

The Body in French Queer Thought from Wittig to Preciado: Queer Permeability

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The Body in French Queer Thought from Wittig to Preciado: Queer Permeability

The emergence of queer theory in France offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the state of queer thought more widely: what matters to queer theory today? The energy of queer thinking in France – grounded in activist groups and galvanised by recent hostility towards same-sex marriage and gay parenting – has re-ignited queer debates. This book identifies a common concern in French queer works for the materiality of the body, and argues for a return to the body as fundamental to queer thought and politics, from HIV onwards. Examining Paul B. Preciado’s experimentation with theory and pharmaceutical testosterone; Monique Wittig’s exploration of the body through radically innovative language; and, finally, the surgical performances of French artist ORLAN’s ‘Art Charnel’, this book asks how we are able to account for the material body in philosophy, literature and visual image.

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The Body in French Queer Thought from Wittig to Preciado

Queer Permeability

By Elliot Evans

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Introduction

the full sense of the flesh of it ...

David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* (1991)

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

La Pudeur ou l'Impudeur [Shame and Pride], Hervé Guibert (1991)

Copyright Photo Christine Guibert *La Pudeur ou L'Impudeur*.

What makes the materiality of the body so vital to queer theory? Surely, in part, it is that the roots of queer politics and theory in the US are inseparable from the political response to the AIDS crisis. Queer thought emerged from a consciousness of the material vulnerability of certain bodies at risk of contracting the virus; bodies deemed disposable by the state.ⁱ The opening lines of French writer Hervé Guibert's *Le Protocole compassionnel* [The compassion protocol] (1991) display the carnal realities of the author's body as it is ravaged by the effects of the HIV virus.ⁱⁱ Guibert's body does not fade with his illness: while he writes of witnessing 'nouvelles absences de chair' ['new losses of flesh'] (18), corporeality is rendered sharply in focus in his writing, taking centre stage as the virus transforms his body, in turn transforming his daily realities and changing how he is able to move, to wash, or to look at his body in a mirror. It is not only the body's image that is made evident; where so

often the body's materiality remains unacknowledged and overlooked, in Guibert's work it is this materiality that becomes pivotal as the effects of a virus attaching to his body's cells, multiplying and attacking his immune function, become central and undeniable. Nevertheless, Guibert's description of this bodily reality in his text appears frustrated: while carnal realities overtake his everyday life, even his sense of self, he appears aware of the difficulty – the impossibility, even – of presenting this to his readers fully. It is to visual work that Guibert turns, and in the opening minutes of his short film *La Pudeur ou l'Impudeur* (1991a),ⁱⁱⁱ Guibert records himself standing naked in front of a mirror. Over these frames, he reads lines from *Le Protocole compassionnel*, as if supplementing his words with the visual image of his now emaciated body, perhaps even depicting a thwarted attempt to display his body 'laid bare', or to present it fully.

The work of the American writer and artist David Wojnarowicz similarly uses both text and visual image to present the experience of living *in* or *as* a body with HIV. He writes in *Close to the Knives* (1991) of his use of Super 8 film to attempt to show the material realities of HIV/AIDS. Filming the body of his friend Peter Hugar immediately after his death seems to him to capture 'the full sense of the flesh of it', the image 'printed on celluloid on the back of my eyes' (102). In another work, *Memories that Smell like Gasoline* (1992), Wojnarowicz describes wanting to show a Super 8 film (perhaps this same film) of a friend's dying face, to project in a hospital ward – a political effort certainly as much as it was aesthetic, and an attempt to show the reality of the AIDS epidemic (48).

The works of both Guibert and Wojnarowicz emphasise the necessity of presenting the material body in all its vulnerability – of recognising the vulnerability of *particular* bodies – as vital to queer politics and thought. Their works also repeatedly show the frustration of attempts to express this materiality, both in visual image and in writing. What can be made of Wojnarowicz’s sense of the immediacy of visual imagery over writing in conveying materiality? If the material vulnerabilities of marginalised and abjected bodies, as well as the carnality of sex and disease are foundational to queer thought, how is queer theory (and philosophical or theoretical writing more broadly) able to account for the body? The French context, I will argue – through its literary, artistic and philosophical expressions – is particularly well-placed to reassess the direction of queer thought on the body.

Despite queer theory’s association with the material body through its roots in the AIDS crisis, it has since been criticised for failing to take account of this materiality. Leo Bersani’s *Homos* (1996) highlights the elision of sex in the work of Judith Butler,^{iv} and raises the concern that ‘when we speak of gay rights, we are speaking of rights for men whose primary erotic pleasure is taken from the bodies of other men, and for women whose primary erotic pleasure is taken from the bodies of other women’ (58). Tim Dean has more recently made the similar point that ‘it is striking how quickly the intractable materiality of sex drops out of the discourses of queer critique, in favour of other issues’ (2012: 430). From the emerging field of transgender studies, Jay Prosser in *Second Skins* (1998) and Vivien K Namaste in *Invisible Lives* (2000) have also charged Butler’s inaugural work of queer thought, *Gender Trouble* (1990), on this count specifically in relation to transgender and transsexual bodies. Both

argue that queer theory's poststructuralist roots in the work of French thinkers such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault render it incapable of taking account of the material body. New materialist thinkers, in particular Karen Barad (2003, 2007), argue similarly. How did queer theory, at its roots politically invested in expressing the material realities of bodies, fail to do so? Can such a failure be understood as a result of queer thought's foundations in French poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory, or rather as a result of the fundamental impossibility of representing the body?

If this French theoretical tradition was central to the birth of queer theory in the US – and potentially also to its flawed approach to the body – the recent wave of queer expression in the French context also offers ways to explore this problem. This book identifies a common concern in French queer works for the materiality of the body, arguing for a return to the material and to bodily matters as fundamental to queer thought and politics from HIV onwards. Examining the 'embodied philosophy' of Preciado's experimentation with theory and pharmaceutical testosterone; Monique Wittig's exploration of the body through radically innovative language; and, finally, the surgical performances of French artist ORLAN's 'Art Charnel', I ask how we are able to account for the material body in philosophy, literature and through performance and visual image.

A new wave of French queer thought

The specific French political and theoretical context is key to the vitality and energy of queer thought emerging from France. The development of queer studies in France within activist groups from the mid 1990s onwards, a political

climate hostile to gay marriage and ‘gender theory’ and the specific theoretical legacy in France – already foundational to Anglophone queer thought, from Lacan to Derrida – make the recent development of queer theory in France unique.

This charged environment has cultivated theoretical developments that demand questions of the queer project globally: what matters to queer theory today, given the increasingly globalized traffic of ideas and the rapid institutionalization of queer thought in the Anglophone world? How does its translation into another cultural and political context expose its universalist tendencies? French queer theory has emerged already informed by the interventions from transgender theorists (Prosser; Namaste) into early queer thought. As a result, French queer thought combines insights from activist praxis as well as queer, transgender and feminist theory, responding by creating work that confronts the body; addressing the points of convergence between theory, philosophy and bodies; as well as the tensions, possibilities and limitations of this engagement.

The specificities of French queer thought are inextricably linked to the marginal position of queer theory in France. Queer thinking is still embedded in activism rather than entrenched in universities as it increasingly is in the US and the UK. This lends French queer texts a particular political focus and dynamism, influencing their style (often unconventional in terms of language, register or genre).^v Queer work emerging from France from the beginning of the 21st century remains marginal to Anglophone queer studies, despite Paul B Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* (2008) receiving widespread critical acclaim. Referenced by queer heavyweights such as Tim Dean (2015) and Jasbir Puar

(2015), Dean describes it as ‘the most important work of queer theory to appear in the last decade; those who have pronounced queer theory dead are in for a surprise when they read it’ (237). Dean’s remarks pick up on the extraordinary energy and pace of Preciado’s experimental text, which in my view is related to this unique theoretical and political context from which queer theory in France has emerged.

Rather than simply absorbing the lessons of US queer theory or even becoming the partner in a debate, French queer theory has its own specificities that are inseparable from the political, theoretical and historical context of France. While queer theory has exploded in the Anglophone academy, its translation into the French language and context has been difficult. As James Agar notes, while

the *emergence* of queer theory is indissociable from the start of the second decade of the AIDS pandemic in America [...] the situation in France is more complicated. France was a very fertile culture for the epidemiological spread of HIV and yet remained until very recently a barren ground for the flourishing of queer theory. (2011: 64)

Despite being one of the most cited works in the Anglophone world and perhaps the best-known work of queer theory, it took over fifteen years for Butler’s *Gender Trouble* to appear in French (its translation by an American philosopher, Cynthia Kraus, was published in 2006). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) took even longer to be published in French translation, not appearing until 2005. A leading figure of queer thought

in France, sociologist Sam Bourcier, writes that ‘la situation de l’univers référentiel et intellectuel français est pathétique. Il y a bien longtemps que l’intégralité des œuvres d’Haraway ou de Butler a été traduite chez nos voisins européens’ [The French context, referential and intellectual, is in a pathetic state. The entire works of Haraway or Butler have long since appeared in translation amongst our European neighbours] (Haraway, 2009: 9).

Such delays in the official publication of queer works meant that ad-hoc French translations appeared, produced notably by the collective *le Zoo*. This group was comprised of a number of academics including Bourcier, Preciado, Marco Dell’Omodarme and Catherine Deschamps, but it was also an activist collective. Its ‘seminars’, later published as *Q comme Queer: les séminaires Q du Zoo (1996 - 1997)* [Q like Queer: the queer seminars of le Zoo], were not held at a university but at the Centre Gai et Lesbien de Paris (CGL). In contrast, Didier Eribon and Françoise Gaspard held seminars on the ‘Sociologie des homosexualités’ from 1997 to 2004 at the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (ÉHESS) in Paris, but while they invited a number of (mostly American) figures working in queer theory, their focus was on the development of gay studies rather than developing a specifically queer theoretical approach in France. Indeed, the ÉHESS seminars were the target of a ‘zap’ by members of *le Zoo* (including Bourcier, Dell’Omodarme and Maxime Cervulle and carried out under the name *Panik Qulture*) due to their difference in approach.^{vi}

Le Zoo considered their position outside of the academy to be an advantage: ‘en étant au CGL, on parle de dedans et pas de l’extérieur’ [‘situated at the CGL, we speak from within rather than from the outside’]

(Bourcier, 1998: 10). How should we understand this designation of university space in France as ‘exterior’ to critical thinking around minority genders and sexualities? While queer theory has become to a certain degree institutionalised in the US and to a lesser extent the UK, in France it remains marginal in universities and *grandes écoles*.^{vii} a number of reasons begin to explain this notable absence.

Firstly, the historian Régis Revenin (2012) identifies a ‘monodisciplinarity’ in French universities that lies in tension with the often interdisciplinary nature of queer studies. Bourcier describes fields such as race studies, feminist, queer and trans studies as ‘des nouveaux objets/études qui menacent salutairement la répartition hexagonale des disciplines traditionnelles’ [new objects/fields of study which advantageously threaten the very French separation of traditional disciplines] (2009: 10). Often gender is seen as a question for sociology rather than philosophy or the humanities, with a much stricter disciplinary divide than is seen in the UK or US.

Secondly, while feminism has more often than not been allied to queer theory in the US and the UK, often being inextricable from it (Butler, of course, considers herself a feminist philosopher) and sharing a common aim in the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, Bourcier writes of a tension between feminism and queer theory in France. The psychoanalytic strand of feminism in France, espoused since the 1970s principally by ‘Psych et Po’ (*Psychanalyse et Politique*) and associated thinkers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Antionette Fouque, tends towards an essentialising difference feminism, placing it in opposition to the constructivist aims of queer theory (2009: 8). On the other hand, Bourcier contends that materialist

feminism in France, dominated by the figure of Simone de Beauvoir and then Christine Delphy, does not consider culture surrounding minority sexualities as the proper place of resistance (2009: 8). Both strands of feminism share a form of toxic Republican universalism, ‘ce républicanisme ranci et cet universalisme arrogant rétifs aux logiques identitaires’ [this rancid Republicanism and arrogant universalism, blind to the logic of identity] (Bourcier, 2009: 8).

This question of French Republican universalism recurs time and again in queer thinking around and emerging from France. Republican logic – that all citizens are equal in relation to the state – results in a ‘supposed blindness to all particularities, including of course sexual orientation’ (Robcis, 2004: 113). This ‘blindness’ is used to justify the refusal to acknowledge or address specific demographics and is fiercely antagonistic towards what it considers identitarian concerns.^{viii} As Bourcier notes, in France, ‘universalism is sacred’ (2012: 234), and is evident in attitudes towards the study of minority sexualities (and gender) in universities. This attitude accuses queer theory as well as lesbian and gay studies of being *communautariste* [communitarian] (that is, of putting individual concerns before that of the ‘general’ community), minoritarian and even of creating academic ‘ghettos’. Queer, transgender and feminist studies are perceived as ‘mauvais sujets minoritaires’ [‘bad’ minoritarian subjects], as ‘zones de savoirs interdites en France’ [zones of knowledge forbidden in France] (Bourcier, 2009: 10).

Régis Revenin (2012: 170) and Camille Robcis (2015: 452) both note in particular the comments of Frédéric Martel, the author of *Le Rose et le noir* [The pink and the black] (1996), a history of homosexuality in France after 1968. In an article for *Le Monde* in 1997, Martel expressed concern that LGBT

studies posed a danger to the university by subordinating it to the logic of the ‘ghetto’. Rather than benefitting the university, some evidently see queer studies as a threat to it. This way of thinking espoused by Martel goes some way to explaining why *le Zoo* considered themselves outside the university, rendering it a space which pushes out thinking emerging from positions of difference in favour of universalism.

French politics, gay marriage and ‘la théorie du genre’

The rhetoric of Republican universalism is powerful, with far-reaching material consequences. Republican logic mobilised against the public display of religion, which effectively targets Muslim women almost exclusively,^{ix} is the same logic that regarded HIV as a ‘private matter’ and delayed the government at the time from providing funding for research and targeted information campaigns directed at specific demographics (i.e. gay men).^x

Robcis understands French Republicanism as intertwined with the concept of the heterosexual family as a stable political unit allied to the state. She thus explains the fierce resistance in France to laws pertaining to reproductive rights, IVF, surrogacy and adoption outside of the (married) heterosexual unit (2004). Republican language was widely adopted by both sides of the same-sex marriage debate in France:

choosing the name “*Démonstration for All*” – was a direct response to the embrace of republican universalism on the part of the promoters of the law. This was evident in the branding of the bill: a “marriage for all,” as opposed to a “gay marriage.” (Robcis, 2015: 452)

Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric was combined with nationalism, racism and the quintessentially French logic of the *République* in the coalition of voices under *La Manif Pour Tous* [Demonstration for All] and in the more militant *Printemps Français* [French Spring]. This former group united Catholic organisations, far-right groups and politicians of the Left who viewed gay marriage as contradicting the values of the Republic and therefore as anti-French.^{xi} The debate often focused on what was seen as the imperialist imposition of identitarian, individualist and neo-liberal American values and began to include, often bizarrely, popular opposition to a reductive misapprehension of queer theory and ‘la théorie du genre’.

Placards and posters in the anti-gay marriage protests read ‘Non à la théorie du genre’ [No to gender theory] (Robcis, 2015: 896); ‘NON au GENDER! NON à l’enfant COBAYE’ [NO to GENDER! Children aren’t experiments] (897); ‘Pas touche à nos stereotypes de genre!’ [Hands off our gender stereotypes!] (898); and ‘Théorie du genre à l’école STOP’ [STOP gender theory in our schools] featuring a giant snail (an infamously hermaphroditic creature) about to trample a child. The Catholic Church mobilized the idea of gender theory as a threat, which alongside gay marriage would promote ‘reproductive technologies, surrogacy, transsexuality and masturbation, [...] ultimately lead[ing] to the destruction of man and society’ (448). While these might seem to be examples of particularly extreme responses, similar arguments were repeated by medical professionals, mainstream politicians and academics in France.

Rhetoric around ‘gender theory’ was often nationalist and racist. One

political video described the “theory of gender” as an “ethnic theory seeking to legitimate homosexuality” and “the fruit of Jewish-American lesbians”, while UMP politician and psychiatrist Nicolas Dhuicq compared gay parenting to terrorism (457, 450).^{xii} Ironically, given Butler’s investment in French thinkers from Foucault to Lacan, campaign groups such as the ‘Observatoire de la Théorie du Genre’ [Observatory of Gender Theory] understand gender theory in specifically imperialist terms, as an invasion of France: ‘Longtemps cantonnée de l’autre côté de l’Atlantique, la théorie du genre a débarqué en France au début des années 2000’ [Long confined to the other side of the Atlantic, gender theory disembarked in France at the beginning of the 2000s] (Observatoire de la Théorie du Genre).^{xiii} Even in universities ‘la théorie du genre’ is considered to be ‘un truc anglo-saxon ([...] un effet de l’impérialisme américain ou pire encore une inutile traduction)’ [something Anglo-Saxon ([...] an effect of US Imperialism, or even worse, a useless translation)], the fault of ‘le grand Satan butlérien’ [‘the great Butlerian Satan’] (Bourcier, 2004). The notion of gay marriage – as well as what was perceived to be the associated demands of queer and gender theory – as un-French (as American, specifically) repeats the widespread and institutional view of AIDS ‘in the period 1980–1984 [...] as a quintessentially American concern’, again contributing to the French government’s disastrously slow response to the crisis (Agar, 2011: 64).^{xiv}

While it must be conceded that French demonstrations are generally larger and more colourful than British protests, the turnout to protests against the French law for same-sex marriage by French expatriates in London was significantly larger than any UK protest against the law proposing equal

marriage in Wales and England in 2013.^{xv} France is often considered a much more liberal society than the US or the UK in its attitudes to sexuality, and even gender (consider the figure of the androgynous *garçonne* popularised by Jean Seberg and French New Wave cinema, or Yves Saint Laurent's pioneering *le smoking* suit for women), but in reality this is often far from the case. Historically, laws against homosexuality were increasingly harsh in France in the period from the end of the second World War to 1968. Julian Jackson's *Living in Arcadia* (2009) describes a tightening of laws against homosexuality in this period, contradicting the common assumption that legal restrictions against homosexuality were simply a hangover of the Vichy regime (and therefore another foreign imposition). Such laws included the 1949 Prefectural ordinance making it illegal for two men to dance together in the city of Paris until the late 1960s (48). Obscenity laws were actively enforced later than is commonly thought in France, with the notable and high-profile prosecution of Sartre in 1971 (after he lent his name to a publication by Guy Hocquenghem and the *Front Homosexuel D'Action Révolutionnaire* [Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front] (FHAR) in the Maoist magazine *TOUT!*) as well as Félix Guattari in 1973 (as the editor of the journal *Recherches*, convicted of outraging public decency after his publication of the special issue, 'Trois milliards de pervers' ['Three Billion Perverts'],^{xvi} again containing texts by the FHAR).

Until 1987 advertising condoms in France was illegal (Agar, 2011: 67). As of January 2019, IVF remains illegal for homosexual couples – a bioethics law from 1994 restricts *la procréation médicalement assistée* (PMA) to married, heterosexual couples with proven fertility problems. And until

October 2016, when the *Assemblée Générale* adopted new legislation, transgender people seeking to legally change their gender in France were expected to present documentation to a court proving medical sterilisation. These laws indicate the power relations between the state (through legal discourse, the political establishment and medical institutions) and particular, marginalised bodies. Requiring transgender individuals to undergo sterilization demonstrates a logic of amputation in order to protect the body politic: the particular, trans body must not reproduce, thereby contaminating the universal. French universalist ‘blindness’ towards minority sexualities was again emphasised after the mass shooting at a gay club in Florida in June 2016, with not one single national newspaper headline the following day mentioning the fact that the club was gay.^{xvii} These realities facing LGBT individuals in France and the violent response to gay marriage give some idea as to the political climate from which queer theory in France has emerged.

French Theory, praxis and the particular: a ‘queer made in France’

There is a strong tradition in France of theoretical writing bound up with politics and activism, from Sartre’s ‘committed’ writing, to that emerging from May ’68 and the feminist and gay activists of the time. Members of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* [Women’s Liberation Movement] included Antoinette Fouque of ‘Psych et Po’, as well as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig; the latter two founding the journal *Questions Féministes* in 1977.^{xviii} Thinking on sexuality in France is also indebted to social movements that mixed activism and reflective writing, including the review *Arcadie* headed by André Baudry^{xix} and the FHAR, whose more vocal members

included Guy Hocquenghem, Daniel Guérin and Françoise d'Eaubonne. FHAR activists were also prolific authors, Hocquenghem theorizing sexuality in *Le Désir homosexuel* [Homosexual Desire] (1972) and d'Eaubonne developing the beginnings of ecofeminism in *Le féminisme ou la mort* [Feminism or Death] (1974). Guérin published *L'Anarchisme: de la doctrine à l'action* [Anarchism: from doctrine to action] (1965) and *Homosexualité et révolution* [Homosexuality and Revolution] (1983). The group 'Gouines Rouges' [Red Dykes], of which Monique Wittig was a founder, emerged in 1971, partly as a result of the increasingly male-dominated meetings and publications of the FHAR.

Quite opposed to the notion of queer theory's translation into the French context as an imperialist imposition, or the import of already-formed ideas, French queer theory is the product of this specific political-theoretical heritage. Rather than a textbook 'Queer 101' for obedient French pupils, *Q comme Queer* offered a chance to consider how queer theory might emerge in this new national context: 'ce que ce pourrait être en France...' [what it could be in France] (11). The activists of *le Zoo* sought to 'redéfinir en permanence ce que queer peut vouloir dire...' [permanently redefine what queer could mean] (7). Insisting that a 'queer made in France' (56) will be a quite different prospect from US queer thought, *le Zoo* sought to return to the roots of queer theory, asking 'Qu'est-ce qu'on jette? Qu'est-ce qu'on garde? Qu'est-ce qui nous sert?' ['What do we discard? What do we keep? What will serve our purposes?'] (58). A decade later, Maxime Cervulle's and Marco Dell'Omodarme's 'Épistémologies-caméléon' [Chameleon Epistemologies] (2008) also took up the issue of what queer could mean in France, addressing

the French political context and universalism in particular. Rather than an example of intellectual colonisation, queer thought in France is a specific, *particular* incarnation produced *within* and *as a result of* the political and theoretical context outlined above. It is not a ‘subset’ of a global, universal queer theory, but – in its specificity – offers new perspectives and new possibilities for queer thinking more widely.

Writing for *Le Zoo*, Catherine Deschamps maintained that queer thought should not be understood as static but rather as a strategy of resistance; as a result, queer thinking should cultivate different points of resistance in France than it would in the US (Bourcier, 1998: 58). In France, *le Zoo* points to anti-Arab racism in the context of France’s recent colonial history, popular support of an electorally successful far-right in the *Front National*, as well as resistance to a sanctified universalism and its refusal to recognise the particular – whether in relation to race, gender or sexuality. Given the Republican demand for minorities to remain invisible, the anti-identitarian injunction of queer theory holds a different political significance in France (Bourcier, 2008: 109). As such, many queer activists in France use the in-your-face collocation of identity terms *transpédégouine* [transfaggotdyke].

This attention to the specific material conditions within France exposes an unacknowledged universalism in Anglophone queer theory. Following Wittig’s critique of universalism, Bourcier and Preciado both emphasise the consideration of the particular.^{xx} Referencing Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, Bourcier appeals to ‘savoirs situés’ [situated knowledge], underlining the specific rather than neutral position of the researcher (Haraway, 2009: 14). He is concerned with his own ‘position dans une situation

d' énonciation spécifique' [position as a specific site of enunciation] (2001: 65). As for *le Zoo*, the particular position is often expressed or explored through 'l'autoreprésentation' [self-representation] (1998: 12): 'le queer c'est alors la pratique d'identités différentes, un processus autobiographique' [queer is thus the practice of different identities, an autobiographical process] (98).

While Bourcier incorporates this principle into his methodology as a sociologist, refusing to occupy the position of neutral observer, Preciado interrogates his own embodied and particular position in his philosophical work. Turning to Preciado, Wittig and ORLAN, I ask how these authors and artists consider their own situated and particular bodies, as well as how they explore the layers of metaphor surrounding the body when negotiating its representation.

Material Bodies and *Queer Permeability*

Through the term 'material' body, I aim to consider bodies in all their physicality: their flesh, their cells and skin, their potential to feel pain, pleasure or to suffer violence. I understand bodies as emerging in relation to state and discursive power, the movements of capital, as well as viral epidemics, cultural productions and relations to others (as examples). In this sense, I draw on both the historical materialist *and* new materialist traditions, without remaining entirely faithful to either. None of this should suggest that I attempt to consider a 'brute' material body that is separate from discourse or language. The body is composed of layers of metaphor, as well as cells, skin and flesh – separating these out would be impossible.

With regards to HIV/AIDS, work by Douglas Crimp, Susan Sontag, Simon Watney and Leo Bersani elucidated the metaphors, discourses and ideologies surrounding the illness. Sontag's attempts, however, to 'abstain from or try to retire' metaphors surrounding the body – a desire to strip the body of metaphor – contradict her much more persuasive assertion on the very same page that 'one cannot think without metaphors' (2002: 91), and later that 'metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belaboured, used up' (179). Metaphor and discourse surrounding and producing bodies cannot be bypassed, but should be revealed and confronted. Along similar lines, Crimp insisted that 'AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it' (1988: 3). And for Watney, 'AIDS is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge about the human body' (1987a: 9). In this book, I turn to authors and artists who confront, reveal and respond to the metaphors and discursive processes that shape material bodies, and who speak – from a queer perspective – to this 'crisis of representation'; a crisis of how we understand the human body.

Queer Permeability seeks to take account of a reflexivity, a symbiosis between material body and language overlooked in much contemporary theory influenced by poststructuralism. It takes inspiration from new materialist scholarship seeking to affirm the complex, entangled relationship between material and cultural phenomenon. In an article analysing the event, context and ongoing effects of Hurricane Katrina, feminist new materialist Nancy Tuana writes that 'in witnessing Katrina, the urgency of embracing an ontology

that rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural is rendered apparent' (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008: 188). As was evident in the AIDS crisis, Tuana emphasises that Katrina was not simply a natural disaster, but that human decision-making and cultural-economic phenomena were also key to shaping the catastrophe, from the warming of seawater in the Gulf of Mexico to forestation policy, and the construction and maintenance of levees.

Tuana uses metaphors of porousness and viscosity to emphasise indeterminacy and slippage between what we consider 'natural' and 'cultural' phenomena: 'Viscosity is neither fluid nor solid, but intermediate between them. Attention to the porosity of interactions helps to undermine the notion that distinctions [...] signify a natural or unchanging boundary' (193-4). Where Tuana's model emphasises indeterminacy and porous borders, my work builds upon Preciado's imagery of the absorption of testosterone gel into his skin to elucidate the notion of permeability, a transitive model signifying an overlapping of language, culture and materiality. Permeability does not simply allow for one ontologically distinct substance to pass through another leaving both intact, but rather refuses this ontological separation. It suggests absorption, secretion and a lively, interaction between language and matter that cannot be pulled apart but remains inseparable.

Bringing the work of Preciado, Wittig and ORLAN together allows for the consideration of a number of different approaches to the material body: from philosophical writing to prose poetry, visual image to performance. ORLAN's investment in utilising her own material body as well as her engagement with poststructuralism further sheds light on many of the questions raised by my discussion of Preciado and Wittig: in particular, the addition of

performance studies offers insight into Preciado's use of his material body in his text as a kind of performance-within-writing.

This book is committed to both the anti-identitarian impulse that inaugurated queer politics *and* the deep suspicion of universalism permeating French queer works. I explore work from a variety of situated positions (rather than 'identities'), seeking to consider multiple differences and particularities. In contrast to universalising theoretical claims, this work is committed to particularity, seeking to situate the authors and artists it treats within a global framework. By examining them within the particular conditions that have led to the emergence of queer theory in France, I hope to elucidate the ways in which theory, literature and art emerge inextricable from the specific political and cultural climate that engenders them. Through the concept of queer permeability, I therefore make a claim for the *transitivity* of theoretical writing, emerging inseparable from particular political movements and conditions, and able to act *materially* on bodies.

Chapter 1 returns to Descartes's work to consider the conditions under which he is able to separate rational thought from material body. How has philosophy imposed limits upon our understanding of bodies? Moving to Jean-Luc Nancy's engagement with this Cartesian separation of mind and body in *Ego Sum* (1979), as well as the more recent *l'Intrus* [The Intruder] (2000), I compare Nancy's approach to a recent pre-cursor of Descartes in the bodily philosophy of Montaigne. While Montaigne similarly involves his body in his philosophical thought, Nancy attempts to go further in his concept of writing as *exscription*, writing that is able to gesture towards the material body. Despite

this, discourse and matter remain ontologically separate, as I explore through Nancy's concept of touch/separation with bodies as constituting the very limits between discourse and matter. It is this separation – from Descartes to Nancy and Butler – that subsequent authors and artists examined in the book react against.

Chapter 2 considers Preciado's insistence on a relational model of permeability between language and the material body. This model takes queer theory's political and, vitally, bodily concerns into account. Preciado's method of self-experimentation with topical testosterone gel in *Testo Junkie* builds upon a Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics to consider the regulatory power of the pharmaceutical industry on sex and gender. The absorption of testosterone gel through Preciado's skin exemplifies the notion of permeability, signifying a symbiosis between texts and bodies informed by Donna Haraway's work on prosthetics. According to this understanding, the body's borders are lively and mutable, shifting to encompass texts and discourse. While Preciado offers textual incitements to perform bodily acts in his *Manifiesto contra-sexuel* [Countersexual Manifesto], by taking testosterone he also brings a material intervention to language by incorporating it as part of his writing practice. Through this 'self-experimentation', Preciado attempts to break down the Cartesian tradition of philosophical writing by producing an 'autotheory' questioning the generic conventions and boundaries of theoretical writing.

Given the concerns over queer thought's ability to account for the material body, Chapter 3 looks back to the remarkable emphasis on material

corporeality in the work of Monique Wittig, the French feminist activist and writer of *The Straight Mind* (1991), foundational to Butler's origination of queer theory. The resurgence of interest in Wittig's work in queer circles in France is part of the desire to revisit queer theory's roots, from Bourcier, Preciado and Cervulle, to Yannick Chevalier's and Benoît Auclerc's *Lire Monique Wittig Aujourd'hui* [Reading Monique Wittig Today] (2010). Butler's influential reading of Wittig rests, I argue, on a fundamental misapprehension of her 'textual materialism'. Wittig emphasises the materiality of language itself on a monist account allowing discourse and matter to interact directly. This model allows Wittig to use writing itself as a political weapon. For Wittig, experimentation with literary form and creative metaphor can constitute a violent, material intervention, producing shocks and clearing ground for new possibilities. I consider how Wittig explores the materiality of language in *Virgile, Non* (1985), the progression of metaphors around the sexed body in *Les Guérillères* (1969) and, finally, the fantasy of reaching and resignifying a material, cellular corporeal depth through literature in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973).

Chapter 4 turns to the work of the French performance artist ORLAN.

Preciado's project of administering testosterone recalls elements of visual and performance art; I explore points of comparison between ORLAN's work and Preciado's. Through ORLAN's 'Art Charnel', I consider the specificity of performance as a potentially anti-universalist medium able to reconcile notions of authorial subject and bodily object. ORLAN's work interacts with various theoretical concepts through her body. Her series of nine filmed surgery-performances for *La Réincarnation de sainte Orlan* (1990) and the sculpture

and photographic work produced alongside it explore the construction of sexed and gendered bodies. This work has led ORLAN to describe herself as ‘une transsexuelle femme à femme’ and epitomises what Jay Prosser sees as poststructuralism (and queer theory)'s elision of the body, describing ORLAN's work as the ‘insane personification of the poststructuralist insistence on the absolute constructedness of the body’ (1998: 62). In this chapter, I approach ORLAN's work through her repeated motif of the head, exploring firstly her anti-Cartesianism in the performance of *Woman with Head* at London's ICA in 1996 and secondly the account of material sex offered by *La tête de Méduse* [Medusa's Head] (1978). Finally, I consider the confrontation with the Lacanian Real symbolised by the repeated trope of the Death's Head in *Réincarnation* as well as video works from *Bien que... Oui mais* [Although... Yes, but...] (2003) to *Bump Load and Memento Mori* (2013).

This book asks substantial questions of the queer ‘project’: what does it mean outside of the national, cultural and linguistic context from which it emerged? How might we reconcile queer theory's materialist, political concerns with its roots in poststructuralism and linguistic theory? Confronting the tensions between constructivist and essentialist accounts of sexed bodies, each of the authors and artists I discuss explore how we can begin to form a non-essentialising, materialist account of the body vital to queer, feminist and transgender studies. Through their work, I consider the possibilities of addressing corporeality through theory, literary writing and performance and ask what can be learnt from work that pushes linguistic engagements with bodily matter and bodily responses to texts.

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ⁱ See, for example, Bersani’s ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ (1987).

ⁱⁱ Guibert was a well-known and prolific author and photographer, as well as a close friend of Michel Foucault. He died in 1991 after recording his increasingly painful battle with AIDS.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Screened after Guibert's death on French television channel TF1.
- ^{iv} Bersani notes in particular Butler's claim that what lesbians have in common is not a shared sexual identity or even a sexual practice but a common knowledge of homophobia (56).
- ^v There is something of a tradition of using of non-academic language in French theoretical work on sexuality, displayed in work from Deleuze and Guattari to Bataille or Guy Hocquenghem.
- ^{vi} See Perreau (2016: 89) for his take on this conflict.
- ^{vii} French Higher Education is comprised of public universities and selective institutions known as *grandes écoles*, whose students often feed into politics, the civil service and the education system.
- ^{viii} For Oliver Davis, 'Republican universalism [refuses], as a matter of principle, to recognize the collective existence and identity of minority communities in their particularity' (2015: 149). Agar describes Republican universalism as a 'tradition [...] which sees all as equal partners in the republic but which likewise tends not to recognize specific expressions of group difference such that universal inclusivity tends to exclude marginalized groups such as gays [...] France has difficulty in recognizing and sanctioning communities brought together through shared engagement in identity politics, a situation clearly evident in recent debates over the wearing of the veil' (2011: 64).
- ^{ix} Since 2004, pupils in French schools have been banned from 'ostentatious' displays of religion. This universal language masks the fact that in practice, the law has a particular target: Muslim girls who wear the veil. Equally the 2010

ban on ‘face coverings’ has almost exclusively affected Muslim women who wear the niqab.

^x See Boulé (2002: 11) for an overview.

^{xi} Resistance to gender theory in Europe is not limited to France, with the Vatican funding campaigns across the continent. Eva von Redecker describes a similar coalition of the Catholic church and the far-right nationalist group Pegida in Germany (2016), while Slavoj Žižek references opposition to gender theory in Slovenia, apparently there understood as a communist conspiracy to undermine societal values (2016). However, the particularities of French *Republican* opposition to gay marriage, which has garnered support from across the political spectrum, render the situation in France unique.

^{xii} The UMP (L’Union pour un mouvement populaire) was an ostensibly centre-right party, that of former Presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy. It was renamed *Les Républicains* in 2015.

^{xiii} This language echoes the Vatican’s idea of gay marriage as ideological colonisation as well as the association of effeminate gay men with treachery and cowardice in 1930s France (see Perreau 22; 58).

^{xiv} France had rates of HIV three times as high as those in the UK (Boulé, 2002: 11), and was ‘notoriously slow in developing a public debate about HIV/AIDS, and [...] equally slow in developing integrated and coherent government policies and infrastructures to deal with the emerging epidemic’ (Agar, 2011: 64).

^{xv} The London protest against the French law organised by ‘La Manif pour Tous’ was attended by around 2000 people, the largest against the UK law was a reported 300 people at David Cameron’s constituency office in Witney (see

Philby, 2013). Admittedly, the ‘Coalition for Marriage’ (the main group opposing the law in the UK) appears to have focused more on lobbying and a petition, although this petition received less than 700,000 signatories – by some estimates around the same figure that turned out against gay marriage in Paris alone in May 2013. The focus on lobbying nevertheless shows a decidedly less militant and less violent response to same-sex marriage laws in the UK than in France.

^{xvi} See Nadaud on Guattari (2012: 298), and a discussion of the special issue and its place in contemporary activist memory.

^{xvii} See Nicolas Martin, ‘Tuerie d'Orlando: géométries variables’ (2016).

^{xviii} However, after a major split with Delphy over the specificities of lesbian sexuality in feminist thinking and politics, Wittig moved to the US and began to write in English, with her seminal work of collected essays *The Straight Mind* (1991) appearing in English. This represents for Bourcier the influence of ‘heterofeminists’ in France, who see discussion of gender as indulgent, a distraction from ‘real’ issues of sexed oppression. Bourcier writes that the silencing of questions of minority genders and sexuality from feminist debates is a problem that still persists (2005: 189). Indeed, Delphy, who remains one of the most influential feminist academics in France, was a signatory to the statement released in 2013 and signed by a number of radical feminists mainly in France and the US: ‘Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of “Gender”’. This statement misgenders trans women by referring to them as men throughout and supports their exclusion from women-only spaces, understanding ‘gender theory’ as a fashionable, postmodern distraction from a singular understanding of women’s oppression along biologically essentialist

and binary lines ('biological women are oppressed and exploited as a class by men and by capitalists due to their reproductive capacity').

^{xix} See Jackson's *Living in Arcadia* for a history of *Arcadie*.

^{xx} The 'particular' will be explored throughout this work, drawing on Wittig's notion of the particular as opposed to the universal. Wittig is an important figure for both Bourcier (who translated in part Wittig's collected essays, *La Pensée straight* [The Straight Mind] (2001)) and Preciado (who dedicated his *Manifeste contra-sexuelle* [Countersexual Manifesto] (2000) to her). Cervulle and Dell'Omodarme also note the influence of Wittig (2008: 41), and Cervulle maintains attention to materialist concerns through his translations and work on cultural studies and cultural materialism, particularly the work of the Birmingham School and Stuart Hall.

1 Bodies beyond Language or Reason: The legacy of Descartes's Dualism in Poststructuralist accounts of the body

Abstract

This chapter considers the emergence of queer theory in France, through the activist group *le Zoo*, and work by Sam Bourcier and Paul B Preciado. These authors responded to Anglophone queer thought years after it had gained momentum in the US, and with the benefit of having the critiques of early queer thought available to them, in particular, those of transgender theorists Jay Prosser and Vivian K Namaste. Both Prosser and Namaste argued that queer thought – due to its poststructuralist, Lacanian roots – cannot take into account the materiality of the body. In response, embracing the material body becomes central to both Bourcier's and Preciado's queer works. This chapter interrogates the poststructuralist position of the material body as 'beyond the reach' of language, or as *impermeable* to language, drawing links between this and the Cartesian dualist position which also leaves the body beyond the reach of rationalist philosophy. The chapter outlines varying approaches to the body in the French context, not only from Descartes, but also the pre-Cartesian bodily philosophy of Montaigne, and the anti-Cartesian projects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Jean-Luc Nancy's work. It considers Nancy's work, however, as paradigmatic of the poststructuralist position separating language entirely from (bodily) matter, and uses his work in *Corpus* (2000) and *L'Intrus* (2000) as a test case for assessing the concerns over poststructuralism's ability to account for the body expressed by Prosser and Namaste.

Is there something about the way we *do* philosophy that makes us forget our bodies? How might a departure from this philosophical mode affect attempts to reach the body? This chapter turns to a decisive moment in the body's figuration within the Western philosophical canon, one that still has implications for theory today – that of Descartes's famous *cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I exist. Preparing the theoretical ground for the discussion of Preciado's anti-Cartesian intervention in philosophy in my second chapter; Wittig's critique of the separation of matter from writing and, finally, the interrogation of embodied subjectivity in ORLAN, I turn here to a

consideration of Descartes's view of bodies, and to the place of his own body in particular within his philosophy: how is he able to distance himself from his body? I examine Descartes's account alongside that of Montaigne's, with these two writer's contrasting views on the body and its place in philosophy representing a premodern manifestation of the same tensions regarding the body evident in theoretical work today.

This chapter considers the Cartesian influence in Anglophone queer and constructivist thought via its roots in 20th-century French poststructuralism. I assess Judith Butler's concerns over the lingering legacy of Cartesian dualism in contemporary poststructuralist and constructivist (including queer) theory, drawing a comparison between the elision of the body through Cartesian dualism and the side-lining of the body through what she terms a 'linguistic monism' in constructivist thought. Then, of the 20th-century French reactions against Cartesianism, I consider Jean-Luc Nancy's in-depth engagement with Cartesian accounts of the body. Nancy offers a typically poststructuralist account of the interaction between the material body and writing, and his approach will be considered a 'test case' in assessing the criticisms of poststructuralism's treatment of the body.

