The ambiguity of the term “feminist” sums up the whole situation. What does “feminist” mean? Feminist is formed with the word “femme,” “woman,” and means: someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class. For many others it means someone who fights for woman and her defense—for the myth, then, and its reinforcement. (*Straight* 14)

Wittig cautions about the uncritical use of the denomination “feminist” as it lumps a diverse range of subjective experiences into an abstract category that so closely recalls that of “woman,” the myth, the social construction. Hence the destructive effect that the word “woman” can have is perhaps the one at work in the tense relationship between *elles* and *j/e* in *Le corps*. Wittig refused the term “woman” for the destructive effects the word could have for the subjects who uncritically identified with it. As long as *elles*/hetero-feminists advocate a feminism based on “woman” there cannot be any liberation or any transformation since lesbians, for Wittig, do not identify as “women,” nor as “men” and cannot see the political validity of such identity labels. As a result, lesbians such as Wittig, were not easily subsumed into either the label “woman” or the label “feminist,” and therefore the lesbian found

herself out of place, or with no place at all. She did not have it in the movement or in fiction, and thus became the paradoxical place of a material and symbolic void: “Ce qui a cours ici, pas une ne l’ignore, n’a pas de nom pour l’heure” (*Corps* 7). [There is not one who is unaware of what takes place here, which has no name yet (15).] “Ce qui a cours ici” has no name, and naming what the fiction is about (properly “ce qui a cours ici”) becomes impossible because of the very fact that it has no name. That blank space appears to be the creative realm that Wittig share with other writers, but also the conceptual space of the lesbian. The problem is then how to articulate a void with a fiction that has never being imagined as Monique Wittig explained:

With *The Lesbian Body* I was confronted with the necessity of writing a book totally lesbian in its theme, its vocabulary, its texture, from the first page to the last, from title page to back cover. I was thus located in a double blank. The blank that all writers have to face when they begin a book. The other blank was of a different nature. It was the nonexistence of such a book till then. (Shaktini, 44)

Once again we are confronted with a language struggle, as in *Les guérillères*, but here the struggle is not over existing representations, but over the fabrication of a new fictional form, previously inexistent. As a result, the fiction is less about the telling of a story than the search for a new form, a new matter. As much as fiction relies on the act of invention so does the lesbian, and in this respect, the pair “fiction” and “lesbian” become almost synonymous. Perhaps the cryptic nature of *Le corps*, which critics have highlighted, draws upon the dilemma that the simultaneous discursive invention of “fiction” and “lesbian” poses. For if invention was in *Les guérillères* a matter of re-reading or re-writing, a movement back and forth between tradition and newness, in *Le corps lesbien* invention becomes a much more complex issue.

The Lesbian Body: A Concept that Mattered

The lesbian had for Wittig and other critics such as De Lauretis, who is one of her finest readers, a social and political relevance:

Lesbians should always remember and acknowledge how “unnatural,” compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being “woman” was for us in the old days before the women’s liberation movement. It was a political constraint, and those who resisted it were accused of not being “real” women. (*Straight* 12)

Lesbianism was not merely a form of subjectivity, but a form of historical consciousness, a particular position vis-à-vis women’s material oppression. Because lesbians saw the destructive effect that the word “woman” could have, they actively resisted it with the consequence of being considered less than women. De Lauretis pointedly grasped the discursive nuances of Wittig’s lesbian, highlighting its subjective and its relational import:

Wittig’s “lesbian” was not just an individual with a personal “sexual preference” or a social subject with a simply “political” priority, but the term or conceptual figure for the subject of a cognitive practice and a form of consciousness that are not primordial, universal, or coextensive with human thought, as de Beauvoir would have it, but historically determined and yet subjectively assumed. (Shaktini 55)

Recognizing all the different layers that the term “lesbian” involves, De Lauretis situates the lesbian as a discursive figure, at once theoretically produced, but also socially produced to contrast and critique the categories of “woman,” and of “man”: “Thus a lesbian *has to* be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society” (*Straight* 13). The presence of lesbians suggests the fictiveness of any idea of a “natural” society or a “natural” being. Wittig embrace of the lesbian as a social product helps to better understand the constructed-ness of the sex categories. Wittig’s lesbian urges women to think of how conscious women are of inhabiting constructed categories, since consciousness is, for Wittig, already, “the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social

world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression” (18). De Lauretis celebrates the lesbian as the new emerging consciousness which she qualifies as “eccentric,” for its particular power of destabilizing the social while experiencing it from within. This particular position is one that derives from the consciousness of oppression: “The movement back and forth between the levels of reality (the conceptual and the material reality of oppression, which are both social realities) is accomplished through language” (19). Once again, as in the case of *elles*, the lesbian brings us back to the linguistic implications of social constructions, the tensions between the linguistic and the social, between the conceptual and the material. This tension is one that can be productive in conditions of oppression, and one from which the lesbian body emerges in the paradigmatic void of fiction.

Le corps is composed of a number of fragments in which the subject pronouns *j/e* and *tu*, like a lover and her beloved, come together in a series of erotic and destructive encounters. Those fragments are also interspersed by sections that list body parts, organs or physical characteristics which meticulously describe an anatomy of the lesbian body:

Le corps lesbien la cyprine la bave la salive la morve la sueur les larmes le cérumen l’urine fèces les excréments le sang la lymphe la gélatine l’eau le chyle le chyme les humeurs les sécrétions le pus les sanies les suppurations la bile les sucs les acides les fluides les jus les coulées l’écume le soufre l’urée le lait l’albumine l’oxygène les flatulences les poches les parois les membranes le péritoine, l’épiploon, la plèvre le vagin les veines les artères les vaisseaux. (22-23)

[The lesbian body the juice the saliva the snot the sweat the tears the wax the urine the faeces the excrements the blood the lymph the jelly the water the chyle the chime the humours the secretions the pus the discharges the suppurations the bile the juices the acids the fluids the fluxes the foam the sulphur the urea the milk the albumen the oxygen the flatulence the pouches the parietes the membranes the peritoneum, the omentum, the pleura the vagina the veins the arteries the vessels the nerves. (28)]

The lesbian body appears here in a dissected materiality that reveals both its heterogeneity and its similarity with any other human body. This particular combination of bodily components from fluids to gases, however, serves to emphasize its fluid material quality. Such fluidity includes elements of sexual desire and pleasure such as la “cyprine,” Wittig’s neologism for vaginal fluids. Interestingly, those body parts that evoke pleasure are integrated with different components that are associated with scatology and secretion as to make the lesbian body a heterogeneous blending that disturbs the distribution of elements under recognizable categories. While some elements are indeed recognizable, some of them may also remain quite obscure, for instance the chyle, the chime or the omentum. The accumulation of details is such that the body unfolds like the unsentimental production of a scientific treatise, but its parts can become quite unfamiliar. The anatomical listing has the effect of becoming so objective as to defamiliarize the reader from the body and produce it as disintegrated materiality.