Descartes's disembodied philosophy

Descartes's announcement of the *cogito* – his claim that he exists because he is a thinking being – together with his substance dualism separating mind from body is seen as the key moment in Western thought at which the body is disavowed; divorced from human identity and subjectivity in favour of the mind. The reception of Descartes's ideas and the legacy of his thought have

been understood as a major rift in how we have viewed our bodies and minds, how these interact and what this means for our sense of self. This was nowhere more true than in France, where Cartesian thought ‘became nationalistically enshrined in the French curriculum’ (Collins, 1998: 817).

Explorations of subjectivity in French literature and philosophy often rework the *cogito*: from Camus’s ‘Je révolte donc nous sommes’ [I resist therefore we exist] (1951: 36), to Nancy’s *Ego Sum*, discussed below, to contemporary French queer writer Erik Rémès’s work *Je bande donc je suis* [I get hard therefore I exist] (1999).ⁱ The specific national context of France has affected the legacy of Cartesianism: Martin Jay has identified a difference in the cultural reception of Cartesian ideas in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. In *Downcast Eyes* (1993), he argues that the work of Descartes was key in producing in France a culture of ‘ocularcentrism’; that is, the privileging of vision above other senses. Jay examines recent reactions against this in the critical engagement with vision in 20th-century French work, from Bataille and the Surrealists to Merleau-Ponty, Foucault and Lacan amongst others:

The grip of modern ocularcentrism was perhaps nowhere as evident as in France [...] No better evidence of its power can be offered than the stubborn hold Cartesian philosophy had on its major thinkers for so many years. (69)

Just as this Cartesian heritage has affected the way vision has been approached critically in the French (in distinction to the Anglophone) context, the influence of Cartesian accounts of the body manifests differently in the Francophone

world, with a huge depth of theoretical and paraphilosophical writing challenging the dualist account.

A less critical discussion of Descartes has persisted within Anglophone ‘analytic’ philosophy, which has often elided the nuances of his original texts and ignored his anxious questioning of his conclusions. Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris use the term ‘Cartesian Legend’ to refer to ‘a *fiction*, if more of a superstition than a mistake’ (1996: 2); Lilli Alanen refers to the ‘Myth of the Cartesian Myth’ (1989: 391), and Amélie Oskenberg Rorty writes of the ‘familiar caricature’ that ‘represents Descartes as having the grossly simplified, nearly grotesque features often attributed to Platonists who allegedly locate the source of confusion and error in the body, while treating the pure intellect as rational, truth-bound’ (1992: 371). Yet, she later adds, ‘like all caricatures, this gross distortion of Descartes’ views conveys some features of the original’ (371).

Under which conditions could Descartes have imagined himself without a body? Descartes’s texts were much more nuanced than is often suggested, and he continually reworks and develops his position in ways that can appear contradictory. Upon closer examination of his texts, it is actually much harder for him to distance himself from his body than the ‘Cartesian Myth’ allows. He often ties himself in knots in considering his body and what it means to him. By returning to his original texts, though, it is clear that the seed of later distortions is present.

Descartes’s inability to know bodies with complete certainty, and conversely, his wavering ability (or inability) to doubt them is one of the anxieties driving the *Meditations* [1641]. The difficulty of thinking and writing

about the body is ever-present in Descartes's work. The body, although not completely beyond reach, will always fall short of his very specific conditions for knowledge. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy: in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated*, Descartes wrote:

whatever proof and argument I use, it must always come back to this, that only the things I conceive clearly and distinctly have the power to convince me completely. (147)ⁱⁱ

For Descartes, the body will always fall short of being apprehended in thought; it will never be known 'clearly and distinctly'. Clear and distinct principles include statements such as 'I exist' (the *cogito*), simple mathematical formulae, or truths of logical deduction. What is excluded would be entities such as bodies, the perception of which is supposedly less clear-cut.

Descartes's very philosophy – his rationalist epistemic standards – thus discounts knowledge of bodies, although he does not therefore conclude that bodies do not exist – in fact quite the opposite: 'I thence conjecture that it is probable that bodies exist; but this is only a probability' (152). Descartes's position with regard to bodies is one of rather unsatisfying doubt; while we do not *know* bodies, we also cannot know that they do not exist. His question is not so much how far or in what way bodies can be known, but whether they can be known fully, according to his exacting epistemic standards.

In the opening pages of the Second Meditation, having previously dismissed his body, Descartes asks the rather anxious question ‘myself, then, at least am I not something?’ (103):

I have already denied that I have any senses or any body. I hesitate, however, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and sense that I cannot exist without them? (103)

One aspect of Descartes’s problem is how we can have knowledge regarding the body that he believes can only be perceived as an image, or ‘idea’; how we can know the extended, material body beyond that, since ‘it is possible that all those images, and, in general, all the things one relates to the body, are nothing but dreams and chimera’ (102). As Martin Jay notes, Descartes prioritises a visual (‘ocularcentric’) engagement with the material world, and feels unable to differentiate between dreams and the images we perceive of material things (97). Descartes thus sets his rational thoughts apart from the material world through his epistemological structure: while we know these images must depend on *something* material, these material things are set apart from thoughts in how far we have access to them as ‘clear and distinct.’ Thus, having previously considered his body to be ‘perhaps [...] the whole of me’ (152), it is this inability (at least in this part of the text) to perceive the body in any more ‘depth’ than an image (incidentally, the accusation Prosser levels at Butler and queer theory, to be discussed later) that leads him to dismiss his earlier understanding of himself as primarily a body and to write: ‘But what, then, am I? A thing that thinks’ (106).

In his *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences* [Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences] ([1637] 1943), written in French rather than Latin, Descartes ultimately sought through his rationalist principles to gain control over the unruly body, to 'master nature':

au lieu de cette philosophie spéculative [...], on en peut trouver une pratique, par laquelle, connaissant la force et les actions du feu, de l'eau, de l'air, des astres, des cieux et de tous les autres corps [...] *et ainsi nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature.* (166, my emphasis)

[in place of that speculative philosophy [...], it is possible to find a practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us [...] and thus render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature (74)]ⁱⁱⁱ

Nature is presented here as object to be possessed, a force or tool to be harnessed. Descartes is the investigator, the scientist-subject who will carry out that study. Through his new method of deductive science, he seeks to be the 'master' and 'possessor' of nature – this language most clearly setting up a distinction between himself as subject and nature as his object of study.

Through deductive science, Descartes sought to master the body he variously describes – in contrast to the soul – as deceptive, unclear and impermanent.

In contrast to the *Meditations*, Descartes mentions his body very rarely in the *Discours*. One exception is an extended discussion of his study of the heart through his new deductive method, using rationalist principles to enhance the scientific understanding he would gain through simple empirical observation. Throughout the discussion, this bodily organ is imagined as an object. Descartes's uses the heart of a large animal, which he describes as similar to a human heart. At first, the flow of blood to and from the organ leads Descartes to compare the arteries to branches of a tree: 'la veine cave, qui est le principal réceptacle du sang, et comme le tronc de l'arbre dont toutes les autres veines du corps sont les branches' ['the vena cava, which is the principal receptacle of the blood, and which is like the trunk of a tree of which the other veins of the body are the branches' (67)] (141). This heart – firstly distanced from the human subject by belonging to a non-human animal, is now compared to a non-sentient organism in the branches of a tree. Descartes's second comparison sets the heart further away again from the human subject by comparing it to the machination of a clock:

ce mouvement [...] suit aussi nécessairement de la seule disposition des organes qu'on peut voir à l'oeil dans le coeur [...] que fait celui d'un horloge, de la force, de la situation et de la figure de ses contrepoids et de ses roués. (145-6)

[this movement [...] follows just as necessarily from the mere disposition of the organs that can be seen in the heart by the naked eye [...] as does the movement of a clock from the force, placement, and shape of its counterweights and wheels. (69)]

It is now firmly imagined as an inanimate object, distanced from the sentient, rational and human scientist-subject.

Descartes is then able to consider the whole human body as a superbly crafted machine:

ceux qui, sachant combien de divers *automates*, ou machines mouvantes, l'industrie des hommes peut faire [...] *considèront ce corps comme une machine* (154, my emphasis)

[those who are cognizant of how many different *automata* or moving machines the ingenuity of men can make [...] will regard this body as a *machine* (71)]

He concludes that it is only through reason that we are able to recognise humans as distinct from automata. Irrational beings such as monkeys could be 'recreated' as automata, indistinguishable from the real thing. Thus Descartes's relegation of the body to machinery solidifies the supposedly unique nature of

humans amongst animals in their capacity for rational thought, an anthropocentric assertion of human sovereignty via rationalist principles.

There are important material conditions for the kind of thought Descartes produces. He insists in both the *Discours* and the *Meditations* on solitude for his rationalist philosophical investigation. In the *Discours*, he writes of a desire to ‘m’éloigner de tous les lieux où je pouvais avoir des connaissances, et à me retirer ici [... où] j’ai pu vivre aussi solitaire et retiré que dans les déserts les plus écartés’ [take my leave of all those places where I might have acquaintances, and to retire here [... where] I have been able [...] to live as solitary and as withdrawn a life as I could in the remotest deserts.’ (60)] (110). And in the *Meditations*:

Now therefore, that my mind is free from all cares, and that I have obtained for myself assured leisure in peaceful solitude, I shall apply myself seriously and freely to the general destruction of my former opinions. (95)

Descartes seeks out solitude; it seems to be a necessary condition for the philosophical projects he undertakes. This goes beyond a simple concern for free time and a lack of distractions as the necessary conditions for any writing project. In one his letters to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia,^{iv} Descartes suggests it is necessary to the kind of thinking he is undertaking. While metaphysical meditation can lead us to understand the soul, in contrast:

en usant seulement de la vie et des conversations ordinaires, et en s'abstenant de méditer et d'étudier aux choses qui exercent l'imagination [...] on apprend à concevoir l'union de l'âme et du corps. (1953: 1158)

[in using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things which exercise the imagination [...] we learn to conceive the union of the soul and the body. (Shapiro, 2007: 70)]

In order to appreciate the union between soul and body, Descartes expresses a necessity for relationality and conversation. He emphasises to Elisabeth the need to get away from meditation (by which he means rationalist philosophical thought) and to utilise 'la vie'. All of these conditions – relational interaction, lived experience and a limiting of rationalist contemplation – are apparently necessary for an appreciation of the body and how it relates to what Descartes terms 'soul'. One might then pose the following question: is rational philosophy fundamentally at odds with an understanding of the body? Is even an appreciation (let alone knowledge) of the body possible through this philosophical method?

According to Alanen, the mind-body union has an 'experiential, pre-philosophical character' (1996: 13) and ultimately, the letter to Elisabeth 'can be seen [...] as a recognition of the limits of rational knowledge and explanation and [...] of the importance of daily experience, intercourse and action too often neglected by philosophers' (14). Descartes frames his

argument as though rational thought and engaging in the world are almost like exercising two different faculties, producing knowledge of two different things (mind or body). Privileging one of these methods of investigation (solitary, rational thought) will surely then produce specific conclusions and biases. Ultimately, Descartes's method of philosophical enquiry and the conditions for his investigation produce a kind of interiority that one can only conceive of in solitude.

Where does this leave theory that seeks to involve itself in the world; what are the possibilities for an 'engaged' philosophy? Without wanting to suggest that Anglophone queer theory is entirely removed from either life or ordinary conversations, could a link be made between the increasing institutionalisation of queer theory, its distance from the experiential and activist concerns of groups such as ACT UP, and its neglect of material bodies? If so, could the way in which French queer theory has grown out of activist groups such as *le Zoo* offer a way to refocus upon the materiality of bodies?

The Cartesian legacy in queer thought? Judith Butler and the 'linguistic monism' of French poststructuralism

In current thinking, what is left of Descartes's skepticism surrounding the body? What relevance does it have today for theorists, and queer theorists in particular? Judith Butler's essay 'How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body are Mine?' (1997) borrows its title from a line in Descartes's *Meditations* (96). Butler explores Cartesian philosophy out of a concern that contemporary constructivism leaves the body in much the same position as Cartesian dualism did, even if by different means. The issue for constructivism

lies in the limitations of language in approaching the material body; Butler famously argues that language cannot tame the beast of the body – when one tries to approach the body in language it withdraws, and when one seeks to deny it, it rears back up to confront the reader, undeniable. The problem begins with the claim that what it is possible to know regarding the body can only be known through language; and it is of central importance here that, for Butler, the body can *only* be understood through language.

Butler works within a theoretical context heavily informed by French poststructuralists (Lacan, Derrida, Foucault), one which not only centralises language as key to the formation of subjectivities and structures, but understands language as the symbolic framework through which alone we may access the world. While the body can only be accessed through language, Butler also insists that the body is not reducible to language; it is also comprised of ‘non-linguistic stuff’ (3). These ‘extra linguistic’ elements of the body will of course resist description through or by language (4). In short, ‘the body is only knowable through language’ though it ‘exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture’; it is ‘given and withheld at the same time’ (4). Butler is ultimately concerned with the idea that language fails to fully grasp that which it names. We do not need to deny the material existence of a hand or body to seriously consider the question: how far are we able to approach the material body in language, and how far will it resist description or representation?

In the passage from the *Meditations* Butler references in her paper’s title, Descartes seeks to reassure himself of the existence of his body, noting that only ‘insane persons’ could deny it (96). He asks: ‘how can I deny that

these hands and this body are mine?’ – how could he possibly deny the existence of his body, and the hands that wrote his sentence, putting ink to paper? Yet Butler argues that the doubt regarding his own body Descartes is seeking to dismiss here is in fact performed by the question itself. The ‘strange grammar’ of the question separates the ‘I’ (the grammatical subject) from the hands and body (the grammatical objects) (8). If they ‘belong to’ this ‘I’ they are relegated to mere property of a disembodied ‘I’ rather than being materially constitutive of it. Unsurprisingly adopting a linguistic focus, Butler suggests that even in a question that seeks to show the absurdity of those who doubt the body’s existence, Descartes’s grammar already performs the separation of the body from the self, a separation that will be explored and extended by Descartes later in his work.

Conversely, when Descartes seeks to doubt his body in his writing, it refuses to fade away but is ever present within his language:

when we consider Descartes’ efforts to think the mind apart from the body, we see that he cannot help but use certain bodily figures in describing the mind. The effort to excise the body fails because the body returns, spectrally, as a figural dimension of the text. (14)

The examples she gives are of Descartes’s references to God ‘engraving’ a resolution into his mind, or his own ‘imprinting’ of a physical thought on his mind (14-15). Ultimately, Butler warns of the slipperiness of the physical body, which she argues can never be fully described, present or accounted for within writing. On Butler’s model, bodies always display a kind of linguistic

recalcitrance; jumping out from the page when we try to deny them, or drawing into the shadows when we try to elucidate them.

While the de-centering of a rational, sovereign Cartesian subject has been a key concern for much poststructuralist and queer theorising, does the disavowal of the body persist? Butler notes the lingering suspicion with which the body is treated in constructivist theories, a suspicion resulting from concerns over language's limited abilities to approach the material world. In fact, she claims at the very beginning of her paper that she has been driven to write the piece by criticism of constructivist positions' stance on the question of what can and cannot be known regarding sexual difference.^v The criticism holds that for constructivists, sexual difference is 'culturally variable, or worse, discursively fabricated, as if it is all a matter of language' (2). Butler, in part, mounts a defense against the accusation she feels has been leveled against her (an accusation repeated by Prosser); that of 'having made the body less rather than more relevant' (2). But referring again to her title, she writes: 'these are, of course, Descartes' words, but they could be ours or, indeed, mine, given the dilemmas posed by contemporary constructivism' (2).

A startling and uneasy comparison is therefore made between the body as figured by Descartes's dualism and the body as figured by what Butler terms the 'linguistic monism' of contemporary constructivist positions. In much constructivist thought 'language is said to fabricate or to figure the body, to produce or construct it, to constitute or to make it' (3). This position ultimately elides the materiality of the body. That considerations of the body in contemporary constructivist theory could leave it in much the same place as

Descartes's dualism is alarming for queer theory's political and academic investment in marginalised bodies and bodily acts.

If Cartesian philosophy leaves the body beyond the reach of knowledge as it will always remain unclear and indistinct, for constructivism, the material body is beyond the reach of language. Both positions ultimately leave the body unknowable: is this a symptom of the mode of philosophical writing within which Descartes worked and in which Butler remains? Butler is, of course, a philosopher – a professor of Rhetoric. In fact, the space and weight afforded in both their work to their own bodies, to bodily experience, is remarkably similar. Butler's paper references the ways in which Descartes alludes to his body in the *Meditations* (memorably, sitting beside a fireplace, contemplating his limbs). Yet Butler echoes Descartes's treatment of his body with that of her own within her paper; she recounts an anecdote in which she experiences sleeplessness and unease when watching a documentary containing the accusations levelled against constructivism referenced earlier. This bodily experience is brushed over as a mere introductory remark – her body is merely the *setting* for a philosophy exercised by the mind, in much the same way as Descartes's. While Butler appears to be consciously riffing on Descartes's use of his body as a setting for philosophy, the allusions she makes are telling. Butler does not seek to extricate herself from or surpass the kind of rational discourse Descartes worked within in the way that others, including Jean-Luc Nancy or Preciado have attempted.

Pre- and Anti-Cartesian approaches to the philosopher's body: Jean-Luc Nancy and Michel de Montaigne

If both Descartes and Butler acknowledge their bodies only as the setting for a philosophy of the mind, how does anti-Cartesian work respond to the problem of thinking the body? Principal examples of French thought reacting against the Cartesian view of bodies include Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological engagement with Descartes, the notion of a body-subject formed in opposition to the Cartesian *cogito* expressed in *Phénoménologie de la Perception* [Phenomenology of Perception] (1945);^{vi} as well as Luce Irigaray's *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* [An Ethics of Sexual Difference] (1984), which reacts against the elision of the feminine in Descartes's work in order to elucidate a concept of sexed bodies. The most influential for Preciado's exploration of the body include Deleuze's and Guattari's engagement with the radically connected *body without organs* in *L'anti-Œdipe* [Anti-Oedipus] (1972), which criticises the Cartesian nature of the subject as conceived by psychoanalysis; Foucault's notion of 'L'Homme-machine' [man-as-machine], the body as an object of philosophical and medical knowledge expressed in *Surveiller et Punir* [Discipline and Punish] (1975); and finally Bataille's anti-Cartesian work in the review *Acéphale* (literally meaning 'headless'), which is taken up by Preciado and discussed in the following chapter.

Sara Ahmed's work has taken up the phenomenological emphasis on 'the importance of lived experience [...] and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds' (2006: 2) in the service of queer theory, particularly employing Merleau-Ponty's description of 'moments of disorientation' provoked by bodily experience (4). However, since my concern

is with Anglophone queer theory's French poststructuralist roots, I opt here to consider a typically poststructuralist example of the reaction against the Cartesian view of bodies in French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy's work. Nancy responds directly and extensively to Descartes's conception of bodies and his thinking of what constitutes a subject. While his conception of bodies and embodiment appears almost reactionary in its anti-Cartesianism, I argue that a lingering dualism regarding the interaction between language and the material body remains in his work, and I will use his work to pick apart the concerns over poststructuralist approaches to the body.

Nancy refers to '[le] vilain dualism cartésien, d'origine platonico-chrétien' ['an ugly Cartesian dualism, Platonic and Christian in origin' (2000a 133)] that places body and soul in opposition. Preferring to use the plural *bodies* in an attempt to avoid appealing to idealist and universalist notions of 'The Body', Nancy offers an understanding of bodies as *limits*, as taking place at the very borders between 'le sens' and matter.^{vii} Bodies 'happen', for Nancy, where these two meet, where they press against each other. In *Corpus*, his most extensive work on the nature of bodies and how they interact with meaning, writing and each other, Nancy writes:

Les corps n'ont lieu, ni dans le discours, ni dans la matière. Ils n'habitent ni 'l'esprit', ni 'le corps'. Ils ont lieu à la limite, en tant que la limite – bord externe, fracture et intersection de l'étranger dans le continu du sens, dans le continu de la matière. (2000a: 16)

[Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter. They don't inhabit "mind" or "body." They take place at the limit, *qua limit*: limit-external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter. (2008: 17)]

It is clear that Nancy's conception of bodies owes much to his reading of Descartes, reacting against it by uniting what Cartesian substance dualism renders as distinct.

Nancy returns to Descartes's work to expose the contradictions of dismissing one's own body, and his method is often to twist Cartesian philosophy, to focus on its inconsistencies or even to ventriloquise Descartes himself either to emphasise the ambiguity already present in Descartes's work itself or to openly contradict Cartesian principles. While in the final essay of *Ego Sum*, 'Unum Quid', Nancy gives a clear summary of the complexities with which Descartes firstly dismisses his body and then insists on a union between body and soul, Nancy manages to find a way to locate his own view of the body as already present within Descartes's works. For instance, he refers to Descartes's letter to Elisabeth to conclude that 'Le sujet n'est rien que l'expérience de l'*unum quid*' [the subject is nothing other than the experience of *unum quid*] (159) – *unum quid*, meaning something that is one, a unification rather than separation, and referring here to the union of body and mind.

In a particularly odd essay from *Ego Sum*, 'Dum Scribo', Nancy even goes as far as to ventriloquise Descartes, writing in his voice, and announcing that '*Nulle pensée n'est plus matérielle que la mienne*' (47) [*No thought is more material than my own*'], fantasizing about the potential for his (this

imagined Descartes's) own writing, his philosophy, to be inextricable from his body:

je fantasme tout mon corps comme une plume: mon corps – par moi-même manié, entre mes doigts, corps dactylographique – se meut du mouvement des caractères. (53)

[I fantasise of my body as a quill: my body – manipulated by myself, between my fingers, a typed-out body – moves itself with each letter]

This ventriloquised Descartes begins to espouse the kind of writing on the body Nancy produced in *Corpus*, openly contradicting Descartes's own work. Nancy engages with Descartes's writing on the body sometimes to expose the complexities of his position, sometimes to pounce on and embrace its contradictions and at other times simply to contradict his arguments. His reading of Descartes is persistently perverse, but is of course rendered possible by the tensions and ambiguities that are already present within the works he discusses.

Nancy pinpoints Descartes's *cogito* claim as the Heideggerian *subjectum*, the very foundation of subjectivity (1979: 27-8). His work in *Ego Sum* is dedicated to a typically poststructuralist attack on the certainty Descartes sought in his *cogito*, by exposing it as an empty mask with nothing (or nobody) behind it. Nancy's work often relies on metaphor and imagery to gesture towards particularly weighty terms – Ian James thus refers to Nancy's work as a 'figural praxis' (2006: 64). In *Ego Sum*, Nancy employs such

imagery to force the Cartesian cogito back to the level of the body. He imagines the ‘empty mask’ firstly as an eye, the pupil of which symbolizes emptiness beyond its surface (83, 90). Later, he imagines this cogito as a mouth, its lips forming a circle to pronounce ‘je’, again producing the black space beyond, exposing the emptiness of Descartes’s supposedly solid ground:

Imagine une bouche sans visage (c’est à dire à nouveau la structure du *masque*: l’ouverture des trous, et la bouche qui s’ouvre au milieu de l’oeil; le lieu de la vision, de la théorie, traversé, ouvert et clos simultanément diaphragmé d’une profération) – une bouche sans visage, donc, faisant l’anneau de sa contracture autour de bruit: *je*. (1979: 157).

[Imagine a mouth without a face (a new structure of a *mask*: an opening of holes, a mouth which opens in the middle of the eye; location of vision, of theory, penetrated, at once both open and closed, shuttered with a proclamation) – a mouth without a face, making a ring as it contracts around the sound: *I*.]

The cogito is brought back to the level of the body, a fractured body-part of a mouth ‘sans visage’. The subject is firstly described by Nancy as ‘un murmure’ (1979: 25) [a murmur], and later as a bodily convulsion: ‘Dans la fermeture brutale du diaphragme de sa certitude, le Sujet se convulse’ (1979: 152) [In the brutal closing of the aperture of its certainty, the Subject convulses].

Nancy not only brings corporeality to his readings of Cartesian philosophy, but also draws on bodily experience to inform his philosophy in a radically different way to either Butler or Descartes. In the short piece *L'Intrus*, Nancy wrote a philosophical account of his heart transplant and surrounding health problems and explicitly references Descartes:

Depuis l'époque de Descartes, au moins, l'humanité moderne a fait du vœu de survie et d'immortalité un élément dans un programme général de 'maîtrise et possession de la nature' (2000b: 24)

[‘Since the time of Descartes, at least, modern humanity has transformed the longing for survival and immortality into an element in a general program of "mastering and possessing nature."’ (2008: 165)]

To recall, ‘maîtres et possesseurs de la nature’ appears in the *Discours* just a couple of pages after Descartes’s own discussion of the heart as scientific object of study. Nancy, however, gives a strikingly different account of the act of removing a heart from a body.

Nancy uses his experience to consider the philosophical implications of subjectivity and relationality in the context of an invasive medical procedure. He uses his body as a *platform* for philosophy, working with and including bodily affect as the fundamental basis for exploring ideas, rather than treating the body as merely an incidental *setting* from which a philosophy of the mind is produced:

qu'est-ce que cela peut être, de remplacer un cœur? La chose excède mes possibilités de représentation. (L'ouverture de tout thorax, le maintien en état du griffon, la circulation extra-corporelle du sang, la suture des vaisseaux... (2000b: 25)

[‘What does it mean to replace a heart? Representing the thing is beyond me. (Opening up the entire thorax, taking care of the graft-organ, circulating the blood outside the body, suturing the vessels . . . ? (2008: 165)]

Like Descartes, Nancy acknowledges the limits of representing his bodily experience in language, resorting to simply listing the procedures relating to the operation. He does not excise these experiences from his philosophy, but rather embraces them, using them as the trigger for questioning of his sense of self:

la transplantation impose l'image d'un passage par le néant, d'une sortie dans un espace vide de toute propriété ou de toute intimité, ou bien au contraire de *l'intrusion en moi de cet espace*: tuyaux, pinces, sutures et sondes). (2000b: 26, my emphasis)

[‘transplanting imposes an image of passing through nothingness, a flight into space emptied of any propriety or intimacy, or else, conversely, *an image of that space intruding upon the inside of me*: feeds, clamps, sutures, and tubes.’ (2008: 166)]

In Descartes's discussion, the heart becomes removed from the human subject to become a distinct object, first likened to a tree, and then a machine. In contrast, Nancy does not flinch from discussing his own body in his text, considering his body as inextricably himself ('l'intrusion en moi') rather than distancing the heart from the human body. Indeed, the separation of the Cartesian 'I' from Descartes's body pointed out by Butler in the line 'How Can I Deny that These Hands and This Body are Mine?' is strikingly different to Nancy's treatment here of his body as simply 'moi'. In considering his subsequent treatment with immuno-suppressant drugs to prevent his body rejecting this new heart, Nancy writes of the consequence of their painful side effects on his sense of self:

Qui fatiguent, qui abîment l'estomac, ou bien la douleur hurlante du zona... À travers tout ça, quel 'moi' poursuit quelle trajectoire? (2000b: 34)

['They fatigue, they ruin the stomach, or there's the howling pain of shingles ... Through it all, what "me" is pursuing what trajectory?' (2008: 167)]

Nancy again asks the same question as Descartes, although he is provoked here by his body's undeniable, overwhelming presence rather than by seeking to doubt it as Descartes did. Where Descartes asked 'What, then, am I?' (1985:

106), Nancy concludes he is a strange 'I', shifting pronouns to use the decidedly unphilosophical 'moi': 'Quel étrange moi!' (2000b: 35) ['What a strange me!' (2008: 167)]. Nancy even goes as far as to play with the cogito in this piece, taking into account his bodily experience to modify it:

Jusqu'ici, il était étranger à force de n'être même pas sensible, même pas présent. Désormais, il défaille, et cette étrangeté me rapporte à moi-même. 'Je' suis, parce que je suis malade (2000b: 17-18, my emphasis)

['Up to this point, it was strange by virtue of not being even perceptible, not even being present. From now on it fails, and this strangeness binds me to myself. "I" am, because I am ill.' (2008: 163)]

Just as Nancy brings the body in to his reading of Descartes, he brings Descartes's work into his philosophical exploration of bodily affect. Yet the heart discussed in Nancy's text is no more 'his' than the heart Descartes discussed in his *Discours*. In fact, Nancy breaks down the very notion of propriety over the body. His heart is an intruder; he questions whether it ever belonged to him. Quite opposed to Descartes's solitary philosophical meditation, Nancy thus uses the experience of his transplant to consider issues of relationality and subjectivity, using it as a metaphor (at least in part) to exemplify his concept of originary otherness, undermining coherent subjectivity: 'Mon cœur devenait mon étranger: justement étranger parce qu'il était dedans' (2000b: 17) ['My heart became my stranger: strange precisely because it was inside' (2008: 163)].

While Nancy's inclusion of his body within the philosophy he writes might seem novel, it shares similarities with the pre-Cartesian philosophy of Michel de Montaigne. A precursor of Descartes, Montaigne (and in particular his scepticism) was influential for Descartes. Yet Montaigne held very different views on the interaction of body and soul, views that significantly affect the space afforded to his own body within his philosophy. Many of Montaigne's thoughts on this matter are laid out in his essay 'De l'Expérience' [On Experience], the last essay of his third and final volume of the *Essais*, which brings together much of his philosophy from previous pieces. For Montaigne, the denial of either body or soul is ungracious and an insult to both nature and God (1979b: 313). Body and soul not only complement each other, but are indivisible from one another:

Artissippus ne defendoit que le corps, comme si nous n'avions pas d'ame; Zenon n'embrassoit que l'ame, comme si nous n'avions pas de corps. Tous deux vicieusement. (1979b: 319)

[Artissippus spoke for the body only, as if we had no soul; Zeno dealt only with the soul, as if we had no body; and both were mistaken. (1993: 396)]

Montaigne objects to the denial of the body, seeking a philosopher who could capture the 'true mean' of these conflicting positions, doing justice to the demands of both body and soul.^{viii} He sought to bring the soul and body together, intertwining the two:

Je hay qu'on nous ordonne d'avoir l'esprit aus nues, pendant que nous avons le corps à table. Je ne veux pas que l'esprit s'y cloue ny qu'il s'y veautre, mais je veux qu'il s'y appliquee (1979b: 319)

[‘I hate to be told that my spirit should be in the clouds while my body is at the table. I would not have the mind pinned or sprawling there, but I would have it attentive’ (1993: 396)]

Whereas Montaigne seems somewhat hesitant here, still having some reservations about dwelling too much on the body, slightly later in the essay he uses much stronger words:

A quoy faire desmembrons nous en divorce un bastiment tissue d'une si jointe et fraternelle correspondance? Au rebours, renouons le par mutuels offices. Que l'esprit esveille et vivifie la pesanteur du corps, le corps arreste la legereté de l'esprit et la fixe. (1979b: 326)

[What reason can we have to dismember by divorce a fabric woven of so close and brotherly a correspondence? On the contrary, let us strengthen it by mutual service. Let the mind rouse and enliven the heaviness of the body, and the body check and steady the frivolity of the mind. (1993: 404)]

Montaigne uses the language of marriage and the fraternal bond to describe the connection between mind and body. Both are locked together in a partnership much like marriage, to the extent that separating them in ‘divorce’ would constitute an act of bodily violence, a dismemberment. Here Montaigne states his desire to ‘tie’ body and mind together in a kind of mutually beneficial co-dependency.

Montaigne’s philosophical writing involves and draws upon his bodily experience as Nancy’s does. In particular, he discusses his bodily ailments in a way that is intrinsic to his thought rather than a distraction from it. He discusses his numerous health problems at length – his ‘reumes, defluxions gouteuses, relaxation, battement de coeur, micraines’ (1979b: 299) [‘colds, gouty discharges, looseness of the bowels, palpitations, headaches’ (1993: 373)], his kidney stones (304), his itchy ears (308) – and uses them as a platform for his philosophy in the same way he might use an anecdote from Horace or Pliny. In the case of his itchy ears, for example, he discusses the pleasure he takes in scratching them before the inevitable regret of doing so to offer the reader a lesson on the virtues of restraint (308). His suffering from kidney stones is included as having had a profound effect on his beliefs in relation to Stoicism and his thinking on death; he rails against the Stoic principle of composure and calls for a philosophy able to accommodate bodily experience (1979a: 423).^{ix} Although as usual he includes citations from the likes of Martial and Seneca, these appear almost as distractions from the philosophical provocation he takes from his own bodily ailments rather than the contrary. Instead, he uses his condition to consider lineage in bodily terms, since he has inherited his kidney stones from his father. Montaigne embraces

his body in his work and embeds it in the philosophy he writes, offering a seamless coalescence of accounts of bodily experience with philosophical discussion.^x In this respect, Montaigne's *Essais* present a model of the relation between philosophy and the body similar to Preciado's 'essai corporel' in *Testo Junkie*, as I explore in the following chapter. Indeed, the tension between these diverging approaches towards the body epitomised by Descartes and Montaigne not only anticipates, but informs the debates that persist in the 21st century, now represented by the tensions between queer and transgender theories, or between poststructuralism and various forms of materialism.

In this premodern incarnation of the debate, Montaigne uses his own bodily affect as a platform for his philosophy, as Nancy will centuries later. Both find that their experiences of their own bodies and bodily ailments provoke philosophical questioning and include them centrally in their writing. What, then, does Nancy's account of bodies offer in addition to Montaigne?

Nancy's touch/separation and *exscription*

Nancy's conception of both writing and bodies holds very specific implications for how they interact in his work. Through his concept of writing as *exscription*, Nancy attempts to bridge the gap between language or writing as 'sens' and what he sees as the material aspects of bodies. His concept of writing as *exscription* attempts to give space to the body while also acknowledging the limitations of language and rational discourse for approaching it.

Writing is understood by Nancy as an act of simultaneous inscription and *exscription*, with Nancy's essay 'Exscription' (1990) claiming that:

‘writing ex-scribes meaning just as much as it inscribes significations. It ex-scribes meaning, that is it shows that what it’s about, the thing itself [...] take[s] place outside writing’ (63).^{xi} Taking a poststructuralist position much like that of Butler’s, Nancy goes on to explain that while writing can capture *signification*, ‘being itself’ (the material or the real, Butler’s ‘extra linguistic’) is beyond the reach of language. Yet, for Nancy, writing can gesture towards the presence of the material through *exscription*: ‘In inscribing significations, we exscribe the presence of what withdraws from all signification, being itself (life, passion, substance...)’ (64).

Nancy uses the metaphor of ink spilling over a page, an excess of meaning beyond language – ‘meaning spills out of itself like a simple ink stain on a word, on the word “meaning”’ (47). Bodies are always beyond ‘sense’ alone and in *Corpus*, Nancy writes that ‘Nous touchons à une certaine interruption du sens, elle a à faire avec le corps, elle est corps’ (112) [‘We are touching on a certain interruption of sense, and this interruption of sense has to do with the body, it is body’ (125)]. As such, Nancy recognizes the limits of rational discourse to take bodies into account and instead relies on his concept of *exscription*, the potential for writing to *exscribe* bodies. Quite opposed to the strict Cartesian demand for rational discourse to know an object clearly and distinctly, *exscription* nonetheless allows a way for language to point towards bodies’ materiality within the poststructuralist framework. Bodies are, for Nancy, ‘êtres-excrits’: ‘Le corps n’est ni substance ni phénomène, ni chair, ni signification. Mais l’être-excrit’ (2000a: 20) [‘The body’s neither substance, phenomenon, flesh, nor signification. Just being-exscribed’ (2008: 19)]. As bodies are not reducible to signification, Nancy hopes through this model to

find a way out of the poststructuralist dilemma of how language might deal with the ‘extra-linguistic’ aspects of the body.

While Nancy attempts to make space for bodies in his work, by placing bodily affect centrally and by introducing the concept of *exscription*, his idea of bodies as limits nevertheless leads him to a restricted relationship between bodies and writing. As such, his model is unable to respond fully to the concerns of French queer theorists in their attempts to make theory take account of material bodies. While he finds some way out of the limits of rational discourse, his bodies remain impenetrable to writing and theoretical discourse. Nancy returns time and again to the relationship between bodies and writing, asking ‘comment toucher au corps?’ (2000a: 12) [‘How are we to touch upon the body?’ (2008: 11)]. He writes that language, specifically writing, ‘touche au corps, par essence’ (2000a: 13) [‘in its essence touches upon the body’ (2008: 11)].

While Nancy does suggest that writing can gesture toward the body, even the ‘extra-linguistic’ body, the metaphor he uses repeatedly is that of touch. For Nancy, touch implies proximity but also separation – a contiguity rather than a continuity. Thus while writing might touch the body, it cannot pass within. In striking contrast to Preciado, as I explore in my next chapter, Nancy’s concept of bodies as limits has definite restrictions for how they are able to interact with other bodies and with writing. While Preciado seeks to push theoretical writing into the body, and continually uses metaphors of porosity and permeability, Nancy’s bodies are impermeable. He writes that:

L'écriture touche aux corps *selon la limite absolue* qui sépare le sens de l'une de la peau et des nerfs de l'autre. Rien ne *pass*e, et c'est là que ça touche. (2000a: 10)

[Writing touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches. (2008: 11)]

Using molecular imagery and metaphor, Nancy notes that:

Un *corpus* ne serait donc possible qu'à la condition qu'il y ait accès aux corps, et qu'ils ne soient pas impénétrables, ainsi que les définit la physique. Car s'il en est ainsi, le corpus se produit comme une combinatoire de chocs, comme une agitation brownienne de bonds et de rebonds particuliers, moléculaires [... mais] Les corps sont impénétrables aux langues – et celles-ci sont impénétrables aux corps. (2000a: 50-51)

[A corpus could only happen, then, by gaining access to bodies that are not impenetrable, as defined precisely by physics. If this is the case, then a corpus is produced as a combination of shocks, as a brownian agitation of molecular leaps and bounds. As indeed it is. Bodies are impenetrable to languages – and languages are impenetrable to bodies (2008: 57)]

A writing of ‘bodily entry’, as Nancy puts it – a corpus – could only be possible in the event that language is able to access the body; could only be produced by the motion of bodily cells as they collide with one another in Brownian motion. But Nancy goes on to insist that bodies are impermeable to language, language is ‘un dur bloc étendu de signifiance’ (2000a: 51) [‘a hard, extended block of significance’ (2008: 57)], which is thus impenetrable to bodies. Does this separation of ‘sens’ and matter leave the materiality of bodies in much the same place as Cartesian dualism, as Butler warns? Indeed, the following lines from Nancy would seem to confirm Butler’s fears:

je le dis un peu par provocation, mais pas seulement – [nous devons] restituer quelque chose du dualisme, en ce sens précis qu’il faut penser que le corps n’est pas l’unité moniste (opposée à la vision dualiste), l’immédiateté, l’immanence à soi dont auparavant on dotait l’âme. (2000a: 125)

[I say this as something of a provocation, but not merely so — [we must] restore something of the dualism, in the precise sense that we have to think that the body is not a monist unity (as opposed to the dualist vision), having the immediacy and self-immanence with which we earlier endowed the soul. (2008: 133)]

This is indeed a provocative statement, and one that sheds further light on Nancy’s definition of bodies as ‘sens’ and matter as entirely impermeable to one another: so much so as to warrant something of a return to dualism.

Preciado's thinking is strikingly different. The motif of penetration through skin is employed continually in his work, and when Preciado discusses the work of Judith Butler, he declares that he wants to 'pousser [...] l'hypothèse performative dans le corps, jusqu'aux fluides, la faire passer dans les cellules' [push the theory of performativity into the body, into its fluids, force into the cells] (2008: 98). Just as Descartes's concept of himself as a thinking subject resulted from and enforced a condition of non-relationality and solitude, Nancy's and Preciado's ideas of what bodies *are* impacts on questions relating to the affective power of literature and theory and how bodies interact with the world. Nancy's specific conception of bodies leads him to this model of relationality between writing and the body; since bodies are conceived as limits, they may be touched by writing, but never penetrated or passed in the way that Preciado's model allows.

Nancy's work gives an example of the kind of engagements with the Cartesian account of bodies that have emerged in the recent French context. His account offers an exploration and interrogation of coherent subjectivity through the consideration of the material body, such as in the description of his heart transplant in *L'Intrus*. His work, as well as that of Montaigne, shows that the elision of the body in philosophy is not inevitable, that attempts to discuss the body need not abandon philosophy completely. Rather than simply involving the experience of his body in his philosophical writing, as Montaigne had already done prior to the interventions of Descartes, Nancy describes the relation between bodies and meaning through the models of *exscription* and touch/separation. These models, however, display all the ambiguity and contradiction that Nancy locates in his reading of Descartes's mind/body

dualism: if bodies are the very meeting point of matter and *sens*, they are also the point at which they are separate. Nancy does not describe the ‘mélange’ of meaning and body that Merleau-Ponty reads in Montaigne’s work, but ultimately describes their separation. Indeed, while Nancy’s account reacts against Descartes, the typically poststructuralist relation he sees between material body and *sens* appears to be haunted by Cartesian dualism and gives weight to concerns over the place of the body in poststructuralist thought. In the following chapter, I ask how Preciado’s project of incorporating his own bodily experimentation into his theory seeks to go further, insisting on the permeable boundaries of bodies and on a reflexivity between bodies and texts.