Disintegration is perhaps, as Butler argued, one of the strategies of the fiction, and I would add one of the ways in which the lesbian body can materialize through fiction and even collapse with it. Anatomical listings can thus be read as a consequence of a disintegrating approach to the body, which becomes ever more apparent in the encounters of *j/e* and *tu*. Their encounters oscillate between destruction and recomposition. Destruction is at times performed through a cannibalistic urge:

M/a très délectable *j/e* m/e mets à te manger, m/a langue humecte l’hélix de ton Oreille se glissant tout autour avec délicatesse, m/a langue s’introduit dans le pavillon, elle touche l’antélix, m/es dents cherchent le lobe, elles commencent à le broyer, m/a langue s’immisce dans le conduit de ton oreille. J// arrache un os, *j/e* tombe sur le superbe limaçon os et membrane tout enroulés. *j/e* les dévore, *j/e* fais éclater les canaux circulaires...*j/e* suis emprisonnée par toi qui m/e nourris. (17)

[M/y most delectable one *j/e* set about eating you, m/y tongue moistens the helix of your ear delicately gliding around, m/y tongue inserts itself in the auricle, it touches the antihelix, m/y teeth seek the lobe, they begin to gnaw at it, m/y tongue gets into your ear canal. *J/e* wrench away a bone, I fall on the superb cochlea bone and membrane all wrapped round together, *j/e* devour them, *j/e* burst the semicircular canals. *J/e* am poisoned by you who nourish m/e. (24)]

The cannibalistic drive of *j/e* coincides with acts of consumption and absorption of the beloved on the part of the lover; it also simultaneously depicts a penetration of the beloved's body parts. Penetration is not merely a cold bodily invasion, but a recognizable gesture of seduction, like the penetration of the ear. Its seductive allure is disturbed and almost made unfamiliar by the precision of the description of a cannibalistic ritual. The cannibalistic relation of the lover and the beloved is erotic and returns throughout the fiction. While in this instance the lover eats up the beloved, in another section, it is the beloved who gets to taste the lover's body by the hand of *elles* who present the lover's limbs for a cannibalistic banquet:

Sur m/on ordre elles apprêtent m/es membres sectionnés m/es bras m/es cuisses m/es jambes dont les chairs sont retirées avec précision et longuement bouillies, elles te les présentent entourées de sauces diverses sur des plats brillants chaque mets portant pour te plaire un nom différent. (117-18)

[At m/y order the women prepare m/y severed limbs m/y arms m/y thighs m/y legs whose flesh is meticulously removed and boiled for a long time, they offer it to you surrounded by different sauces on glittering plates each plate bearing a different name to please you. (105)]

Critics of Wittig have often expressed a discomfort with the apparent violence that emerges from *Le corps lesbien*—cannibalism, bodily dissection and dismemberment—arguing that such violence would align the text with a masculine discourse.¹¹² Both De Lauretis and Butler seem to understand the seemingly

¹¹² Namascar Shaktini detects in the uncomfortable reception of the text's violence (cannibalism, bodily dissection, dismemberment) a distinctive trait of Wittig's feminist readership as if the very fact of violence was in contradiction with a feminist approach. Building on a piece by Clare Whaling "Wittig's Monsters: Stretching the Lesbian Reader," Shaktini urges us to understand Wittig's textual

discursive violence of the text as a discursive strategy much in the way Wittig herself suggested in her commentary to her fiction: “It’s necessary to talk about violence in writing because it is always the case with a new form: it threatens and does violence to the older ones” (Shaktini 45). Butler instead regards the act of doing violence to older forms as an engagement with the violence produced by the compulsoriness of the heterosexual institution upon bodies:

The violence is neither a simple ‘turning of the tables’ in which women now wage violence against men, nor a simple internalization of masculine norms such that women now wage violence to themselves. The violence of the text has the identity and coherence of the category of sex as its target, a lifeless construct, a construct out to deaden the body...Wittig’s textual violence is enacted against that institution and not primarily for its heterosexuality, but for its compulsoriness. (*Gender* 161)

In a similar move De Lauretis argues that the violence of the text is the necessary strategy for the representation of the death of the anatomical female body that patriarchal discourse produced: “The dismemberment of the female body limb by limb, organ by organ, secretion by secretion, is at the same time the deconstruction term by term of the anatomical female body as represented and mapped by patriarchal discourse” (Shaktini 58). Hence Wittig’s fiction implies an amount of violence which is itself a translation of the violence exerted at the material and symbolic level. I would add that the coming together of *j/e* and *tu* is necessarily embedded in such violence, the violence of an institution that regulates bodies and desires. What critics have perceived as violence may be nothing but the struggle that the two loving subjects go through in order to inscribe onto the text their eroticism. This tension at once subtends and produces the fictional materialization of a lesbian body/text as a narrative of erotic struggle.

violence as the mark of a different relation between author and reader, a relation in which the reader is invited to partake into an experience which is both fascinating and repellent (Shaktini 153).

The disintegrating encounters have a transformative impact over the body that loses at times its human contours to become “something else.” I think of this transformation in terms of the “medusean” effects of fiction. Wittig’s fiction, like the Medusa, can act upon the body to affect its nature, or rather its material quality, to change it and deform it. Transformation can thus take several modalities. It can be a literally physical metamorphosis by which the body turns into another substance:

J/e m/e transforme en boue m/es jambe m/on sexe m/es cuisses m/on ventre debout entre tes jambes saoule de l’odeur qui de la cyprine vient montant de tin milieu, j/e m/e liquifie au-dedans et au dehors...m/es muscles se séparent les uns des autres par mottes détrempées. Tout m/on corps est gagné. Le premier à tomber est /on anus. Quelques fessiers suivent de près. M/es biceps abandonment m/es bras. Les bras tout entiers tomber par terre. J/e perds courage, j/e m//abandonne à ta volonté m/a déplorable j/e n’ai aucune part à cette transformation systématique que tu commets sur m/oi. (76)

[J/e am transformed into mud m/y legs m/y sex m/y thighs m/y belly standing between your legs glutted with the smell of the vaginal secretion rising from your middle, J/e liquefy within and without. My muscle separate from each other in sodden masses. M/y entire body is overwhelmed. First to fall is my anus. Some glutei soon follow. M/y biceps abandon m/y arms. The arms themselves fall entire to the ground...J/e lose my heart, J/e submit m/yself to your will m/y deplorable one J/e have no share in this systematic transformation you impose on m/e. (72)]