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ⁱ See Best & Crowley (2007) for an exploration of existentialism, HIV/AIDS and the cogito in Rémès's work.

ⁱⁱ Descartes originally wrote the *Meditations* in Latin, and this chapter uses the Penguin Classics English translation.

ⁱⁱⁱ All translations from this work are cited from Cress, in *René Descartes: Philosophical Essays and correspondence* (2000).

^{iv} Descartes corresponded with Elisabeth on philosophical issues. This particular letter to her is dated June 28 1643, two years after publication of the *Meditations*.

^v A question extensively explored by Butler, particularly in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*.

^{vi} See in particular the section 'Le Cogito' (423-68).

^{vii} 'Sens' in Nancy's work is often characterised by being opposed to matter. While it relates to matter and is always embodied, this relationship is always one of touch, with 'sens' and matter always remaining impenetrable to each other' (James, 2006: 205).

^{viii} Montaigne believed that such a philosopher could be found in Socrates (1979b: 319).

^{ix} For an extended discussion of the body in Montaigne's work, see Stegman's article 'Exposing Montaigne' (2007: 314). In particular, for an extended discussion of Montaigne's privileging of his own bodily experience above the medical science of the day, see Starobinski and Gallucci's 'The Body's Moment' (1983).

^x See Dalia Judowitz's *The Culture of the Body* (2001) for a genealogical account of the body from the premodern period, encompassing discussion of both Montaigne's and Descartes's work. See also earlier work on the body in Montaigne, particularly Cathy Yandell's "'Corps" and "corpus": Montaigne's "Sur des vers de Virgile"' (1986) and Lawrence Kritzman's 'My body, My text: Montaigne and the Rhetoric of Sexuality' (1983).

^{xi} The word 'meaning' here is often used to translate Nancy's concept of 'le sens', which is also translated elsewhere by the English 'sense' or simply left untranslated. Like many of Nancy's terms, 'le sens' is over determined, but is often opposed to matter, as I go on to discuss.

2 Queer permeability in Paul B. Preciado's literature of entanglement: narrating the posthuman self, performing philosophy

Abstract

This chapter explores Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2008) and *Manifeste contra-sexuel* (2000) [*Countersexual Manifesto* (2018)], outlining a permeable account of the relation between bodies and language that I argue to be crucial to queer theory's biopolitical investments. Drawing on new materialist analysis (Jane Bennett (2010); Karen Barad (2003; 2007); Noella Davis (2009)), I explore Preciado's reworking of Butlerian performativity to account for transgender experience, seeking to push Butler's theory into the material body's cells and setting it to work at the level of the material body. Preciado presents his transgender body as a means to explore theory through performance as well a philosophical writing. By presenting his own body as inextricably entangled with his philosophy, Preciado not only confronts concerns from transgender theorists (Jay Prosser (1998); Vivian K Namaste (2000)) regarding queer theory's ability to account for the material body, but also draws on the French literary genre of *autofiction* to dismantle the Cartesian notion of a 'disembodied', rational and dispassionate philosopher. Preciado presents his body as just as permeable to material events and discourses as it is to the Testogel he administers, exemplifying my notion of queer permeability. His work explores what it might mean to narrate a posthuman account of the self, a literature of entanglement.

Paul B. Preciado's work emerged as part of the French queer activist and intellectual group *Le Zoo*. A former student of Derrida, Preciado's work is indebted to French poststructuralism, but also embraces a materialism that, though hard to define in traditional terms, could be placed somewhere between contemporary heterodox Marxism and feminist new materialism – although Preciado does not engage directly with the latter, his work shares striking similarities to this approach, as this chapter will bear out. I focus here on two of Preciado's texts, the *Countersexual Manifesto* (2000) and *Testo Junkie: sex, drugs and biopolitics* (2006; 2008; 2013).¹ The first of these is at once a political manifesto and a diagnosis of contemporary society; a collection of theoretical essays (on Butler, Derrida, Deleuze); an invitation to partake in transformative rituals and to sign a countersexual contract divesting oneself of

naturalized gender. *Testo Junkie* is also not a singular text: for a start, it was published originally both in Spanish and in French in 2008 by Preciado himself, and then translated by Bruce Benderson into English in 2013. While Preciado writes of feeling ill at ease in any single national or linguistic context, the book is very much embedded in Paris where it was written, with descriptions of the author walking the city's streets, taking part in the queer scene and surrounded by familiar French literary figures such as Guillaume Dustan and Virginie Despentes. *Testo Junkie* records its author's daily application of Testogel, a topical pharmaceutical testosterone gel, that is absorbed through his skin. This process is recounted through narrative sections set alongside a theoretical genealogy of pharmaceuticals, making the text impossible to define neatly in terms of genre and exploding the notion of a 'disembodied' and neutral theoretical work.

This chapter will respond to concerns expressed in the previous chapter: if early (Anglophone) queer work informed by (French) poststructuralism is haunted by a Cartesian dualism insistent on the absolute separation of language from matter, resulting in a world reduced to language and rendering the material inaccessible ('linguistic monism'), how does Preciado's embrace of matter and materialism in his work respond to these concerns? Preciado's work is a frequently dizzying mixture of theory and practice, writing and performance, poststructuralism and materialism, material and metaphor. What can be made of his project of self-experimentation with testosterone in *Testo Junkie*, a move intended to change the rules of philosophy; to 'decapitate' the philosopher? How can we understand his inclusion of performance in his work from the *Manifeste* onwards, or his desire to push Butler's concept of performativity into the body? These ideas identified in Preciado's work all contribute to a model of permeability between language and the body, politics and theory, the

self and the other, the individual and the global, which can answer the concerns of Prosser, Namaste – and indeed Butler herself – regarding queer theory’s ability to take account of the material body, and the material world.

Rethinking performativity

Preciado’s work intervenes in queer studies almost two decades after it erupted in the US in the early 1990s. It is clear that he has taken on board many of the revisions made and objections raised since its conception. In his introduction *Queer zones* (2001), by another member of Parisian queer activist and intellectual collective *Le Zoo*, he writes that rather than the materiality of sex ‘la théorie *queer* a joué la carte du genre’ [queer theory has played gender as its hand] (15), and then conflated the two:

la théorie *queer* a eu tendance à fondre sexe et genre. Résultat: elle a zappé le corps. Et avec lui, tout ce qui rendait le menu *queer* indigeste: le sida, les drogues, le travail sexuel, les pratiques trans(sexuelles)... (16)

[queer theory has tended to merge sex and gender together. The result: it has made the body vanish. And with it, everything that made the queer ‘menu’ so hard to swallow: AIDS, drugs, sex work, trans(sexual) practices...]

For Preciado, it is clear that the body is central to ‘le menu *queer*’; these ‘indigeste’ bodies or bodily acts are central to its political force, and should be where queer

theory's allegiances lie. His work seeks to take account of the material vulnerability of marginalised bodies to normative discourse, and responds in particular to critiques of early queer theory from the field of transgender theory from Jay Prosser (1998) and Viviane K. Namaste (2000).

Prosser and Namaste are both critical of queer studies' (particularly Butler's) treatment of transsexual and transgender 'phenomena.' Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998) describes 'queer theory's [...] incapacity to sustain the body as a literal category' (27). He argues that Butler's theory of performativity relies on a scopic fascination with transgender phenomena, which understands the body purely 'as visual surface' (43), rather than materially experienced.ⁱⁱ For Prosser, transsexual bodies are inescapably material; their embodiment means they 'exceed [...] performativity' (33). Namaste's criticism of Butler in *Invisible Lives* (2000), like Prosser's, focuses on the inability of queer theorising to take the 'realities of [trans people's] lives' into account (1), realities which very often have to do with the material body. Indeed, Namaste's list of such daily realities rarely departs from inescapably material, bodily concerns: 'learning how to inject hormones; recovering from surgery; electrolysis; Norvir, Crixivan, and Interferon; overdoses; visiting the hospital; trying to find a surgeon willing to perform sex reassignment surgery on a seropositive transsexual' (1).ⁱⁱⁱ

Prosser's reading of Butler focuses on her account of the murder of Venus Xtravaganza, the Latina trans woman featured in Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1990). His criticism is threefold: firstly, that her particular deployment of psychoanalytic theory (what he views as a misreading of Freud) fails to imagine a material body beyond its fantasised image; secondly, that Venus's transsexuality (her desire to change her material sex) is viewed as the limitation of

subversive transgender practices; finally, that her reading of Venus wavers between the literal and the metaphorical, just as her interchangeable use of the terms ‘penis’ and ‘phallus’ confuses the Real and the Symbolic. Prosser sees this last point as exemplary of poststructuralism’s failure to distinguish between the literal (material) and the figurative. It is this theoretical shortcoming that renders Butler’s reading of Venus as ultimately depersonalising: ‘in metaphorising transsexuality, Butler inadvertently repeats something of this deliteralization of the subject, her [Venus’s] body, her death. The substance of the transsexual body is sublimated in the move from the literal to the figurative’ (1998: 55).

Prosser identifies queer theory’s issue with materiality not in its focus on transgender as opposed to transsexuality in and of itself, but in its roots in poststructuralism:

my sense is that the reasons for transsexuality exceeding queer lie [...] in queer’s poststructuralist problems with literality and referentiality that the category of transsexuality makes manifest – particularly in relation to the sexed body. Butler’s metaphorical displacement of the literality of Venus’s sex can serve to exemplify just this. (58)^{iv}

‘Literality’ – used here to denote the real or the material – is displaced, understood solely on the level of linguistics and metaphor by this theoretical field. Both Namaste and Prosser diagnose this inability to take proper care over the material as an issue stemming from queer’s theoretical heritage. Both hold poststructuralism (not one particular author, but poststructuralism generally) to blame in their critiques, with Namaste writing that ‘an American application of French poststructuralist theory to

transgendered phenomenon voids the possibility of transsexual and/or transgendered bodies' (2000: 2). Prosser's concern over poststructuralism refers to a paradox identical to that voiced by Butler about the potential for language to grasp the material body: 'Is this paradox about the body – the body's materiality slips our grasp even as we attempt to narrate it – our inevitable poststructuralist legacy?' (1998: 13).^v

Butler's *Bodies That Matter* sought to take greater account of the materiality of bodies, responding to a question often posed to her: 'What about the materiality of the body, Judy?' (1993: viii). She understands the use of the informal, feminised 'Judy' as opposed to 'Judith' as an attempt to extricate her from the 'masculine' and 'cerebral' discipline of philosophy, to 'recall [her] to a bodily life that could not be theorized away' (viii). And indeed, she seems to identify an uneasiness, a 'blind spot', when attempting to deal with the material body as a philosopher:

I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought [...] I reflected that this wavering might be the vocational difficulty of those trained in philosophy, always at some distance from corporeal matters, who try in that disembodied way to demarcate bodily terrains: they invariably miss the body or, worse, write against it. (viii)

Butler's expression here of her inability to fully conceptualise the material body in or through language, and particularly within a *philosophical* enterprise, amounts to the

same concerns she expressed in her reading of Descartes, as I discussed in the previous chapter. What can be made of this opposition between philosophy and ‘corporeal matters’? What might this mean for a philosophy such as queer, that is at its very heart invested in such matters?

As a result of his engagement with Butler, Prosser, in addition to Namaste, ultimately advocated for the separation of queer studies from transsexual studies. He describes a:

conceptual splitting between transsexual and queer and, indeed, of queer theory’s own incapacity to sustain the body as a literal category. In transsexuality, *sex returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle its theory of gender performativity. (1998: 27).

Yet while these critics argue that queer theory should be abandoned as inherently incapable of dealing with embodiment, and thus unable to account for transsexual bodily experience, Preciado instead seeks to build on queer work: not only to expand it to take account of embodiment, but to reconceptualise the relationship between language and matter and offer a different model to the typically poststructuralist account which sees these as fundamentally different, like oil and water. His work instead demonstrates an overlapping and blurring of borders – what I will later describe as permeability – bringing bodies into texts and texts into bodies. Not only does he imagine this reflexivity between bodies and texts, he re-imagines what we understand by language, the body, and indeed philosophy.

Preciado takes up both Prosser’s and Namaste’s arguments on Butler in his *Manifeste contra-sexuel*, writing that ‘l’identité performative manquerait par là

même de poser la question de la corporalité' [performative understandings of identity do not even pose the question of corporeality] (75). His concern for the material is more far-reaching than simply seeking to accommodate transsexual and transgender embodiment, however. He also wants to consider more globally the kinds of embodied transformations that he sees as essential to 'le queer', including the bodily experiences of those living with HIV:

En privilégiant la performance de genre, les effets théâtraux, *le pouvoir performatif du langage et de la textualité*, les théories queers de l'identité performative sont restées propres sur elles évitant finalement, malgré les apparences, de penser les changements corporels radicaux des personnes vivant avec le sida ainsi que les transformations corporelles des personnes transgenres et transexuel(e)s. (75, my emphasis)

[by focusing on gender performance, theatrical effects, and *the performative power of language and textuality*, queer theories of performative identity have remained self-contained and have avoided, despite appearances, consideration of the radical bodily changes of people living with AIDS as well as the bodily transformations of transgender and transsexual people.]

While the reading of Butler that Preciado offers here is not strictly faithful (Butler's *Bodies That Matter* specifically clarifies that gender performativity has nothing to do with theatricality), Preciado follows Prosser in understanding performativity as relating to language and textuality and in holding this relation responsible for

avoiding proper engagement with the materiality of bodies. He also hints here at a sense in which queer studies has betrayed its earlier, founding commitment to materiality through its activist roots in the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Like Prosser and Namaste, Preciado also expresses concern over the linguistic focus of constructivist thought:

Dans les années 90, période *d'euphorie constructiviste* s'il en fût, on a beaucoup *célébré la fluidité* des genres sans prendre suffisamment en compte la force des technologies du corps qui modifient et stabilisent l'identité de sexe et de genre. (2000: 75-6, my emphasis)

[In the 90s, a period of constructivist euphoria if ever there was, we saw a celebration of the fluidity of gender that did not take sufficient account of the force of technologies of the body, which modify and stabilize sex and gender identity.]

Again Preciado follows Prosser in criticising queer theory's valorisation of transgendered fluidity, which in effect served to obscure corporeality. Ultimately, though, he does not reject Butler, queer thought or performativity, instead seeking to build on her work to include the material body. In an interview with Butler herself for the French gay magazine *Têtu*, Preciado recalls:

Je suis obsédée par la question du corps et de sa matérialité et j'ai eu un choc en découvrant l'analyse performative de l'identité selon Butler [...] Ce que je

voulais depuis le début, c'était prendre cette analyse et l'amener sur le terrain de la corporéité.' (*Têtu*, 2008)

[I am obsessed with the question of the body and its materiality and I was amazed to discover Butler's performative analysis of gender [...] From the start, I wanted to take this analysis to the level of the body.]

Preciado also writes, in *Testo Junkie*, of wanting to 'pousser l'hypothèse performative dans le corps, jusqu'aux fluides, la faire passer dans les cellules' [push the hypothesis of performativity into the body, right up to its fluids, to channel it into its cells] (2008: 98). But how might one begin to deploy performativity at the level of the body?

Firstly, Preciado takes Butler's theoretical arguments on drag and performativity in *Gender Trouble* and resituates them on a material, practical level. He reconsiders Butler's argument for the subversive potential of drag practices through descriptions of the drag king workshops he ran in France, and in Chile. The *practice* of drag is described as activating a dormant queer virus in participants:

Une fois le virus *king* activé en chaque participante, il agira, comme soupçon de genre, au delà de l'atelier, il se propagera au reste de la vie quotidienne et provoquera des modifications dans l'ensemble de nos interactions sociales. (2008: 320)

[Once the *king* virus is activated in each participant, it will continue to act as a mistrust of gender even beyond the confines of the workshop, it will spread throughout daily life and spark modifications in the entirety of our social

interactions.]

Once ‘infected’, participants are transformed beyond the confines of the workshop; the ‘virus’ provoking a fundamental and seemingly irreversible change in attitude toward gender. Drag is metaphorised as a physical agent that can transform the molecular structure of the body in the same way that a virus, or indeed a molecule such as pharmaceutical testosterone, might. But there is an insistence that goes beyond metaphor here: Preciado affirms that the (material) practice of drag is a lasting and transformative *epistemic practice*, able to effect material changes in social understanding and interactions. Echoing Foucault’s concept of *dispositifs disciplinaires* – of the multiple material and discursive apparatus that disciplines bodies, Preciado refers to ‘le dispositif *drag king*’ [the *drag king* device] as ‘un processus ouvert de mutation’ [an open process of transformation] (2008: 311) as an alternative and intentional form of bodily discipline.

Secondly, Preciado’s desire to push performativity into the body, to set it to work at the level of its cells, is enacted through a concept he terms ‘*biodrag*’. Butler’s work is expanded so that it concerns not only *gender* but may account for the materiality of bodies, the material configuration of *sexed* bodies:

S’il est possible d’évoquer, avec Judith Butler, une ‘production performative du genre’, il faut préciser que ce qui est codifié, imité, et répété coercitivement, ici, ce n’est pas seulement une représentation théâtrale ou un code sémiotique, mais bien la totalité biologique du vivant. Je nommerai ‘*biodrag*’ ce processus. (154)

[If it is possible to describe, using Judith Butler, a ‘performative production of gender’, we must be clear that this is codified, imitated and coercively repeated. What I discuss here is not simply a theatrical performance or a semiotic code but rather the entire biology of a living being. I call this process *biodrag*’.]

What Preciado imagines through the concept of ‘*biodrag*’ are supposedly ‘natural’ processes that are in fact *performed* with the use of technologies. These include the production of the ‘natural’ regularity of the menstrual cycle via the contraceptive pill, or (a particularly French example) the supposedly natural athletic masculinity of *Tour de France* athletes that is in fact fabricated with the aid of hormonal or steroid supplements. This is what Preciado terms an act of ‘biocamouflage’: the manufactured illusion of natural ‘sexed’ biological processes or bodies (156); the concealment of the ways in which the materiality of sex is constructed.

Preciado’s own experiment in taking testosterone must be understood in relation to this concept of ‘*biodrag*’. If trans bodies are often held up as ‘constructed’, ‘unnatural’ or somehow ‘fake’, Preciado repeats Butler’s formula of drag to work against this exceptionalisation of trans bodies. On Butler’s model, drag exposes *all* gender to be imitative, rather than just that of the drag performer; on Preciado’s model, his performed ‘*biodrag*’ exposes the fact that, in a world flooded with pharmaceuticals and other drugs, bodies are – especially in the West – increasingly materially constructed and ‘unnatural’. He tells his readers that in administering Prozac, Ritalin, alcohol, the contraceptive pill (examples amongst many others), ‘Vous autres, vous aussi, vous êtes le monstre que la testosterone

éveille en moi' [you others, you too, you are the monster that testosterone awakens in me] (348).

Preciado's practice of administering testosterone renders visible the myth of natural sex, exposing the reliance of many contemporary sexed bodies, particularly celebrated and normative 'ideal' examples of men and women (the athlete, the pornstar), as reliant on (and constituted by) prosthetic supports. His concept of 'biodrag', explored through performance as well as in writing, puts Butler's performativity to work on the level of the material, sexed body. If Butler's analysis of sex is through psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and linguistic frameworks, Preciado displaces a psychoanalytic understanding of the production of (discursive) sex,^{vi} translating Butler's thinking on gender to material, sexed bodies and putting it to work in exploring the material production of sex.

While Preciado responds to criticisms of Butler from the field of transgender studies, similar critiques have been made by new materialist thinkers. Karen Barad writes that: 'Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn [...] every "thing"—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language' (2003: 801). Barad has also reworked performativity from a materialist perspective, calling for 'a specifically posthumanist notion of performativity—one that incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors' (808). If, on Butler's model of performativity, gender does not precede but is constituted by gendered acts; for Barad, material objects do not precede their interaction, but emerge through 'intra-actions' – there is no discrete object preceding its entanglement with other objects. I will explore further similarities between new materialist approaches and that of Preciado's later on in this chapter, but both

Barad's and Preciado's reworking of performativity move away from an entirely linguistic focus, where *linguistic* acts affect the *linguistic* formulation of gender, to a focus on the ways in which material objects are formed *through* relations to other objects, such as gendered discourse and pharmaceuticals.

Performing Theory

Preciado's first published text, his *Manifeste contra-sexuel*, is a radical, utopian manifesto, set alongside essays on Deleuze, Butler and Derrida. It was published in French, then Spanish and translated into English only in 2018. While this manifesto is outlined as a collection of 'Principes de la société contra-sexuelle' [principles of the countersexual society] (32), also included in the text is a 'contra-sexual' contract and a series of illustrated, bodily 'Pratiques d'inversion contra-sexuelles' [practices of countersexual inversion] (41). Just as Preciado's reworking of Butler's theory of drag sets it to work on a practical level through performance, Preciado's *Manifeste* invites its readers to use bodily acts themselves in attempting to resignify the body.

Preciado's manifesto outlines the aims of his 'nouvelle société' [new society] as 'la déconstruction systématique de la naturalisation des pratiques sexuelles et du système du genres' [the systematic deconstruction of the ways in which sexual practices and the system of gender is naturalised] and proclaims 'l'équivalence (et non l'égalité) de tous les corps-sujets parlants qui s'engagent dans les termes du contrat contra-sexuel dédié à la recherche du plaisir et du savoir' [the equivalence (rather than equality) of all speaking body-subjects who enter into the terms of the countersexual contract dedicated to seeking pleasure and knowledge] (21). While

Preciado's aim – that of denaturalisation – is similar to Butler's project in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, his strategy is very different. Where Butler engages psychoanalytic works, feminist theory and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the theoretical essays in Preciado's *Manifeste* are set beside instructions for his readers to engage their bodies through his contract and practical exercises. Preciado again offers a way out of the bubble of 'linguistic monism' by emphasising the materiality of bodies and utilising them in the task of denaturalising gender and sexual practices.

The name of the text is a clear nod to Michel Foucault's concept of a 'contre-discours' [counter-discourse]. Foucault understood that while various *dispositifs* may be mobilised, particularly by the state, in an attempt to regulate and control bodies and behaviors, there will always be a space open in which the terms of the debate can be turned upside down and used against their intended purposes. Foucault was clear that counter-discourse involved 'not another theory, but rather a practical engagement with political struggles' (Moussa and Scapp, 1996: 89). Preciado's work takes up this challenge, his 'manifesto' leaving no doubt as to his political intent.

Acknowledging the influence of Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, Preciado writes that:

Le corps est un texte socialement construit, une archive organique de l'histoire de l'humanité comme histoire de la production-reproduction sexuelle dans laquelle certains codes sont naturalisés [...] La contra-sexualité a pour tâche d'identifier les espaces erronés, les ratages de la structure du texte. (2000: 25)

[The body is a socially constructed text, an organic archive of the history of humanity as a story of sexual production-reproduction in which certain codes are naturalised [...] counter-sexuality aims to identify the gaps, the failures in the structure of the text.]

The influence of language in the production of bodies is recognised; that in some ways at least, it may be useful to describe the body as a text. Yet bodies are also described here as ‘[les] archive[s] organique[s]’ [organic archives], indicating that they cannot be described purely as text, or on a linguistic level but must include the material or the organic. Preciado juxtaposes ‘archive’, echoing Derrida’s use of the term,^{vii} with the notion of the organic, and with this phrase already offers a proximity, a fusion, between discourse and matter.^{viii} While Preciado does describe bodies as texts here, his countersexual society ‘ne propose pas pour autant des interventions politiques abstraites qui se réduiraient à des variations de langage’ [does not however propose abstract political interventions which can be reduced to variations of language] (25). Strategies that deploy language alone will not suffice, and instead Preciado invites his readers to utilise their bodies.

Descriptions of three *pratiques* or practical exercises are included in the *Manifeste*. The first draws on Ron Athey’s performance piece ‘Solar Anus’ (performed at the *Forum des Images* in Paris in 1999), itself a response to Bataille’s text *L’Anus Solaire* (1927). Athey’s performance, which Preciado describes in detail before outlining the exercise derived from it, included having a black sun tattooed around his anus, modifying his genitals by injecting them with a saline solution, applying make-up and performing (or attempting to perform) anal masturbation with two dildos attached to the high heels he wore.

Athey's performance is described by Preciado as countersexual because it works to denaturalise sex; Preciado hails Athey's use of his physical body in subverting not only his gendered presentation but his own sexual organs, described by Preciado as they are distorted by the saline injection as resembling 'plus à une sorte d'utérus externe qu'à un sexe masculin' [more a kind of external uterus than male genitals] (45). Preciado's own countersexual practices follow Athey's performance in outlining corporeal acts that disrupt the notion of natural, heterocentric sex, and perform the denaturalisation of sex. Preciado also, however, draws inspiration from Athey's method – his physical, bodily response to a written text – and responds to the transitivity between Bataille's text and Athey's bodily performance. An evolving dialogue takes place between writing and performance, each responding to the other. Preciado's *pratiques* offer readers the opportunity to reproduce this relationship between texts and bodies, offering a textual invitation to perform corporeal acts that demonstrate the transitive communication, the permeable relation, he sees between bodies and texts.

Preciado's treatment of explicitly sexual acts in his work may be read as a simple provocation. It should be understood, however, in the context of his understanding that queer theory has omitted the body and bodily acts – including, ironically for a theory of sexuality, sexual acts – as 'indigeste'. In this sense, it is a provocation, but one aimed squarely at queer theory. In his introduction to the new English translation, Preciado explains that his focus on the dildo was an attempt to wrest it away from the pathologising grip of psychoanalysis, the cloying influence of concepts of penis envy and castration, or from a feminist view that imagines it as the very emblem of phallic masculinity. Instead, Preciado embraces it as something

entirely different: a symbol of a prosthetic order running counter to claims of naturalism, essentialism, purism and pathologisation.

As such, Preciado's first practical exercise recreates part of Athey's performance by inviting readers to attach two dildos to a pair of high heels (objects Preciado has illustrated in diagrams next to his text) and asking them to attempt anal masturbation while wearing them. The second two *pratiques*, 'Branler un bras' [Jerk off an arm] and 'Comment fair jouir un gode-tête' [How to make a dildo-head cum], perform a 'citation du gode' [dildo citation] (48; 52) by drawing these *godes* on various parts of the body with a red marker pen.^{ix} Again, both *pratiques* include instructive hand-drawn diagrams, either of the entire body or of specific body parts. The accompanying text is humorously set out much as a text-book science experiment might be, not only providing instructions, descriptions of materials needed, and a total duration for the act, but also a justification for the acts themselves. These include 'L'objectif' [aim] of learning to 'trafiquer les signifiants sexuels' [traffic sexual signifiers] (46), or of practicing an 'inversion' that amounts to 'une operation de citation textuelle' [an operation of textual citation] aiming to 'déplace[r] la force performative du code hétérocentré' [displace the performative force of the heterocentric code] (49).^x

The 'citation' of a physical object (the dildo, itself a prosthetic extension of what is seen as being the 'natural' body) on the body's skin shows an understanding of bodies as inseparable from (gendered) discourse. Preciado insists on the potential for writing to subvert not only discursive constructions of gender, but material sex ('les organes sexuels'). He confronts Derrida's insistence that 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' [there is no outside-text] from *De la grammatologie* [*On Grammatology*] (1967), or Butler's formulation that there is no 'pre-discursive' sex, and also insists

on the inscription of discourse on bodies. Importantly, however, he does so whilst simultaneously underlining their materiality. By insisting on the importance of physical performance, he underlines that bodies are irreducible to language alone. Preciado's corporeal *pratiques* include writing while at the same time emphasising materiality – drawing the signifier (the drawing of the *gode*) onto the body's skin amusingly literally with the tool of a red marker pen. Preciado again shows an overlap, a fusion, between text and bodies. His work demonstrates permeability, a communicative traffic between discourse and material bodies, with neither reducible to or separable from the other and with each shaping the other. Preciado's *pratiques* are irreducibly bodily acts, but are nevertheless immersed in discourse.

Preciado's *Manifeste* includes a page-long 'contra-sexual' contract that can be cut out, filled in and signed by the reader, and – if desired, emailed to Preciado himself. The contract asks those who sign up to it to renounce all 'relations sexuelles naturalisantes' [naturalising sexual relationships], all 'liens de filiation (maritaux ou parentaux) [...] assignés par la société hétérocentrée' [familial ties (marital or parental) assigned by heterocentric society], as well as the 'condition naturelle d'homme ou de femme et à tout privilège (social, économique, patrimonial) et à toute obligation (sociale, économique, reproductive) dérivés' [idea of being a 'natural' man or a woman and every privilege (social, economic, familial) and all obligations (social, economic, reproductive) derived therefrom] (30-1). This contract acts similarly to the *pratiques* in that it asks readers to act, to perform, in response to theoretical work. Rather than passively reading, readers are asked to materially alter their behavior, and a reflexive relationship is established between author and reader, with readers of the text able to respond to and communicate with its author.

The contract included in this text is indebted to Monique Wittig's notion of a 'heterosexual contract'. Preciado dedicates the entire text of the *Manifeste* to Wittig, and writes that in a countersexual society, '**les corps ou les sujets parlants s'appelleront des corps lesbiens ou "wittigs"**' [bodies or speaking subjects will be termed *lesbian bodies* or "*wittigs*"] (39, emphasis in bold in the original text). Here Preciado playfully acknowledges Wittig's attempts to resignify the female body through her fictional writing in *Le Corps lesbien*, explored in the following chapter. Wittig's essays in *The Straight Mind* outline her notion of the heterosexual contract as productive of sex, describing women as a political class rather than a biological category. She understands sexual difference as a political difference, falsely naturalised in order to perpetuate women's subjugation by men. Preciado's countersexual society seeks to 'substituer à ce contrat social que l'on appelle Nature un contrat contra-sexuel' [substitute this social contract upheld in the name of Nature with a countersexual contract] (20). This temporary contract invites those who sign up to it to practice the kind of resignificative, countersexual acts of inversion Preciado offers in his *pratiques*, asking them to become 'une producteur de godes' [a producer of dildos], 'un trou de cul et [...] travailleur de cul' [an ass hole and a worker of the ass] (30-1). While Butler responds to Wittig's critique through her writing in *Gender Trouble*, Preciado's contract responds para-theoretically, asking his readers to performatively declare themselves in rebellion.

This countersexual contract is, alongside Wittig's influence, also indebted to sadomasochistic cultures and the practice of S/M contracts. Preciado affirms that: 'les pratiques SM ainsi que la création de pactes contractuels [...] ont rendu manifestes les structures érotiques de pouvoir sous-jacentes au contrat que l'hétérosexualité a imposé comme nature' [SM practices, in addition to the creation

of contractual agreements [...] have elucidated the erotic structures of power underlying the contract imposed by heterosexuality as nature] (29). Rather than simply describing the knowledge derived from these practices in exposing naturalised power structures, Preciado uses his contract as a device to open up a space in which alternative de-naturalised relations (to oneself as well as others) can be explored in practice by his readers. His countersexual society ‘se fait l’héritière du savoir pratique des communautés SM et adopte le contrat contra-sexuel temporaire comme forme privilégiée pour établir une relation contra-sexuelle’ [The countersexual society inherits the practical knowledge of SM communities and adopts temporary countersexual contracts as a principal way of establishing countersexual relationships] (29). While Preciado’s countersexual contract draws on the (usually) private contracts agreed between (and confined to) a fixed number of individuals in S/M subculture, its intentions are set on creating more public and far-reaching societal transformations. His project is thus not simply about resignifying individual bodies, but is set on more far-reaching societal transformation.

In his later interviews, Foucault was open about the creative and political potential he saw in S/M practices to resignify the erogenous zones of the body, describing practitioners as ‘inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body-through the eroticization of the body. I think [S/M is] a kind of creation, a creative enterprise’ (1997: 165). The project of resignification that Preciado undertakes certainly eroticises ‘strange’ parts of the body (the head, the arm) and takes on board this spirit of creation and invention of new possibilities through bodily practice. Preciado’s project of bodily *pratiques* as well as his contract is also informed by Foucault’s understanding of technologies and embraces his

promise of the possibilities of resistance held by a cultivation of bodies and pleasures through technologies of the self.

In the same interview with *Têtu* cited earlier, Preciado comments:

Mon but était de croiser l'analyse performative de Judith [Butler] avec l'archéologie critique des dispositifs disciplinaires de Foucault, et de les amener sur le terrain du corps, et des technologies biochimiques et pornographiques. C'est là qu'on en vient au pharmacopouvoir. (*Têtu*, 2008)

[My aim was to mix Judith's performative analysis with the critical archeology of Foucault's disciplinary regimes, and to bring that to the level of the body, of biochemical and pornographic technologies. That's where pharmacopouvoir came from.]

Preciado does exactly that, taking works of theory and performing them *through* the body. His *pratiques* are an invitation, an incitement to engage in and proliferate various countersexual bodily pleasures free from the pathologising medical discourse attached to desire, in what he terms technologies of resistance.

If Preciado has invited his readers to respond to the work of Butler, Wittig and Foucault, he also draws heavily on the work of Donna Haraway: particularly her cyborg feminism and work on prosthetics. His phrase 'archive organique' offers a similar juxtaposition to Haraway's 'material-metaphor', which she uses to elucidate her vision of the cyborg. In particular, Preciado takes up Haraway's invitation to consider prostheses as a political tool. In the *Manifeste*, he follows Haraway in her

claim that prostheses are able to interrupt and confuse the borders of the body and of subjectivity:

La prothèse, les hormones, le système immunitaire, le web etc. ne sont que quelques exemples parmi d'autres du fait qu'il est impossible d'établir où finissent 'les corps naturels' et où commencent les 'technologies artificielles'. (2000: 114)

[prostheses, hormones, the immune system, the web etc.: these are just some examples amongst others of the fact that is impossible to establish where 'natural bodies' end and 'artificial technologies' begin.]

Prostheses are useful to the extent that their 'statut borderline' [borderline status] means that it is impossible to 'tracer des limites nettes entre le "naturel" et "l'artificiel", entre le "corps" et la "machine"' [trace clear borders between the "natural" and the "artificial", between the "body" and the "machine"] (2000: 119). Preciado's repeated incorporation of *godes* in his contract as well as his bodily *pratiques*, including drawing a 'prosthetic' *gode* directly onto his skin, takes on a new significance in light of this concept.

If Preciado's *Manifeste* deploys the dildo as an emblem of a prosthetic world, his next work *Testo Junkie* is premised upon a performance carried out in response to Haraway's work on prosthetics: the 'self-experimentation' Preciado records in taking testosterone. Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1990) asked its readers 'Why should our bodies end at the skin or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?' (220).^{xi} Preciado's practice of using topical testosterone gel is a response to

this question in and of itself. Preciado's body does *not* end at his skin. His skin is not an impermeable barrier, but permeable, capable of absorbing and incorporating a molecule that will alter the cells of his body. Preciado's extended project of self-experimentation with the pharmaceutical prosthetic testosterone alluded to in the title of his later work *Testo Junkie*, and which I consider in the following section, takes on board the implications of Haraway's cyborg and her work on prostheses and continues to explore the bodily experimentation initiated by the *Manifeste*.

Décapiter la philosophie: undoing philosophy, undoing the philosopher-subject

The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code. Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies.
(Haraway, 1990: 205)

Influenced by Foucault's concept of biopower, Judith Butler's performativity, Haraway's cyborg theory as well as Marxist materialists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (amongst others), *Testo Junkie* is a genealogy of the pharmaceutical and pornographic industries, which Preciado sees as 'les deux piliers sur lesquels s'appuie le biocapitalisme contemporain, les deux tentacules d'un circuit intégré gigantesque et visqueux' [the two pillars upon which contemporary biocapitalism

rests, two tentacles of an enormous and viscous integrated circuit] (2008: 48). The vast scale of this system, as well as its liquid quality, means that Preciado offers flashes of insight into its workings rather than a neat, systematic overview. These insights are explored through his own personal, bodily experience: in particular his use of pharmaceutical testosterone.

Permeating this theoretical text are narrative breaks detailing Preciado's relationships, notably with the author and film maker Virginie Despentes and his grief at the death of friend and former editor Guillaume Dustan (referred to in the text as V.D. and G.D. respectively). These narrative accounts also include his daily administration of Testogel (the brand name for a gel containing the androgen testosterone) which is applied to and absorbed through the skin into the bloodstream, and which he will take for the duration of writing the text. Preciado describes the process of taking testosterone as a self-experimentation, a process of 'autocobaye' (literally, making oneself the guinea pig or lab rat). The personal narrative and the theoretical sections of the text are not easily separable, since Preciado is exploring theory *through his body* in what he calls 'une autothéorie' [autotheory] or 'un essai corporel' [a bodily essay] (11). For example, while he writes about the history of the pharmaceutical production of testosterone, he also writes about the effects Testogel has on his body as he uses it daily (changing the scent of his sweat, his sleep patterns and even the way he writes).

Preciado's project of self-experimentation with testosterone is a political and philosophical exploration of subjectivity. Putting Haraway's theory of prostheses into practice, he uses the biotechnological prosthetic testosterone in order to disrupt the Cartesian binaries Haraway attacks in her work. Preciado reimagines his sense of self through this experiment, a reimagining far from the Cartesian philosopher-subject

discussed in the previous chapter; the rationalist subject able to separate himself entirely from his body. Preciado describes his self-administration of testosterone as an attempt at auto-decapitation:

Au début de ce livre, je me suis administré la testostérone (au lieu de commenter Hegel, Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir ou Butler), je voulais me décapiter, trancher ma tête façonnée par un programme du genre, diséquer une partie du modèle moléculaire qui m'habite. Ce livre est la trace laissée par la coupure. (375)

[At the beginning of this book, I took testosterone (rather than discussing Hegel, Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir or Butler), I wanted to decapitate myself, slice open my head shaped by a programme of gender, dissect a part of the molecular model that lives within me. This book is the trace left by that cut.]

Preciado writes here of the importance of bodily action rather than solely deploying theory, just as he does in the *Manifiesto*. As if to highlight the difference between his own methodology and Butler's, Preciado references three authors Butler uses in her own work (Hegel, Heidegger, Beauvoir) as well as Butler herself, claiming that in place of citing these authors, he has opted for the bodily experiment of taking testosterone. Preciado goes beyond observing his body, or even placing it centrally within his theory as a trigger for philosophical thought. Rather, he deploys it, intentionally altering it to insist on the potential for bodily resignification and the disruption of binaries.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted Judith Butler's comments on philosophy at the beginning of *Bodies that Matter*: her sense that philosophical investigation was somehow 'disembodied' and 'always at some distance from corporeal matters', that philosophers will 'invariably miss the body or, worse, write against it'. Preciado's work forcefully challenges this view of philosophy with the gesture of the *acéphale*. As I noted in the previous chapter, the image of auto-decapitation echoes Georges Bataille's own anti-Cartesian deployment of the figure of the *acéphale*. Bataille initiated the review *Acéphale* in 1936, with its first issue carrying the above image designed by the surrealist artist André Masson. The image depicts a re-working of Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, the embodiment of classical reason, decapitated and with a dagger in his left hand. This image of auto-decapitation is taken up by Preciado here, making a similar gesture against Descartes's disembodied philosophical rationalism and the humanist philosophical tradition.

Towards the end of *Testo Junkie*, Preciado elaborates on his project of auto-decapitation by recounting a fable. Adopting a tone and using imagery that wryly acknowledges the mysticism with which the body is often treated in contemporary theory, the fable begins with a philosopher ascending a mountain with his disciple, having promised this disciple that he will reveal the 'true' task of philosophy. After an arduous climb to the summit, the philosopher removes a blade. He throws it into the air and it returns at speed, cutting his head clean off. His severed head rolls down one side of the mountain, the headless body down the other. The disciple is faced with a choice: should he chase after the head, or recover the body? This, the reader is told, has been the lesson of philosophy – a choice between head or body, a separation of the two. But, Preciado asks, what if the task of philosophy was instead the intentional act of decapitation itself?

If the choice is between writing from the head and doing away with the body, or the opposite; writing from the body and doing away with the head, neither option is particularly appealing:

Deux voies irréconciliables: une tête automatiquement dactylographe, qui n'a pas besoin des mains pour écrire; ou un corps décapité produisant, comme par suppuration, une réflexion intelligible. Là est le défi et la tentation de tout philosophe: courir après le corps ou après la tête. (375)

[Two irreconcilable voices: a head typing automatically, who has no need of hands in order to write; or a decapitated body producing, as if by suppuration, its intelligible reflections. This is the challenge and the temptation of every philosopher: whether to run after the body or after the head.]