J/e yields to the process of liquefaction lending her body to the impetus of transformation, a change that is occasioned by the pleasurable effect of the erotic encounter with the beloved. The beloved’s vaginal secretions and the overwhelming feelings of pleasure are the signs of an erotic materiality whose main attribute is a material metamorphosis for which *j/e* seems to have no control (“*j/e* perds courage, *j/e* m//abandonne à ta volonté”). Interestingly the body changes into a natural element, a process we also witness in *Les guérillères* when women’s bodies are associated and made into natural elements by means of metaphors and comparisons. Here it is not a matter of metaphor, it is a material transformation that the language of fiction enables. The fictive metamorphosis that changes the human body into mud also results in a

chain of metamorphoses through which the body progressively turns into a winged creature resembling a bat:

M/on cerveau assailli produit des ondes de plus en plus rapides. Les ailes naissent sans discontinuer avec une vitesse qui s'accélère. M/es bras se trouvent reliés à m/es côtés par deux gigantesques ailes de couleur noire, une fois pliée elles n'ont pas plus d'épaisseur que le tranchant d'un couteau, leur matière est identique à la soie noire dont on fait les drapeaux. Leur forme est comparable à celle des chauves-souris. (77-78)

[M/y brain assailed produced increasingly rapid waves. The wings are born incessantly with ever-increasing speed. M/y arms are attached to m/y sides by two gigantic wings of a black color, once folded they are no thicker than a knife-blade, their substance is identical with that silk flags are made of. Their shape is comparable to that of the wings of bats. (73)]

As the *j/e*-bat approaches the body of the beloved, the encounter between the lover and the beloved is transformed into something different, an exchange quite ungraspable, in which the wings of *j/e* embrace *tu*, attracting the screaming beloved into a vertiginous movement. Here the metamorphosis brings together the body of the lover and the beloved while affecting a simultaneous change in the lovers' encounter and in the materiality of *j/e*, who gets undone. Is the image of metamorphosis there to signify that the lesbian body can matter and be fictionalized through a defamiliarization of its own material features? How does this defamiliarization contribute to make the lesbian body into a different and unfamiliar experience of materiality?

Writing over the Woman's Corpse: Lesbianizing Myths, Rewriting Culture

The different encounters between *j/e* and *tu*, whether disintegrating or metamorphic, seem to expose and question both a notion of materiality as stable and unchanging, and a certain relationship of the subjects to the construction of their bodies. I noted earlier that the making of fiction is very much intertwined in the making of materiality, to the point that fiction and materiality are inextricable. If

fiction in the beginning is also that which does not have a name, it seems to acquire its name through the different material experiences that unravel throughout the narration. To the extent that material experiences are produced through and by the dynamic struggle between loving subjects, the fiction can thus be read as the product of the different processes in which the loving subjects are implicated. One example is given by the relationship of the subjects to naming. I pointed out above that the fiction of the lesbian body is nameless due to the fact that its subject matter was thus far inexistent, not yet forged. Like fiction, the beloved *tu* is nameless or rather cannot be named: “*J/e tairai ton nom adorable. Tel est l’interdit qui m’a été fait, ainsi soit-il*” (11). [*J/e shall not utter your adorable name. Such is the interdict you have laid on m/e so be it* (19).] As a result of this prohibition tu becomes the place of a taboo that projects onto the subjects mystery and secrecy: [“*la vie secrete de tes viscères*” (7)] [the hidden life of your viscera (15)]; [“*J/e deveins brusquement le lieu des plus sombres mystères*” (8)], [“*J/e become the place of the darkest mysteries*” (16)]. The beloved is invoked through a variety of appellations such as “*m/on ineffable,*” “*m/a plus interdite,*” “*m/a glorieuse,*” “*m/on adorable,*” epithets that either emphasize the ineffability and the inaccessibility of the beloved’s name or celebrate her. Forbidden to utter the beloved’s name, *j/e* can only recall how *tu* goes to look for her lover in hell: [“*J/e dirai seulement comment tu viens m/e chercher jusqu’au fond de l’enfer*” (11)]. [*J/e shall recount only how you come to seek m/e in the very depths of hell* (19)]. The love search in hell is reminiscent of that of Orpheus who suffers from a prohibition as well: if he wants to take Eurydice back with him to earth, he must not turn around and look at her during his journey upward. The narrative analogy with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice allows Wittig to act upon a myth of heterosexual love and longing producing some interesting fictional effects.

First of all, the mythical subjects are no longer a heterosexual couple formed by a man and a woman, but two lesbians. This mythical rewriting contributes to “lesbianize” a heterosexual myth of Western love and to reread love as lesbian. Moreover, the gender positions of the lover and the beloved is inverted. Such an invention precludes an easy differentiation between an active male subject who engages in a rescue and a feminine object of love who is been rescued. For what is at stake here is not merely the desire to resuscitate a lost object of love, but rather to grant the lesbian loving subjects a visibility. The condition for such visibility lies paradoxically on the beloved’s ability not to turn back and look at the lover’s body and on the recognizability of a myth about a man and a woman. Whereas in the traditional myth Orpheus transgressed the prohibition not to look back, thus losing Eurydice for ever, in the lesbian re-writing the beloved never yields to Orpheus’ temptation: “Pas une fois tu ne te retournes,” (11) [You do not once turn (19)], thus succeeding where Orpheus failed. Only when the beloved reaches the earth’s surface can she face her lover and gaze at her, an act that has an expectedly reviving effect:

Tu m//entraîne jusqu’à la surface de la terre où le soleil est visible. C’est là seulement là au débouché vers les arbres et la forêt que d’un bond tu m/e fais face et c’est vrai qu’en regardant tes yeux, j/e ressuscite à une vitesse prodigieuse. (13)

[You drag m/e to the surface of the earth where the sun is visible. Only there at the exit towards the trees and the forest do you turn to face m/e with a bound and it is true that looking into your eyes J/e revive with prodigious speed. (20)]

At that exit on earth where the sun becomes visible, the lesbian lovers linger after a de-ambulation across “the underground tunnels, the crypts, the caves, and the catacombs” (19) from which the guardians of the dead released them.

The guardians of hell are another interesting twist of the lesbianization of the Orpheus myth. The guardians are feminized figures (“les gardiennes des mortes”)

who grant the beloved the permission to bring *j/e* back to light: “Tu obtiens d’elles de m/e ramener jusqu’à la lumière des vivantes à condition de ne pas te retourner sur m/oi pour m/e regarder” (11). [You obtain their permission to bring m/e back as far as the light of the living on condition that you not turn round to look at m/e (19).] I am inclined to see in those figures a disguise of *elles*, the women, the hetero-feminists. Yet, if those guardians are indeed a disguise of the hetero-feminists, who are “les mortes” that those guardians watch over? Is there any relation between the namelessness of the beloved and those female dead bodies over which the guardians watch? We may argue that “les mortes” are female corpses, a fact that may change the way we look at *j/e* and *tu*’s journey from hell to earth. The guardians are the preservers of the corpse of a female materiality which “les mortes” evoke. *J/e* seems to be kept among “les mortes” (female corpses) from which the beloved is coming to liberate her. Consequently, the journey of the lover and the beloved back to light may be the struggle of a body (and a fiction) to resuscitate from the female corpses (the old myths). What comes to the surface of earth, after an interminable journey across is a purulent body in decay [“m/on corps putrifié” (12)] to which the beloved, unlike Orpheus, refuses to turn to and to see:

Pas une fois u ne te retournes, pas même quand *j/e* m/e mets à hurler des désespoir les larmes roulant sur m/es joues rongées à te supplier de m/e laisser dans m/a tombe à te décrire avec brutalité ma décomposition les purulences de m/es yeux de m/on nez de m/a vulve les caries de m/es dents les fermentations de m/es organes essentiels la couleur de m/es muscles blets. (12)

[Not once do you turn around, not even when *J/e* begin to howl in despair the tears trickling down m/y gnawed cheeks to beg you to leave m/e in m/y tomb to brutally describe to you m/y decomposition the purulence of my eyes m/y nose m/y vulva the caries of my teeth the fermentation of m/y vital organs the colour of m/y rotten-ripe muscles. (20)]

The beloved’s refusal to turn around and rescue that decaying body may symbolize the refusal to embrace once again the symbol of a dead culture. Rather, the beloved

brutally lets the lover's body to decompose so as to expose the process of material undoing that the body has to undergo in order to come to the surface and gain its visibility.

Limb after limb, piece after piece, the material process the body undergoes is that of a dead body literally coming to terms with its own de-composition. How does such decomposition translate? I would say that it translates precisely into a different and renewed materiality or form that arises from the undoing and the re-deployment of old narratives. The re-writing of myth is but an example of the process begun in *Les guérillères*. In it *elles* take the old culture of myths and fairy tales and transform it into a different body/creation. If that move was about undoing the masculine symbolic in *Les guérillères*, in *Le corps* is about lesbianizing the myth while letting go of a dead female body, perhaps the female body of patriarchy as De Lauretis would suggest. "Letting go" entails a process of mourning and a recollection of which the lesbian re-writing of the myth of Orpheus love is but the beginning. Wittig's skillful lesbianization of the myth at the beginning of her work ensures that the fiction of *Le corps lesbien* may be read both as a search for the missing body of the beloved and as the mourning of love.

Embracing the Lesbian Body: The Experience of Emotional Materiality

I argued earlier that the fiction of the lesbian body emerges from a void of representation which makes it unnamable. I also argued that the beloved shares some of the characteristics of the fiction, namely the impossibility of being named. Material loss and fictional void thus become intertwined in a variety of ways, but in the case of the beloved, lack is due less to the representational void than to the sense of loss that accompanies the lover's search of her lost love. *J/e* recalls that, at the origin of loss was a "forfeit" that involved *elles*: an infamous incident turned tu into

stone and made *tu* impenetrable: “Les parois de ton vagin sont jointes et scellées” (26). [The walls of your vagina are shut tight and sealed (30).] Because of a prohibition standing between *elles* and the loving couple, the beloved is made to change her nature. Ironically, that incident is once again reminiscent of the curse of the Medusa, but in this case men are not the objects of the curse, the beloved and her lover are.

The “forfeit” caused *j/e* to separate from *tu*. Since that separation *j/e* has wandered in search of *tu*, finding and losing her “amante de pierre” [stone lover].

Everything is carefully and painfully registered on the surface of the body of *j/e*:

Il n’y a pas de trace de toi. Ton visage ton corps ta silhouette sont perdus. Il y a un vide à la place de toi. Il y a dans m/on corps une pression au niveau du ventre au niveau du thorax. Il y a un poids dans m/a poitrine. Il y a des phénomènes à l’origine d’une douleur intense. A partir d’eux je te quiers mais *j/e* l’ignore. (31)

[There is no trace of you. Your face your body your silhouette are lost. In your place there is a void. In m/y body there is a pressure at the level of the belly at the level of the thorax. There is a weight on m/y chest. Initially these phenomena are intensely painful. Because of them *J/e* seek you but without knowing it. (35)]

The absence of *tu* is perceived as a hole, an emptiness that excavates the body from within. The loss of *tu* has left a material void in which the physical presence of the beloved (the face, the bodily contours) is replaced by signs of its disappearance, like the pressure on the stomach and on the chest (“une pression au niveau du ventre;” “un poids dans ma poitrine”). All those signs describe, on the one hand, a phenomenology of loss and, on the other hand, an attitude of longing and desire (“à partir d’eux je te quiers”). Let us note that *j/e* does not talk of absence, preferring the term “non-présence” that reinforces the idea of a denied presence: “*J/e* te sollicite de sortir de cette non-présence où tu t’abîmes. Tu me tourmentes d’un lent amour” (31). [*J/e* solicit you to emerge from this non-presence which engulfs you. You torment

m/e with a slow love (36).] In the abysmal non-presence of *tu*, *j/e* senses the painful presence of love.