He sets himself the task of reconciling what has previously been perceived as irreconcilable, and indeed the images he conjures do seem to be entirely opposed. Preciado's description of an eerie bodiless head communicating with the world mechanically, through pure thought, 'typing' words without demeaning itself by relying on anything so bodily as a hand is unnerving – not 'natural' enough. While Preciado never explicitly mentions Descartes in this particular section, the imagery he uses certainly recalls the 'meditateur' of Cartesian philosophy, the rational, thinking subject who can exist without his body. This first image could certainly be understood as describing a philosopher who can do without his body, and the line 'qui n'a pas besoin de mains pour écrire' recalls the line from Descartes's *Meditations* that Butler takes up: 'How can I deny that these hands and this body are

mine?’ (Descartes, 1985: 96). The other extreme Preciado presents is, conversely, all too bodily. The gruesome decapitated body’s only means of communicating its ‘réflexion’ is by ‘suppuration’ – a medical term used to describe the seeping of pus from a wound. This headless body’s reflections are thus described as leaking from its body – uncontrolled and undisciplined, messy and abject.^{xii}

Expanding on the first image of the bodiless thinking head, Preciado writes:

En Occident, jusqu’à présent, nous avons cru que le philosophe était une tête pensante (présupposé biohomme qui, mettant apparemment son corps de côté, faisait l’économie de sa bite et pouvait prendre une posture universelle). (375)

[In the West, up to the present, we have believed the philosopher to be a thinking-head (pre-supposed as a cis man who, supposedly putting his body to one side, created an economy with his dick and then took up the posture of universality)]

Preciado follows many feminist thinkers in acknowledging that what purports to be the universal, neutral voice of Western philosophy is in fact a masculine voice. He transports this theory to the level of the body; this philosopher is supposedly a bodiless ‘tête pensante’, yet all the while employs the phallogocentric logic of his unacknowledged ‘bite’. Ironically, it is the specific materiality of his body (‘sa bite’) that allows him to ignore it; there is nothing about his body that deviates from the typical philosopher – the universal does not need to acknowledge difference. The philosophical subject is described here as a Western voice – indeed, Gayatri Spivak has noted that the universal subject is a ‘concealed Subject (who) pretends it has “no

geo-political determinations” (1988: 66). It is also a heteronormative voice – ‘the point of view of the universal’ to cite Monique Wittig, is that of a subject formed in a ‘straight society’ (1992: 59).

The images Preciado presents of writing either solely from the head or from the body are both undesirable. In attempting to write theory that is also concerned with the body, in attempting to acknowledge the body of the philosopher, Preciado refuses to make the choice between head and body that previous philosophy has demanded. Rather than abandoning philosophy as the domain of the ‘head’, the universal, Preciado seeks to broaden its scope to take account of the body, reconfiguring philosophy itself.

This Cartesian division between body and head, nature and culture, has dominated feminist thought. Discussing what he terms ‘le faux débat entre “essentialisme” et “constructivisme”’ [the false debate between ‘essentialism’ and ‘constructivism’] (2000: 113) in the *Manifeste*, Preciado argues that the division between the two has produced a reluctance on the part of constructivists to concern themselves with the material body:

Tout se passe comme si le sexe et la différence sexuelle [...] pouvaient être mieux compris dans un cadre essentialiste alors que le genre [...] gagnerait à être mieux appréhendé à l’aide de modèles constructivistes (2000: 114)

[it is as if sex and sexual difference [...] could be better understood within an essentialist framework and gender [...] better apprehended through constructivist models]

There is a pervasive anxiety in constructivist thought preventing discussion of the material body, as though any mention of it could provoke accusations of ‘essentialising’. Yet for Preciado, both essentialism and constructivism rely on a Cartesian understanding of the body by considering nature and culture as separate or separable: ‘ces deux dependent d’une idée cartésienne du corps’ [both depend upon a Cartesian view of the body] (2000: 115). The premises supporting strict essentialism or constructivism are false: the body can never be understood solely as nature or culture, but only ever as both. Preciado’s approach, outlining a permeability between the material body and the discourse collapses any neat division between the two.

Preciado deploys the prosthetic of testosterone as Haraway intended: to destroy such a binary by blurring the division between head and body. His work takes seriously Haraway’s claim that ‘Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves’, dualisms that include ‘mind/body, culture/nature, male/female’ (1990: 223). In refusing this choice, Preciado brings body and head back together, hoping to make space for the body within a mode of writing that only ever considers its ‘head’. While the project of *autocobaye* appears to be one of self-splitting (into subject and object), Preciado actually occupies both positions, disrupting the division between them. In the same way, Preciado’s auto-decapitation allows him to become both bodiless head and headless body at once, a decapitation that perversely unites the two.

In the *Manifeste*, Preciado had alluded to Descartes’s desire to become master and possessor of nature:

Les narrations positivistes du développement technologique (où l’Homme est représenté comme la raison souveraine qui tempère, maîtrise et possède la

nature brute) [...] présupposent une division et une opposition maintenue entre le corps vivant comme nature et la machine inanimée. (107)

[positivist accounts of technological development (where Man is represented as sovereign reason who tempers, masters and possesses brute nature) [...] presupposes a division and an opposition between the natural living body and inanimate machines]

He identifies in technological or scientific discourse a supposed relation between a sovereign reason that is able to manipulate and control ‘brute’ nature, the rational scientist-subject who is able to control natural objects. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* often playfully takes up such scientific language when describing his own body or events in his life to highlight this division. For instance, the opening foreword describes Preciado’s project as an ‘étude’ [study] of ‘le corps et les affects de B.P.’ [the body and the affects of B.P.] (11).^{xiii} The language of ‘mutations externes’ [external mutations], ‘le tropisme du corps de B.P. vers le corps de V.D.’ [the tropism of the body of B.P. towards the body of V.D.] (11) seems more suited to a scientific experiment than a philosophical work (‘tropisme’ being a biological term, for instance), a theme that becomes more explicitly evident in the title of chapter five, ‘Où le corps de V.D. devient un élément du contexte expérimental’ [Where the body of V.D. becomes a factor within the experiment] (77). The meaning behind this use of scientific language, a kind of scientific drag within the text, becomes clearer when Preciado announces that he is at once ‘le rat de laboratoire et le sujet scientifique’ [the lab rat and the scientific subject] (2008: 126-7). To be at once the scientist and the laboratory rat is to be both the object of study and the subject who records that

study. Again, by simultaneously inhabiting the position of philosophical subject and bodily object through *autocobaye*, Preciado destabilises the division between the two.

In addition to troubling the subject who writes theory, Preciado's work in *Testo Junkie* also disrupts the boundaries of theoretical writing itself. His hybrid genre of 'autothéorie' [autotheory] (11) simultaneously seeks to disrupt the division between theory and literature in an attempt to find a way to address the physical body in a theoretical work. The first few lines of the text outline what an *autothéorie* might be:

Ce livre n'est pas une autofiction. Il s'agit d'un protocole d'intoxication [...]
Un essai corporel. Une fiction, c'est certain. S'il fallait pousser les choses à
l'extrême, une fiction autopolitique ou une autothéorie. (11)

[This book is not autofiction. It's a protocol of intoxication [...] A bodily
essay. A fiction, for sure. If we must insist on a description, an autopolitical
fiction or an autotheory.]

The phrase 'essai corporel' contains a certain tension, suggesting that the body is not the usual or proper object of concern for theory. The verb 'essayer' [to try, to 'test out' or to experiment] alludes to experimentation as well as the genre of the essay (most notably the *Essais* of Montaigne). The phrase also suggests the kind of permeability between theoretical writing (*essai*) and bodily materiality (*corporel*) Preciado insists on throughout his work. The very first line of *Testo Junkie* makes it clear that Preciado is not writing an *autofiction*, yet his reference to the genre is

significant. Autofiction was first used by Serge Doubrovsky in his novel *Fils* [Son] (1977), to describe novels heavily, but often ambiguously, influenced by autobiographical detail. Many of Preciado's influences, in particular Guillaume Dustan and Hervé Guibert, work within autofiction, a genre that plays with an ambiguity over where biographical details end and fictional writing takes over. Preciado transports this ambiguity into theory, his work playfully testing how far the material 'facts' of his life and his body can be brought into a mode of writing that often excludes such concerns.

Writers of autofiction frequently exploit the ambiguity inherent to the genre in their work. Christine Angot, for example, often dismisses shocking and seemingly autobiographical detail in her work (statements regarding incest and homophobia, most notably) by attributing them to her narrator 'Christine', and by asserting the difference between this narrator and herself as author. Gill Rye (2004) explores the uneasy relationship between author, narrator and protagonist in the work of Angot. She writes that the genre Angot writes within renders her both the subject and object of her work. In this way, and significantly given Preciado's investment in performance, Angot's autofiction 'has analogies with performance art' (119). As Hannah Westley has noted in her work on the self-representation of the French artists Louise Bourgeois and ORLAN, 'self-representation means being subject and object at once – seer and seen' (2008: 162). Bringing self-representation into theoretical writing as Preciado does in *Testo Junkie*, allows him to further blur the boundaries between the subject who writes theory and the studied object – in this case his own body. Preciado thus confuses the generic boundaries of theoretical writing, asking what theory or philosophy should concern itself with. As much as he troubles the opposition of rational subject and bodily object, he also disrupts the notion of a

neutral subject who writes theory, gradually widening the scope of theory and introducing aspects of his life and body into the text.

The structure of *Testo Junkie* itself also begins to collapse the distinction between objective theory, as narrated by a neutral or objective theoretical voice, and subjective autofictional narrative. The opening chapter, 'Ta mort' [Your death], is recounted in the first person. Addressed to Dustan, who had recently died after a drug overdose, it is a highly personal account of a sexual ritual performed and recorded by Preciado. Dustan was a friend of Preciado and the editor of the *Manifeste contra-sexuel*, which Dustan included in his series *Le Rayon Gay*. Particularly when describing the action of the performance/ritual, almost every sentence begins with the first-person pronoun 'je'; 'Je plie... Je me fais... J'ouvre... Je prends... Je dépose...' [I fold... I make myself... I open... I take... I lay down] (18). In stark contrast, while the second chapter begins by situating Preciado very briefly through his childhood in industrial post-Franco Spain, the rest of the chapter is written in the third person in the formal theoretical voice, and with not one single use of the pronoun 'je' for the rest of its twenty-eight pages. If occasionally dizzying in terms of its pace, it is a neutrally-voiced genealogy of the production of pharmaceuticals, technologies and discourses surrounding them. As the third chapter returns to personal account, recounting the author's self-prescribed administration of Testogel, the text appears at first to be structured ABAB, alternating chapters on 'theory' with chapters narrating personal events, thoughts and emotions. Just as soon as the reader comes to expect that a 'theory' chapter will follow a 'narrative' chapter, this neatly set-up binary is disrupted. Chapter four is a theoretical discussion of the influence of material and discursive technologies on the construction of sexuality, incorporating Foucault and Butler, yet some aspects begin to undermine the neutral theoretical voice Preciado

has thus far employed. A rather jarring invasion of the author's presence appears at the very end of the chapter, after a discussion of the evolution of technologies of the body, communication and information:

c'est l'ère de technologies molles, légères, visqueuses, des technologies gélatineuses, injectables, inhalables, incorporables – la testostérone que *je m'administre*, par exemple, appartient à ce type de technologies molles. (74, my emphasis)

[this is the era of soft, light, viscous technologies; gelatinous, injectable, inhalable, incorporable technologies – the testosterone that *I administer*, for example, belongs in this genre of soft technologies]

After discussing the history and evolution of pharmaceuticals, the presence of the first-person pronoun 'je' coupled with the reflexive pronoun preceding 'administre', grounds a moment in the complex and lengthy genealogy he is writing in his own corporeal existence – a discussion of theory around pharmaceuticals is brought back to the level at which it alters the cells of his body. The effect is rendered doubly powerful since it recalls the previous 'narrative' chapter (the third chapter, 'Testogel'), which discusses Testogel in detail: how it is administered, who it is supposedly produced for and its effects. What had begun to appear as a genealogy of the pharmaceutical industry and its relation to biocapitalism becomes situated in the effect of its subject matter on the author's life and material body.

The division between these alternating chapters breaks down further as the text progresses. Theoretical definitions begin to be used in narrative sections – for

instance, the theoretical terms used in chapter four are inserted into chapter five, jarring with the rest of the narrative; ‘c’est mon corps, entité prothétique du pouvoir, plateforme microexcitable de résistance, qui tombe amoureux’ [its my body, prosthetic entity of power, micro-excitable platform of resistance, that falls in love] (77), or ‘Durant les sept heures où Victor “travail biopolitiquement”, moi, j’écis’ [During that seven hours Victor ‘works biopolitically’, I write] (118).^{xiv} After a theory-heavy chapter seven (which the reader anticipates as a ‘narrative’ chapter) the reader starts to become confused as to ‘which’ chapter they are reading. The divide does not collapse completely, but is unsettled further, playfully. Chapter eight includes footnotes to a theoretical discussion of the contraceptive pill, which do not refer as usual to a work by Butler or Foucault, but to a conversation with the author’s partner, ‘Je discute la pilule avec V.D. qui a incontestablement plus d’expérience que moi en tant que consommatrice’ [I discuss the pill with V.D. who has incontestably more experience than I as its consumer] (163), or to the author’s own experience with doctors keen to prescribe the pill as contraception (169). By chapter twelve, interjections from ‘V.D.’ are included in the main body of the text rather than relegated to footnotes (303). In this way, the very structure of the text performs the deconstruction of the theoretical voice, the undoing of the ‘neutral’ philosophical subject. The affective response it produces in the reader who has come to expect that the structure established in the first few chapters will continue is one of uncertainty: it forces the reader to question what theory is, what its subject should be and who narrates it.

With the similar effect of situating Preciado’s theory and dislodging the supposed neutrality of the theoretical voice, hand-drawn mind maps begin to accompany the theory sections of the text. These are not neat, digitally produced

diagrams which one might expect to accompany a theoretical work, but include scribbled notes and somewhat frantic connecting arrows that seem to capture some of the experience of thinking through philosophical ideas. Not only do they bring the author's thought processes into the work, these lines – drawn as they are by the philosopher's hands – are offered for the reader to witness. Of course Preciado does not bring his body directly into the text with these marks; they do not imply a body any more than any manuscript would. Rather, when juxtaposed with the digital typeface of the rest of the text, with its uniformity and conventional formality suggesting academic 'objectivity', these drawings gesture toward an embodied theory, performing a playful and subtle disruption of the notion of a neutral philosophical voice. Preciado signals that he is explicitly not a decapitated head without the need for hands in order to write.

Preciado's method is to insidiously undermine the genre of philosophy. While he takes on the neutral philosophical voice at the beginning of his text, this is ultimately a form of drag, with the neutral voice gradually exposed as particular, embodied, queer. His use of polemic, capitalised headings and phrases, his informality, hand-drawn mind maps and the incorporation of frank accounts of sexual acts and the inclusion of personal narrative all contrast with the conventions of philosophical writing. His use of his body is certainly not as the 'setting for philosophy' it is for Butler or Descartes. Similarly, his forthright and unashamedly bold political positions destroy any notion of impartiality, of neutral and objective philosophical inquiry.

A literature of entanglement, or ‘Posthuman life writing’

It is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity, and it is foolish to define the self as something purely human. But how can I start to feel myself as not only human?

(Bennett, 2010: 116)

‘le queer c’est alors la pratique d’identités différentes, un processus autobiographique’
[queer is the practice of different identities, an autobiographical process]
(*Le Zoo*, 1998: 98).

Preciado’s work could be described as an ‘entangled’ literature, a posthuman life writing. In theoretical terms, posthumanist work has undermined certainty in the rational, Cartesian subject. But what would it mean to take this seriously in the way we live, write and understand the world? ‘Entanglement’ as a term has been used by new materialists^{xv} to diagnose the intermingling between what have previously been understood as discreet entities: subjects and objects, selves and others, and even discreet substances (for instance, the substance dualism separating matter and meaning, body and soul). One could read Preciado’s work as a response to feminist new materialist Jane Bennett’s question above: ‘how can I start to feel myself as not only human?’. Indeed, how can we divest of this long legacy of human understanding

– of understanding ourselves as discreetly human – and really begin to see ourselves as emerging and reemerging through ‘entangled intra-relating’ (Barad, 2007: ix); through ‘topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations’ (Barad, 2003: 818)? This humanist legacy has been partly formed and heavily reinforced through the literary genres of memoir, life writing and autobiography. Preciado’s work turns these generic forms upside down, ‘recast[ing] the self in the light of its intrinsically polluted nature’ (Bennett, 2007: 116).

Testo Junkie emphasises what Preciado terms an ‘*autofeed-back*’ between the material body and the discourses surrounding it, exploring a symbiotic relationship – a reflexivity – between bodies and what might previously have been termed ‘outside forces’. This relationship of dynamic coalescence has much in common with Bennet’s notion of entanglement, and similarly ends up collapsing any easy distinction between inside and outside. For example, Preciado discusses the evolving discourses around gender; the forces of global capitalism and the advances in technology that have resulted in the commercial production of testosterone by the pharmaceutical industry. Without the medicalised discourses around gender, particularly the work of John Money, together with the commercialisation of pharmaceuticals in what he terms ‘L’ère pharmacopornographique’ [the pharmacopornographic era] (23), Preciado demonstrates that the Testogel he administers daily simply would not exist; that his material body – his very cells – would not exist in the way that it does; and that (since taking testosterone affects the way he writes) the text he writes would not exist either.

Preciado’s work is concerned with the effects of discourses and technologies on bodies, but also, reflexively, with the ways in which bodies are productive of theories in this continuous and symbiotic process. Not only does Preciado seek to

make theories take adequate account of bodies, he also recognises the transitive relation between the material body and theoretical writing; that theories can not only affect bodies but shape the very cells that compose them. Through testosterone, Preciado illustrates that his body is materially affected by theories and discourses. Simultaneously, and conversely, Preciado's theoretical writing is also influenced by his body's absorption of testosterone. As he begins to take testosterone, Preciado reports an increased drive to read continually, to write prolifically. His body – altered by the prosthetic pharmaceutical – is necessarily implicated in the theory he produces. The text outlines a reflexive causality between body and text: in this example, discourses around gender result in the pharmaceutical production of testosterone, which then affects Preciado's body and the discourse he produces through his text.

Preciado's concept of *autofeed-back* also informs the way in which he understands queer theory's political origins, with its roots in the activist response to the AIDS crisis. Elsewhere I have considered how evolving sexual practices – the concept and practice of bareback sex, specifically – have affected queer theory, as well as how the development of antiretrovirals might affect a body of theory such as queer, in addition to individual bodies.^{xvi} Again there is a symbiosis here which renders any separation of biotechnologies or sexual practices as material on the one hand, and theoretical work as somehow immaterial on the other, as nonsensical. Rather, there is a form of autofeedback, and 'entangled intra-relating' (Barad, 2007: ix), a continuous co-evolution.

The development of prosthetic hormones has relied not only on medicalised discourse but on human experimentation, such as that Preciado describes as carried out in Puerto Rico during the 1950's and 1960's. This relied on the 'pseudo-colonial'

status of Puerto Rico, which became a ‘living laboratory’ for US pharmaceutical companies, effectively enslaving the local population in the service of developing biocapitalism. Preciado acknowledges that his own material existence is formed through these forces of global capitalism, material discourses and, as Marxist world-systems theory^{xvii} describes, the exploitation of those living in the periphery and semi-periphery. Discursive and material technologies, capitalist and colonial realities all combine to produce the material body from which Preciado writes: recalling *Le Zoo*’s investment in Sandra Harding’s situated knowledge, he presents an ultra-situated body and demonstrates an allegiance to particularity over a universal philosophical voice. *Le Zoo* claim the particular position to be expressed through ‘l’autoreprésentation’ [self-representation] (Bourcier, 1998: 12); and thus queer is allied to ‘la pratique d’identités différentes, un processus autobiographique’ [the practice of different identities, an autobiographical process] (98).

What Preciado avoids, though, is a purely individualist account, a navel-gazing approach. Rather, he uses an exploration of his materially situated, subjective position as a starting point for asking much wider questions about the world; questions concerning the entanglement of biocapitalism, systems, state power, industries and institutions. One real strength of *Testo Junkie* is its deployment both of poststructuralism and queer theory – with their focus on language, culture and discourse – together with non-orthodox Marxist materialism and the analysis of (bio)capital. Of the latter, it is work by Negri and Hardt that Preciado is most influenced by, although he also cites Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonella Corsani and Yann Moulier-Boutang. Preciado expands on their concept, which draws itself on Foucault, of ‘biopolitical work’, affirming that ‘les industries pharmaceutiques [...], l’industrie pornographique et l’industrie de la guerre [sont] les secteurs porteurs du

capitalisme postfordiste' [the pharmaceutical industry [...], the pornographic industry, and the industry of war are the load-bearing sectors of post-Fordist capitalism] (2008: 37). Given this, the notion of immaterial labour must be expanded: 'les matières premières du processus productif actuel sont l'excitation, l'érection, l'éjaculation, le plaisir, le sentiment d'autosatisfaction, de contrôle omnipotent, et de destruction totale' [the raw materials of production today are excitation, erection, ejaculation, feelings of self-satisfaction, omnipotent control, and total destruction] (2008: 37). Again emphasizing a liquid quality to this system, he writes: 'l'industrie pharmacopornographique est l'or blanc et visqueux , la poudre cristalline du capitalisme biopolitique' [the pharmacopornographic industry is white gold, viscous, the crystalline powder of biopolitical capitalism] (2008: 38). Not only described as viscous, but also a powder-fine coating, this new form of capitalism is at once insidiously omnipresent, yet hard to perceive, hard to define, and hard to hold on to.

Preciado's subjectivity is not only situated *in relation to* theoretical work, global systems and biocapital but is shown to be formed *through* them: an analysis of self therefore includes, and is used to explore, these wider systems. Preciado's exploration of self is presented not as a coherent, natural whole – but, rather, as historically and materially contingent, as shifting and constituted by various prosthetic-like elements: his relationships with others, with writing, theoretical work, and pharmaceutical testosterone. Another element in the web of entanglement that produces the 'self' Preciado narrates is his personal relationships, most notably, Dustan and Despentés. As noted earlier, the foreword of *Testo Junkie* sets out Preciado's task as an 'étude', which takes as its subject 'le corps et les affects de B.P.' (11). Playing with scientific language, it notes 'deux mutations externes', unforeseen, which have affected it (these are the death of 'G.D.' and 'le tropisme du

corps de B.P. vers le corps de V.D.’) (11). Preciado, his ‘body and affects’, are described like a cell, mutating and evolving with the influence of others, moving in relation to them.

Two scenes describing Preciado’s relationships with ‘V.D.’ and ‘G.D.’ elucidate Preciado’s experience of self as one that is not discreet or self-contained but flooded by texts, language, discourse. Firstly, just as *Testo Junkie* could not exist as a text without Preciado’s bodily experimentation, the embodied experience Preciado describes in his text would not be the same without the theories he has consumed. Recalling a sexual encounter with Despentés, Preciado writes:

Pendant qu’on baise, je sens que toute mon histoire politique, toutes mes années de féminisme avancent directement vers le centre de son corps [...] Quand je jouis, Wittig et Davis, Woolf et Solanas, la Pasionaria et Kate Bornstein, bouillonnent avec moi. (91-2)

[When we fuck, I feel my whole political history, all my years of feminism advance directly towards the centre of her body [...] When I come, Wittig and Davis, Woolf and Solanas, la Pasionaria and Kate Bornstein, simmer within me]

Preciado’s use of ‘bouillonner’ here underlines in this description not only how intertwined he is with the ideas of the writers cited, but also a sense of energetic movement between these ideas and his body. This is a point of culmination in an evolution of the way he experiences his body through theoretical and political ideas. Just as Preciado’s theory is grounded in and confirmed by his body and his

experimentation with it, his experiences and bodily acts are underpinned by the theory he has consumed.

Secondly, in *Testo Junkie*'s opening chapter, addressed to Dustan ('Ta mort'), Preciado channels Dustan's writing style as well as enacting a kind of autopornographic ritual dedicated to him, and performed in his image, in drag (18).^{xviii} Preciado writes that he records this physical performance both by video camera and through the writing of the chapter itself.^{xix} The identity of Dustan – his physical appearance, his writing style or 'voice' as well as certain gestures and facial expressions – is recreated as a 'drag you [Dustan]' (19). Dustan's first novel, *Dans ma chambre* [*In My Room*] (1996), is physically present during his performance and read aloud during the scene:

Je suspends ma bite en plastique au-dessus des paragraphes tatoués sur les pages de *Dans ma chambre*. C'est ton geste. Le gode cache une partie de la feuille, créant une limite, qui permet de lire certains mots et en dissimule d'autres. (19)

[I place my plastic dick below the paragraphs tattooed on the pages on *In My Room*. It's your look. The dildo conceals part of the page, allowing certain words to be read and covering others.]

There is a slippage here between text and body; the pages of the book become skin, the text 'tattooed' onto them. Things are not what they seem – the *bite* is made of plastic, while the book's pages become skin. There is a productive exchange between prosthetic body and text, with the presence of the former delimiting and restricting

what can be read, but, on a more positive reading, in effect creating a new text. Preciado playfully inverts Butler's problem of language's inability fully to capture the body; rather than language's partial access to the body, the body here allows only partial access to the text. In this instance, the prosthetic body overshadows the text, overpowering and obscuring it: perhaps reflecting Preciado's emphasis on the material of his body, his insistence that it cannot be reduced to language alone. Both the physical book and Preciado's body become the host in this communion with Dustan's 'fantôme' [ghost] (19). During his performance, Preciado imitates a memorable facial expression of Dustan's; 'Identique, et méconnaissable... C'est ton geste' [Identical, and unrecognisable... It's your look] (18). As well as temporarily taking on something of Dustan, Preciado shows here that Dustan forms part of him – they are at once alike and dissimilar, not the same, but inseparable.

Preciado's *autocobaye* presents an epistemic methodology – a mode of philosophical investigation – that is inextricable from the body and, vitally, that is able to explore the bodily effects of the dominant pharmacopornographic discourse and regime that he identifies. He uses his body to perform philosophy; his project of *autocobaye* embodying a cyborg politics inherited from Haraway. By presenting a body constituted and permeated by the prosthetic extensions of Testogel, his friendships, the philosophy he consumes and the sexual acts he recounts, Preciado undermines the very possibility of an 'organic' non-prosthetic notion of the self.

Testo Junkie is not only a work of theory that concerns itself with describing corporeality; it is a work of theory with its terms set by the body, inseparable from it. While Preciado is certainly critical of aspects of Deleuze's work in his *Manifeste*, the bodily self presented here reads something like an assemblage – not fixed or stable, but a fizzing coalescence of various shifting components, combining together

momentarily within an equally dynamic, frothy world system. Preciado presents a shifting body flooded with prosthetics, affect, texts, politics, relations to other bodies; all of this producing an entangled account of the bodily self, a posthuman literature.

Queer Permeability

In the previous chapter, I explored the limitations of two strands of theoretical or philosophical writing in approaching the material body – Cartesian rationalist dualism and poststructuralist thinking that results in a ‘linguistic monism’, also manifest in many constructivist understandings of gender and sexuality, not least queer theory. I explored these philosophical approaches out of a concern that both (in different ways) leave the materiality of the body unknowable or indescribable. Where Cartesian dualism’s complex relation to the body imagines it as separable from the mind, both Judith Butler and Jean-Luc Nancy see the material body as impenetrable to language, existing in a different ontological ‘order’ to it (Real as opposed to Symbolic), and certainly unable to be fully grasped by it. While Butler’s response is a warning to bear this in mind, not to resort to a ‘linguistic monism’ that sees the body as quite literally constituted by language, Nancy’s is to outline a way in which language might allude to the material by *exscription*. Preciado, however, insists on an entirely different model of relationality between material bodies and texts: that of permeability. He imagines bodies with shifting and mutable boundaries that are permeable to language, with texts as forms (amongst others) of prosthetic extensions. This radically different response from Preciado as to what bodies are and to how they

relate to language allows queer theory to take account of the weight of bodies' materiality.

Writing in praise of feminist work that takes the proposition of material monism seriously, avoiding repeating the substance dualism that still permeates much feminist theory, separating language from matter and ignoring or remaining agnostic on questions of material biology, Noella Davis writes that 'there is an entanglement, a non-separability, of biology with/in sociality' (2009: 76). Preciado's model of permeability affirms this 'non-separability'. Instead of the poststructuralist insistence on the separation of language from matter, the impermeable block of language that leaves discussion of the material body out of reach, Preciado embraces a materialist monism. This monist approach need not represent a flattening out of substance, or a denial of the power of language. It will include difference, but, as Davis writes further, 'difference is not a joining of two separate categories, but instead implies a differentiation within one system, where the differentiated parts are entangled such that they cannot be distinctly and separately identified' (76). Permeability implies difference between material bodies and writing, but not difference in terms of substance such as that underpinning the dualist account.

Preciado calls for a politics that is not only situated and self-reflective, but that physically experiments with the body of the theorist. He situates his methodology through a discussion of the use of cocaine by Freud, as well as his auto-analysis, and the use of hashish by Walter Benjamin – all of which could be described as self-experimentation. Preciado's writing is a political call to arms: 'Je plaide ici pour un ensemble de politiques d'expérimentation corporelle et sémiotique' [I call here for a collection of politics concerned with the body and semiotics] (2008: 299). While Preciado makes clear that his body belongs to no

particular ideology, this self-experimentation is not a frivolous individual exercise but politically laden. Borrowing a phrase from the AIDS activism of the 1980s New York art collective Gran Fury ‘art is not enough’, Preciado elaborates:

Une philosophie qui n'utilise pas son corps comme plateforme active de transformation techno-vitale tourne à vide. Les idées ne suffisent pas. ‘L’art ne suffit pas.’ Le style ne suffit pas. La bonne intention ne suffit pas. La sympathie ne suffit pas. Toute philosophie est forcément auto-vivisection, quand ce n’est pas dissection de l’autre. Une pratique d’entaille de soi, d’incision de la subjectivité. (2008: 307)

[Philosophy that does not use the body as an active platform for techno-vital transformation is null and void. Ideas are not enough. Art is not enough. Style is not enough. Good intention is not enough. Sympathy is not enough. All philosophy must be auto-vivisection, if it is not to be dissection of the other. It must practice slicing into the self, an incision into subjectivity.]

The images employed by Preciado, previously with ‘autocobaye’, and here with ‘auto-vivisection’ and ‘entaille de soi, d’incision’ – contain a definite violence. He suggests that his method is a turning inward of the potential violence of theory that studies the other, directing it at his own subjectivity.

Yet is there a way in which Preciado uses bodily experimentation, the molecule testosterone, as a material intervention in the text, as a kind of authoritative gesture? Does Preciado appeal to the act of taking testosterone as a kind of validation, an authenticity engendered by bodily presence? If Preciado does appeal to

his material body in this way, it would seem to condemn writing alone as unable to approach the body without such a gesture: ‘Les idées ne suffisent pas’. Wittig’s account of politics explored through the form of writing itself explored in the following chapter certainly offers a different model. But for Preciado, the weight of the material body – albeit one that is understood as always fractured, connected and mutable rather than coherent and static – is central to his theoretical writing.

A closer reading of Preciado’s writing on testosterone exposes its dual function in the text as metaphor as well as material intervention. Once administered, the testosterone gel sinks easily through his skin. In his descriptions of absorbing testosterone, Preciado announces this membrane’s hyper-permeable qualities:

il suffit de l’approcher de la peau, pour que d’un simple voisinage avec le corps, [la molécule de testostérone] disparaisse et se dilue dans mon sang.
(61)

[it’s enough simply to come close to the skin, a simple proximity with the body and [the molecule of testosterone] disappears and is diluted within my blood.]

The process of absorption is precisely not solely a metaphor, but a Harawayan material-metaphor, effecting as it does a material change in Preciado’s physical body. This model of permeability is also used to describe the relationship between language – specifically theoretical language – and bodies. In Preciado’s work, theories are imagined as penetrating through skin and into bodies, much like the testosterone he administers daily. Particularly important to this is Preciado’s comment on

performativity, his desire to ‘*pousser l’hypothèse performative dans le corps, jusqu’aux fluides, la faire passer dans les cellules*’ [push the hypothesis of performativity into the body, right up to its fluids, to channel it into its cells] (2008: 98, my emphasis).^{xx} Just as the testosterone Preciado applies daily sinks beneath his skin and into his bloodstream, modifying the cells of his body, Preciado expresses the desire to understand theoretical writing – Butler’s theory of performativity here, specifically – as affecting bodies at a material level, imagining them passing through skin and into the material body, into its cells and fluids. Preciado’s constant metaphors of theories as cells, molecules, viruses, as well as his bodily experimentation in applying topical testosterone all point towards a model of permeability, towards a subcutaneous theory, a theory that is able to ‘get under one’s skin’.

Preciado uses the model of permeability to build on Foucault’s analysis of biopower, emphasising the materiality of technologies of power in shifting from a disciplinary society to a pharmacopornographic society:

Si dans la société disciplinaire les technologies de subjectivation contrôlaient le corps depuis l’extérieur [...] dans la société pharmacopornographique les technologies *font désormais partie du corps*, se diluent dans le corps, se convertissent en corps. (2008: 74, *my emphasis*)

[If within the disciplinary society, technologies of the self controlled bodies from the outside [...] in the pharmacopornographic society, technologies *now make up part of the body*, dilute themselves within the body, convert themselves into the body]

In what could be viewed as a new materialist reworking of Foucault, Preciado claims that technologies are materially incorporated rather than acting on bodies from the outside. His notion of ‘pharmacopouvoir’ explores pharmaceuticals as material aspects of biopower alongside other forms of discursive control. That is, sex and sexuality are produced by pharmaceutical testosterone, Viagra or the contraceptive pill as much as they are by discursive regimes.

As much as Preciado draws on Foucault, Butler or Haraway, his model of permeability and his focus on the concrete materiality of bodies should also be linked to queer biopolitical concerns, exemplified by the AIDS crisis. Preciado connects the process of absorbing testosterone through skin to the metaphor of pushing a (bodily) queer politics into theory in the paratext of *Testo Junkie*: ‘La politique *queer* y pénètre la théorie, comme la testostérone se glisse dans la peau’ [Queer politics penetrates theory here, just as testosterone slips through the skin]. His reference to the activism of the AIDS crisis, to Gran Fury and ACT UP is telling – the necessity of engaging his body politically can be linked to the urgency of queer politics during this period. Like Preciado, HIV-positive artist and writer David Wojnarowicz writes of a political imperative to engage his physical body, to let his ‘hands become weapons, every bone and muscle and fiber and ounce of blood become weapons’ (1991: 81). Writing during the early years of the AIDS crisis in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, published a year before his death in 1991, Wojnarowicz threatens an explosion breaching the borders of his body, the membrane between interior and exterior. He writes:

I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there's a line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone (161)

While Preciado's breach of skin is imagined and effected through testosterone, a breach from the outside inwards, his model of permeability draws on the logic of outward infection or viral transmission that Wojnarowicz expresses here, a logic that threatens a violent explosion outwards from within and understands a world where bodies are not discreet and contained, but permeated by discourse, vulnerable to viruses. Both threaten the integrity of the membrane itself, both pressure the membrane of skin to breaking point.

Four years after Wojnarowicz died from complications related to AIDS, his partner followed his wishes and threw his ashes over the fence of the White House as part of an action by ACT UP, an act constituting a breach of the imagined borders of state power. The biopolitical context of his future death was certainly not lost on Wojnarowicz during his life, even if it was not framed in such terms. HIV/AIDS was and remains a political virus because of the demographics affected, demographics effectively 'let die' by the state's lack of interest in treating AIDS as a public health crisis, demographics deemed in some way outside of this public.^{xxi} Preciado's allegiance to a biopolitical understanding of subjugated bodies, those who the state would 'let die', triggers his model of queer permeability. A model of permeability is essential to queer theory in providing a way to describe the material violence of discourse and to account for the material vulnerability of marginalised bodies. Preciado's model of permeability affirms this principle, offering a critical understanding of the transitivity between material bodies and discourses that is

crucial to queer theorising. In his attempts to confront materiality and to describe the discursive and material technologies that shape bodies, Preciado's queer permeability is vital to maintaining the political force of queer and to ensure that it continues to speak to situated, material bodies – especially to the vulnerability of bodies marginalised, manipulated and utilised by and for global biocapitalism, normative discourses and technologies.

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ⁱ I focus my attention on Preciado's *Manifeste* and *Testo Junkie* in this chapter, rather than his other published works *Pornotopie. Playboy et l'invention de la sexualité multimédia* [Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics] (2011) and *Un appartement sur Uranus: Chroniques de la traversée* [An apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of crossing] (2019). While *Pornotopie* was published later than *Testo Junkie*, it's writing precedes the latter as it is based on his doctoral thesis in architectural theory at Princeton. While Preciado uses terms in *Pornotopie* that also appear in *Testo Junkie* (for example, a chapter of *Pornotopie* is titled 'Le lit pharmaco-pornographique'), they are still nascent in this work, with more developed accounts outlined in *Testo Junkie*. *Un appartement sur Uranus*, prefaced by Virginie Despentes, comprises a series of very short essays published in the French broadsheet *Libération* between 2013 and 2018. Given their non-specialist audience, this work is far more accessible and less theoretically driven than his other works.

ⁱⁱ In the years since Prosser's publication, such neat divisions between 'transgender' and 'transsexual' as identity categories no longer seem to apply, but his criticism of Butler still holds.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the USA, transgender people are understood to be among those at the highest risk of HIV infection. Despite insufficient data collection, the figures available show that young, black or Latina trans women are disproportionately represented in these figures (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

^{iv} This tactic of using transgender experience to shine a light on wider theoretical approaches, rather than treating transgender experience as the object of study by others, is a common tactic of transgender studies, as I argue in 'Transforming Theory: Innovations in Critical Trans Studies' (2019) *Paragraph* 42:2, 255-68.

^v Gayle Salamon responds to Prosser's critique of Butler in *Assuming a Body* (2010), adding a phenomenological approach to the Butlerian account in an attempt to account for the body. Yet she repeats the Cartesian dynamic of Butler's initial claims regarding the body, reaffirming the body as a site of doubt and uncertainty and insisting on 'those immaterial structures which subtend the body's materiality' (3). She also claims that separating out the 'matter' of the body from its linguistic or social aspects would render it mute: 'What the "real" body tells us – or, rather, what it silently displays,

without the benefit of language – is nothing. Considered only as a blunt materiality, severed from any psychic investments, it has no meaning at all. This body is mute and impenetrable, a fleshy monad that is only “Real” in the Lacanian sense of that word, foreclosed from language, symbolization and meaning’ (88). I contend that it is impossible, however, to separate out matter and meaning in this way – matter is not impenetrable to meaning, nor is meaning ‘immaterial’. Throughout this book I outline a materialist monist approach which sees materiality as permeated with meaning, which is committed to a constructivist and materialist account of sex and gender.

^{vi} Preciado does not employ psychoanalytic theory, sharing Bourcier’s scepticism towards it. See, for example, Bourcier’s essay ‘Zap la psy, on a retrouvé la bite à Lacan’ (2005).

^{vii} Derrida, *Mal d’archive* [*Archive Fever*] (1995).

^{viii} For a discussion of Preciado’s work alongside Derrida’s notion of the archive, see Elliot Evans (2018) ‘Wittig and Davis, Woolf and Solanas (...) simmer within me’: Reading Feminist Archives in the Queer Writing of Paul B. Preciado’.

^{ix} Preciado uses this shortened version rather than ‘godemichets’.

^x The level of agency bestowed on these acts and their predicted subversive outcome is entirely contradictory to Butler in her revision of performativity in *Bodies that Matter*. While they are certainly tongue-in-cheek in the way they are set out, they do conform to a divergence between Butler and Preciado about the political potential of intentionally subversive gendered acts.

^{xi} Butler also cites this line in *Bodies That Matter*, to make the point that bodies are never simply organic, brute matter (1).

^{xii} The example Preciado gives of bodily writing (‘forcer... le corps à produire du texte’) is that of Antonin Artaud (2008: 375).

^{xiii} The initials ‘B.P.’ refers to Preciado under his previous name ‘Beatriz’.

^{xiv} Victor was Preciado’s partner. The ‘biopolitical’ work described is sex work; the reader is told Victor works as an operator on a phone-sex line.

^{xv} Karen Barad’s work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) in particular develops the term.

^{xvi} Evans, E. (2015). ‘Your HIV-positive sperm, my trans-dyke uterus: Anti/futurity and the politics of bareback sex between Guillaume Dustan and Beatriz Preciado’.

^{xvii} A world-systems analysis describes a self-reinforcing global system of capital whereby core countries benefit from a system reliant on the low-skilled and low-paid labour of those in the periphery and semi-periphery.

^{xviii} Dustan described his own writing as ‘autopornographique’; Preciado clearly channels this ‘genre’ in his opening chapter.