Marked by the loss of *tu*, *j/e* is unable to pronounce the death of the beloved. The burden of loss makes *tu* ever more present, ever more alive so that the impossibility of pronouncing the beloved's death becomes the tenacity of *tu*'s survival:

J/e prononce l'interdiction d'enregistrer ta mort, que la traîtresse responsable de ton déchiquètement ne soit pas inquiétée, *j/e* prononce que tu es là vivante quoique tronçonnée, *j/e* cherche en toute hâte tes morceaux dans la boue. (86)

[*J/e* pronounce a ban on the recording of your death so that the traitress responsible for your being torn to pieces may not be alerted. *J/e* announce that you are here alive though cut to pieces, *J/e* search hastily for your fragments in the mud. (80)]

The survival of *tu* is postulated on her being ripped apart as a body ("déchiquètement"). *J/e*, who refuses to announce her death, declares that tu is alive and carefully searches for bodily fragments of the beloved:

Ce sont tes lèvres jointes jetées un peu plus loin que m/es mains touchent. Tout ton corps est là fragmenté, je ramasse tes cheveux par poignées, à quelque distance il y a ton nez, ton visage est tout éparé. *J/e* te prends morceau par morceau, *j/e* te reconstitue. (127)

[It is your closed lips thrown a little further off that m/y hands touch. Your whole body is in fragments here, *j/e* pick up your hair in handfuls, your nose is at some distance, your face is all dispersed. *J/e* gather you up piece by piece. *j/e* reassemble you. (113)]

The beloved's body lies fragmented before the lover, whose search turns into the act of re-membering scattered body parts like in the myth of Isis. Bodily recollection is then linked with the rereading of a myth which collapses material recollection with fictional recollection of past stories as in *Les guérillères*. Moreover, the act of remembering the body of the beloved is not the cold anatomical recollection of the body parts that punctuates from time to time the fictional rhythm. It is an excruciatingly moving gesture of re-composition and recognition:

J/e m/e mets à crier de toutes m/es forces, j/e rampe à même le sol les cheveux hérissés. J/e reconnais un de tes bras puis l'autre...j/e touche tes mains ouvertes, tes cuisses sont là, tes genoux tes jambes toutes entières. J/e m//écroule sur ton ventre, des larmes de sang coulent sur m/es joues, j/e t//appelle à voix stridente, m/on cœur m/e fait mal à mourir sautant jusqu'à mes lèvres. (127)

[J/e begin to cry out with all my might, J/e crawl along my ground m/y hair on end. J/e recognize one of your arms then the other. J/e touch your outspread hands, your thighs are here, your knees your legs all intact. J/e collapse over your belly. Tears of blood flow over my cheeks, J/e call to you in a strident voice, m/y heart makes m/e feel like death leaping into m/y mouth. (113)]

With the recollection of the scattered body parts, feelings of pain surface (“sautant jusqu'à m/es lèvres”), investing the body parts with emotional value. The recollection of the beloved's body makes the lover weep with tears of blood and collapse over the fragmented body almost as to embody the death of the beloved. The fragmentation of the beloved body recalls the destruction of the body of the lover enacted by *elles* and invoked earlier by *j/e*. In that occasion a tension emerged between the lover's desire to be reduced into pieces by *elles*, and the desire to be kept intact within the beloved's body as a fragment of memory:

Mais dans le plus secret de m/on corps j//écoute un feulement doux et furieux, ton nom m/e parcourt et m//enorgueillit, pourvu que toi m/a chérie tu m/e retiennes et me recèles en toi, j/e vis à jamais dans la mémoire des siècles. (150)

[But in the secret privacy of m/y body J/e hear a soft and furious growling, your name pervades and elates m/e, given that you m/y dearest one retain and harbour m/e within you J/e live for ever in the memory of the centuries. (133)]

Even though *j/e* and *tu* have been separated, acts of bodily recollections function as encounters between the loving subjects which reveal a certain amount of erotic tension and even of erotic fusion. To say it with De Lauretis, such tension signifies a highly de-constructive moment of the old dismembered anatomical body (Shaktini 58). Yet, the dismembered body gives way to the making of a different materiality, one that is conveyed through the emotional experience of loss and mourning.

Interestingly, the loss of the beloved body is not the only experience of material loss in the fiction. The pain for the loss of the beloved is suggestive of the desperate cry of *j/e* for the mother who abandoned her:

J/e suis au Golgotha par vous toutes abandonnée. La peur *m/e* vient et le désir de vivre avec toi encore dans ce jardin pas une de vous ne sait rien de *m/on* angoisse, alors *j//*implore la grande déesse ma mère et *j/e* lui dis mère mère pourquoi *m//*as-tu abandonnée, elle en silence se tient tandis que vous dormez, pas un souffle de vent ne soulève *m/es* cheveux, *j//e* crie dans *m/a* détresse, mère pourquoi *m'as-tu* abandonnée. (138)

[*J/e* am at the Golgotha you have all abandoned. Fear grips *m/e* and the desire to go on living with you in this garden, not one of you knows anything of my anguish, then *J/e* implore the great goddess *m/y* mother and *J/e* say to her mother mother why have you forsaken *m/e*, she remains silent while you sleep, not a breath of wind stirs my hair, *J/e* cry out in *m/y* distress mother mother why have you forsaken *m/e*. (123)]

The passage plays a couple of discursive functions: first of all, the daughter's cry for the missing mother's goddess is a rewriting of the Golgotha scene from the Gospel in which Jesus calls out for God who has abandoned him to the cross. Then it is also a search for a female archetype of loss which establishes a rather queer parallel between the grief of the lover for the lost beloved and the grief of the daughter for her missing mother. Although reading the lesbian loving couple as a reproduction of the mother-daughter bond may appear problematic because of its Freudian underpinnings, I think the text is not quite reproducing that psychoanalytic dynamic. The Golgotha scene, when linked with the intimate and material experience of mourning that *j/e* undergoes, can be re-signified as a mourning of lost love; but the difference from the original scene is that the gender of the narrative changes: where Jesus forcefully says "father father" *j/e* addresses instead the mother with the same force. The sacred love between Jesus and God, and the loss of the father on the part of the son are re-conceptualized as an all-female experience. The regendering of the story and its contextualization in a narrative of lesbian loss may contribute to the queering of the original.

Le corps lesbien is not all about destruction and remembering, loss and mourning, all of which emphasize nonetheless a strong component of desire and erotic tension. The erotic encounters can also be a fusional moment: “J/e me souviens du doux contact des seins et des ventres des allées et venues lentes et sinueuses de la tiédeur des peaux de la délicatesse des bonheurs” (115). [*J/e* recall the soft contact of breasts and bellies the slow sinuous coming and goings the warmth of the skins the delicacy of touching (103).] If for Butler love-making is “what tears the body apart” and produces it as “an incoherent center of attributes, gestures and desires,” (*Gender* 160) the material experience of love is not always posited through split and fragmentation, but also through fusion. At times the fusional encounter is so intense as to provoke the collapsing of the bodies into one living organism: “Nos deux corps organisme unique parcourue des vibrations trépidant plein de ses propres courants” (*Corps* 123) [Our two bodies which now constitute a single organism pervaded by vibrations quivering full of its own currents, is it not so m/y dearest (109).] Swept by the intensity of the encounter, the previously separated loving subjects reunite in one single organism that prefigures a dual subjectivity that only love-making or love loss can produce. Both experiences of love-making and love loss have a material component that is constituted by the emotional quality of the encounters of *j/e* and *tu*. This emotional component produced by contacts and sensations, movements and vibrations, tensions and struggles I would call emotional materiality. From the torments of separation and loss to the painful recollection of the beloved remnants, from the delicate encounter of bodies to their fusion, the text and the body that emerge are perhaps the ones that bear the sign of the only thing which has a lesbian name in the fiction. That is love: “Que l’*étoile* noire pour finir te couronne, te donnant de t’asseoir à m/es côtés à l’apogée de la figuration de l’amour lesbien m/a

plus inconnue” (166) [May the black star crown you finally, giving you to sit at m/y side at the apogee of the figuration of lesbian love m/y most unknown (146).] This image, like the one of Golgotha may carry a sacred allure in the reference to the beloved sitting next to her lover like Jesus next to his father in the moment of his resurrection.