^{xix} Preciado claims that the ritual he describes performing in writing is also recorded in film, offering two potential records of the physical event in different media. The potential of performance and the visual to represent the body will be explored later in this book, using the work of the French performance artist ORLAN.

^{xx} To give an example of the divergences in the English translation of *Testo Junkie* from Preciado’s text, this line appears in a much later section of the chapter (chapter six, ‘Technogenre’) with its meaning and the theoretical context in which it is situated significantly changed: ‘Today, this Butlerian analysis comes together with Donna J. Haraway’s lessons for examining the semiothechnical dimension of this performative production: pushing the performative hypothesis further into the body, as far as its organs and fluids; drawing it into the cells, chromosomes, and genes’ (Preciado, 2013: 110).

^{xxi} See for example Leo Bersani’s ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ for an analysis of the ways in which gay men as a demographic were imagined as outside the ‘general public’, with AIDS deemed a threat only to certain demographics rather than society as a whole. He summarises this attitude in *Homos* (1996): ‘Since AIDS is concentrated among homosexuals, drug users, the poor, and the undereducated – what the council calls “socially marginalized groups” with “little economic, political, and social power” – the epidemic will have minimal effect on “the structures and directions of [American] social institutions”’ (21).

3 Writing as a ‘war machine’: Monique Wittig’s textual materialism and bodily metaphor

Abstract

Monique Wittig’s essays and literature are foundational to queer thought, with her work best known through its reading by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). This chapter argues, however, that Butler fundamentally misreads Wittig’s account of sexuality, shifting Wittig’s materialist account of a ‘heterosexual society’ in *The Straight Mind* (1992) to the psychoanalytically informed ‘heterosexual matrix’ of *Gender Trouble*. A Marxist feminist, Wittig insists on language’s materiality, which I term ‘textual materialism’, seeking to exorcise the lingering Cartesian dualism falsely separating language from materiality. Through readings of metaphor around the material, sexed body in *Les Guérillères* (1969) and *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), as well as startling descriptions of words as material objects in *Virgile, Non* (1985), I explore how Wittig’s textual materialism is key to her understanding of the transformative, political power of writing. For Wittig, the power of language to shape the material body is a fundamental concern of feminist thought: if language constructs the body, language can also change it. Long before transgender experimentation with gender neutral pronouns or orthographies, and drawing on surrealist politics, Wittig considers the creation of new and unfamiliar pronominal forms as ‘shocks’: grenades are able to disrupt dominant ideology, offering the reader a chance to experience ordinary language anew. Wittig aims to use these linguistic experiments to infiltrate universal ideology, to flood ‘the straight mind’ with particularity. Given Butler’s suspicion regarding how language can approach the material body, this chapter asks what Wittig’s textual materialism is able to offer queer theoretical endeavors.

Monique Wittig’s collected essays, *The Straight Mind*, particularly her concept of a heterosexual society, are viewed as one of the formative influences of queer theory. Not only are her ideas central to Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble*, they also inform Teresa de Lauretis’s thinking on gender and sexuality. Wittig took a critical stance, however, toward the disciplines that Butler combined with her ideas, including Lacanian psychoanalysis and certain ideas relating to poststructuralist thought. Queer thinking such as Butler’s has

undoubtedly added to an understanding of Wittig's work, yet it is important to consider what might also have been lost with the addition of the theoretical frameworks Butler employs, especially given concerns over their ability to take the material body into account. Wittig herself offers a powerful materialist account of bodies and discourse: could a return to Wittig as one of the foundational influences of queer aid more recent attempts to refocus on the material body?

This chapter explores the relation between writing and the material body in Wittig's work. While in the previous chapter I explored how Preciado makes a material intervention in his texts through bodily acts such as administering testosterone, Wittig's materialist position allows her to open up space for new possibilities for the material body through startling experimentation with form and metaphor in her literary works. Wittig's *textual materialism* is key to understanding her literary project, and I begin by setting out the fundamental differences between Butler and Wittig on the relation between matter and discourse. In moving from Wittig's materialist concept of the straight mind to Butler's psychoanalytic understanding of a heterosexual matrix, Butler's reading of Wittig elides the radical transitivity between matter and discourse in the latter's work.

For Wittig, the function of the straight mind relies on the dismissal of particular experience in favour of universalist abstraction. Destroying the Cartesian gulf between discourse and matter is key to her political aims and central to her literary project. Through her essay 'The Trojan Horse' (1984, republished in 1992) and imagery of the materiality of language in *Virgile, Non* [*Virgil, no* – translated to English as *Across the Acheron*] and *Brouillon pour*

une dictionnaire des amantes [*Material for a dictionary of lesbian peoples*] (1976), I consider Wittig's claim that literary writing can function as a war machine, blasting away convention through the shock of innovative literary form emphasising language's materiality.

Finally, I discuss Wittig's exploration of metaphor around the sexed body in *Virgile, Non*, asking how Wittig accounts for material sexual difference given her definition of sex as a relational term, as a political class. I then examine Wittig's ambivalence towards metaphor and her understanding of its use as a political weapon, offering readings of metaphors around the material, sexed body in both *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien* in order to consider metaphor as a violent, creative and concrete intervention rather than simply an abstraction of material objects.

Context: reception, reading and opposition

Early works of queer theory such as Butler's *Gender Trouble* are indebted to Wittig's contribution to literature, as well as her essays on gender and sexuality. Butler works extensively with Wittig's essays as well as her fiction, specifically *Le Corps lesbien* and *Les Guérillères*; Teresa de Lauretis credits Wittig with inspiring her decision to consider lesbian and gay theorising apart from feminist theorising. Queer theorists in France have more recently taken up Wittig's work: Wittig is influential to Paul Preciado; Sam Bourcier has written on her extensively, and translated *The Straight Mind* into French. Bourcier also

organised a colloquium in Paris on Wittig's work in 2001, shortly before her death in 2003.ⁱ

In a paper presented at this colloquium, Bourcier noted the relative lack of interest in Wittig's writing within France, even in her earlier work written in French. Wittig was embedded in the political movements of the 1960s and 70s; a founding member of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) and the lesbian feminist activist group *Les Gouines Rouges* [Red Dykes], she began writing essays and literary work in French, including an early manifesto for the MLF, and yet came to write and publish in English. Wittig's radical essays and especially her infamous conclusion to her essay 'La Pensée Straight' [The Straight Mind] – that 'lesbians are not women' – resulted in the split between her and other members of the editorial collective of the journal *Questions Feministes* (most notably Christine Delphy, who went on to form *Nouvelles Questions Feministes* without Wittig). Wittig began instead to publish her work in the American journal *Feminist Issues*.

By the time consideration of gay and lesbian studies began to appear in France with Didier Eribon's colloquium at the *Centre Georges Pompidou* in 1997, Wittig had already moved to the US; taking up a post at the University of Tucson, Arizona in 1990. Bourcier presents this move very much as a linguistic exile. Indeed, despite Wittig's essays appearing in both French and English from 1976 onwards, the selection collected under the title *The Straight Mind* was published in English. While in France the queer activist collective *le Zoo*, whose members included Bourcier, fought for a translation of these essays into French, Bourcier writes that the dismissal of any consideration of gender rather than sex in the French academic context had rendered it so hostile that 'd'une

certaine manière, ce texte [*The Straight Mind*] a été rendu impossible en français et en France' [in some ways, this text had become inconceivable in French and in France] (Bourcier & Robichon, 2002: 30).

Bourcier notes that the overwhelming majority of readers now arrive at Wittig's work through Anglophone queer theory, specifically through Butler's critique of her work in *Gender Trouble*. Since Bourcier's colloquium in 2001, however, there has been renewed interest in Wittig's work in France, with the publication of *Lire Monique Wittig Aujourd'Hui* in 2012, edited by Benoît Auclerc and Yannick Chevalier, including an essay by Bourcier himself. But even this work arrives at Wittig via a strange trajectory, after the arrival in France of the translation of Butler's *Gender Trouble* some fifteen years after its publication in English:

Le retentissement majeur de l'ouvrage [*Gender Trouble*], dont la traduction française – *Trouble dans le genre* – paraît en 2005, est l'occasion pour une nouvelle génération de lecteur.rice.s de (re)découvrir Wittig et de s'apercevoir que, dans le monde académique nord-américain, elle est un 'classique' du xx^e siècle. (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012: 6)ⁱⁱ

[The major consequence of the work [*Gender Trouble*], which appeared in French translation as *Trouble dans le genre* in 2005, is cause for a new generation of readers to (re)discover Wittig and to see that, in the US academy, it is a 'classic' of the 20th Century]

Even in France, readings of Wittig's work emerge via the translation into French of Butler's reading of her. And yet Butler's reading of Wittig in *Gender Trouble* has been much criticised: de Lauretis claims Butler offers a reductive and superficial reading of Wittig's work, imagining her as:

an existentialist who believes in human freedom, a humanist who presumes the ontological unity of Being prior to language, an idealist masquerading as a materialist, and, most paradoxically of all, an unintentional, unwitting collaborator with the regime of heterosexual normativity. (2005: 57)

Without pausing here to examine individually these numerous accusations levelled against Butler's reading, I do want to consider what has been lost by Butler's reading of Wittig and indeed what could be gained by returning to Wittig's works themselves. In particular, what do writers such as Bourcier and Preciado seek to gain by returning to Wittig? If Butler abstracted Wittig's materialism in one of the inaugural texts of queer theory, what could a return to Wittig's approach bring to new developments in queer theory?

The attention afforded to Wittig's work by French queer writers should certainly not be explained as a nationalist project of repatriation or restoration – although Bourcier especially is of course concerned with the (feminist) academic climate left in France by Wittig's departure. Rather, I want to consider what might appeal in Wittig's attempts to create new material possibilities through literature. If Preciado attempts the resignification of the body through bodily acts, by bringing his material body into writing, Wittig

employs writing (literary experimentation with form, specifically) to dismember the body through words, open up space for new corporeal possibilities. While Preciado attempts to escape the overemphasis of the linguistic he sees in Butler and earlier queer theory by using his body, Wittig's radical textual materialism means that she does not need such an intervention. While Preciado deploys his body, Wittig sees no problem in using writing alone as a political weapon, a 'war machine'.

From heterosexual society to heterosexual matrix: Butler's discursivist misreading of Wittig's *textual materialism*

Wittig insists on a material monist position: language and matter are not separate substances (a dualist account); rather, language is itself material. Like others in the French context (Wittig herself cites Barthes, *Tel Quel*, and Genette (1992:70)), Wittig emphasises literary form, and more specifically, the materiality of language and words as they are written on a page. She maintains that words and language are material – for Wittig, there is 'another order of materiality, that of language' (1992: 30). Secondly, and following on from this first claim, Wittig continually insists in her essays on the power of language to affect the material. Her linguistic materialism is vital to her political use of literature as a weapon, and to the possibilities of finding a language for new and unknown societal relations and corporeal possibilities, for re-writing what she understands as the social contract of heterosexuality. In the essay 'The Straight Mind' (1980, republished in *The Straight Mind*) she wrote that: 'There

is nothing abstract about the power that sciences and theories have to act materially and actually upon our bodies and our minds' (26). In 'On the Social Contract' (1989, republished in *The Straight Mind*), she wrote: 'even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. *Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it* [...] there is a plasticity of the real to language' (43-44, my emphasis). Here, Wittig gives an indication of the violence that language, (specifically the universalism of 'abstract philosophical categories') is able to inflict upon material bodies. The notion of 'plasticity' suggests malleability, the idea that 'the real' is able to be molded, shaped and changed by language – as such, Wittig attempts to use language in very specific ways through her literary practice to effect material change.

By the term *textual materialism*, I emphasise Wittig's rejection of the separation specifically between discourse and matter, a separation explored previously through Butler's term 'linguistic monism', as well as through Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of touch. For Wittig, the division between discourse and reality is sustained by a Cartesian metaphysics that persists in the disciplines of semiotics and psychoanalysis. It is this division that is inseparable from the function of universalism, preventing consideration of concrete, material oppression and, consequently, of the particular point of view. Wittig insists that any separation of discourse from the material is political as it allows only the universal position to be expressed. This universal view is one of abstraction; it is the legitimate, 'objective' voice of philosophical discourse, claiming to possess reason and common sense.

After citing similar claims on universalism and abstraction from Marx and Engels, Wittig notes that a minority group must appeal to universal reason, and that this is especially true within philosophical discourse:

in the philosophical domain this [minority] class must give the form of universality to its thought, to present it as the only reasonable one, the only universally valid one. (1992: 84)

And yet, what she terms ‘the particular point of view’ can only be expressed by acknowledging the concrete or the material, rather than abstract universalising. As an example she notes Nathalie Sarraute’s comment that she ‘cannot use the feminine gender when she wants to generalize (and not particularize) what she is writing about’ (1992: 60). The gendered nature of the French language makes this much more apparent than in English – with the universal masculine (il/ils), as well as gendered nouns and agreements. Wittig goes on to outline this more explicitly: ‘Only the masculine as general is the abstract. The feminine is the concrete’ (1992: 61). Such concerns are especially out of place in philosophical thought and prevent appeals to the universal. So it is, for Wittig, that by separating material (particular) concerns from abstract (universal) discourse, the particular point of view is dismissed. This split is crucial to what Wittig sees very much as universalism’s totalising function.

The power of universalism is well understood by those inhabiting particular positions (as examples, she offers lesbians, gay men, women). Wittig argues:

All of the oppressed know this power and have to deal with it. It is the one which says: you do not have the right to speech because your discourse is not scientific and not theoretical, you are on the wrong level of analysis, you are confusing discourse and reality, your discourse is naïve, you misunderstand this or that science. (1992: 26)

Key to perpetuating the totalising force of universalism is the dismissal of concrete and particular concerns in favour of the certainty of ‘abstract philosophical categories’ that benefit the unacknowledged universal: not only the masculine, but also what Wittig terms ‘the straight mind’. The universalism of the straight mind prevents expression of the particular point of view, for example: ‘discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms’ (1992: 25). For Wittig, it is this erroneous separation of abstract and concrete, of language and matter that sustains universalism, thus preventing expression of the particular point of view and the creation of new, particular or concrete (as opposed to abstract, philosophical and universal) categories. It is through this insistence on the materiality of language that Wittig is able to see literature as a political weapon ready to breach the borders of universal discourse and create new possibilities through language. By acknowledging the concrete, material concerns of the particular point of view, Wittig attempts her assault on the universal straight mind.

Wittig identifies in particular the disciplines of semiotics and linguistics, as well as the language of psychoanalysis, as key to maintaining this split between matter and discourse characterising the universalism of ‘the

straight mind'. There exists in these disciplines what she understands as a Cartesian division between meaning and matter. More widely, she also criticises this 'classical division of body and soul' at work in the disciplines of history and politics, even in supposedly materialist Marxist and post-Marxist traditions, that separate 'the economic order, the material one, and, on the other hand, ideology and politics' (1992: 73). With the exception of Mikhail Bakhtin's work, as well as some feminists' materialist approaches, Wittig argues that structural and socio-linguistics and semiotics reproduce these same Cartesian divisions:

Form and content correspond to the body/soul division, and it is applied to the words of language and also to ensembles, that is, to literary works. Linguists speak of signifier and signified, which comes to the same distinction. (1992: 73)

Despite acknowledging this same problem of Cartesianism even within the Marxist tradition, Wittig criticises Roland Barthes for ignoring Marxist materialism and instead limiting semiology to a branch of linguistics (1992: 22). She warns that when universal ideas ('the discourses of the dominating group') are abstracted to another domain, that of 'Irrreal Ideas', material violence is forgotten:

When we use the over-generalizing term 'ideology' to designate all the discourses of the dominating group, we relegate these discourses to the domain of Irrreal Ideas; we forget the material (physical) violence

produced by the abstract and ‘scientific’ discourses as well as by the discourses of the mass media. (1992: 25)

Using the example of pornography, which she sees as an example of a violent and oppressive discourse, she argues that semioticians maintain this divorce between discourse and ‘the real’, writing on the contrary that ‘this discourse is not divorced from the real as it is for semioticians’ (1992: 25). Whether or not one agrees with Wittig’s particular example of pornography, her more general argument remains that discourse can violently shape subjectivity and material bodies and minds.

The separation of what Wittig terms as distinct ‘domains’ in semiology is reproduced in the separation of ‘orders’ in psychoanalytic discourse, a matter I explore in the following chapter. Wittig again objects to a false division in this field:

to our analysis they object that there is a symbolic order, as though they were speaking of another dimension that would have nothing to do with domination. Alas for us, the symbolic order partakes of the same reality as the political and economic order. (1992: 57-58)

Having already argued in ‘The Straight Mind’ against what she sees as the totalising discourse of psychoanalysis, specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis, here Wittig criticises the separation of orders in the distinction of the Symbolic from the Real.

If Wittig is highly critical of semiotics, linguistic theorising and (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, Butler is immersed in them – certainly at the time of *Gender Trouble* – and combines them with Wittig’s political theory of a heterosexual society (the ‘straight mind’). Butler is critical of how Wittig believes she is able to deploy language. She reads Wittig as imagining a sovereign subject independent of language, able to deploy it as a tool rather than being constituted by it. She also objects to the political strategy she sees in Wittig’s work; that is, a separatist attempt to establish a ‘pure outside’ of homosexuality, untainted and untouched by heterosexuality. While Butler writes that for Wittig, it is ‘the split between materiality and representation that characterizes “straight” thinking’ (1990: 159), she does not appear to acknowledge the impact of this in Wittig’s thought. Butler’s inability to take Wittig’s materialism into account frames her reading and criticisms of Wittig. Indeed, it influences them to such an extent that Butler misreads Wittig’s work and the terms on which she is writing. Butler and Wittig work with entirely different models of materiality, and it is only on Butler’s own terms that many of her criticisms of Wittig can hold – that is, within a discursivist approach and on the relational model of a separation of discourse from matter.

Wittig’s heterosexual society is a description of material societal relations: women are defined by Wittig in material terms, not in relation to biology but as a political class who are materially (economically, politically) subjugated by men. The heterosexual contract produces sex by falsely naturalising this relation in order to sustain it. Since lesbians do not share this relation to men, Wittig concludes they are not women. In *Gender Trouble*, however, Butler re-formulated Wittig’s heterosexual society as the

heterosexual matrix outlined in her second chapter 'Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix' (1990: 45). Butler's work offers a very different analysis to Wittig, explaining the *discursive* production of compulsory heterosexuality through the theory of a primary taboo against homosexuality in ego formation, informed by psychoanalytic theory and structural linguistics.

Not only does Butler's heterosexual matrix employ theories antithetical to Wittig's thought, Butler criticises Wittig's thinking on these theoretical terms, producing a reading of Wittig estranged from its original meaning. As Sara Salih neatly summarises:

While Wittig claims that lesbian is a concept that is beyond the categories of sex and calls for the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system (1992: 20), Butler argues that sex and gender are discursively constructed and that there is no such position of implied freedom beyond discourse. (2002: 48)

Butler maintains that the heterosexual matrix is vital in the production of *discursive* sex, rather than material sex. Her description of what she terms 'materialization' in *Bodies that Matter*, is actually a description of the discursive production of a discursive construct, writing that "'sex" is an ideal construct' (1993: 1). Butler's theory of the construction of sex is one firmly lodged within the symbolic. That is not to say that Butler denies the impact of the heterosexual matrix on the real, but she certainly abstains from commenting on what this could be. Butler refers to the heterosexual matrix as a grid, writing

of ‘regulatory grids of intelligibility’ (1990: 166) and states that she uses ‘the term *heterosexual matrix* throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized’ (194). Where Wittig’s model of a heterosexual society is fundamentally material, what Butler means by her heterosexual matrix is a grid of intelligibility in the symbolic, like a web covering the real – affecting how we understand the real, but certainly nothing like the transitive interaction with matter that Wittig proposes. Wittig’s ‘heterosexual society’ and Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’ are ultimately very different things, a difference constituted by each author’s varying ideas of the relation between matter and discourse.

Material Language: literature as a ‘Trojan Horse’

Wittig’s essay ‘The Trojan Horse’ explains how the materiality of words is essential to their use as a political weapon through literary writing. Wittig begins by offering a description of the Trojan Horse deployed by the Greeks, which she compares to the potential use of literature as a weapon:

At first it looks strange to the Trojans, the wooden horse, off color, outsized, barbaric. [...] Then, little by little, they discover the familiar forms which coincide with those of a horse. [...] they still consider it with uneasiness. It is barbaric for its size but also for its form, too raw for them, the effeminate ones, as Virgil calls them. But later on they

become fond of the apparent simplicity, within which they see sophistication. [...] They want to make it theirs, to adopt it as a monument and shelter it within their walls [...] But what if it were a war machine? (1992: 68)

Wittig's imagery is striking, but one might well ask how literature could be deployed as the 'war machine' Wittig so powerfully describes. This, for Wittig, depends on two things. Firstly, just as the form of the Trojan Horse is key to its seduction of the Trojans, the unique medium of language deployed in all its materiality as *both form and matter* through literature is key. Secondly, the classification of literature as a war machine depends on an attempt to assault the universal with the particular point of view, to breach its borders. Wittig offers the work of Proust as 'one of the best examples of a war machine with a delayed effect', since by the end of *À la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time], 'Proust has succeeded in turning the "real" world into a homosexual-only world' (74) and it is 'the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine' (75). The two matters of form and universality are not separate; for it is through both the shock and allure of innovative literary forms that language is able to make such an assault.

Wittig's essay emphasises language as a 'raw material' (70), claiming that 'language [is] already a form, but also matter' (71). She asks her readers to imagine a statue of a Trojan horse and compares words to clay imbued with meaning through the form it takes on in sculpture, writing that:

Words lie there to be used as raw material by a writer, just as clay is at the disposal of any sculptor. Words are, each one of them, like the Trojan Horse. They are things, material things, and at the same time they mean something. And it is because they mean something that they are abstract. They are a condensate of abstraction and concreteness, and in this they are totally different from all other mediums used to create art. Colors, stone, clay have no meaning. (71)

Words are unique as a medium – unlike clay, they already contain meaning even before the writer works with them. It is precisely this unique nature of words – as both abstract meaning and concrete form – that leads Wittig to outline their political potential in shocking the reader, something Wittig describes as ‘dealing a blow with words’ (72). It is only therefore through the kind of writing that acknowledges the materiality of words that they can be deployed to their full effect. For Wittig, this means literary writing that pays attention to form as well as content. She argues that much academic writing is unable to produce the political effect that literature can, since it does nothing to extricate language from ‘the domain of ideas [...] issued directly from the mind’ and ‘still rest[ing] on the classical division of body and soul’ (73).

Literature, then, is political in its anti-Cartesianism – that is, in its acknowledgement of both the form as well as the *meaning* contained by words. Literary writing’s use of the form renders it a tool in agitating against the abstraction through which universalism functions and is sustained. Thus, when Wittig writes that in ‘literature words are given to be read in their materiality’, she is making a claim about the political utility of literary writing (71-72):

Through literature, though, words come back to us whole again.

Through literature, then, we can learn something that should be useful in any other field: in words, form and content cannot be dissociated, because they partake of the same form, the form of a word, a material form. (73)

This attention paid to form and the materiality of words in literary writing results in its ability to shock the reader: the ‘shock of words is produced by their association, their disposition, their arrangement, and also by each one of them as used separately’ (72). Wittig shows a visual appreciation of words as they are written, and her thinking here, as well as her description of language as a grenade explored later, is undoubtedly informed by Dadaist and surrealist notions of shock.ⁱⁱⁱ Acknowledging the influence of the Russian formalist Viktor Schlovsky, Wittig writes that she seeks to recreate ‘the first powerful vision of *words* [...] the same shock as if they were being read for the first time’ (72).

To return to the metaphor of the Trojan Horse, Wittig claims that literary work that is innovative in terms of form functions as a war machine, ‘because its design and its goal is to pulverise old forms and conventions’ (69). Despite its strangeness, ‘eventually it is adopted, and, even if slowly, it will eventually work like a mine. It will sap and blast out the ground where it was planted’ (69). Her words are striking, and it is to this imagery of a mine blast, a sap clearing out old ground and a shock ‘pulverising’ convention that I now turn. How does Wittig deal a blow with words?

Wittig's theoretical concepts could often quite justifiably be described as shocking, with both Butler and de Lauretis testifying to the effect her statement 'Lesbians are not women' had on those when Wittig presented her ideas at an NYU conference in 1979. De Lauretis describes her words as opening up 'a conceptual, virtual space that was foreclosed by all discourses and ideologies left and right, including feminism' (2005: 52). She describes this 'conceptual space' as something:

that until then had been rendered unthinkable by, precisely, the hegemony of the straight mind – as the space called 'the blind spot' is rendered invisible in a car's rear-view mirror by the frame or chassis of the car itself. (52)

De Lauretis's metaphor of the 'blind spot' captures the sense of new and unseen space opening up. Perhaps in this way, metaphor itself can open up new space by gesturing towards the unforeseen, towards something that perhaps there are no words for as yet. The concrete metaphor employed by de Lauretis demonstrates the way in which metaphor can be creative. can offer an understanding of something that familiar words cannot – familiar words of course, for Wittig, being immersed in the universalism of the straight mind. It is this notion of metaphor as accessing the material rather than as being an abstraction of the material, the capacity for metaphor to invent, to create new linguistic and material space that I explore later in the chapter in arguing for the use of metaphor as a political tool.

In this sense, then, Wittig's statement that 'lesbians are not women' functions as a war machine of sorts; it produces a shock, opens up a new conceptual space and constitutes an assault on the universalism of the straight mind. It could certainly be likened to the mine blast clearing away old ground to make way for a new conceptual space. De Lauretis powerfully outlines the proliferation of yet unknown possibilities in what she describes as the disidentification inherent in Wittig's infamous words:

Such a shift entails displacement and self-displacement: leaving or giving up such a place that is known, that is 'home' – physically, emotionally, linguistically, epistemologically – for another place that is unknown, that is not only emotionally but also conceptually unfamiliar, *a place from which speaking and thinking are at best tentative, uncertain, unauthorized.* But the leaving is not a choice because one could not live there in the first place. Thus all aspects of the displacement [...] are painful and risky for they entail a constant crossing back and forth, a remapping of boundaries between *bodies and discourses*, identities and communities. *At the same time, however, they enable a reconceptualization of the subject, of the relations of subjectivity to social reality, and a position of resistance and agency that is not outside but rather eccentric to the socio-cultural apparatus of the heterosexual institution.* (2005: 53, my emphasis)

In these few words, de Lauretis succinctly summarises the exciting and unforeseeable potentialities made possible by the disidentification inherent to

the statement ‘lesbians are not women’. Again, the action of disidentification described by de Lauretis could be compared to the mine blast of Wittig’s war machine. Her notion of the lesbian is also described as an assault on ‘the heterosexual institution’ by positioning itself in an eccentric relation to it rather than being outside of it, as Butler suggests in *Gender Trouble*.^{iv} This attack on universality via a breach of its borders, through infiltration, is also indicative of the stealthy assault performed by a war machine such as a Trojan Horse. Yet, de Lauretis’s words here also note the difficulty and disorientation of speaking from the nascent positions produced by disidentification. To further her point, that this is ‘a subject in excess of its discursive construction, a subject of which we only knew what it was not: not-woman’, de Lauretis later refers to Wittig’s second line of *Le Corps lesbien*: ‘Ce qui a cours ici, pas une ne l’ignore, n’a pas de nom pour l’heure, qu’elles le cherchent si elles y tiennent absolument’ [‘There is not one who is unaware of what takes place here, which has no name as yet, let them seek it if they are determined to do so’ (15)]^v (2005: 56). Wittig is certainly aware of the difficulties of speaking from this new position, of naming something as yet indefinable. Further to de Lauretis’s own example, there are numerous instances in *Le Corps lesbien* of an inability to speak names (1973: 147-149; 166), and repeated scenes featuring stuttering and animal sounds (116). Rather than visit these scenes from *Le Corps lesbien*, I examine instead the repeated imagery of arduous attempts at finding an explicitly *material* language linked to a political project – that of finding a utopia beyond the straight mind or heterosexual society in Wittig’s *Virgile, Non*.

Virgile, Non is a reworking of Dante Alighieri’s *La Commedia Divina* [Divine Comedy] [1320] that sees its protagonist ‘Wittig’ being led by her

guide 'Manastabal' (rather than Virgil, as in Dante's work) through Hell reimagined as the heterosexual society, an imagined Paradise and the Limbo of San Francisco's lesbian bars and Pride parades. While Dante's work refers to Hell, Paradise and *Purgatory* (from the latin *purgatorium*, to purge), Wittig refers to Limbo, from the latin *limbus*, meaning an edge or boundary. Rather than existing as three separate locations, these three domains shift into one another throughout the text, with Limbo appearing as an intermediary space. The description of Paradise is not straightforward, but is rather offered in much the same way as a disidentification: we are told what it is only in relation to what it is not. Indeed, its existence is uncertain, and 'Wittig' is told at one point by a mythical creature, 'l'ulliphant' that:

il y a de l'autre côté du soleil une planète jumelle de la terre. C'est là qu'à l'en croire se situe le paradis, tandis que la terre c'est l'enfer.
Comme il se trouve en opposition. (1985: 25)^{vi}

['on the other side of the sun there is another planet, a twin to the earth. It is there apparently that Paradise is situated, whereas the earth is Hell. The Paradise planet is located in opposition' (22)]

Just like a disidentification, then, Paradise is in some way beyond linguistic definition. It appears only fleetingly through much of the text and is only eventually fully reached by 'Wittig' at the end of the book after repeated scenes of painful linguistic failure, in a finale of music and plentiful food prepared by angels in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. Spurred on by her

‘providence’ just as the protagonist in Dante’s work is by the figure of Beatrice, ‘Wittig’ journeys through Hell and Limbo in an attempt to reach Paradise.

In earlier scenes, ‘Wittig’ has struggled to find words to describe Paradise, yet she is told by Manastabal that these words must be found or else it will disappear. ‘Wittig’, however, can only describe what she sees, ‘piteusement’ [pitifully] and insufficiently, as ‘Beauté’ [Beauty] (23). Later, while words begin to appear to ‘Wittig’, she is only able to catch glimpses of them and is concerned they will disappear:

Je tends vers toi, mon beau paradis, du plus profond de l’enfer, bien que je ne te connaisse que par éclairs et que *si les mots me manquent tu disparais comme dans une hémorragie à l’envers*. (Wittig, 1985: 64, my emphasis)

[I reach out towards you, my beautiful Paradise, from the very depths of Hell, although I know you only in flashes, and *if words fail me you disappear like a haemorrhage in reverse* (55)]

If ‘Wittig’ is unable to find the words to describe Paradise, it will disappear like ‘une hémorragie à l’envers’: its disappearance would be something like the stopping up of a flow of blood (hemostasis). The imagery here is violent, carnal and complex. The loss of words resulting in Paradise slipping away from the grasp of ‘Wittig’ is described as a shoring up of bodily borders, the stemming of a rupture. Conversely, finding the words for Paradise is linked to the violent

imagery of a hemorrhage (bleeding): it is compared to a breach of bodily borders, to a flow or free movement across such borders. The passage underlines the difficulty, but also the necessity, of beginning to find a language that resists the status quo, with which new and oppositional possibilities can be opened up. But Wittig describes finding or losing Paradise – a space beyond the universal straight mind – not only through her ability to find words for it, but simultaneously through inescapably violent and bodily imagery. The metaphor is used forcefully to imagine a space beyond the universal – a new linguistic as well as material space – and ties this to corporeal materiality, emphasising universality as a materially violent rather than abstract system. Wittig reimagines the walls of Troy as capillary walls and describes an assault on the universal's borders in carnal terms. The presence of words to describe Paradise is described similarly to the effects of Wittig's literary war-machine – as a violent and physical shock, or a mine blast that can breach borders and open up space for new possibilities.

In the recurring visits 'Wittig' and Manastabal make to Paradise throughout the text, the possibility for language to describe it appears gradually: 'c'est alors mon beau paradis que je cherche parmi eux les mots pour te dire et au moyen desquels *te donner forme* une fois pour toutes' (65, my emphasis) ['it is then, my beautiful Paradise, that I search among them for words to describe you and *give you shape* once and for all' (56)]. Language does not simply *describe* Paradise, but realises it. Later, when 'Wittig' meets her 'providence', she is unable to hear her: 'tandis qu'elle ouvre la bouche pour me parler, je n'entends pas le son de sa voix, je ne distingue aucune parole' (88-9) ['when she opens her mouth to speak to me, I can't hear the sound of her

voice, I can't make out a word' (76)]. A glass wall is imagined between them that prevents linguistic communication, but despite this it is language that is described as having the power to break the barrier down: 'Si c'est une question des mots, il me manqué le sésame ouvre-toi de la fable pour casser la glace. Je reste là à me tourmenter de ne pouvoir rien inventer qui le vaille' (89) ['If it's a question of words, I lack the Open Sesame of legend to break the glass, I remain there, tormented by my inability to invent anything useful' (76)]. It is 'Wittig's inability to invent or create a new language that means it cannot be crossed with the 'magic words' of an 'open-sesame'.

Towards the end of the book, however, Wittig describes a scene set in Paradise where the words that have eluded the protagonist thus far rain down from the sky as material objects: 'Des samares dans leur vol descendant, tels quels, les mots tombent par mille, l'air en est empoisée' (126) 'The winged seeds of the ash descending in their flight, just like that, the words fall in thousands, the air is laden with them' (108)]. As well as to falling seeds or samaras (winged seeds such as those from the ash or elm), words are compared to butterflies' wings, to leaves falling from trees – in short, to solid, material objects, described as 'la chute des masses noirs' (126) ['the fall of the masses' (108)]. Words appear as:

Des flocons de dissemblable densité, obscurcissant le ciel visible entre leurs espaces en longs éclats bleus, tels quels *ils s'appesantissent* jusqu'à toucher terre. Jamais *leur présence physique* ne m'aura cause une joie plus parfaite. Je dis:

(Je tends vers toi mon beau paradis.). (126, my emphasis)

[‘Flakes of dissimilar density, obscuring the sky that is visible between them in long blue flashes, *become heavy enough*, just like that, to touch down. Never will *their physical presence* have caused me more perfect joy.’ (108)]

The phrase from ‘Wittig’'s previous attempt to reach paradise through words – ‘Je tends vers toi, mon beau paradis’ – is repeated. The form of this phrase, enclosed within parentheses, conjures a kind of materiality of words and together with its repetition, it is rendered as a kind of Surrealist *objet trouvé*. Yet this time, rather than anxiety over words stultifying as if through ‘une hémorragie à l’envers’, an immense movement of words is described as they rain down as material objects. Words appear as a physical presence: weighty enough to become subject to gravity, a solid mass of varying densities able to obscure the sky. It is their weightiness that brings them to ‘Wittig’, ‘ils s’appesantissent jusqu’à toucher terre’. When this rain of words finally halts, ‘Wittig’'s ‘providence’ appears and transports her ‘au septième ciel’ (127) [‘to the seventh heaven’ (109)]. This scene heralds ‘Wittig’'s ability to begin to use words to describe Paradise, to render it within her grasp and retain its presence. It also begins her eventual journey to Paradise where in the final scenes, ‘Wittig’ is able to hear ‘la musique des anges et [...] leur parler serein’ (138) [‘the music and serene speech of the angels’ (118)].

While emphasising the difficulty in finding words, these scenes from *Virgile, Non* demonstrate the necessity of their invention and of their *materiality* to the project of creating a space in opposition to convention. In

1976, Wittig published a dictionary with her partner Sande Zeig, *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*. This often humorous text forms a dictionary of an imagined lesbian society presented in the quintessentially universal form of a dictionary. Many entries re-write various figures from Ancient myth (Medusa imagined as lesbian, Medea offered a happy ending (1976: 168)) or more recent history (Marie-Antoinette and Marie-Laure de Lamballe imagined as ‘deux sales gouines à qui on a coupé le cou’ (168) [two dirty dykes who had their throats cut]) or create histories for Amazon warrior races. Others offer new definitions of, for example, ‘Cuir’ (68) [Leather] ‘Pois’ (201) [Peas] ‘Joie’ (142) [Joy], or definitions of words that have become obsolete (e.g. ‘Travail’ (236) [Work] and, unsurprisingly, ‘Femme’ (93) [Woman]). There are also words given entirely new meanings such as ‘Ocelle’ (‘On dit des pores de la peau qu’ils deviennent des ocelles quand ils s’élargissent’ (185) [When the skin’s pores enlarge, we call these ocelli, or eye-spots]). The text is not a simple attempt to produce and proliferate new vocabulary: Wittig’s and Zeig’s text also shows an awareness of the slipperiness and difficulties that the creation of new language poses.

Wittig’s and Zeig’s entry on ‘Langue’ offers a mythical history in which a split between ‘les civilisations des mères’ [the civilization of mothers] and ‘les anciennes amazones’ [the Amazons of the past] resulted in the creation of multiple languages by the former group (150). These multiple languages are described as obfuscatory, having ‘des sens à dédoublement multiple, sorte de galeries des miroirs’ (150) [meanings of multiple dualities, a kind of gallery of mirrors]. They replaced an older, unifying and more truthful language described as infinitely powerful. Wittig creates a fantasy of finding this older

and universal language again, in the entry 'Barrière' [Barrier] in which she describes a magical 'poudre d'escampette' [vanishing powder] invented by the *Gouines Rouges*, which breaks down linguistic barriers and enables a universal lesbian language: 'une langue familière à toutes. Cette langue très ancienne et retrouvée s'appelle la langue lesbienne. Gloire.' (39) [a language familiar to all. This very ancient rediscovered language is called the lesbian language. Glory.]

The myth (or fantasy) of an original and universal lesbian language rests in stark contrast to the difficulties Wittig describes for lesbians (and indeed all particular subjects) in using language as a result of the universal straight mind, as she outlines in 'The Point of View: Universal or Particular?' (1980, republished in *The Straight Mind*): 'This (lesbian) poet generally has a hard battle to wage, for, step by step, word by word, she must create her own context in a world which, as soon as she appears, bends every effort to make her disappear' (1992: 65). Just as writers can inflict violence through their words, writing can violently erase the minority writer who must adopt a universal position in order to speak. This violence of the universal creates a sort of positional push and pull, with the writer moving between particular and universal through attempts to speak:

when you say I, speak as I, you must speak from the universal, not the particular. Women cannot say I – they have to occupy the I: 'no woman can say "I" without being for herself a total subject – that is, ungendered, universal, whole.' Or speak the master's speech. (Wittig, 1992: 80)

Despite this fundamental violence involved in language production, Wittig still attempts to create new possibilities through language, and even through individual words – nowhere more powerfully than through her experimental use of pronouns that she identifies as representing subject positions in language. Wittig ‘pulverizes convention’ and creates a linguistic assault on the universal through her use of pronouns. These single words act in the same way as the disidentification inherent to lesbian positionality (as not-women), encapsulating an assault on the straight mind delivered through the mutated pronominal forms Wittig creates. In short, through her manipulation of pronouns, Wittig is able to render even a single word a war machine.

Pronouns as war machines

Pronouns represent an important space in language for Wittig, representing the locutor and acting as ‘the pathways and the means of entrance into language’ (1992: 78). Wittig claims in ‘The Mark of Gender’ that pronouns are the subject of each of her books (except her dictionary) (1992: 82). Firstly, she discusses her use of ‘on’ in *l’Opoponax* (1964) as an attempt to universalise: ‘*One, on*, lends itself to the unique experience of all locutors who, when saying I, can reappropriate the whole language and reorganize the world from their point of view’ (1992: 84). She writes that the final words of the book (a line from Maurice Scève, ‘Tant je l’aimais qu’en elle encore je vis’) use ‘je’ rather than ‘on’. This establishes an ‘understanding both global and particular, both

universal and unique' and renders the novel's lesbian protagonist 'a lesbian subject as the absolute subject' (88). Wittig claims that this pronominal shift from 'on' to 'je' 'created a context for the 'I' in *The Lesbian Body*', that 'the opoanax appears as a talisman, a sesame to the opening of the world, as a word that compels both words and world to make sense, as a metaphor for the lesbian subject' (1992: 88). Rather than a shower of words as in *Virgile, Non*, this 'opening of the world' can be achieved through the use of the single pronoun 'je' at the end of the text.