Whether awaiting for the beloved in hell, or sitting in heaven like Jesus, j/e continues to bear the mark of a split (graphically signaled by a slash). Critics have commented on the split status of *j/e* in a variety of ways. For Butler, *j/e* signals the constant movement of construction and reconstruction of a lesbian subject who “can wage war linguistically against a ‘world’ that has constituted a semantic and syntactic assault against the lesbian” (*Gender* 153). Butler’s argument echoes Wittig’s hermeneutics of her own text, in which *j/e*, like a “lava flow” invades the text, attacking a heterosexual discourse and lesbianizing it.¹¹³ I showed how this attack becomes possible through a lesbian re-reading of the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, and Isis as well as a regendering of the Golgotha passage. Wittig goes at the heart of the heterosexual and masculine construction of the foundational Western myths, reversing, destabilizing and undoing their contents and their forms. The result of this fictional lesbianization is a body that is not produced through sexual categories, but arises from the fictional de/composition of the female body, which the female corpses (“les mortes”) recall. The decomposition of the female body symbolizes not merely the death of a female biological body, but also the deconstruction of a phallic culture and discourse whose straight “nature” has gone unquestioned. The process of re-

¹¹³ “The bar in the *j/e* of *The Lesbian Body* is a sign of excess. A sign that helps imagine an excess of ‘I,’ an ‘I’ exalted. ‘I’ has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. Nothing can resist this ‘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” (*Straight* 87).

invention that we witness in both *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* is thus crucial to the dismantling and the undoing of such discourse since invention lies in a whole variety of rhetorical techniques which engage the old (inversion, repetition, negation, rereading, rewriting) and ultimately constitute the very fabric of Wittig's fiction.

The lesbianization of fiction is like a body whose materiality is reconfigured through the erotic encounters between the lesbian lovers which distillate a specific moving and emotional quality. For one thing, *j/e* is defined by the erotic tensions that traverse her body. Those tensions are the product of an inter-subjective relationship and describe a dynamic map of the bodies, made of dis-memberment and recollection, absorption and penetration, desires, pleasures and pains. *J/e* thus becomes the place not so much of a division predicated on sexual categories, but the space of an encounter with another body, another subject with whom *j/e* erotically engages throughout the fiction. Perhaps the graphic split should not be read as a cut, but more like a transversal sign that can account for the multiple and pervasive tensions that produce the lesbian body as emotional materiality, a body made through emotions. As a moving subject, the lesbian body is ultimately a body capable of moving (physically and emotionally) another body. Perhaps the readability of *Le corps* depends upon the ability and the willingness of the reader to move beyond the meticulous anatomical constructions of the fiction and to be moved, to be touched by the emotional body woven into those constructions. The challenge of reading *Le corps lesbien* and of making it readable resides in that what I call the emotional materiality of the text and that Seth Silbermann refers to as queer intimacy: "Tu prends m/es doigts pour qu'ils touchent ton corps pour que j/e m/e familiarize avec ta nouvelle apparence pour que j/e te déchiffre m/a plus mauve, gloire à Sappho dans les siècles des siècles" (132. [You take ahold of m/y fingers so they may touch your

body so I may familiarize m/yself with your new appearance so I may interpret you m/y most mauve one, glory to Sappho over centuries of centuries (116).] ¹¹⁴ Perhaps that queer intimacy is the one that the loving subjects rediscover by becoming familiar with a new material form, with an emotional materiality, as the beloved touches the lover under the auspices of Sappho.

Although Wittig sought to create a fiction beyond the categories of sex/gender, sex/gender cannot be eluded completely. In both Wittig's text and Cixous' theoretical fiction, gender becomes the pretext and one of the means for feminist and queer discursive invention. Moreover, one significant achievement of this reinvention is to lead us to a reconsideration of the intricate relations between the material and conceptual, of which women's bodies are but a starting point. Cixous does so through a performative writing that bends the conceptual rigidity of sexual difference and shows that writing can allow her to perform different gendered and even sexual positions and even turn her "feminine" pen into a "butch" one. The textual materiality that results from Cixous' playful manipulation of the categories of the "feminine," "the masculine," the "maternal," "the gay" and the "lesbian" is an unforeseen queer dimension that the laugh of her Medusa inaugurated. For the laugh of the Medusa as well as the laugh of the lesbian is the strategy that ensures that a woman writing need no longer inhabit a specific sex and a particular body, but the queer place where multiple subjects may embrace. Far from positing one single body and sex, Cixous' "écriture féminine" problematizes the idea that writing from the standpoint of sexual difference amounts to reproducing one single essentialized body

¹¹⁴ Seth Silbermann offers one compelling and moving reading of *Le corps lesbien* titled "I have access to your glottis: the Fleshy Syntax, Ethical Irony and Queer Intimacy of Monique Wittig's *Le corps lesbien*." In his piece he folds his own analytical reading of Wittig's fiction into the narration of the mourning for his mother's loss. He also understands "lesbian" not as a sexual signifier, but as an attribute which defines a particular subject position through which *J/e* is partially "outside of herself" as she provides the context of *tu*'s death.

of femininity. Cixous redeploys sexual difference and the feminine as sites for the proliferation of different gendered and sexualized positions (butch, femme, masculine, gay, bisexual). In this respect, the Medusean writing subject of Cixous can find herself unexpectedly close to Mario Mieli's "transessuale" (see chapter 3) insofar as she traverses and navigates sexual and erotic boundaries by means of fiction, making fiction into both a moment of transformation and of queer fictive transit among positions.