Wittig also writes on her use of the plural 'elles' to replace the universal 'ils' in *Les Guérillères*: 'I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language' (1992: 85). Together with an attempt to universalize – 'faire basculer le pronom **ils** en tant que général, à connotation masculine et lui dérober son universalité, au moins dans l'espace du texte' (1994: 119, emphasis in bold original) [to upset the pronoun 'ils' in so far as it signifies the general, while also denoting the masculine, to steal away its masculinity, at least in the space of the text] – Wittig writes: 'I wanted to produce a shock for the reader entering a text in which *elles* by its unique presence constitutes an assault' (1992: 85). This shock is inextricable from the form of the word on the page, a new form that constitutes an assault and asks readers to see familiar words anew. In addition to 'on' and 'elles', Wittig discusses her use of the barred first-person pronoun 'j/e' throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. Noting the influence of Benveniste's writing on the 'I' as shifter in *Problèmes de linguistique Générale* [Problems in General Linguistics] (1966)), Wittig writes that:

The bar in my j/e is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of 'I', an 'I' exalted in its lesbian passion, an 'I' so powerful that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and goddesses, lesbianize Christ, lesbianize the men and the women. (2005: 47)

Just as the Trojan Horse is designed to breach the city walls of Troy, Wittig's pronoun-as-war-machine 'j/e' is rendered as always in breach of its own borders. Just as Wittig's lesbian performs a kind of contamination of supposedly natural binary sex, the particular point of view cannot be contained and spills over its borders in a relentless assault on the universal: the straight mind, gender categories and even Christ. Wittig describes the power held in a single pronoun:

This 'I' can be destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated. Nothing resists 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. (1992: 87)

A perfect war machine, Wittig's 'j/e' is unstoppable. The imagery of lava flow is reminiscent of the linguistic hemorrhage of *Virgile, Non* but this time there is no danger of shoring up borders to reverse its effects. Just as through Wittig's corporeal metaphor, the shock caused by Wittig's pronouns again results in an opening up of possibilities lying irreducibly in the form of the new word – the materiality of 'j/e' or 'elles' as it appears to the reader. Both in the necessity of

their materiality, in harnessing form in order to shock, and their unstoppable assault on universality, I suggest that Wittig's experimentation with pronouns can epitomise the function of a war machine and distill it even into a single word.

It is this assault on universality that renders Wittig's particular experimentations with pronominal forms unique. While other such experimentations with gendered pronouns in French (for example, Hélène Cixous's fusion of 'ils' and 'elles' into 'illes' in 'Le rire de la Méduse' [The Laugh of the Medusa] (1975), or more recent attempts to create the gender neutral pronoun 'iel' by transgender communities in France) may produce the shock of a new form, they do not constitute the displacement of the universal that is key to the force of Wittig's deployment of new pronominal forms. Similarly orthography such as 'lecteur.rice.s' used by Auclerc and Chevalier show 'la prégnance de la marque du genre en français' [the importance of the mark of gender in French] (an effect these authors try to achieve by choosing 'la forme la plus spectaculaire' [the most dramatic form]) but Wittig's aim is much more far-reaching (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012: 5). None of these pronouns or orthographies perform the same function as Wittig's, which is to seek to displace universal pronouns ('je', 'ils', 'on') with the particular point of view; that is by replacing 'ils' with 'elles' as in *Les Guérillères*, by rendering an eventual lesbian 'je' as the universal 'on' as in *L'Opoponax*, or as in *Le Corps lesbien* by creating a monstrous and unstoppable 'j/e' which refuses to remain either particular or universal. Like Wittig's statement that 'lesbians are not women', her pronouns can perform a disidentification key to destroying the borders between universal and particular. Like this statement, they are able to

open up possibilities and conceptual space, to shock and deal a blow to the reader. Her pronouns, however, can deal this blow in a single word due to the shock produced by their material form that forces the reader to re-imagine the word anew, to see a pronoun as if for the first time. In this way, Wittig molds some of the most often used and seemingly benign words into linguistic grenades.

The material body: universalism, language and metaphor in *Virgile, Non; Les Guérillères; Le Corps lesbien*

How does Wittig describe the material body, and how does it relate to metaphor? Just as her experiments with pronominal forms ask readers to consider everyday words anew, Wittig's uses of metaphor perform something similar. Her metaphors of lava flow and hemorrhage, just like de Lauretis's description of 'lesbians are not women' through the metaphor of the 'blind spot', all gesture towards something beyond static language weighed down by universalist ideology, language constitutive of the straight mind. For Wittig, the 'straight mind' functions through myth and metaphor, it 'envelops itself in myths, resorts to enigma, proceeds by accumulating metaphors' (1992: 28). Wittig explores metaphor on her own terms, in particular in relation to the material body, in *Virgile, Non, Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*. Firstly, I examine Wittig's statement 'lesbians are not women' in relation to questions of material sex: if sex is understood as a political class, what becomes of the materiality of sex? Wittig was clear that 'Woman' is not an ontological

category but a political and economic position in relation to men: ‘The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual. As such it does not concern being but relationships (for woman and men are the result of relationships)’ (1992: 5). For Wittig ‘sexual difference’ should be understood in Marxist terms as class struggle. But if sex is to be thought of as *a product of* a hierarchized political relationship rather than a natural fact, how then do we understand the material body? Are material sexed differences simply conservative political fictions?

An early scene of *Virgile, non* stages a confrontation between the ‘lavender menace’ of political lesbianism and a group of straight women in a San Francisco laundromat. In just a few pages, this short scene manages to be at times hilarious, moving and unsettlingly violent. While the (heterosexual) women verbally attack ‘Wittig’ at length for being a lesbian, the text presents a linguistic barrier between these women and ‘Wittig’. The lines of communication are not clear, with the women unable to pronounce ‘Sappho’ (over-pronouncing the final syllable), emitting wailing, whistling sounds and remaining ‘sourdes à [ses] exhortations’ (16) [‘deaf to my exhortations’ (14)]. Conversely ‘Wittig’ is unable to ‘atteindre leur compréhension’ (16) [‘penetrate their understanding’ (14)]. Eventually, in an effort to express a commonality, ‘Wittig’ strips naked between the rows of washing machines to display that ‘Je n’ai [...] rien de spécial à exhiber si ce n’est pas la parfaite conformité humaine avec les personnes de mon sexe, une similitude de plus évidentes et banales’ (16) [‘I have nothing special to exhibit, only perfect human conformity with persons of my own sex, a most obvious and commonplace similarity’ (14)]. Despite ‘Wittig’'s intentions, what the other

women see is anything but the physical sameness ‘Wittig’ hopes to express. Rather, firstly they see a body ‘couverte de poils de pieds à la tête’ (17) [‘covered with hair from head to foot’ (15)]. ‘Wittig’ is astonished to see that the ‘duvet’ [down] that formerly covered her skin has indeed been replaced: ‘Je me regarde avec étonnement: c’est vrai, j’ai des poils longs, noirs et luisant qui me couvrent tout le corps’ (17) [‘I look at myself in astonishment: it’s true, long, black, glossy hairs cover my entire body’ (15)]. While ‘Wittig’ remains unperturbed, seeing this change only in terms of the warmth it will provide her in winter, the women then exclaim that she is covered in scales. ‘Wittig’ finds that her body is now indeed covered in scales, and again takes delight in ‘des écailles dures et brillantes que je trouve du plus bel effet et qui ne vont pas manquer de resplendir au soleil’ (18) [‘hard, shiny scales that I find most attractive. They won’t fail to glitter in the sun’ (15-6)]. Finally, the women exclaim ‘Regardez, il est long comme un long doigt. Coupez-le, coupez-le’ (18) [‘Look, it’s as long as a middle finger. Cut it off, cut it off.’ (16)]. ‘Wittig’ has no time to verify this new accusation since the women begin to attack her. The scene later prompts the protagonist to ask her guide if the laundromat is the first circle of Hell (20).

This interaction shows something of Wittig’s understanding of the importance of discourse in shaping the way that the body’s materiality, including the sexed body, is viewed and understood. In her attempt to find a commonality between herself and the women, ‘Wittig’ appeals to what she imagines is their shared sexed physiology. Yet it is her body that provokes chaos and ultimately violence against her, with Manastabal hurriedly attempting to cover her with a piece of clothing that she has stolen from a

tumble-dryer, covering her ‘nudité, cause d’après elle de tout ce chahut’ (17) [‘nudity, the cause [...] of all this uproar’ (15)]. What ‘Wittig’ imagines as a total equivalency in their sexed bodies – ‘la parfaite conformité humaine avec les personnes de mon sexe’ – is seen as anything but. ‘Wittig’'s body is seen by the women as monstrous, and *monstrously different* from their own bodies. ‘Wittig’ herself begins to see what they see, and yet is able to appreciate the hair or the scales positively. Ultimately, ‘Wittig’'s attempt to express a commonality fails because her body is seen by these women as differently *sexed*, with the women locating the presence of a phallus on ‘Wittig’'s body.

In the opening diatribe of the women in the laundromat it was obvious that they saw no commonality between themselves and ‘Wittig’ as a lesbian, who is described as a deserter, told to go back to the lesbian bars of 24th Street and Valencia, and that it would be better if all lesbians were drowned. In the following passages, however, it is clear that this sense of difference also extends to the physical body; the women cannot see ‘Wittig’'s body as the same as theirs. ‘Wittig’'s gesture of nudity and her body are both violently rejected *and* perceived as violent themselves – before articulating the monstrosities they read on ‘Wittig’'s lesbian body, the women are described as wailing like furies, calling out ‘au viol, au viol’ (17) [‘rape, rape’ (15)]. Lesbians are certainly not seen as straightforwardly female in this passage, but as possessing variously monstrous, alien or phallic bodies. The women’s words are inflected by the language of Freudian psychoanalysis – in a nod to penis envy and castration anxiety, they immediately want to cut off the phallus they perceive on ‘Wittig’'s body. ‘Wittig’ responds in the same language, noting that ‘pour ce qui est de le couper, elles se trompent de continent’ (18) [‘when it

comes to cutting it off, they've got the wrong continent' (16)], alluding to Freud's claim that female sexuality was the 'dark continent' of psychoanalysis. It is clear that the image they perceive of Wittig's body, the image of a lesbian body, is constructed through numerous discourses, including psychoanalytic (one which Wittig had no particular time for) and sexological.^{vii} Jack Halberstam notes the widespread consensus of 18th- and 19th-century sexologists on 'tribades with enlarged clitorides' (1998: 79) as well as Valerie Traub's research in 'The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris' (1996) that examines anxieties over 'clitorides capable of penetration' in early-modern European and Ancient Greek culture (Halberstam, 1998: 60). Halberstam also refers to Havelock Ellis's claim in 'Sexual Inversion in Women' (1895) that 'some kinds of excessive hairiness (hypertrichosis) and masculine distribution of hair can be associated with inversion' (1998: 78). Wittig's addition of scaliness to the supposed physical characteristics of lesbians simply forces the point: lesbians have been suspected of being in some way physiologically different from heterosexual women for centuries.

In these scenes in *Virgile, Non*, 'Wittig' embraces the physical changes that appear on her body after they are read there by the group of heterosexual women. Wittig also repeats similar scenes of becoming monstrous or animal throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. Just as in the scene from *Virgile, non*, her protagonists grow hair or fur to become wolf-like, their skin is covered in snakes (1973: 125-126) or takes on the sleek, blue skin of a shark (67). Is there a way in which Wittig's disidentification 'lesbians are not women' extends to the material body? If lesbians are not women, are they female? In his essay 'Gare à la Gouine Garou!' [Beware of the were-dyke!] (2002), Paul B Preciado

reads these descriptions of physical mutation as Deleuzian becomings that embrace monstrosity, animality and being non-human. Preciado argues that they enact a *corporeal disidentification* from the category 'woman'. Reading Wittig's work in relation to what he sees as Simone de Beauvoir's traumatic and wholly negative description of the process of becoming woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), Preciado claims that Wittig is equally aware of the material, corporeal consequences of gendered discourse on the body and its formation, something he describes as 'la déformation politique du corps féminin' [the political deformation of the female body] (201). In discussing the 'gouine-garou' of the essay's title, Preciado sees embracing the 'poil' of the wolf, or the were-wolf ('loup-garou') in *Le Corps lesbien* as a resistance to the heterosexual construction of sex in terms more post-human than performative.

Preciado also addresses the issue of what becomes of the sexed body given Wittig's analysis that lesbians are not women and that sex is a political class. In the same collection of essays, Sam Bourcier offers an important point in terms of contextualization, noting that in the context of France the discussion of 'gender' simply did not (and continues not to) exist in the same way that it does in the Anglophone context, with an arguably greater intellectual support for essentialising 'difference' feminism in France. Thus, in France, the move to re-conceptualize sex as a political class by Wittig removed it from essentialist discourse entirely, something which even previous constructivist writing such as Beauvoir's had not imagined (Bourcier & Robichon, 2002: 27). Preciado takes up the issue of materiality in the spirit of Wittig, insisting upon discourse's radical influence in shaping material bodies. Preciado refers to Leo Bersani's discussion of Wittig in *Homos*, in which he writes of the 'poignant'

yet ‘incomparably absurd’ moment in which Wittig responds to the question of whether or not she has a vagina at a lecture at Vassar College with the answer ‘no’ (Bersani, 1996: 45). Bersani refers to Wittig as a ‘martyr, ready to sacrifice her own body to the logic of her lesbian passion’ (45). While Preciado claims Wittig reported that she was never in fact asked this question, he is nonetheless happy to take up the cause: ‘Ce n’est donc Wittig mais moi qui dis aujourd’hui: “Je n’ai pas de vagin”’ [It’s therefore not Wittig, but myself who pronounces today: ‘I do not have a vagina’] (2002: 205). Preciado affirms that one could only argue this through a ‘cadre hyper-constructiviste et surtout post-féministe pour penser le corps’ [hyper-constructivist, and above all post-feminist, framework for thinking about the body] (205). His position constitutes a war against the ‘natural’ body, but also the body as constructed by the discourse of heterosexuality. As does Irigaray in *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* [This Sex which is Not One] (1977), Preciado refers to the etymology of ‘vagina’ from the latin *vāgīnae*, meaning ‘scabbard’. He argues that the vagina is defined in heterosexual terms, as a sheath for a penis. Building on Wittig, he claims that the straight mind organizes and defines bodily organs as much as it does economic realities or social relations. Refusing Bersani’s reading, Preciado argues that from a material position outside of straight sexuality, one can make a claim about the material body: ‘que l’on n’a pas de vagin et donc pas de corps qui puisse être appelé “femme”’ [that one does not have a vagina, and therefore does not have a body that can be called ‘female’] (205-6). Preciado thus shifts Wittig’s disidentification ‘lesbians are not women’ firmly onto the material body, reading multiple corporeal disidentifications from female/woman to animal in Wittig’s work, especially to the ‘gouine garou’ of

the essay's title. Preciado's reading offers insight into the way in which Wittig sees discourse as shaping the material body. Exploring this relationship further, I turn to Wittig's use of metaphor around the sexed body in *Les Guérillères*, as well as her exploration of the violent battle for a lesbian body staged in *Le Corps lesbien*.

Les Guérillères is an uncompromisingly violent epic poem, relating a war between a group of guerilla fighters referred to as 'elles' against a group referred to as 'ils'. These pronouns do not correspond, as is often incorrectly assumed, to 'women' and 'men' with Wittig intending 'elles' to be understood as a universal pronoun. Indeed, Wittig was critical of David Le Vay's English translation of the text, originally published in 1971: 'When *elles* is turned into *the women* the process of universalization is destroyed' (1992: 86). Wittig notes her displeasure at the result that 'the word *women* appear[s] obsessively throughout the text' (86). Similarly, Le Vay often translates 'ils' as 'the men', or even adds the qualifier 'male' when translating masculine nouns – for example, 'les assiégeants' (Wittig, 1969: 143) is translated as 'the male beseigers' (Wittig, 2007: 99). Thus, the importance of these translations as interpretations of Wittig's French text relates not only to questions of universalisation, but to questions of material sex.

Les Guérillères is a text divided into three chronologically complex parts, each beginning with a large black circle that fills a blank white page reflecting the circular chronology that follows. The third part, according to Wittig herself, is the 'chronological beginning of the narrative' and is the most disturbingly violent as it describes the war itself (1992: 85). The first two parts relate various scenes after this war. While the first describes 'elles''s use of

small books carried by ‘elles’, which list endless metaphors and similes relating to the vulva, by the second section these have become obsolete. The opening section displays an obsession with the vulva, clitoris and labia, with various scenes including descriptions of music evoking ‘le O, le zéro ou le cercle, l’anneau vulvaire’ (1969: 16) [‘the O, the zero or the circle, the vulval ring’ (22)];^{viii} ‘elles’ taking pride in ‘l’emblème de la fécondité’ (42) [‘emblem of fecundity’ (53)]; comparisons of the clitoris ‘à un noyau de cerise, à un bourgeon, à une jeune pousse [...]’ (42) [‘a cherrystone, a bud, a young shoot’ (53)]. These endless comparisons are often articulated after the much-repeated construction ‘Elles disent que...’ [They say that...] (appearing ten times over two pages alone (42-3)) and are linked to ‘féminaires’ [feminaries] that list these comparisons (‘Elles disent que dans les féminaires le gland du clitoris et le corps du clitoris sont décrites comme encapuchonnés [...] Elles le comparent au mercure’ (29) [‘The women say that in the feminary the glans of the clitoris and the body of the clitoris are described as hooded [...] They compare it to mercury’ (38)].

These organs are generally idealised in the *féminaires*, no more so than in a scene where ‘elles’ describes the exposure of their genitals to the sun: ‘Elles disent qu’elles exposent leurs sexes afin que le soleil s’y réfléchisse comme dans un miroir. Elles disent qu’elles retiennent son éclat’ (24) [‘The women say that they expose their genitals so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance’ (30-1)]. Although at one point they are described in a potentially negative way (‘les vulves sont des pièges des étaux des tenailles’ (43) [‘vulvas are traps vices pincers’ (54)], this inscription is not from a *féminaire* but from graffiti on an old plaster-

covered wall. Thus, while Erika Ostrovsky claims that it is obvious that these *féminaires* have been written by male authors, focusing on ‘women’s bodies as objects [...] reducing women to their genitalia’ (1991: 56-7), I would argue that the imagined authorship of these books within *Les Guérillères* is less than clear-cut. Ostrovsky makes a link between the words ‘féminaire’ and ‘bestiaire’ [bestiary], with the imagined authors creating a derogatory association of women with animality (1991: 56). The *féminaires* do indeed have strong resonances with bestiaries by virtue of the way in which these texts often create myths and metaphors to attach to various animals. But Wittig’s description of *féminaires* as small books carried around by ‘elles’, together with the suggestion that ‘on peut réciter les comparaisons à la façon de litanies’ (43) [‘these comparisons may be recited like a litany’ (54)] also indicates a link between ‘féminaire’ and ‘breviaire’ [breviary]. It is equally possible that such litanies have been created by women, or by ‘elles’ in an attempt to valorise their sex (as indeed many French feminist texts contemporary to Wittig’s did). Despite most of the comparisons in the first part being positive (idealisations, in fact) Wittig’s protagonists come to reject this metaphor wholesale. At the end of the first part there is the suggestion that these *féminaires* may have fulfilled their function and have become obsolete. To avoid being restricted ‘d’un savoir inutile’ (68), the handbooks are publicly burned.

The second part of *Les Guérillères* describes ‘elles’ having moved on from the *féminaires*. ‘Elles’ must now begin to invent their own terms without resorting ‘aux herbiers ou aux bestiaires’ (74) [‘to herbals or bestiaries’ (92)]. This creation of terms is effected by the ‘grand registre’ [great register] – a large public book that is constantly being filled with writing by one of the

group of 'elles' (74). 'Elles' now reject the idealisation of the vulva in favour of 'corps intègres': 'Elles disent qu'il faut alors cesser d'exalter les vulves [...] Elles, corps intègres premiers principaux, s'avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde' (102) ['They say they must now stop exalting the vulva [...] They, the women, the integrity of the body their first principle, advance marching together into another world' (128-9)]. Wittig rejects the focus on genital sex in attempts to revalorise what has been disdained:

Elles disent qu'elles ne privilégient pas telle de ses parties sous prétexte qu'elle a été jadis l'objet d'un interdit. Elles disent qu'elles ne veulent pas être prisonnières de leur propre idéologie [...] elles ne comparent pas les vulves au soleil à la lune aux étoiles. Elles ne disent pas que les vulves sont comme les soleils noirs dans la nuit éclatant. (80-81)

[They say that they do not favour any of its parts on the grounds that it was formerly a forbidden object. They say that they do not want to become prisoners of their own ideology [...] they do not compare the vulvas to the sun moon stars. They do not say that the vulvas are like black suns in the shining night. (100-1)]

Such attempts at revalorisation will again lead 'elles' to become victims of ideology, even if this time it is their own. When metaphor begins to become dogma, to shut down new possibilities, it is rejected. When vulvas are

discussed in this second part it is now often with the preceding phrase ‘elle ne disent pas’ [‘they do not say’]. There is an explicit rejection of idealisation and metaphor: ‘Elles n’utilisent pas pour parler de leurs sexes des hyperboles des métaphores [...] Elles ne récitent pas les longues litanies, dont le moteur est une *imprécation* sans fin’ (93, my emphasis) [‘In speaking of their genitals the women do not employ hyperboles metaphors, they do not proceed sequentially or by gradation. They do not recite long litanies, whose refrain is an *unending imprecation*’ (116)]. The eventual understanding of the old litanies as ‘une imprécation sans fin’, as a curse, is telling. At this point, one might just as well read the rejection of the proliferation of positive metaphor around the vulva, labia, clitoris etc. as a rejection of feminist models based on sexual difference prevalent in much feminist thought during the time Wittig was writing. As Diane Crowder writes, Wittig’s aim is not an essentialist valorisation of the female sex by any means:

The thrilling and horrifying war depicted in that novel is less a war of the sexes than a war on the notion of two sexes. If the *guérillères* initially glorify femaleness as a way to rediscover the history of female resistance to heterosexuality (by invoking a rich tapestry of myths and legends or by privileging female nonreproductive sexuality), they soon realize that no part of any body should be valued over any other. (2007: 493)

Wittig’s work constitutes a war against binary sex as located entirely in genital sex or sexual difference. Her eventual rejection of metaphor around the sexed

body in her text suggests that while such metaphors may be strategically useful in the creation of new material possibilities through experiments with linguistic form, they should never be considered an end point in themselves: attaching fixed rather than fluid meaning to the body will eventually amount to a curse. The 'féminaires' in *Les Guérillères* have been rejected because, pulled down by their own weight, they have ceased to open up possibilities of inventing new meaning. Their meaning has now been forgotten ('À propos des féminaires elles disent par exemple qu'elles ont oublié le sens d'une de leurs plaisanteries rituelles' (60) ['As regards the feminaries the women say for instance that they have forgotten the meaning of one of their ritual jokes' (76)]) and they are remembered only as a source of amusement: 'Elles disent qu'elles ont trouvé des appellations en très grand nombre pour désigner les vulves. Elles disent qu'elles en ont retenu quelques'un(e)s pour leur amusement. La plupart ont perdu leur sens' (66) ['The women say that they have found a very large number of terms to designate the vulva. They say they have kept several for their amusement. The majority have lost their meaning.' (84)]. Indeed, commenting on the repetition of 'elles ne disent pas', Wittig has remarked: 'C'est une façon ironique de se défaire des féminaires de la première partie. Ces féminaires ambigus où sont répertoriés tous les termes décrivant les vulves *ne servent plus maintenant*, dans cette deuxième partie, qu'à informer et amuser les petites filles' [It's an ironic way to undo the feminaries of the first part. These ambiguous feminaries list all the terms describing vulvas in this second part, terms which *are no longer of any use*, except to educate and amuse little girls] (1994: 120, my emphasis). Wittig suggests again that metaphor is a temporary political tool, to serve a purpose rather than being the

goal itself. And yet, she also cunningly suggests her own text as a feminary in *Les Guérillères* itself. She describes the feminaries as containing lists in capitals at the centre of the page on a white background, just as the lists of capitalised names or the poem that frames *Les Guérillères* are set out (1969: 17). Wittig here acknowledges the temporary utility of bodily metaphor in creating new space for bodily possibilities, in creating new meanings for bodies. She may even suggest (perhaps even hope) that one day her own text will be laughed at, considered obsolete just as the ‘féminaires’ within the text are, seen merely as a necessary but temporary step along the way.

Wittig’s aim is not to solidify metaphor, then, and she is clearly aware of its political power as well as its dangers. Nevertheless, she writes of *Le Corps lesbien*:

If I used the anatomical vocabulary to design the human body then I would appropriate it for my purpose. The whole vocabulary of the fiction *The Lesbian Body* is thus derived from a rigid anatomical vocabulary. Thus I acquired a precise set of words with which to talk about the body without metaphors, staying practical and pragmatic without sentimentality or romanticism. (2005: 46)

Wittig is clear here in her intent to describe the body without metaphor, to use and appropriate anatomical terms for her own ends. Yet how is one to understand this statement when only on the following page she writes of *Le Corps lesbien*: ‘The book is thus formed of two parts. It opens and falls back on itself. One can compare its form to a cashew, an almond, to a vulva’ (2005:

47)? Wittig is well aware of the omnipresence of metaphor, and that supposedly neutral anatomical terms are not devoid of metaphoric force and violence, as Preciado's comments on the etymology of 'vagina' demonstrate. In the final part of this chapter, I examine how Wittig interacts with the materiality of the particular body and these supposedly neutral anatomical terms in *Le Corps lesbien*.

Le Corps lesbien is a lyric poem staging a series of meetings between its protagonists 'j/e' and 'tu', protagonists who, as I will discuss, are not clearly distinct but always appear in relation to the other. Wittig notes the influence of a huge range of works and authors on her text including Homer, the Song of Songs, Sarraute, du Bellay, Genet, Baudelaire and, especially, the poems of Sappho. *Le Corps lesbien* constitutes Wittig's most in-depth and extended engagement with the material body in her literary work, addressing the effects of the straight mind on material bodies. This work is even more gruesome than *Les Guérillères*, with violent and graphic descriptions of bodily disintegration and reconstruction, generally inflicted by 'j/e' and 'tu' on each other. There are frequent descriptions of both 'j/e's' and 'tu's' blood, bodily fluids or organs spilling beyond their skins and merging with one another. The protagonists also merge in various other ways; for instance, through descriptions of body parts whose propriety is eventually rendered obscure. In one complex scene, 'j/e' carefully sets about devouring 'tu's' ear, from the outside inwards: 'M/a très delectable j/e m/e mets à te manger' (17) ['M/y most delectable one I set about eating you' (24)].^{ix} The list of anatomical terms solely relating to the ear is already immense: 'le pavillon' [auricle], 'l'anthélix' [antihelix], 'le tympan' [tympanum], 'le marteau' [hammerbone], 'le canaux circulaires' [semicircular

canals], ‘le mastoïde’ [mastoid] (17). Reaching the inside of ‘tu’’s cheek, ‘j/e’ is suddenly poisoned, turns into a fly in ‘tu’’s mouth. Choking, ‘tu’ attempts to expel the fly in vain, this fly/’j/e’ still intent on eating ‘tu’ by applying ‘m/es ventouses contre ta douce lulette’ (17) [‘m/y suckers to your delicious uvula’(24)].

In this scene, ‘j/e’ shifts from eating ‘tu’ to being eaten and back to eating again, even while within ‘tu’’s mouth – eventually, the issue of who is being devoured becomes totally confused. These repeated scenes involving merging, integration and expulsion with regards to ‘j/e’ and ‘tu’ describe the violent movement between universal and particular involved in the writing process for authors inhabiting the particular point of view; the violent push and pull of positionality that the act of writing involves for the lesbian poet. Wittig emphasises the materiality of this violence of the universal on bodies: the text offers numerous corporeal descriptions of the violence of occupying the universal position as the particular (lesbian, in this case) subject. This ‘j/e’ that is precisely not the universal ‘je’, but the occupation of the universal with the particular, is therefore inseparable from the ‘tu’ that accompanies it. These positions are at once inseparable, yet also often in tension or opposition – an antagonism and ambivalence accounting for much of the violence in the text.

I have already cited Wittig’s claims about the pronoun ‘j/e’ in *Le Corps lesbien*: that it is ‘a sign of excess’ able to universalise the particular (to ‘lesbianize’) (2005a: 47), that it may be ‘destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated’, that it is like ‘a lava flow that nothing can stop’ (1992: 87). Indeed, there are multiple scenes of death and resurrection throughout the text, often with one of the protagonists killing the other, or bringing them back to

life. As well as death, there are also repeated scenes of paralysis that appear in stark contrast to the way in which bodies are described for most of the text; that is, frenzied, dynamic and in motion. There are scenes, for instance, of ‘tu’'s body being frozen (103-104; 169-170) or set in plastic resin: ‘dans un bloc iridescent de plastique pétrifié tout ton corps’ (146) [‘Your entire body is fixed petrified in an iridescent block of plastic’ (129)]. Yet these often involve ‘j/e’ reviving ‘tu’ by encouraging motion and taking on paralysis herself – in one scene, ‘j/e’ attempts to rescue ‘tu’ from being encased in ice, trying to keep the water of the stream they are in moving (‘j//opère une traction [...] j/e te pousse’ (170) [‘I exert traction [...] I thrust you’ (149)]).

The opposition of frenzied motion and paralysis of such scenes recalls Wittig’s opposition of hemorrhage/homeostasis in *Virgile, Non* as well as the unstoppable lava flow of her ‘j/e’. Both metaphors of hemorrhage and lava flow associate the ability to resist the universal with movement and invention, with stillness being linked to the paralyzing effects of the universal on particular subjects. Indeed, in this verse describing the freezing stream, when ‘tu’ begins to move, ‘j/e’ becomes static herself in order to look at her: ‘j/e ne bouge pas pourtant’ (170) [‘yet I do not stir’(149)]. With ‘tu’ now trapped underneath the weight of ‘j/e’, the ice solidifies around them both (170). Conversely, a scene involving bleeding in *Le Corps lesbien* could be read as imagining a resistance to the universal that involves linguistic creation. ‘J/e’ is described as being forcibly and painfully bled out by ‘tu’, eventually leaving only a stretched-out skin that is described at one point as being as thin as the paper of a map, and at another as ready to be pinned up on a wall with drawing

pins. 'Tu' – the particular position – creates a parchment out of 'j/e''s body (141-142), a blank space upon which to create new words or images.

The repeated, almost ritual, dismantling of the body and the revelry in anatomical terms may be read as a fantasy of reaching the material depth of the body; of reaching its organs, its bones, its cells, as opposed to describing the body's surface, its representation or bodily affect. This fantasy of reaching or 'grasping' the body may be seen in imagery of manipulating the internal organs (33; 98), and especially the brain (9). One particular verse sees 'j/e' tearing the skin from 'tu''s head, lifting the skin 'pellicule par pellicule' ['layer by layer' (17)] and finally crushing her skull before plunging her hands into the medulla and cerebellum (9). 'J/e' holds the brain in her hands rendering 'tu' immobile, silent and unconscious. The scene not only emphasises the materiality of the brain and of thought and language as belonging to such anatomical materiality, but again imagines the silencing and stultifying violence of the universal in shockingly, grotesquely carnal terms, as a material violence against particular bodies.

The complex relation between 'j/e' and 'tu' is often imagined through the imagery of ruptured skin. Numerous scenes describe flaying (17; 56; 146; 151), skin bursting open (109; 124) splitting (51) perforating (108) and the peeling back of muscles (32). One particularly powerful verse towards the end of the text describes skin bursting open to reveal cells:

M/es cellules sous tes doigts m/a plus atroce s'élargissent. M/a peau se couvre d'ocelles de plaques rouges marron clair, les globules de noyaux cellulaires grossis des milliers de fois provoquent des

perturbations considérables, ils franchissent les membranes nucléaires, ils roulent dans le cytoplasme de leurs cellules, ils en sortent avec une pression brutale [...] (173)

[M/y cells enlarge beneath your fingers m/y most atrocious one. M/y skin is covered with ocelli red lightbrown plaques, the globules of the cell-nuclei enlarged thousands of times provoke considerable perturbations, they transgress the nuclear membranes, they roll around in the cytoplasm of their cells, they emerge from it by brute force (154)]

Wittig's writing here offers a microscopic close-up of skin, upon which a display of frantic and blistering molecular activity unfolds. This passage describes the eruption of skin from within provoked by the touch of another, by the skin of 'tu''s fingers. The passage is notable for the position of the protagonists; while the previous scene of cranial manipulation and violence from the beginning of the text was performed by 'j/e' on or against 'tu', it is 'j/e' whose skin now blisters and erupts simply as a result of the touch of 'tu''s fingers. This touch provokes an incredible motion, 'des perturbations considérables' that result in the build-up of 'une pression brutale' [brute force], and the reciprocity between 'j/e' and 'tu' is explored in 'tu''s startling and explosive response to it. Touch here is completely opposed to the Nancean notion of touch-as-separation, distance, as explored in chapter one: while touch here may begin at the surface, it provokes a frantic cellular motion beneath that cannot be contained, breaching the membrane's walls.

Wittig thus explores numerous fantasies of reaching a cellular depth beyond skin: of tearing off skin layer-by-layer, gouging and cutting, ripping and biting. Wittig's fantasy in this particular scene is one of epidermal manipulation, of provoking eruptions, movement and cellular explosions by the touch of 'tu's fingers. The agency of these fingers, and the power of their touch, is important. 'Tu's fingers do not simply manipulate the skin or work it as if it were a piece of clay. In the first instance a minimal touch provokes a vibration of molecules within 'j/e's skin. These molecules burst to the surface to meet the fingers. While eventually 'tu's fingers take on their own motion, it is initially a simple proximity that produces a jubilant destruction that spreads to the entire body:

un effondrement de surface m/e vient, de proche en proche il gagne
l'ensemble de m/on corps m/es muscles m/on sang m/es os m/es
organes essentiels m/es substances jusqu'à la décomposition complète.
(176)

['m/y surface caves in, step by step it affects m/y entire body m/y
muscles m/y blood m/y bones m/y vital organs m/y substances until
decomposition is complete.' (155)]

Rewriting the body requires its initial destruction. This destruction is effected by an initial contact between 'j/e' and 'tu' that provokes a contagious and explosive movement, and eventually this fragment or verse describes the collapse of 'j/e' via the surface of her skin. In comparison, and again

emphasising the ambivalence of the reciprocity of ‘j/e’ and ‘tu’'s interactions, ‘tu’ is left complete, described as ‘toi m/a plus intacte’ (173) [‘you m/y most intact’ (155)]. Notions of bodily disintegration and completeness are exchanged between ‘j/e’ and ‘tu’ – again provoked, I argue, by the exchange or the ‘push and pull’ between universal and particular that is both violent and productive at the same time.

It is ‘tu’'s touch that is described in the second line of the fragment that results in the presence of the ‘ocelles’ that spread over ‘j/e’'s skin. The entry on ‘ocelles’ in *Brouillon pour une dictionnaire* describes the skin’s pores when they become enlarged upon contact with another body, transforming the skin ‘de couleur bleue rouge verte sur tout la surface du corps’ (Wittig & Zeig, 1976: 185-6). This blue/green ‘eye’ is described as the ocelli of peacock feathers, but could also perhaps suggest the more violent visible signs of skin contact evident as coloured bruising. These ‘ocelles’ are contagious, spreading over the entire skin, and as an opening up of the skin’s surface at its pores they indicate vulnerable permeability. They might also indicate the necessarily tentative act of speaking from an unfamiliar subjective positions described by de Lauretis. This outlandish myth of the ‘ocelles’ competes in *Le Corps lesbien* to displace stale universal ‘myths’ that create and sustain the straight mind.

In this passage, Wittig presents the hideous nuclear disintegration of the skin’s cells, the expulsion of globules of viscous cellular matter, in a beautiful and even jubilatory description:

des bulles se forment sans arrêt à la surface de m/on corps touché par

tes doigts, j/e les vois crever en silence sur m/es bras dans de longs jets
orange verts (176)

[‘bubbles form continually at the surface of m/y body touched by your
fingers, *I* see them burst silently on m/y arms in long orange green
spurts’ (154)]

The fizzing nuclei and the coloured bubbles of bodily matter are presented here almost as a firework display. Wittig’s microscopic perspective creates a new and technicolour universe out of cellular materiality, and the alien scale of the encounter engenders ambivalence in the aesthetic description of such matter that echoes the strange reciprocity between ‘j/e’ and ‘tu’. Colours enliven the molecules and nuclear matter, not only as ‘de longs jets orange verts’ or as ‘plaques rouges marron clair’ but through the striking luminosity evoked by ‘nucléoses brillants’ [‘shining nucleoli’] or the globules described as ‘billes de verre’ (176) [‘glass marbles’]. Contrast this with the images of ‘du sang de la lymphe de la bile’ (177) [‘blood lymph bile’], adding similarly strange and ambiguous colours to Wittig’s palette. Sound is equally ambivalent: where initially ‘j/e’ witnesses the bubbles forming on her skin ‘en silence’ [‘in silence’], eventually this becomes a soft and intimate whispering, ‘un bruit léger un chuintement des susurrements sont perceptibles’ (176) [‘a slight noise a hissing susurrations become perceptible’ (154)]. Eventually, the movement provoked in ‘j/e’’s cells by ‘tu’ reaches a crescendo: ‘le phénomène s’accélère’ [‘the phenomenon accelerates’] and ‘le bruit devient une série de mugissements de sifflements cessant par à coups puis reprenant, j/e suis le lieu

d'un grand vacarme' (176) ['the sound becomes a series of bellowings of whistlings ceasing abruptly then beginning again, *I* am the site of a great hubbub' (154)].

Wittig's writing in this passage is dynamic, particularly when read aloud, with her piled up, rolling lists of nouns and her sparse use of punctuation. Yet even the frenetic molecular movement of the passage – 'perturbations considérables', 'une pression brutale' – is problematized by the encounter between the protagonists, with the cellular explosions of 'j/e''s skin displaced by a frantic motion in 'tu': 'j/e deviens de plus en plus immobile, tandis que toi m/a très féroce m/a frénétique tu es d'une vitesse incomparable' (176) ['thus *I* become increasingly immobile while you m/y so ferocious one m/y frenzied one you have an incomparable speed' (154)]. The crescendo of motion achieved by 'j/e''s cells does not simply die down, but infects 'tu' with a frenetic speed of her own, just as the asymmetry of completeness and destruction had also played out between the two protagonists.

In this fragment, Wittig creates a landscape on the skin of 'j/e''s body that is explored by 'tu''s hands: 'tu vas et tu viens dans m/es pores élargis [...] dans m/es sillons dans m/es tranchées dans m/es crevasses, tu m/e mines' (176) ['you come and go in m/y widened pores [...] in m/y furrows in m/y trenches in m/y crevices, you mine m/e' (154-5)]. Here, the perspective shifts from the cellular to the expansive, from the particular to the universal. These landscapes of skin are created not with the contours of the body from the usual visual perspective, but within a microscopic universe of skin. In fact, the cellular scale and motion of skin here is so microscopically alien that it becomes cosmic. The movement of Wittig's skin-scene is immense and other-

worldly – a Brownian motion of cells beyond everyday human experience or comprehension and known only through the lens of a microscope. The fizzing molecular movement and speed of cells mirror the equally unknown and incomprehensible motion of orbiting planets, the explosions like a supernova. How do the cells become an entire universe here, one of equally alienating speed and scale? Wittig creates a new ‘universal’ on the skin. The microscopic becomes its own universe – a world-view of the up-close that obscures any notions of a flat, dull surface in favour of violent motion and epic proportions. Wittig uses this skin-universe to regain the universal, locating it on the skin of the lesbian body in an eroticised description of cellular motion. Wittig’s writing lesbianises the body’s cells with a speed and motion alien to familiar experience. The dynamism Wittig imagines here is vital to the political potential of her corporeal metaphor: for Wittig, accepting essentialism means ‘no change, no movement’ and countering it will require an extraordinary motion (1992: 3). Wittig is able to subvert the universal in this way only through the specificity of the skin and the body’s cells as a site of metaphor; she displaces ‘neutral’, universal anatomical terms and creates lesbian cells, skin – versions of what a lesbian body could be.

Wittig describes cells themselves here as breaching the borders of their membranes – Wittig’s metaphor of the Trojan Horse has finally reached the building blocks of the material body. The way the cells are described in these lines as pulsating and erupting makes it hard not to compare them to a grenade, to Wittig’s mine blast – can Wittig really make bodies’ cells erupt through the war machine of literary writing? Even Butler concedes that Wittig’s writing in this text conveys, in ‘erotic struggle’, the ‘reinscription of the body’. On

Wittig's understanding, nothing – not even the brute matter of the body's cells – is immune from resignification and the rupture of borders, the insistent encroachment of the lava flow against the universal. In this scene, Wittig describes the particularisation – the lesbianisation – of the body even down to its very cells.

If Wittig's fantasy is one of bodily depth, it is a cellular depth – an assault on the very foundations of bodily materiality, on the supposedly neutral or universal substance of a cell. At this point Wittig's claim to use 'a rigid anatomical vocabulary' and 'appropriate it for my purpose' may be better understood: her claim to 'acquir[e] a precise set of words with which to talk about the body without metaphors, staying practical and pragmatic without sentimentality or romanticism' is entirely ironic (2005: 46). Wittig is well aware that words considered as utterly void of metaphor and partiality – in this case scientific or anatomical terms – are in fact not neutral at all but carry the weight of the universal with them for precisely that reason. Wittig's work in *Le Corps lesbien* is to attach each of these universal anatomical terms to the lesbian, to stage an invasion of the universal body by lesbianising it each anatomical term at a time. Here lies the force of the title of Wittig's work, the dissonance and destabilisation in attaching the particular (lesbian) to the universal (body), a feminine qualifier to the masculine noun 'le corps'. It is this dissonance that Wittig found 'hilarious' in its irony, describing it as 'a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really' (2005: 46).

At this point we might recall Preciado's desire to 'pousser l'hypothèse performative dans le corps, jusqu'aux fluides, la faire passer dans les cellules'

[push the hypothesis of performativity into the body, right up to its fluids, to channel it into its cells], through the infiltration of his body's cellular depths with the absorption of topical testosterone through his skin (2008: 98). Wittig, in contrast to Preciado, feels no need for an intervention such as the molecule of testosterone in her text: the materiality of writing is enough. Wittig's textual materialism means that she is able to lesbianise the body's cells in all their materiality through writing alone. Preciado's text metaphorises the insidious infiltration of the body through the permeability of his skin absorbing testosterone, but Wittig's imagery in *Le Corps lesbien* is of skins violently torn off, blistering and erupting or removed completely. The startling consequences drawn by Wittig's textual materialism should not be lost: for Wittig, lesbianising the body's cells is precisely not metaphor, despite being performed through metaphor. She is describing and effecting a shock, a shift in conceptual space that is inseparable from material bodies, that is able to reorganise the body down to its very cells.

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ⁱ The proceedings of this colloquium, at Columbia University, were published as *Parce que les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes* (2002) and include papers by de Lauretis, Bourcier and Preciado.

ⁱⁱ Auclerc and Chevalier have attempted to merge the masculine and feminine forms ‘lecteurs’ and ‘lectrices’ by using a hybrid orthography of ‘lecteur.rice.s’. This particular feminist attempt to address gender in the French language has previously been used by French academics and activist groups rather than being one of Auclerc and Chevalier’s invention, but the particular importance of the use of these techniques in a book on the work of Wittig will be discussed later in the chapter.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Benjamin’s description in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’: ‘The work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality [...] This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all

shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind' (Benjamin, 1992: 304).

^{iv} De Lauretis's notion of the 'eccentric subject' involves 'deviating from the conventional, normative path but also eccentric in that it did not center itself in the institution that both supports and produces the straight mind [...] Indeed, that institution did not foresee such a subject and could not contemplate it, could not envision it' (de Lauretis, 2005: 52). See also 'Eccentric Subjects' (1990: 115-50).

^v All translations from this work are from David Le Vay's published version (1975).

^{vi} All translations from this work are from David Le Vay's and Margaret Crosland's published version (1989).

^{vii} Indeed, Lisa Downing (2012) argues that Wittig's work resists and perverts the European sexological understanding of female sexuality.

^{viii} All translations from this work are from David Le Vay's published version (2007).

^{ix} All translations from this work are from David Le Vay's published version (1975).

4 The constructed body of ORLAN's "Art Charnel"

Abstract

French performance artist ORLAN pushes the limits of engagement with the material body, most famously in her surgical performances from 1990 onwards, where she has aspects of famous art works 'cited' on her face through plastic surgery. I argue that ORLAN offers an example of a constructivist engagement with the material, sexed body throughout her work, exploring how sexed bodies are surrounded by and constructed through discourse, including psychoanalytic work. This chapter is structured by three instances of the head in ORLAN's work – firstly, *Femme avec tête* (1996), in which ORLAN performs as a decapitated head resting on a table, reading theoretical texts aloud in front of another, digital composition of her head; secondly, *La tête de la Méduse* (1970), in which ORLAN displayed her genitals daubed in paint, framed by her *trousseau* sheets as a comment on Freud's essay comparing the vulva to Medusa's head; and finally, through the recurring images of the death's head in ORLAN's work. ORLAN denies the psychoanalytic and religious taboo of altering her flesh in what I read as a confrontation with the Real, and an exploration of how the material body-figured-as-Real overlaps with signification. It is this final aspect that I argue offers an engagement with Lacanian psychoanalytic constructions of sex and sexual difference which renders it more conducive to a productive relationship with transgender theory than has more recently been imagined in France.

This chapter explores the use of the body itself as an artistic medium in the work of the French artist ORLAN. For Jay Prosser, ORLAN figures as ‘an insane personification of the poststructuralist insistence on the absolute constructedness of the body’ (1998: 62). She is seen to embody the failure of poststructuralism (and later, of queer theory) to recognise the materiality of the body. Through her work, I hope to interrogate Prosser’s claims further: can theory, and queer theory in particular, ‘deal’ with, or account for, the material body? ORLAN’s work gets to the heart of the matter of this book: that of the possibilities of engaging with the material body through varying theoretical frameworks, and of how to do so when material bodies appear to resist representation, when words seem to refuse to ‘stick’ to materiality.

While ORLAN does not engage directly with queer theory herself, her work is embedded in and conversant with the same theoretical groundings. She incorporates feminist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic texts into her performances, reading the work of Michel Serres, Julia Kristeva and Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni during her surgical performances. Queer and gender theorists have engaged with her work, from Dominic Johnson and Amelia Jones to Jay Prosser and Sandy Stone. There is an undeniably queer vein in her work, which provokes critical, feminist and anti-essentialist examination of the constructions and restrictions of gender and sex, with the effect of destabilising and denaturalising both.

Three very different instances of the recurring motif of the head in ORLAN’s work organise this chapter. Firstly, I consider *Femme avec*

Tête [Woman with Head] (1996), which stages the illusion of the decapitated head of ORLAN reading theoretical texts aloud to her audience. Alongside Amelia Jones's writing on performance, I examine concerns of pervasive Cartesianism and universalism in this work, mounting a challenge to ORLAN's provocative insistence that 'the body is obsolete'. In my second instance of the head in ORLAN's *La Tête de la Méduse* [Medusa's Head] (1978), the Medusa's head is reimagined as the vulva, commenting on Freudian concepts of sexual difference. What does ORLAN's performance say about the materially sexed body? I use this work, as well as ORLAN's claim to be a 'transsexuelle femme à femme' [female-to-female transsexual], to consider interventions in ORLAN's work from transgender theorists. Finally, I examine the recurrent figure of the Death's Head in ORLAN's work as signifying a confrontation with the Lacanian Real. What could ORLAN's forceful rejection of the Lacanian prohibition against altering the Real mean for queer theory's psychoanalytic investments? Could it in fact re-situate her work as allied to transgender concerns?

ORLAN's body of work: historical, theoretical and artistic context

ORLAN is best known for her controversial project *La Réincarnation de Sainte ORLAN ou Images nouvelles images* [The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN or Images New Images], a series of nine 'opération-performance'ⁱ pieces incorporating surgical procedures carried out between 1990 and 1993. Throughout her career, ORLAN's practice has included sculpture,

photography, video work and occasionally painting,ⁱⁱ as well as numerous performances that do not include surgical interventions. It is impossible to offer an overview of her work that is both succinct and comprehensive, but I offer below some examples of the themes, projects and also the specific materials to which ORLAN repeatedly returns in her work.

ORLAN's first performance pieces took place in the mid 1960s. These included the first incarnations of her 'measurements' – public performances during which ORLAN measured public space and institutions (often art galleries, sometimes religious buildings or spaces) with the length of her body, marking out each 'unit' with a piece of chalk. A recurrent material used time and again in ORLAN's practice began to appear in these works – during 'measurements', ORLAN would wear the *trousseau* sheets given to her by her mother for a future marriage. As ORLAN repeatedly lay down on pavements, roads or public squares, the sheets became dirty, with an aspect of the performance including publicly washing them and bottling the dirty water, sealing the bottles with wax as physical testament to the performance (as 'relics' as O'Bryan suggests, (2005: 5)). ORLAN continually returned to these *trousseau* sheets, incorporating them into her work for over a decade. These earliest performances of 'measurements' have been recently revisited by ORLAN with digital technology, in a series of video works including *Bump Load* (2013) and *MeasuRages* (2013), depicting the flayed body of 'ORLAN' performing the same measuring ritual, but incorporating the notion of subcutaneous flesh explored in the operation-performances.

ORLAN's work is consistently (if unorthodoxly) feminist in its critical exploration of sex, gender and societal or religious constraints on women. In

another use of the trousseau sheets in the installation *Plaisirs brodés. Étude documentaire N°1. Couture-Clair/Obscur* [Documentary Study No.1: Plaisirs brodés (Embroidered Dissipations, or, Chiaroscuro Couture, Collection)] (1968) at the atelier Delaroa in Saint-Etienne, ORLAN asked male art dealers and gallery owners to stain these sheets with ejaculate, and traced the outline of the stains in embroidery – a violent rejection of the institution of marriage and domestic labour that the trousseau represented. Another of ORLAN's most famous pieces, *Le Baiser de l'artiste* [The Kiss of the Artist] (performed in 1976 at Caldas da Rainha Museum, Portugal and in 1977 at the FIAC (Foire internationale d'art contemporain) in Paris) again offered a critique of the male-dominated art world. The work asked spectators for 5F, inserted into a slot in a photo-sculpture of ORLAN's naked torso, in exchange for a kiss from the artist herself.

ORLAN's work evolved in France at the same time as that of feminist performance artists elsewhere, notably in the US, from the late 1960s to early 1970s, from Carolee Schneemann to Gina Pane, Martha Rosler and Yoko Ono. Schneemann referred to the performance art group Fluxus as the 'Art Stud Club', noting the masculinism of the circle and in the art industry more broadly. ORLAN's work shares particular resonances with feminist artists who engaged with the materiality of their body, not least Schneemann and Pane. However, ORLAN describes her work as 'Carnal Art' in distinction to 'Body Art' due to her lack of interest in pain, and dismisses the levels of pain involved in her surgical procedures.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although ORLAN's work must be situated in relation to the MLF and the wave of feminist activism and cultural production of the 1960s and 70s, her

engagement with the movement was one of critical distance. She staged an intervention at a feminist conference in Toulouse in 1971, where she held a placard with reversed gendered articles for ‘homme’ and ‘femme’: ‘j’ai troublé plusieurs fois des colloques féministes en me présentant avec une pancarte *je suis une homme et un femme*’ [I bothered feminist conferences many times by turning up with a placard reading *I am a woman and a man*] (1996: 85). ORLAN’s engagement with feminism has always been unorthodox and, I argue, consistently constructivist.

ORLAN has incorporated biomedical and communication technology into her sculptures and performances for longer than is generally acknowledged. Her first use of surgery in her work predates the *Réincarnation* project by over a decade, for example. When ORLAN was forced to miss a symposium in Lyon in 1979 due to an urgent surgical procedure, she filmed the operation and showed this instead of appearing in person. ORLAN continued to use the latest technology in her work; *La madone au minitel* [Madonna on the Minitel] was shown at the Palais de Tokyo in 1989, using France’s own precursor to the internet, the Minitel. During her seventh operation-performance *Omniprésence* [Omnipresence] (1993), which again revisited the character ‘Sainte ORLAN’ and referenced Baroque imagery, ORLAN answered questions sent to her via fax during the surgery. This event at the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York was transmitted live via satellite to galleries worldwide including the Centre Georges Pompidou. ORLAN has since used cell cultivation in collaboration with the Australian laboratory SymbioticA on the *Manteau d’Arlequin* [Harlequin’s Coat] project from 2008. Referencing Michel Serres’s use of the Harlequin figure as a model for *laïcité* in *Tiers-*

Instruit [The Troubadour of Knowledge] (1991), ORLAN uses her own skin cells, as well as those from bodies of other races and that of a foetus to create a hybrid skin.

Another constant in ORLAN's work is the continued exploration of the relation between her body and texts, often engaging with theoretical and psychoanalytic works including that of Serres, Kristeva and Lemoine-Luccioni. In 1979 at the Galerie N.R.A., Paris, ORLAN invited viewers to bring a personally significant book with them, using these books to measure out the length of her body and promising not to leave the gallery space until she had read all of them. This performance, and the accompanying photographic series, was titled *Un ORLAN corps-de-livres* [An ORLAN body-of-books] (1979), speaking to the 'thorough imbrication' of writing and materiality that Kate Ince describes in *Millennial Female*. After ORLAN's reading of Serres's *Le Tiers-Instruit* during a surgical performance in 1990, she produced a number of sculptural works titled *Réliquaires, 'Ma chair, le texte et les langages'* [Reliquaries, 'My flesh, text and languages'] (1992-93). These pieces are comprised of glass engraved with citations from Serres's text, with a metal receptacle containing twenty grams of ORLAN's flesh extracted during the operations, welded shut 'donnant une impression d'inviolabilité' [giving the impression of inviolability] (ORLAN, 1996: 93). From these works, to reading critical texts aloud during the surgical performances themselves, or during the performance of *Femme avec Tête* at the ICA in 1996, ORLAN has continually staged meetings between texts and her body. Her work considers the relation between writing and bodies, contributing to what I consider a material engagement with constructivist feminism.

This constant revisiting and reworking of projects, themes and even specific materials in ORLAN's work suggests continual movement and an accumulation of meanings rather than the attachment of singular, fixed meaning to any particular work. It also creates an invitation to read ORLAN's works backwards as well as forwards, or in a non-linear fashion entirely, with more recent re-engagements of a theme or material adding to the layered and multiple meanings imbued in their prior usage. For this reason, I have outlined ORLAN's work via the themes and materials she returns to over time rather than offering a chronology of works. The effect ORLAN creates is one of open-endedness and possibility – contributing to what Kate Ince considers as constituting a 'postmodern' aesthetic:

It is clear [...] that Orlan's work possesses many of the characteristics of art and culture agreed on as 'postmodern' by the majority of postmodernism's commentators; one striking example is the recombination and permutation of images from one work to the next, particularly in evidence in 'Reincarnation'. (2000: 99)

I agree with Ince that the layered, plural meanings created by repetition and revisiting works destabilises the notion of singular meaning in ORLAN's works. I would also add that this 'recombination and permutation' in ORLAN's work should be linked to the relation she sees between texts, her art practice and her body: not only does ORLAN use poststructuralist texts within her work, she also incorporates poststructuralist principles in her art practice. Poststructuralist texts are intertwined visibly with her art works and the

practice itself, just as her art practice – not only in her performance but in sculptural works using her flesh – is imbricated with her body. In ORLAN's work, theory, practice and the material body become inseparable.

ORLAN's work, as her statement 'je suis une homme et un femme' suggests, has never been essentialist. On the contrary, it has consistently emphasised the cultural mediation and construction of the material body, nowhere more so than when she deploys her body in her work. Yet readings of ORLAN's early work suffer from assumptions about feminist performance of this era of the kind Amelia Jones responds to in *Body Art* (1998). Jones objects in particular to Mary Kelly's dismissal of feminist body art from this period as 'naïve essentialism', and '*necessarily* reactionary' (1998: 23).^{iv}

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Strip-tease occasionnel à l'aide des draps du trousseau [Incidental Strip-Tease Using Sheets from the Trousseau], ORLAN (1974-5).

Countering Kelly's claims, Jones offers a reading of the work of Ana Mendieta, troubling the assertion that her engagement with her body, and indeed her female body, necessarily amounts to essentialism. Jones's reading instead emphasises the aspects of Mendieta's work that create multiple meaning in relation to her body, a 'particular experience or identity that has no "essential" meaning in relation to her work' (1998: 27). Similarly, ORLAN's early work can be convincingly read as complicating the notion of an essential, unmediated body as opposed to presenting such a body in her performances. While critics have often overlooked the potential of reading ORLAN's earlier works in this way, I foreground works such as *Corps-Sculptures* (1964) and *La tête de la Méduse* in my reading of the culturally mediated body presented by ORLAN, even in her very earliest work.

As I explore through *La tête de la Méduse*, when ORLAN incorporates her genitalia into her work, it is not to present an essentialist female bodily presence but rather to interrogate constructions of femaleness and femininity. ORLAN's earlier work has always shown the body precisely not as pure unadulterated presence; rather, she explores constructions and representations of the body. For instance, *Strip-tease occasionnel à l'aide des draps du trousseau* (1974-5) records ORLAN gradually removing her trousseau sheets from her body. Yet ORLAN does not strip away these layers to reveal an authentic, natural bodily presence beneath. Far from it: in the final shot ORLAN's body has disappeared entirely. She does not reveal a bare body, but the sheets themselves. In the penultimate frame, ORLAN's body without the trousseau is just as stylized as in the first: her eyes turned upwards in supplication echo the religious connotations of previous shots; her pose is

identical to Botticelli's Venus. ORLAN writes of the piece: 'The idea is that striptease for a woman is impossible because, even as she undresses, she is re-dressed by other images, thoughts, preconceived ideas and prejudices, none of which she can remove. Viewers don't see a nude woman – they see what's in their own head' (2016).

ORLAN frequently uses screens in her work to this effect. In *Le baiser de l'artiste* (1976) and in *S'habiller de sa propre nudité* (1981), ORLAN's 'nakedness' is not present 'in the flesh' but as a photographic image printed onto clothing or the sculpture of her torso. In *Le baiser de l'artiste*, three 'ORLANs' are present – two photographic representations, one ORLAN-Madonna and one naked torso – and the artist who sprang out to offer a kiss when 5F were inserted into the slot in the centre of the torso. None, I argue, are presented as any more authentic than the other, rather, they comment on the multiple cultural constructions of femininity. In *S'habiller de sa propre nudité*, ORLAN walked through the streets of Lisbon wearing a life-size photographic print of her naked body, provoking a police officer to attempt to arrest her for public indecency.^v That the joke is on the police officer, who relented when convinced by ORLAN that her attire was simply the height of fashion, underlines my point – ORLAN presents an *image* of the (naked) body that is precisely not the body itself. She does not attempt to present the body as pure presence, and this is nowhere more evident than when she uses representations of nudity in her work.

Ince has suggested that a development in ORLAN's work can be traced; associating 'authentic physical presence of the body' with her early work in the 1960s as opposed to postmodern accounts of subjectivity in her work from the

1990s. She writes that ORLAN's 'career is a particularly good illustration of the evolution of performance art from its 1960s essentialist modernism to its thoroughly postmodern 1990s mediatization' (2000: 105). Ince writes further:

Orlan's career as a performance artist spans both the first and contemporary generations of body artists. The immediate, authentic physical presence of the body espoused in the art of the 1960s and 1970s is obviously a value in her early actions, which did not use any electronic media; her very early 'slowed-down walks' in the street, her measurings of public spaces with her body, and her early appearances as Saint Orlan demonstrate this type of bodily presence. The arrival of poststructuralist theory in the 1970s, and in particular of Derridean deconstruction, posed a head-on challenge to the aesthetics of presence, and simultaneously to this phenomenological approach to performance. (2000: 103)

Ince here uses ORLAN's 'measurings' as an example of her investment in the notion of an unadulterated bodily presence, and one could indeed compare them to the kind of body presented in Bruce Nauman's filmed walks and repeated movements from this period (e.g. *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968) or *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967)). Yet I would emphasise, in contrast to work such as Nauman's, ORLAN's use of the 'dirty' trousseau wrapped around her body, the bottled relics in this performance that allude to the complex layers of meaning through which her particular, French Catholic, female body must be read. I would like

to consider an alternative reading of ORLAN's early work as offering an engagement with the body not as pure presence or 'whole' but as always culturally mediated, always inseparable from layers of gendered, religious and cultural meaning.

Referring to Jeff Rian's article in *Flash Art*, 'What's All This Body Art?' (1993), Ince writes:

Taking Kiki Smith, Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney and Sue Williams as his examples, Rian affirms that in 1990s body art, technology has usurped nature. The body can no longer be celebrated as an unmediated site of identification for the artist, or as an authentic pre-representational physical presence that can be affirmed *as* present in performance. Works by Kiki Smith, Cindy Sherman and Charles Ray show a fascination not with a pre-technological 'natural' body, but with mannequins and automata, as often dismembered as they are unified into a whole human form (Rian, 1993: 52). (2000: 102)

Rian categorises the use of technology and prosthetics – particularly mannequins – as characteristic of work from the 1990s as opposed to the work of the 1960s/1970s depicting the body as 'unmediated site of identification', as 'authentic pre-representational physical presence'. ORLAN's work does not fit at all easily into this division or 'evolution', especially because of her constant re-working of themes and projects. ORLAN's body is presented throughout her career as a prosthetic entity – whether through the use of actual prosthetics or the *technē* of writing and texts. Specifically in relation to Rian's remarks cited

above, ORLAN used mannequins long before Cindy Sherman, in *Orlan accouche d'elle-m'aime* [ORLAN pregnant with herself]^{vi} and *Shiva* in the 'Corps-Sculptures' [Body-Sculptures] series from 1964. She used masks or prosthetics in some images for this series, but not all – and yet the shapes into which ORLAN contorts her body in those images without prostheses render them no more 'organic' than those incorporating prosthetic limbs.

The use of dismembered mannequins in and of itself at this time was not in itself innovative; Hans Bellmer had famously used them in the 1930s (most famously in *La Poupée* [The Doll] (1936)). Bellmer's work, however, did not use mannequins in the way that Rian discusses, as juxtaposed with the artist's body itself as an interrogation of subjectivity and bodily integrity, as in Cindy Sherman's work. ORLAN's work does, and pre-dates Sherman's work by some thirty years. ORLAN writes of the 'Corps-Sculptures' series:

I juxtapose myself with objects [...] Objects become grafts, prosthetic extensions of my body.

I turn my body into an absorbent substance for external materials at the same time as I imprint my organic carnality onto those external materials. Nothing is fused, nothing is divided. I enter into a dialogue. Interior and exterior copulate. The camera pursues this copulation as its position with respect to my body conceals or reveals fragments of those assemblages. (2010: 104)

While it could be argued that ORLAN is commenting here on work produced early on in her career some thirty-five years later, having absorbed the later work of Haraway on cyborgs and Deleuze on assemblages – and she certainly does echo terms from both here – the works themselves clearly do trouble notions of pure, organic bodies. ORLAN does not present the body in her work – even and especially the naked body – as ‘stripped bare’; rather, the body is displayed to emphasise its imbrication with technology, texts or ideas.

ORLAN describes her body in the quote above as an ‘absorbent substance’ – a substance that is not closed but permeable. Her representation of the body has partly evolved with the technologies available to her. While the surface of the body in *Corps-Sculptures* is permeable to prosthetics, and the body in *Le baiser de l’artiste*, *La tête de la Méduse* and *S’habiller de sa propre nudité* [Dressed in her own Nudity] is permeable to cultural, theoretical and political signification, ORLAN’s bodily representations increasingly use technology to explore this permeability.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Shiva ou tentacules de bras multiples [Shiva or tentacles of many arms], ‘Corps-sculptures’ series, ORLAN (1965).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

ORLAN accouche d’elle m’aime [ORLAN pregnant with herself], ‘Corps-sculptures’ series, ORLAN (1965).

This development has meant that ORLAN's work increasingly interrogates the representation of material bodies' interiority, their cells and flesh. However, as ORLAN acknowledges above, the notion of permeability, of subjectivities and bodies that are not closed-off, natural or essential has been present in her work from the beginning. As it is for Wittig and Preciado, I argue, this notion of the body's permeability is linked to her understanding of the meeting between her work and politics.

Key to understanding this notion of the body as absorbent, as well as the exchange between the material body and texts presented in her work, is an understanding of ORLAN's political motivations:

l'art [...] doit bousculer nos a priori, bouleverser nos pensées, Il est hors normes. Il est hors la loi. Il est contre l'art bourgeois.

Il n'est pas là pour nous bercer, pour nous resservir ce que nous connaissons déjà. (1996: 87)

[art [...] must jolt us from preconceived ideas, upset our beliefs, it must be outside of the norm. Outside of the law. It is against bourgeois art.

It is not there to comfort us, to make us think we know it all already.]

ORLAN is well aware of art as an industry, yet she claims that art can and *should* be political. In a statement strikingly similar to Wittig's writing on poetic language, art exists to 'bousculer', to 'bouleverser'. While poetry for

Wittig can produce violent shocks in the reader, ORLAN makes similar comments about the violence of a certain kind of visual art:

Peu de sortes d'images nous obligent a [sic] fermer les yeux: La mort, la souffrance, l'ouverture du corps, certains aspects de la pornographie (pour certaines personnes) ou pour d'autres l'accouchement. Ici, les yeux deviennent des trous noirs dans lesquels l'image est absorbée comme de gré ou de force, ces images s'engouffrent et viennent taper directement là où ça fait mal sans passer par les habituels filtres, comme si les yeux n'avaient plus de connections avec le cerveau. (1996: 83-4)

[Few images force us to close our eyes: death, suffering, the opening of the body, certain kinds of pornography (for some people) or for others childbirth. In these instances, the eyes becomes black holes into which the image is absorbed whether we like it or not, these images rush in and directly hit the point where it hurts without passing through the usual filters, as if the eyes no longer had any connection with the brain.]

Certain images penetrate the viewer directly, as if bypassing any protective filter in the brain. If ORLAN imagines herself as an absorbent surface, the viewer is no less permeable, absorbing the image with or without consent. In a particularly violent account of the relation between viewer and art object that turns the concept of the male gaze on its head, ORLAN imagines her viewer as passive, unable to mount a defense to discomfiting images, and unable to avoid her message. Even more strikingly, ORLAN describes the prosthetic bumps she

has inserted beneath the skin of her temples during the surgery-performance *Omniprésence* as ‘les deux petites bosses qui dépassent de mes tempes, deux volcans en éruption sur l’idéologie dominante...’ [two little lumps protruding from my temples, two volcanos erupting over dominant ideology] (2001: 50), recalling Wittig’s notion of poetry and language as an unstoppable lava flow threatening universalist ideology.

If art attempts to effect material change, conversely (and again just as for Wittig), ORLAN insists that ideology acts materially on the body. When asked in one interview whether her engagement with her body is a way to ‘*prouver la radicalité de votre engagement artistique*’ [prove the radicality of your artistic engagement], she replies: ‘Que cela s’imprime directement dans les chairs, là était la vraie bataille. L’idéologie dominante s’imprime dans les chairs. Toutes les civilisations ont fabriqué non seulement les corps, mais aussi les logiciels qui sont à l’intérieur’ [That it imprints itself directly onto the flesh, there is the real battle. The dominant ideology imprints itself onto the flesh. All civilisations have fabricated not only bodies but the software inside] (2004: 120). ORLAN considers her work is an attempt to shift this ideology. Her understanding of prosthetic permeability – what Ince, following Rian, sees as characterising the postmodern – is thus informed by her understanding of politics, and perhaps even materialist feminist politics in the notion that ideology shapes material bodies. ORLAN’s work brings together a materialist political impetus and a postmodern or poststructuralist exploration of bodies, texts and subjectivity. For this reason, her work is particularly useful in responding to the question of how queer theory can account for material bodies, in bringing adequate accounts of materiality to queer thought.

Cartesianism, Bodies and Texts: *Femme avec Tête* (1996)

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Femme avec tête, ORLAN (1996).

In 1996, ORLAN gave a performance as part of ‘Totally Wired: Science, Technology and the Human Form’, at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts. The programme included Franko B, Stelarc and Bruce Gilchrist and explored the relationship between the human body and contemporary technology. The English title of ORLAN’s performance was *Woman with Head... Woman without Head*, with the rather different *Femme avec Tête et Illusion, Simulation, Virtualité...* [Woman with Head and Illusion, Simulation, Virtuality] used in French.^{vii} A collaboration with the illusionist Paul Kieve, video artist Dean Bramnagann, and musician Robin Rambau, the performance presented the illusion of ORLAN’s disembodied head atop an otherwise empty chrome table. This lone head with cropped blonde hair and a distinctive blue quiff sat a metre away from a lectern and read texts by Kristeva, Artaud, Serres and Lemoine-Luccioni. Projected behind this scene was a digitally rendered three-dimensional image of ORLAN’s head, composed of rapidly changing scenes of her previous work. The digital head asked the head upon the table the ‘usual’ questions ORLAN claims to receive: ‘es-tu la copie ou l’original? crois-tu en Dieu? es-tu folle?’ [are you the copy or the original? Do you believe in God? Are you mad?] (2001: 49). Rather than reply, the head resting on the table continues to read critical texts aloud, soberly facing the lectern.

ORLAN described the performance thus:

J'ai [...] utilisé un tour de magie datant de 1893 grâce auquel il est possible de faire semblant de n'être qu'une tête posée sur une table pour les spectateurs et soi-même, de ne plus avoir de corps mais simplement une tête posée sur une table. (2001: 48)

[I used a magic trick dating from 1893 thanks to which it was possible to appear just as a head resting on a table for spectators as well as oneself, to no longer have a body but simply be a head resting on a table.]

This particular technique of illusion is known as 'The Sphinx', created by Thomas Tobin at the end of the 19th century, as ORLAN states. The original performance featured an Egyptian head upon a table, smiling, reading verse and responding to questions. A contemporary review of ORLAN's version, by Judith Palmer for the broadsheet *The Independent*, finds the 'initial effect [of the performance] stunning' but complains that shortly after, it becomes possible to work out how the illusion is staged. For Palmer, the performance ultimately fails since 'a glimpse of leg, then a familiar ringed hand, sneak out from behind the mirror' (1996), with the presence of ORLAN's body shattering the illusion.

This interpretation of ORLAN's performance, however, rests on the assumption that ORLAN seeks to present a kind of corporeal transcendence in her piece, to preserve the initial illusion of a head existing without a body

rather than disturbing it. On the contrary, ORLAN performs the undoing of the illusory ‘tête pensante’ of Cartesian rationalism, questioning the relation between her body and the philosophical texts she reads out, as well as the way in which the rationalist subject is gendered. This performance also specifically confronts the ways in which contemporary technology can display the Cartesian desire to ‘master nature’, to transcend the limitations and constraints of the flesh.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Femme avec tête, ORLAN (1996).

In my second chapter, I discussed Preciado’s use of the motif of auto-decapitation in *Testo Junkie* to consider the legacy of Cartesianism in theoretical writing. Preciado imagines a splitting of an irrational body and a ‘tête pensante’, a head that has no need of hand in order to write, but produces text as if automatically (2008: 375). ORLAN deploys this motif similarly, exploring body’s relation to theoretical texts. While it is impossible to know whether the glimpses of ORLAN’s body during her performance were intentional, staged photographs of the piece are less ambiguous. These photographs depict ORLAN with her head resting on her hand curled into a fist, or making gestures as if to illustrate her speech. In these photographs ORLAN clearly does not intend to hide her hand – in fact, in one image this fragment of her otherwise invisible body *props up* the decapitated head that is supposed to exist without it. In another image of the performance, ORLAN’s hand appears to enhance her reading of philosophical texts, her index finger

lightly touching her thumb, animating her words. ORLAN's head and her reading of texts depends upon her hands and her body, and her photographs acknowledge that the rational mind depends upon the existence of the body, that the head is part of the body and inseparable from it.

In a sense, Palmer is right: ORLAN's performance *is* one of failure, but it is the failure of the Cartesian desire to separate mind from body. ORLAN uses the Sphinx technique to '*faire semblant de n'être qu'une tête*' [*to appear just as a head*]: she highlights that the neutral, disembodied mind of rationalism is always a pretense. Ultimately, ORLAN offers a performance of rationalism that is bound to fail – as noted in my first chapter, Judith Butler notes that Descartes's attempt to deny his body in the *Meditations* 'fails because the body returns, spectrally, as a figural dimension of the text' (1997: 14). ORLAN's body also returns here as a spectre within her performance. *Femme avec Tête* emphasises that the disembodied rationalist subject is a fiction, an illusion that is never quite convincing. ORLAN performs this subject with a flickering corporeal presence that simultaneously undoes it. If Descartes writes that he cannot deny his hands, ORLAN does not want to, including them in her photographs as integral to the image.

While Preciado's 'tête pensante' is male, despite claiming to be 'neutral', ORLAN's performance also highlights gender by performing the Cartesian head as a woman, commenting on the historical binary of masculinity associated with the rational head and women with irrational corporeality.^{viii} This is reflected by Palmer in her review, which describes ORLAN as 'haughty', 'emotionless', 'inscrutable and dour'; words which perhaps might not have been so easily aimed at a male artist displaying similar behaviour. It is

true that *Femme avec Tête* is much more sombre than ORLAN's surgery-performances, which often deploy camp humour and carnivalesque elements. This could be read as part of ORLAN's performance of 'emotionless' disembodied rationalism. Both the French and English titles of ORLAN's performance emphasise that ORLAN's head is gendered, yet are more complex than they may at first appear. Although linking 'woman' and 'head', they do not offer the straightforward possessive implied by 'Tête de Femme'. By using the preposition *with/avec*, a separation between the two is also indicated, the head potentially becoming an adjunct, with this possibility emphasised in the English title by the use of 'without'. One might also consider the 'two' ORLANs presented in the piece: the head upon the table and the digital head. ORLAN's use of digital technology in her piece not only comments on issues relating to identity and new technologies; it also draws links between the bodily transcendence sought by both rationalism and technology.

In her essay 'The Virtual **and/or** the Real' ORLAN writes:

Sometimes I do an art work **and/or** a performance that permits me to highlight my critical distance in relation to new technologies. For example, the performance I did at the ICA in London in 1995, 'Woman with a Head **and** Illusion, Simulation, Virtuality', was inspired by an observation: new technologies promise to get rid of the body, they promise a dematerialization, but for a mortal body like mine, that remains inaccessible. (2002: 169, emphasis in bold original)^{ix}

If the body cannot be wished away by rationalism, digital technology is no more able to ‘get rid of the body’. Despite her provocative statement that the ‘body is obsolete’, too often taken at face value, ORLAN takes a critical stance in relation to technology here. ORLAN’s essay ‘Ceci est mon corps...’ elaborates her claim:

Je pense que le corps est obsolète. Il ne fait plus face à la situation.

Nous mutons à la vitesse des cafards, mais nous sommes des cafards qui ont leurs mémoires dans les ordinateurs, qui pilotons des avions, des voitures que nous avons conçus bien que notre corps ne soit pas conçu pour leur vitesse et que tout va de plus en plus vite. (1996: 92)

[I consider the body to be obsolete. It is outdated. We evolve at the pace of cockroaches, but we are cockroaches with memories in computers, who fly planes, drive cars we have invented even though our bodies were not designed for such speeds, and everything moves faster and faster.]

ORLAN does not argue that we no longer have a need for the material body, but rather remarks on the growing gap between the capabilities of the material body and those of technology, which is evolving at a much faster pace.^x She

links her concept of the body's obsolescence to the Australian artist Stelarc, who also performed as part of 'Totally Wired'.^{xi} Both artists' work is often read together in what is seen as their unambiguous embrace of technology.^{xii} Yet both can be read in a more nuanced way as critically exploring new technologies and the Cartesian impulse to become 'masters and possessors' of nature (Descartes, 1943: 166), as discussed in chapter one.

In *Second Skins*, Prosser writes of attending a video screening of *Omniprésence* at the Sandra Gering gallery in New York. He writes of a 'bloody robe' pinned up on the wall of the gallery bearing the phrase 'The body is but a costume' (61).^{xiii} He reads this as a 'disavowal of the body's materiality' and sees ORLAN as embracing this statement: 'In her surgical performance of the body [...] in her literalization of the body as costume, Orland appeared to provide an insane personification of the poststructuralist insistence on the absolute constructedness of the body' (61-2). Prosser sees this as indicative of what he reads as ORLAN's treatment of the body as surface – a skin or costume that may be easily modified, her work a 'skin deep' transformation rather than a deeper process of altering identity. This, he claims, allows ORLAN to claim she is a 'transsexuelle femme-à-femme' since she misreads transsexuality as a similar 'phenomenon of the body's surface' (63).^{xiv} Rather than ORLAN misreading the corporeality of transsexual transformation, imagined as 'depth' opposed to surface by Prosser, I suggest that ORLAN offers a provocative account of material corporeality in her surgical performances. Her statement that 'the body is a costume' should be understood as a similar provocation to her statement that 'the body is obsolete'. In contrast to Prosser's assessment of the performance, the blood on the robe in question

neatly betrays the sentiments of the phrase he picks up on. Indeed, ORLAN in fact states that while she ‘would truly wish the body to be a costume’ this is in fact ‘something that is not definitive’ (O’Byrne, 2005: 141). ORLAN is deliberately confrontational in these works, and it is of course no coincidence that Prosser turns to ORLAN’s work as an example. Investigating Prosser’s concerns in *Second Skins* through ORLAN’s work may seem obtuse, but I suggest that ORLAN is in fact asking many of the same questions as he does with regards to the material body.

ORLAN’s statement ‘The body is but a costume’ must also be understood in relation to Lemoine-Luccioni’s *La Robe* [The Dress] (1983): ORLAN read parts of this text aloud at the beginning of the performance of *Omniprésence* and during *Opération Réussie* [Operation Accomplished] (1990). During the latter, her reading of the following passage is recorded:

Mais il n’y a rien à l’intérieur de la statue; il n’y a rien non plus à l’intérieur du sujet qui dise au sujet qui il est. Il faut que le regard ou le sourire de sa mère lui dise, de quelque façon: te voilà; sinon l’enfant ne voit rien; parce qu’il n’y a rien à voir; pas d’objet. Il n’y a qu’un regard maternel qui enveloppe l’enfant; alors l’enfant voit, et se voit. Mais il ne sait pas qu’il voit *rien*. Il y a donc trois instances au moins qui s’articulent dans cette machinerie optique: la mère, l’enfant et le miroir (1983: 82)

[But there is nothing inside the statue; there is nothing either inside the subject which tells the subject who they are. The look or the smile of

the mother must tell him or her, in some way: there you are; otherwise the child does not see anything; because there is nothing to see there; no object. There is but a maternal gaze that envelops the child; so the child sees, and sees him/herself. But the child does not know that sees *nothing*. There are at least three bodies at play in this optical machination: the mother, the child and the mirror]

The recording then immediately cuts to a statement from ORLAN herself: ‘le corps n’est pas autre chose qu’un costume’ [the body is nothing but a costume]. Rather than a disavowal of the body’s materiality, ORLAN comments on the potential for the body’s surface to become the cover (the English ‘cover’ added in dubbed translation to ‘costume’) for the subject whose experience of self is fragmented, an *hommelette*.^{xv} She refers, via *La Robe*, to the fantasy of a coherent image of the body as Lacan describes in ‘Le stade du miroir’ (1936). The fantasmic *image* of the whole body is a cover that allows the fiction of a discrete and coherent subject.^{xvi} Images of the *corps morcelé* expose this fiction – and it is this fragmented body ORLAN presents through her surgical actions.^{xvii} Rather than any denial of the body as such, she rejects the body as the harbour of a stable and sovereign subject. ORLAN’s operation-performances, and the photographs and sculptures surrounding them, do not deny the body. Rather, they emphasise its materiality and again engage with technologies and the Cartesian desire to do without the body, or to manipulate and shape it. ORLAN repeatedly renders visual the resistance of the material

body to this manipulation: puffy eyes, bloodied sheets, facial bruising, extracted flesh.

The evening before ORLAN's *Femme avec Tête* was performed at the ICA, ORLAN read aloud her essay 'Ceci est mon corps, ceci est mon logiciel' in the same venue, with the video of her seventh operation-performance *Omniprésence* projected onto a twelve-foot-high screen behind her. The audience would have heard her recite the same excerpts from critical texts in the video of *Omniprésence* as she read during *Femme avec Tête*. In juxtaposing these performances, ORLAN may be seen as encouraging their reading alongside one another. Indeed, *Omniprésence* and *Femme avec Tête* share more than just the critical texts ORLAN chose to read during their performance: ORLAN's operation-performances explore medical technologies to address similarly Cartesian issues of (in)corporeal existence as *Femme avec Tête*.

Amelia Jones (1998) has claimed that body art has been key to the dislocation of a Cartesian modernist subject, and that that this dislocation is characteristic of postmodern art. Technology has been identified, by Rian and others, as a way to effect this disruption of the subject by challenging the notion of unmediated bodily presence. ORLAN's use of digital technology in *Femme avec Tête*, and her use of medical technology in her operation-performances questions this; exploring the ways in which technology can repeat the Cartesian fiction of bodily transcendence. Her work interrogates this in a way that is nuanced and provocative, using her body to push the limits of this neo-Cartesian promise.