It is precisely in this fictional context in which bodies are redeployed to account for different, performative, trans-subjective notions of materiality and subjectivity that Wittig's lesbian matters. First of all Wittig's fiction is built upon a destabilization of old forms and contents. It is postulated on the undoing of materiality by means of a number of narrative and rhetorical strategies. Through her fiction Wittig seems to suggest that no form, no body can emerge without a movement and a gesture of undoing. Undoing is also to some extent and paradoxically, a foundational moment in Wittig's texts. While reading them we may have the sense of standing at the threshold of something that is no longer (but that we keep doing and undoing) and something that is yet to be. Our body comes undone through the reading while participating in the erotic struggles of *j/e* and *tu*, awaiting a new form to emerge, a new body to arise. The lesbian body is no longer the "female anatomical body" of sexual difference and patriarchy, a body defined through sex, but a body that lends itself to the flux of emotions and the tension of eroticism. The lesbian body is thus not so much about the making and the naming of a new sexual identity, as it is the emblem of a material threshold, it is the threshold where the subjective, the material, the conceptual, the symbolic meet and get intertwined. The result of Wittig's fictional movement is a complex text (or body) in which all those

dimensions are present and cannot be easily separated nor reduced. Similar to the aborting bodies of Ernaux and Maraini, Wittig's lesbian bodies becomes the complex site of negotiation of material and symbolic meanings. It is through their symbolic and material complexities that those bodies and those texts urge us to reconsider what women's feminist bodies have contributed and can contribute to a queer interrogation of materiality.

CONCLUSION

Cinema and the Sexual Politics of the 1970s: Swept Away by an Unusual Queer Destiny

Literature and theory are by no means the only place for queer embraces in the 1970s. Italian cinema and in particular the cinema of Lina Wertmüller is another place of passionate and irreverent queer embraces. Of course the embrace in question is the memorable one between Mariangela Melato and Giancarlo Giannini in *Travolti da un Insolito Destino nell’Azzurro Mare d’Agosto* [Swept Away by an Unusual Destiny in the Blue Sea of August] (1974). *Travolti*, like so many other Italian movies of the 1970s, used sexuality as an allegory to represent the socio-political climate of the years. Yet, unlike other movies that focused on the perverse association between Fascism and the nation through sexuality, *Travolti* is a sexy political satire of the communist revolutionary credo. The co-protagonist of the movie, the Southern deck-hand Gennarino Carunchio (Giancarlo Giannini) is almost leader of the Communist party of his town” (Russo Bullaro, 56).

Travolti is enmeshed in the climate of political oppositions of the 1970s and the appeal of political and social communism. However, the narrative is purposefully removed from that tension as the story takes place on a scorching summer day and is set for the most part on a remote island of the Mediterranean, which becomes for the occasion the site of a rather queer sexual and social reversal. The spatial and temporal setting of *Travolti* evokes that of *Donna in guerra* (set in an imaginary

island of Southern Italy) and Gennarino has much more in common with the masculine characters of the novel (Giacinto and Santino) than his love of the sea—critics have actually pointed to the chronological and social proximity of the novel and the movie. A queer parallel between the novel and the film can be useful and productive and further will allow me to point to the postcolonial implications of my queer embraces. I shall use this brief conclusion on cinema and sexuality to briefly sketch out the encounter between the queer and the postcolonial in the 1970s body politics.

The story line of *Travolti* is quite simple: the deck-hand Gennarino gets stranded on an island with Raffaella Pavone Lanzetti, the boisterous and bitchy bourgeoisie for whom Gennarino slaves as a deck-hand. Deprived of the basic survival skills, the arrogant Raffaella is as needy on the island as she was pampered on her husband's yacht. Gennarino, however, turns out to be much more resourceful and comfortable in the natural element. But determined to seek revenge he offers no help or support to Raffaella until she agrees to become his slave. As Gennarino demands that Raffaella call him "Signore" (Sir/Lord) the interpersonal dynamics that existed on the yacht are reversed.

This film is perhaps among the best known comedies of 1970s Italy but has been largely discredited in Italy and in the US because of its indulging in misogynistic clichés. In the 1970s Tania Modleski maintained that the movie was anti-feminist and even vented at Wertmuller's presumed misogyny. In the 1980s Millicent Marcus highlighted "the reductivist and exploitative uses" that Wertmuller makes of comedy for commercial reason and "comic pleasure" (314). Marcus attributes the supposed reductivism of Wertmüller to what she calls her "politics of polarity" (Marcus 318) that amounts to an aesthetic of "dualities, dichotomies and reversals" (Russo Bullaro

56). In the 1990s Molly Haskell begrudges “the one filmmaker who least identifies with the concerns and interests of the women’s movement” and considers outrageous the fact Wertmüller proclaims herself an androgynous artist (86). Only recently has Grace Russo Bullaro reconsidered Wertmüller’s 1970s comedies arguing that “Lina Wertmüller is simply exposing, not endorsing or condoning the abuses and injustices of society” (71). I agree that Wertmüller makes use of an array of clichés and dichotomies that can raise more than an eye-brow among feminist critics and that it would be hard to easily condone the director’s abuse of stereotypical images. Nor are her clichés limited to the relationship between sexes, but also encompass those between the North and the South. However, I believe that, because of the pleasurable effects the movie can produce, it is worth taking a second look at *Travolti da un insolito destino*. Rewatching the movie in light of the queerness of 1970s feminist body politics leads me to view it less as reductively antifeminist than as productively queer. One way a feminist might avoid being outraged by Wertmüller’s movie is by looking at it with a queer eye and considering it within the complex body politics of the 1970s. Indeed, the cinematic aesthetics of Wertmüller is very close to the transsexual theory of Mario Mieli, and her film may be seen as a cinematic version of the theory of erotic communism that I discussed in my third chapter.

Wertmüller herself gave a very important clue for reading *Travolti* when stating that “Raffaella really represents the man□artificially elevated into a position of superiority by society□and Gennarino the woman” (Marcus 317). Raffaella, by her wealth, her power, her arrogance, and her speech (she constantly speaks as if she knew everything) embodies the phallic woman. Her position of superiority, as critics have already noted, is also conveyed cinematically, at the beginning of the movie, by standing at the top of the boat in relation to Gennarino. His intense gaze, constantly

directed at Raffaella, is also that of the camera tilting up to her as if to convey fear and seduction. This top/bottom relation is kept throughout the movie, but gets reversed during the couple's stay in the island; it even takes on a queer twist in a couple of scenes that I believe crucial to a queer reading of the film.

Raffaella has just yielded to Gennarino's will and discovered herself to be madly in love with him. As a result she has relinquished the position of top to assume that of the bottom. Politically speaking this switch represents a materialization of Marxist utopia in which the master becomes the slave and viceversa. The scene revolves around Gennarino's sexist assertion that "il partito è sacro e tu sei puttana e io ti fotto" [the party is sacred and you are a whore and I fuck you]. Gennarino defends his communist credo and protects its sacredness against the bourgeois whom he deems corrupt and dirty, or rather "ricchioni, porconi e drogati" [faggots, pigs, and drug addicts]. Not only is Gennarino sexist, but he is also homophobic in his definition of the bourgeois. What do the sexism and the homophobia of Gennarino conceal? If, following Wertmüller's assertion, Gennarino is the woman, or at the least the effeminate man, once he is on top of the phallic woman, he is in the position to dominate and, so to speak, to penetrate him/her; by contrast Raffaella, the man or the phallic woman becomes the penetrable one. Wertmüller however plays with the role reversal (whether social or sexual) by following the two bodies with her camera as they alternatively switch positions between top and bottom, which renders the mechanics of the reversal rather dynamic and queer. The genders we are looking at are not exactly the genders we see. Can we still say that the representation is sexist if we think that the woman at the bottom is the man? And if the bottom is a man what does that do to the homophobic assertions of Gennarino?

The top/bottom dynamic of the film produces two sexual/narrative climaxes: one mild climax is reached when Raffaella demands that Gennarino sodomize her (“sodomomizzami”). This is perhaps one of the most pleasurable scenes in the movie. Its comic effect has very little to do with sex and very much to do with language and accent. Gennarino supposedly never heard the word “sodomizzare,” and when Raffaella pronounces it, he lingers incredulous with his eyes wide open looking at us looking up at him (the spectator is a bottom, as well!). He first timidly withdraws from Raffaella saying that he does not feel like it; he then discloses that he does not know the word; Raffaella has managed to humiliate him by using one of her sophisticated bourgeois terms. While pronouncing the word, Gennarino also deforms it (“sotorazzame” instead of “sodomizzami”) in a distinctively Sicilian accent thus reinforcing the cliché that certain sexual practices are foreign not only to the non-bourgeois, but also to the Sicilian man who remains impenetrable to sodomy both linguistically and sexually. In turn Raffaella’s request not only reveals the desire of the phallic woman/man to be penetrated but also reinforces its queerness by virtue of the queer gender identification of the two characters’ queer gender identifications. Yet we will never know for sure whether Gennarino actually sodomizes Raffaella, whether any other kind of intercourse takes place (except in allusions to Raffaella’s satisfaction). What we do see is that Gennarino temporarily regains a “bottom” position precisely when he is playing the role of the master and the man, which once more makes the sexual polarization dynamically queer.

The second climax occurs at the end of the movie when Gennarino and Raffaella leave their erotic communism and go back to their previous social roles or as some have said to “civilization.” One of Gennarino’s overstated goals is to fuck Raffaella (“io ti fotto”). “Io ti fotto” has in Italian a social and a sexual meaning for it

also means “I fuck you over.” On the island Gennarino entertains the pleasurable thought of fucking Raffaella and also of fucking the bourgeois over, socially and politically. This erotic dream will come true for ever provided that Raffaella agrees to go back to the island with Gennarino and leave behind her bourgeois privilege. In other words Raffaella has to relinquish once and her position as top. But this dream in turn gets an unexpected reversal when the bourgeois phallic woman turns around and takes off aboard her helicopter regaining her top position and leaving the miserable Gennarino behind. The one who really gets fucked over in the end is Gennarino. The camera tilts down at him (from the top view of the helicopter as Raffaella takes off) while the desperate cry of Violetta, the protagonist of Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* is superimposed to that of abandoned Gennarino.¹¹⁵ Gennarino thus regains the position of bottom thereby becoming the queer embodiment of the “seduced and abandoned” stereotypical image of the “commedia all’italiana.”¹¹⁶ Ironically Gennarino is also the *infinocchiato*, a word that in Italian refers to the man who is been baffled, fucked over, and disempowered. *Infinocchiato* has both a sexual and a social meaning since it symbolizes the lack of economic and social power through sexual inadequacy. Moreover, because the term contains the word *finochio* (faggot), the *infinocchiato* is queered by virtue of being turned into a faggot. The implicit characterization of Gennarino as the *infinocchiato* or the socially castrated is reminiscent of the representation of masculinity in *Donna in guerra* and of Mieli’s

¹¹⁵ *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi is a romantic drama based on Alexandre Dumas’s novel *La Dame aux camélias*. It also represents an attack on conventional bourgeois morality and its sexual hypocrisy.

¹¹⁶ *Sedotta e Abbandonata* (1964) is a movie by Pietro Germi who is also the director of *Divorce* □ *Italian Style*. Both movies deal with the issues of female chastity codes and marriage. Cinema scholar Jacqueline Reich explains that one important feature of these “commedie all’italiana” is that they are embedded in Italy’s major social and political issues of the 1960s. Among these issues are the North and South disparity and the political opposition Communists and Christina Democrats (Reich, 66). Germi’s movies influenced Wertmuller’s own cinematic production and treatment of social, sexual and political issues.

marginal masculinities (proletarian double males). Therefore the queering of Gennarino cannot be viewed simply in terms of reversed gender dynamics; it also bears social and geographical implications based on the depiction of Southern masculinity as socially and sexually disempowered.

The representation of Gennarino's disempowered masculinity is further complicated in the beginning of the movie by the deliberate association that Raffaella makes between Southernness and race. When the small boat goes adrift Raffaella starts wining about being stuck with a Negro ("il negro"); the word *Negro* is replaced by *Sicilian* in the English subtitles, a move that makes even more explicit the racialization of Gennarino's masculinity. The use of the word *Negro* not only aligns Sicilian-ness with race in derogatory ways, but also contributes to a definition of the relationship between the North and the South in colonial terms. The colonial nuance of Gennarino's queer masculinity, then, can help us frame the cinematic construction of erotic communism as a satirical response to a colonial discourse.

If *Travolti* is a queer cinematic rendition of Mieli's erotic communism, this cinematic representation also entails some unexpected postcolonial implications. It is plausible to think with John Michalczyk that Wertmüller's depiction of the South as Third World comes from her "sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, and the proletariat" (Michalczyk, 238). Yet this sympathetic depiction remains to be explored within a post-colonial critical perspective that could certainly enrich the critical work done in this dissertation. Some of the theoretical terms that I have analyzed and engaged with such as discursive excision have apparent postcolonial implications that invite for a further exploration of the intersection between a queer feminist and a postcolonial approach. Wertmüller's own play with social and sexual dichotomies such as wilderness and civilization, North and South, man and woman

point to the importance to reconsider 1970s queer body politics in dialogue with postcolonial studies.

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