Omniprésence is the seventh surgery-performance of ORLAN's project *La Réincarnation de Sainte ORLAN ou Images nouvelles images*. These

performances are recorded on video and through other work such as photographs and sculpture. They often employ props (including plastic grapes, devil horns, lobsters) and elaborate costumes, using various technologies such as fax and live-streaming. While each performance is unique, there are continuities in the project as a whole. ORLAN has stated that each surgical performance is based on a theoretical text,^{xviii} and while these are read aloud during each surgery, Dominic Johnson claims that it is ORLAN's body itself that speaks. Commenting on the photograph *Seconde bouche* [Second Mouth] (1993), he writes:

What is it to peer into the second mouth that seems to speak from beneath her chin in *Omnipresence*, before the uncanny insertion of a polymer structure? [...] Conspicuously, ORLAN repeatedly emphasized the importance of being conscious during her operations, reading texts aloud and giving stage directions, even while surgeons sculpt her face with scalpels and sutures. Indeed, ORLAN's body *speaks* relentlessly. (2010: 90)

Johnson also notes that while ORLAN presents herself as a speaking body, she also reads and choreographs the performance live, inserting agency and control into the medical procedure. ORLAN describes the development of this 'conspicuous' performance of agency:

In 1986 I organized another surgical event *Cheri's Bloc*, to evaluate how much control I could instil in a context that is not an emergency. I

worked with a surgeon to simulate a surgical operation in which I could devise and inscribe visual components drawn from my own artistic practice: masks and costumes that bring the fictional and parodic nature of my art into the operating theatre. (2010: 110)

ORLAN is insistent on this assertion of agency, which is clearly key to her operation-performances: ‘I do not abandon my body to the surgeon’s hands, I remain conscious and active: I read texts, I enter into dialogues, I orchestrate the accessories and costumes of the surgeons’ (2010: 111).^{xix} Despite this, a number of critics of ORLAN’s work overlook this aspect. Julie Clarke writes that in her operations ORLAN is ‘virtually a cadaver’ (2002: 43); Hannah Westley argues that ORLAN embraces female objectification in these works to the extent that she ‘render[s] herself redundant as [a] practicing artist [...] offering up her flesh as the raw material from which [the surgeons] fashion an image of femininity’ (2008: 191-2). When Paul Virilio repeated this reading of her performances in a somewhat tense interview, ORLAN corrected him: ‘I do not undergo the surgery-performances, I orchestrate them’ (2010b: 193). Furthermore, she writes:

Je lis de textes le plus longtemps possible pendant l’opération, même lorsque l’on m’opère le visage. Ce qui donnait dans les dernières opérations l’image d’un cadavre autopsié dont la parole continuait encore, comme détachée du corps. (1996: 90)

[I read from texts for as long as possible during the operation, even when they operate on my face. This gave the last operations the impression of an autopsied cadaver that continued to speak, as detached from the body.]

What is at stake in ORLAN's presentation of herself as an autopsied cadaver, simultaneously speaking or reading aloud? ORLAN's use of 'cadavre' leads back to the discussion in my first chapter of the dissections performed by Descartes, described in detail in his *Discours*. Descartes describes the rationalist subject of deductive science examining the inanimate body as his object of study, in the pursuit of rationalist principles that can be used to allow this subject to become master and possessor of nature. In her surgical performances, ORLAN appears as both the object (as body/cadaver) and the rational subject, reading philosophical texts aloud and emphasising her agency throughout every aspect of the performance.^{xx}

Johnson also suggests that ORLAN's body – the flesh itself – speaks during her performance. Gianna Bouchard similarly describes the appearance of ORLAN's skin as the process of liposuction takes place. In 'Orlan Anatomised', she describes ORLAN's flesh coming alive, as 'animated flesh'; as flesh 'rendered animate below the surface of the skin, as if another organism resides within ORLAN's body. Her flesh ripples and undulates with the intrusion of the technology' (2010: 69). Finally, she writes that 'the flesh is also strangely and shockingly animate through the insertion of the cannulae' (2010: 69). Her use of 'animate' to describe flesh three times over one page of writing is significant, and strengthens Johnson's claim that ORLAN's body

itself speaks. Given that ‘animate’ is derived from the Latin *anima*, meaning vital breath or soul, Bouchard describes ORLAN’s flesh as taking on its own movement, appearing to possess its own agency.

In a video recording of ORLAN’s fourth operation *Opération Réussie*, she at first appears motionless. Later, as the surgeon penetrates her skin and tissue with the liposuction cannula, her body is jolted and she is prompted to sit up and read the text she has chosen for the piece. The effect is startling; if ORLAN indeed appears initially as motionless ‘cadaver’, her sudden movement – prompted by the movement of medical technology that should mean she remains motionless, unconscious – dramatically disrupts this idea. In fact, as the shot pans out, the viewer becomes aware that ORLAN was reading all along, that she has never in fact been the lifeless body that would be more congruous with the scene. With the camera having previously only focused on the surgeon as ‘active’, agency is transferred to ORLAN. Later in the film, the shot is framed so that ORLAN’s mouth appears in close up, continuing to speak while a clear liquid, presumably botox, is injected into her cheek to the right of the frame. The juxtaposition heightens Johnson’s sense that ORLAN’s body speaks, as the increasingly awkward movement of ORLAN’s tongue appears twinned with, even overshadowed by the movement provoked in her cheek by the syringe.

It is as the small wound made by the cannula is sewn shut that ORLAN reads the line ‘the body is only a costume, a covering’ (*le corps n’est pas autre chose qu’un costume*). Rather than a disavowal of the material body, this statement appears in the video alongside the depiction of ORLAN’s body in all its grisly corporeality. The recent stitches concealing ORLAN’s flesh are

untidy, barely concealing the flesh underneath. The final shot of the film shows five images of ORLAN's head, initially four in each corner of the screen as the shot spins at a dizzying pace around the operating theatre. Accompanied by a somewhat menacing soundtrack, the final image of ORLAN's head appears at the centre of the screen smiling and wearing sunglasses, with no signs of post-surgical trauma. Yet after the excruciating scenes of ORLAN's body violently gouged with various surgical implements the viewer is abundantly aware that this is a fiction, the all-too-cheerful title 'Successful Operation' [sic] seeming far too neat and tidy.

In the works surrounding the *Réincarnation* project, particularly the performance *Omniprésence*, ORLAN presents the material consequences of this intervention to her body. In *Présentation par le médecin de prélèvement de sang effectué sur la feuille jaune* [The doctor presents a blood stain on a yellow sheet] (1993), the surgeon reveals ORLAN's face as a bloodied sheet is lifted away. Her lips and jaw are badly swollen, the lines in marker pen that have guided the surgeon's scalpel adorn her face, the 'second mouth' on her chin puckers where the stitches have sewn it shut. In *Portrait No.1 fait par la machine-corps quatre jours après la 7e opération-chirurgicale-performance* [Portrait no.1 by the body-machine four days after the 7th surgical-operation-performance] (1993), ORLAN's lips are perhaps even more swollen, and dramatic bruises cover her eyes. *Omniprésence: No. 1* (1993) is comprised of forty-one diptychs of ORLAN, the top row consisting of photographs taken of ORLAN's face daily as she recovers from the surgery, beginning with her bruised face and her head covered in bandages. *Saint suaire n°9* [Saint's Shroud no. 9] (1993) uses a blood-soaked piece of gauze, while the *Réliquaires*

(1993) each preserve ten-gram pieces of ORLAN's flesh within resin, soldered metal or security glass. ORLAN does not deny the material impact of surgery in her work, neither does she treat her bodily interventions lightly, or as a surface phenomenon. On the contrary, her engagement with the materiality of her body could produce a much more productive engagement with transgender theory than Prosser imagines.

Constructions of Sexual Difference: *Étude Documentaire: La Tête de la Méduse* (1978)

In my second, very different, instance of the head in ORLAN's *Étude Documentaire: La Tête de la Méduse* I explore the meeting between textuality and materiality in ORLAN's work. In this performance, ORLAN engages with a line from Freud's essay 'The Medusa's Head': 'At the sight of the vulva even the devil runs away' (2010: 3943). The 'Medusa's head' in ORLAN's performance is the vulva, partially painted and displayed through a magnifying glass and a hole cut into her trousseau sheets, stretched out as a canvas. Here, ORLAN's work displays a sensitivity to the constructed nature of material, sexed bodies.

Étude documentaire: La tête de la Méduse, is a key performance in which ORLAN stages a confrontation between text and body. Staged at a performance symposium at the Musée S. Ludwig, Aix-la-Chapelle, ORLAN's piece involved her trousseau sheets covered in traces of her blood, as well as yellow and blue paint. These were pinned to a four-metre high canvas, and through a hole at the centre, those in attendance viewed ORLAN's vulva:

This involved showing my sex (of which half my pubic hair was painted blue) through a large magnifying glass – and this, during my period. Video monitors showed the heads of those arriving, those viewing, and those leaving. Freud’s text *The Head of Medusa* was handed out at the exit, stating: ‘At the sight of the vulva even the devil runs away.’ (ORLAN, 1996: 84)

ORLAN’s work appeared three years after Hélène Cixous’s ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’ (1975), and may be read as following its call to use the body to create new meaning. It also appears to reference Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum: De l’autre femme* [Speculum of the Other Woman] (1974), sharing Irigaray’s critique of psychoanalytic discourse on women, but not what many read as its essentialism. The Freud essay ORLAN refers to locates in the myth of Medusa an early exploration of the castration complex, which he imagines as heightened by the homosexual tendencies of Greek society, resulting in the representation of a monstrous woman, both frightening and repellant. For Freud, the Medusa’s head stands in for a ‘representation of the female genitals’ isolating ‘their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones’ (2003: 85). The full line ORLAN references from Freud’s essay reads: ‘We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva’ (2003: 85), in which Freud specifically considers the display of the vulva as a defensive or apotropaic act. He writes: ‘To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something’ (2003: 84). Of course in the original myth of Medusa, those who

gazed upon her face turned to stone – Freud reads this as a similar affect provoked by the male child upon the first instance of viewing ‘the terrifying genitals of the Mother’ (2003: 85).

ORLAN’s piece responds to many of the themes in Freud’s work. Firstly, her work plays with the gaze and Freud’s understanding of castration anxiety as ‘linked to the sight of something’. As in Freud’s scene of castration anxiety, unaware of what is behind the canvas, viewers of ORLAN’s work have no control over what they are about to see. The viewer’s gaze is emphasised by the magnifying glass, which alludes to the title ‘Étude documentaire’, with ORLAN’s genitals being the object of study. Conversely these viewers are recorded themselves by video camera, with images of their heads appearing on video monitors as they become object of the gaze themselves. If Freud saw the fragmentation of the female body in fetishism as a response to the inability to overcome the fear provoked by the initial instance of viewing the vulva, it is the vulva that is viewed here in isolation, as a fragment, through the frame of the canvas.

While ORLAN’s display of her genitals could quite easily render her as vulnerable, ORLAN shows none of the vulnerability that nakedness represents in performances such as Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (Kyoto, 1964), in which viewers became participants in the piece by accepting an invitation to cut into Ono’s clothing (a vulnerability emphasised by the aggression of white viewer/participants, both male and female, when Ono performed the piece in New York in 1965). Yet when ORLAN’s viewers become unexpected participants by appearing in the piece on video monitors, they take on a vulnerable visibility themselves. ORLAN’s presentation of her genitalia is, by

contrast, confrontational, even aggressive; the Medusa's head/vulva presented as more powerful than the viewers' head appearing unknowingly on the monitors. Rather than feminist accounts of the objectifying male gaze, ORLAN's use of the myth of Medusa emphasises the potential violence of the gaze suffered by its subject rather than its object, of seeing rather than being seen.^{xxi} She thus confronts Freud's comment that the horror understood as provoked by the vulva holds a certain apotropaic power. ORLAN clearly confronts Freudian discourse on the vulva in this piece, offering what Ince describes as a 'knowing and fun-poking mise-en-scène of castration anxiety' (2000: 68).^{xxii} The fun-poking, I suggest, could even extend to the viewers, who, by receiving the Freud quote on exiting the performance and viewing each other's reactions on the video monitors, are forced to question their own absorption of Freudian (and other) discourses of bodies sexed as female evident in their reaction to the piece.

While ORLAN does not directly reference Lacan in the same way as she does Freud, his comments on the Medusa's head are important to note. Lacan describes the Medusa's head in his second seminar, *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* [The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis] (1954-55). He comments on Freud's analysis of his dream known as 'Irma's injection', discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Freud describes a dream during which he examines a patient, Irma, staring into her throat. Lacan writes:

l'image terrifiante, angoissante, de cette vraie tête de Méduse, à la révélation de ce quelque chose d'à proprement parler innommable, le

fond de cette gorge, à la forme complexe, insituable, qui en fait aussi bien l'objet primitif par excellence, l'abîme de l'organe féminine d'où sort toute vie, que le gouffre de la bouche, où tout est englouti, et aussi bien l'image de la mort, où tout vient se terminer (1978: 196)^{xxiii}

[the terrifying anxiety-provoking image, to this real Medusa's head, to the revelation of this something which properly speaking is unnameable, the back of this throat, the complex, unlocatable form, which also makes it into the primitive object par excellence, the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life emerges, this gulf of the mouth, in which everything is swallowed up, and no less the image of death in which everything comes to its end (trans. Tomaselli, 1991: 164)]

Lacan links the gaping abyss of the throat Freud examines to 'l'abîme de l'organe féminin', swallowing everything and symbolising death; in short, Lacan uses it to set up a discussion of the Real. If the vulva, also Lacan's 'tête de Méduse', represents the Real, it represents a threat to engulf meaning, language and the Symbolic: being 'innommable, le fond de cette gorge [...] insituable'. Where Lacan renders the vulva as lack, absence of meaning, ORLAN emphasises its presence.

ORLAN incorporates the notion of the screen into her work in *La tête de la Méduse*. This Lacanian concept, elaborated in his eleventh seminar, uses Pliny the Elder's tale of a competition between two painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, over who can produce the most lifelike painting. While Zeuxis's

painting renders grapes so realistic that birds attempt to eat them, Parrhasius paints a curtain. Lacan explores this depiction of a curtain that conceals nothing; the screen becomes a veil just as the Symbolic covers the nothingness or lack of the Real. Even when presenting her genitalia in *La tête de la Méduse*, ORLAN does not present a ‘Real’ unadulterated sexed body behind the trousseau-screen: this body is permeated by Freud’s words, drawing on Rabelais, the constructed body signified by the touches of paint on her labia. In contrast to Lacan’s account, here there is indeed *something* behind the screen, and that something is touched by the daubs of paint; it is nothing pure, nothing that is not also culturally constructed. There is no neat separation indicated by the veil, as the screen becomes permeable in ORLAN’s work.

If in *La tête de la Méduse* the canvas through which the representation of the Real offered by ORLAN’s vulva may be read as a screen; that is, the screen of the Symbolic which masks the Real, ORLAN’s previous use of her trousseau sheets in *Couture en clair obscure* (1968) discussed earlier left them stained with ejaculate, adding to the sense that the canvas with these sheets pinned onto them represents the *nom du père*, the phallic law of the Symbolic. It is through this materialised phallogocentrism that her genitals are observed. Viewed through a magnifying glass, the image of her painted genitals would have appeared distorted at most viewing angles (the curved lens producing a ‘barrel’ distortion), thus creating its own kind of anamorphosis. The deformed image would also have appeared in close-up, appearing to jump out and traverse the screen of the canvas – just as Lacan writes of the vagina as representing the Real that threatens to engulf meaning. ORLAN enacts a staging of the ‘Real’ acknowledging the cultural construction of the material

female body, a construction in which psychoanalytic notions of the Real have played no small part. ORLAN confronts this psychoanalytic reading of female genitalia; while for Lacan, the vulva is made to represent the unrepresentable itself, the presence of the magnifying glass in ORLAN's performance comically references the degree of attention awarded to it by psychoanalysis, which simultaneously claims it exists only as a lack. The magnifying glass belies these claims; firstly emphasising the mediation involved in viewing the images through such an instrument, and secondly inviting viewers to take a look for themselves: is this truly the terrifying abyss Lacan writes of? Or is it a material organ, the vulva and pubic hair painted with blue and yellow, also red with blood?

These touches of paint, especially the dramatic Cruella de Vil-style makeover given to her pubic hair, make it clear that ORLAN is not in any way presenting her genitals as a kind of unmediated bodily essence; neither does she present a female essence. She does not attempt to 'go beyond' the weight of meaning and discourse surrounding them, to something organic. Rather, she confronts one particular discourse in psychoanalysis and the image of the Medusa's head, exposing not 'raw flesh' but rather the way in which psychoanalysis metaphorises the female body and the vulva. ORLAN's work is above all anti-essentialist, destroying the notion that there is any essence to femaleness located in the body or indeed the genitals. Rather, she emphasises layer upon layer of representation, discourse and meaning attached to the genitals in support of various and competing accounts of sexual difference, not least the myth of Medusa and the concept of castration anxiety. Both Freud and Lacan locate the castration complex as the moment the child identifies sexual

difference and begins to take up a sexed position: ORLAN thus focuses on this moment, interrogating the construction of sexual difference. Just as Preciado's reading of Wittig turns the statement 'lesbians are not women' to the material body with his statement 'Je n'ai pas de vagin', arguing that the material, sexed body is defined in heterosexual terms and affirming this statement as part of a hyper-constructivist framework (2002: 205), ORLAN is similarly staunchly constructivist, and despite expectations this is most visible when she includes her genitals in her work. In this way, ORLAN's work can be read as allied to transgender theory – illustrating that the body's materiality can indeed be explored without essentialising, but understood as always loaded with and constructed through meaning and (gendered) discourse.

Transgender theorist Sandy Stone offers a rather different assessment of ORLAN's work to Jay Prosser in *Second Skins*. Stone embraces ORLAN's use of cyborg imagery and the monstrous in her work, claiming she embodies a 'myriad of alterities [...] unanticipated juxtapositions' – Haraway's promises of monsters (1993: 14). Stone sees this as opening up new possibilities for the body, and ORLAN indeed shares this goal, referring for instance to the 'bumps' she has inserted under the skin of her temples in *Omniprésence* as 'aesthetic possibilities' (2010a: 184), or writing that she modifies her body to highlight 'the socio-cultural boundaries of bodies' representation' (2010: 183). Stone also credits ORLAN's work with a powerful anti-essentialism, a key element of Stone's thought, which is able to undermine the possibility of the body becoming a refuge for identity. Finally, and in stark difference to Prosser, Stone sees ORLAN as confronting and engaging with the body's materiality rather than ignoring it.

Allucquère Rosanne ‘Sandy’ Stone wrote what is generally considered to be the inaugural work of transgender theory, a response to Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979). Raymond’s book included personal attacks on Stone due to her work as a sound engineer in an all-women collective, Olivia Records. In 1993, Stone published ‘The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’ with the theoretical influence and personal support of Donna Haraway. Three years later, Stone contributed to the first collection of essays on ORLAN written in English, *Ceci est mon corps... Ceci est mon logiciel* (1996). Much theoretical work has of course been done in the recent and not-quite institutionalised field of transgender studies since Stone’s early work, yet it is at the roots of transgender theory, and ORLAN’s work from a similar period holds much in common with it. Firstly, Stone’s manifesto shares ORLAN’s distaste for borders and binaries. Both embrace Haraway’s figure of the cyborg and the monstrous – with ORLAN taking on not only Medusa, but Frankenstein’s monster in her *Official portrait in Bride of Frankenstein wig* (1990).^{xxiv} A performance artist as well as an academic in the field of communication technologies, Stone’s essay in *Ceci est mon corps...* is titled ‘Speaking of the Medium: Marshall McLuhan Interviews Allucquère Rosanne Stone’. Here, she stages an interview between herself and the philosopher of communication McLuhan, who died in 1980 but is imagined in the text as a disembodied online identity.^{xxv} Just as in ORLAN’s work, Stone’s essay raises questions relating to Cartesianism, identity and contemporary communications technology.

Stone writes that she is ‘in awe’ of ORLAN’s ‘ability to wrestle syntax and grammar from the stubborn and recalcitrant flesh’, echoing ORLAN’s

claim to enact the principle of *chair faite verbe* [flesh made word], or Dominic Johnson's sense that ORLAN's body speaks (1996: 46). Her assessment of ORLAN's suggestion that she is a 'transexuelle femme-à-femme' is much more positive than Prosser's. She writes:

in regard to blasphemy, I am particularly fond of [ORLAN's] appropriation of the hot-potato word *Transsexual* for an unholy purpose for which it was never intended. [...] I saw this remark as playful and ironic, because of the way it stands binary opposition on its head. Once the idea of female-to-female transsexuals is possible, the lid is off the worm can. Of course the purpose of Transgender Theory (Note: Advertisement) is also to do just that (1996: 47).

Stone is writing of the fairly recent adoption of the word 'transgender' at this moment as opposed to 'transsexual'. She hopes that this neologism will widen out the possibilities for gender variant individuals from what she sees as restrictive and essentialist narratives that she locates in the four biographical or autobiographical accounts of transition she writes of in 'The *Empire* Strikes Back'. These include Niels Hoyer's relatively early account of Lili Elbe, *Man into Woman* (1933), which he wrote at her request after she died, with the aid of her diaries.^{xxvi} Stone's assessment of Hoyer's account of Elbe is of particular interest. Stone comments on a kind of Cartesian essentialism in the description of Elbe's surgical procedure, one of the first of its kind:

The first operation...has been successful beyond all expectations.
Andreas has ceased to exist, they said. His germ glands – oh, mystic

words – have been removed.

Oh, mystic words. The *mysterium tremendum* of deep identity hovers about a physical locus; the entire complex of male engenderment, the mysterious power of the Man-God, inhabits the ‘germ glands’ in the way that the soul was thought to inhabit the pineal. Maleness is in the you-know-whats. (1993: 7)

Stone is concerned with the way in which sexual essentialism ties a whole person or identity to specific body parts; how a person (Andreas) can be thought of as ceasing to exist with the removal of a particular material body part into which that identity, apparently reducible to maleness, is distilled. Returning to her comments on the word ‘transgender’, Stone writes that while its use avoids ‘the lethal essentialism of sex’, it may also evade the issue, leaving the matter of sex ‘to the whims of the essentialists’ (1996: 50). Thus Stone, like Prosser, sees an engagement with material sex as indispensable to transgender theory. Rather than leaving embodied sexed identity to essentialising perspectives, anti-essentialist accounts of material sexed bodies must be sought.

Like Prosser, Stone recognises a move away from the body in postmodern theory, and finds in late capitalist society ‘an assumption that the human body becomes obsolete’ (1996: 49). Yet, she writes: ‘beneath all of the uneasy sense that the body is obsolete, in the subterranean cellars of the symbolic the link between body and self – or intellect, as an imperfect term for the sake of this discussion – becomes forged ever more tenaciously’ (1996: 49). As stable identity is eroded, she argues, it takes refuge in the body, just as

‘deep identity hovers about a physical locus’ – ‘the germ glands’ – in the written account of Elbe. In Stone’s assessment, ‘this is what gives Orland’s performances their singular power. By repeatedly attacking the link between her body shape and her self-identity, Orland threatens the last remaining place in which the sovereign self may take refuge’ (1996: 49). Stone sees the force of ORLAN’s surgical performances as ‘finding our own identities annihilated’ (1996: 50), evacuating the body as the last grounding for retreating claims to stable identity, sexed identity or the ‘sovereign self’ of the subject – the ‘cover’ for Lacan’s *hommelette* or *corps morcelé*. In contrast to Prosser, then, Stone sees ORLAN’s work as allied to transgender theory: in her anti-essentialist engagement with the body, in evacuating the lingering notion of stable (sexed) identity that the body harbours. Her assessment of ORLAN’s work as powerfully anti-essentialist is emphasised nowhere more clearly than in works such as *Tête de la Méduse*.

Approaching the Real: The Death’s Head

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE]

EXOGENÈ

[EXOGENE], ORLAN (1997).

[INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE]

Still from *Bien que... oui mais...* [Although... Yes but...], ORLAN (2003).

If ORLAN's work in *Tête de la Méduse* explores psychoanalytic discourse in relation to the material, sexed body, I return to the question of the Lacanian Real to interrogate further its implications for how theory is able to account for the body's materiality. Lacanian psychoanalysis has been influential not only to early queer thought in the work of Judith Butler, but also in the writing of queer theorists including Tim Dean, Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. Yet French queer theory has by and large rejected psychoanalysis entirely; Preciado largely ignores it in his work and Sam Bourcier engages with it only in order to critique what he sees as the more politically conservative elements of Butler's thought,^{xxvii} or its treatment of transgender people in France.^{xxviii} While Prosser takes issue with Butler's interpretation of concepts such as melancholia in her account of sexual identity, he does not reject psychoanalytic theory but deploys it himself in *Second Skins*. He embraces the decidedly non-Lacanian Didier Anzieu and his notion of a *moi-peau* in particular, which he sees as identifying a way to account for material embodiment and identity. Prosser identifies a problem with Butler's use of Lacan's 'conceptualization of the body as illusory psychic projection' (1998: 42) as opposed to a Freudian 'bodily ego'; that is, the psyche's 'corporeal dependence' that he reads in Freud's *The Ego and the Id* (1923) (1998: 40). In considering Prosser's assessment that aspects of Lacanian thought (including those integrated into queer work such as Butler's) constitute part of the problem he identifies in queer theoretical accounts of the material body, I turn to ORLAN's recurrent motif of the Death's Head in her work, as used by Lacan in his discussion of the Real.

ORLAN not only displays flesh beneath the flayed skin of her face during her surgery in *Omniprésence* and digitally in *Bump Load* and *MeasuRages*; she also frequently uses images of the human skull. This image of the Death's Head is used by Lacan to represent the Real in distinction to the Symbolic in his reading of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) briefly in seminar seven, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* [The Ethics of Psychoanalysis] (1959-60), and more fully in seminar eleven, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1973).^{xxix} Lacan sees an illustration of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real in Holbein's use of anamorphosis in the painting. When standing in front of the painting the viewer is immersed in the scene, captivated in particular by the instruments of human communication and measurement signifying the Symbolic, what Lacan refers to as symbols of *vanitas*. From this angle, the anamorphic skull that represents the Real cannot be seen. Lacan elaborates:

Alors, qu'est-ce donc, devant cette monstration du domaine de l'apparence sous ses formes les plus fascinantes, qu'est-ce donc cet objet, ici volant, ici incliné? Vous ne pouvez le savoir – car vous vous détournez, échappant à la fascination du tableau. Commencez à sortir de la pièce où sans doute il vous a longuement captivé. C'est alors que, vous retournant en partant – comme le décrit l'auteur des *Anamorphoses* – vous saisissez sous cette forme quoi? – une tête de mort. (1973: 83)

[What, then, before this display of the domain of appearance in all its most fascinating forms, is this object, which from some angles appears to be flying through the air, at others to be tilted? You cannot know – for you turn away, thus escaping the fascination of the picture. Begin by walking out of the room in which no doubt it has long held your attention. It is then that, turning round as you leave – as the author of the *Anamorphoses* describes it – you apprehend in this form. . . What? A skull. (trans. Sheridan, 1998: 88)]

While immersed in the Symbolic, the viewer is unable to see the skull that represents the Real. When the viewer moves to the angle at which the skull may be perceived, the rest of the image (the two figures, the instruments of measurement) is obscured. Lacan states that ‘Holbein nous rend ici visible quelque chose qui n’est rien d’autre que le sujet comme néantisé’ (1973: 83) [‘Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated’ (trans. Sheridan, 1998: 88)], and continues:

le secret de ce tableau est donné au moment où, nous éloignant légèrement de lui, peu à peu, vers la gauche, puis nous retournant, nous voyons ce que signifie l’objet flottant magique. Il nous reflète notre propre néant, dans la figure de la tête de mort. (1973: 86)

[the secret of this picture is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the

magical floating object signifies. It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head. (trans. Sheridan, 1998: 92)]

While anamorphosis renders the representation of the Real by the Death's Head separate to the Symbolic, once the skull is seen it is able to transform the way in which the entire painting is viewed. Lacan emphasises the movement of the viewer in his description; while the Real and Symbolic appear within the same painting, it is through the mechanism of anamorphosis that they are rendered entirely separate, depending on the perspective of the viewer. Lacan thus outlines the Real as opposed to the Symbolic, as the lack of castration and as resistance to meaning itself (Lacan, 1973: 83). The separation of Real and Symbolic is such that both cannot be perceived simultaneously; they exist in different positions to one another.

The motif of the skull recurs in ORLAN's works including *Opération Réussie Omniprésence, EXOGÈNE* (1997), *Bien que... Oui mais...* (2003), and most recently in *Bump Load et Memento Mori* (2013). ORLAN's operation-performances may be read as staging or literalising a 'cut into the Real' with her surgeon's knife. The viewer is asked to make sense of the trauma of flesh – forcing a meeting between meaning and the Real, testing the limits of both. Hannah Westley has argued that ORLAN's work shows the 'the return of the real body' (2008: 12), that her work 'witnesses the return of the real converging with the return of the referential' (198-9). She cites Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* (1996) in support of her claim, particularly his argument that in response to material events including the AIDS crisis, there exists a

‘dissatisfaction with the textualist model of culture as well as the conventionalist view of reality – as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic’ (Foster, 1996: 166, cited in Westley, 2008: 198). Parveen Adams’s essay ‘Operation Orlan’ in *The Emptiness of the Image* (1996) also links ORLAN’s work to the Lacanian Real:

Confronted with the horrifying spectacle of the rawness of passion, of the *jouissance* of the body as such, the jubilation of meat, [ORLAN] produces a confrontation with the Real and a fear that we will be swallowed into the full space of plenitude in which there is no room for us. (156)

When ORLAN’s body is cut into, the structured, organised and mechanical bodily interior that Descartes describes in his dissection (the heart likened to a timepiece, the body as a whole compared to an impressively fashioned machine), the Symbolic body, is nowhere to be found. Rather, the viewer is left with the ‘jubilation of meat’ of the body-as-Real. Adams argues that when ORLAN’s skin is peeled away from her face, she ‘undoes the triumph of representation’ (145) exposing the fiction of coherent subjectivity harboured by the image of the face. The representation of the Symbolic is revealed as fraudulent; just as Jean-Luc Nancy exposes the *cogito* as a mask harbouring the subject with nothing lying beneath, Adams reads ORLAN’s work as exposing that ‘*there is nothing behind the mask*’ (145). Furthermore, Adams writes that ‘Orlan is not unveiled or stripped bare. There is no signifying interior to be discovered. Rather, the detachment of her face, a manoeuvre which reveals it as

pure exteriority, is one which casts a doubt on representation, which insists on its emptiness' (146-7).

[INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE]

Seconde bouche, ORLAN (1993).

For Adams, the 'refiguration [of the body] touches on the psychotic' (144). ORLAN herself writes of this prohibition against altering the body in psychoanalysis, linking it to religion, presumably to the Christian notion of the sanctity of the body created in God's image (Genesis 1:27):^{xxx}

La psychanalyse et la religion s'accordent pour dire: 'il ne faut pas attaquer le corps', il faut s'accepter soi-même. Ce sont des pensées primitives, ancestrales, anachroniques, nous pensons que le ciel va nous tomber sur la tête si nous touchons au corps!

Pourtant bon nombre de visages accidentés ont été refaits. De nombreuses personnes ont eu des greffes d'organes. Et combien encore de nez redressés ou raccourcis hument l'air sans problèmes tant physiques que psychologiques?

[...]

Mon travail est en lutte contre l'inné, l'innéxorable [sic], le programmé,
la nature, l'ADN

(qui est notre rival direct en tant qu'artiste de la représentation) et Dieu!

(1996: 92)

[Psychoanalysis and religion agree enough to say: 'One must not attack the body', one must accept oneself. These are primitive, ancestral, anachronistic thoughts, we think the sky will fall on our heads if we touch the body!

And yet a good number of disfigured faces have been rebuilt. So many people have received organ transplants. And how many nose jobs sniff the air with no physical or psychological problems?

[...]

My work is at war with the innate, the inexorable, the programmed,
nature, DNA

(which is our direct rival as an artist of representation) and God!]

ORLAN describes her modification of the body here as an attempt to counter a kind of static essentialism; a war with DNA. She insists, against religion, science and psychoanalysis, that the body can be modified – not only at the level of representation, but at that of the Real. In some senses this appears as a

kind of recalcitrant assertion of agency against nature, a Cartesian attempt to master nature and the body. Yet ORLAN's statement also amounts to a rejection of the Lacanian identification of flesh, of bodily matter, with the Real that places it beyond symbolic or imaginary signification.

Adams's association of ORLAN's work in *Omniprésence* with the Real leads her to Lacan's reading of Irma's dream (discussed earlier), and she uses similar imagery to Lacan to argue that when viewing *Omniprésence*, the audience is 'swallowed up'. In the section of Lacan's second seminar to which Adams refers, he includes three references to 'chair' to describe the Real:

Il y a là une horrible découverte, celle de la chair qu'on ne voit jamais, le fond des choses, l'envers de la face, du visage, les secrétats par excellence, la chair dont tout sort, au plus profond même du mystère, la chair en tant qu'elle est souffrante, qu'elle est informe, que sa forme par soi-même est quelque chose qui provoque l'angoisse. (Lacan, 1978, 186)^{xxx}

[There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands par excellence, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. (trans. Tomaselli, 1991: 154)]

This flesh is mysterious, ‘la chair qu’on ne voit jamais’, and like the Real it is closed to signification. Lacan uses ‘la chair’ three times in this section. If ‘la chair’ literally refers to the soft tissue of an organism, it is of course overdetermined. The biblical connotations of ‘flesh’ oppose it to the immaterial soul.^{xxxii} But Lacan here specifically describes flesh as opposed to the symbolic body: it is to ‘la chair *en tant que*’ [flesh *in as much as it is*] formlessness, the unrepresentable, or mystery that he links to the Real. It is this equation of flesh with the Real and its absolute separation from representation in the Symbolic that ORLAN continually confronts and troubles in her work, signaled not only by her use of her own flesh but by the Death’s Head as well.

The image of the Death’s Head has recurred repeatedly in ORLAN’s work since her *Réincarnation* project began in 1990. In the video recording for one of the first works in this series, *Opération Réussie*, ORLAN appears clutching a skull with red plastic devil horns stuck on top of it, ORLAN holding a small pitchfork.^{xxxiii} This skull appears as a provocation; how far is ORLAN prepared to push her body (and her audience)? Adorned with the devil horns, it also alludes to her supposedly blasphemous act in cutting into human flesh, God’s creation in his image. The campiness of the red plastic and the trashy carnivalesque aesthetic of the performance as a whole only adds an overall sense of profanity to the scene, as ORLAN refuses to treat the operating theatre, the surgeons or the act itself with any sense of gravity. Finally, the skull also alludes to the flesh as the Real – the threat of death, of nothingness and lack of meaning. Since *Opération Réussie*, this same skull (without the horns) has appeared in the video work as well as the staged photographs for *Omniprésence*, to which I will return.

A number of digital works by ORLAN similarly employ the juxtaposition of her face with the image of the skull or the Death's Head. Firstly, ORLAN's *EXOGENÈ* merges a photographic image of her head with an x-ray of a skull. This grainy black and white image overlays ORLAN's head with the image of the skull, her eyes appearing as sunk deep into the bone of the sockets. ORLAN's hairline is missing, covered behind the cranium, her familiar blunt bob framing the sides of the skull's 'face', producing the bizarre effect of a clown-like image, emphasised by the pale white 'face' of the bone. And yet, the effect of this image is far from the humour evoked by the skull in the video of *Opération Réussie*. *EXOGENÈ* is an intensely unsettling image, the sunken eyes offering little sign of animation that would dismiss the macabre allusions of the skull that has merged with ORLAN's face. The inversion of an exterior cranium thus overlays the face with a lifeless exoskeleton, as referenced by the title, the capitalised 'exogène' [exogenous]. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the image is the absence of the lips: while the eyes remain, lifeless though they are, the open mouth appears only as a void. In this image, rather than masking the nothingness beneath it, the face barely registers, trapped as it is between the deathly exterior and the interior void of the mouth. ORLAN does not depict the stripping back of the Symbolic to reveal the Real in this image. Rather than the Real (symbolized by the skull) presented as gap or interruption in meaning, ORLAN presents the Symbolic image of the face as overlaid with it, inseparable from it. She offers an uncomfortable representation of the omnipresence of the Real. Rather than the separation of the Real from the Symbolic effected by the technique of anamorphosis in *The Ambassadors*, ORLAN presents a layering of Real and

Symbolic, of the skull and the image of her face. If Adams reads ORLAN's surgery as performing the same separation of Symbolic from Real as anamorphosis, having 'the effect of splitting the body from the signifier as a ceaseless re-enactment of castration' I suggest a layering of meaning with flesh (1995: 156). ORLAN's piece renders the representation of the Real via the skull as inseparable from the Symbolic.

Similarly, in the video piece *Bump Load et Memento Mori*, a digital image of a skull, possessing the outline of the 'bumps' ORLAN has inserted under the skin of her temples, is juxtaposed with a face. This 'face' is not recognisable as ORLAN's, however – it is a flat, white, digital model that resembles the blank mask of a mime, its eyes also white blanks. The skull and the mask face each other, touching as if cheek-to-cheek. As the video progresses, the tone of the black and white image shifts, and another 'face' appears overlaying and *formed by* the other two images. If this new face appears to be more substantial, the viewer is only too aware that it is composed only of a blank mask and a skull. To the left, the shifting images are repeated, this time with an almost perceptible skeleton and a kind of cyborgian outer layer, with stumps on its shoulders and the familiar bumps on each temple. In this scene, ORLAN repeats the 'emptying out' of the coherent image supporting identity referred to by Adams, applying it to the whole body rather than just the face. And again, ORLAN presents a layering of Real and Symbolic in opposition to the separation entailed by anamorphosis.

An earlier video work, *Bien que... Oui mais...*, offers an extended exploration of themes related to the Real. The piece begins with effervescent red globules, coursing across the screen like red blood cells sweeping though

arteries. At first the motion is organic, yet these ‘cells’ begin to pulsate in time with the industrial soundtrack provided by the French sound artist Frédéric Sanchez. Rings of light also begin to pulsate, and a mechanical Catherine wheel rotates creating circles of white light. The traces of an image of ORLAN’s head appear, fading in and out of visibility until white light engulfs the entire screen. ORLAN’s head reappears, in colour, fading to an image of a painted Death’s Head, and then appearing again, with these changes interspersed with white light. Eventually these images of ORLAN’s face and the skull appear simultaneously, overlapping one another. Once more, ORLAN presents a layering of images of her face with images representing the Real. These images include the skull, the intermittent white light expelling all images and meaning from the screen and also the ambiguously organic movement of what appear to be red blood cells – the physical matter of the body that Lacan links to the Real, and that Parveen Adams describes as the ‘jouissance’ of the body.

One particular staged photograph of ORLAN’s *Omniprésence* features two figures in black robes. One of these figures appears to be communicating in sign language, the other (ORLAN) is sitting facing the viewer, holding an open book and resting a keyboard on her lap. Two clocks are visible, mounted on the garish green wall behind these figures; also a saline drip and surgical lamp; finally, ORLAN’s face marked in pen with the lines that will guide her surgeon’s scalpel. Looming in the foreground at the bottom of the photograph is the Death’s Head, with the blue plastic implants ORLAN will have inserted at her temples attached to it. The picture bears many similarities to Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, particularly to the elements Lacan uses to illustrate the Real

in opposition to Symbolic representation. Both paintings feature two figures in black robes, the green background, as well as the foregrounded skull at the bottom of the scene. In Holbein's painting, the various objects presented on the shelves between the two figures are tools of communication and measurement (a celestial globe, a sundial, an open book), tools that Lacan associates with the Symbolic in his reading. The objects in ORLAN's picture represent the same: the keyboard, book and sign language representing communication; the two clocks indicating different time zones (Tokyo and Bangkok), as well as the saline drip, all being tools of measurement. ORLAN has staged a number of *tableaux-vivants* of well-known paintings; *Grande Odalisque* in 1977 representing the work of Ingres, *Naissance d'ORLAN sans coquille* [Birth of ORLAN without Shell] in 1974 and *Strip-tease occasionnel* referencing Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and more recently a digitally flayed ORLAN staging part of Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* [Liberty leading the People] (1830) as *La liberté en écorchée* [Liberty Flayed] (2013). Indeed 'citing' canonical works of art is a recurrent aspect of ORLAN's practice.

[INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE – image to be printed in colour]

Seconde bouche, ORLAN (1993)

[INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE – image to be printed in colour]

The Ambassadors, Hans Holbein the Younger (1533)

There is, however, one highly significant difference between ORLAN's image and that of Holbein: crucial to Lacan's reading of *The Ambassadors* is the anamorphosis of the skull, which renders it as little more than a stain when viewing the painting head-on. Just as the previous works featuring the Death's Head discussed in this section depict a layering between the Real and the Symbolic rather than their separation performed by anamorphosis, the skull in ORLAN's scene indicates an important diversion from Lacan's account. This skull is adorned with bright blue plastic implants on the brow, the cheeks and the chin that contrast strikingly with the bone. These plastic embellishments are explained by ORLAN's piece *Imaginary Generic: Successful Operations* (1990), exhibited at the very beginning of the *Réincarnation* project, and illustrating her plans to physically cite facial features from five well-known paintings. The blue plastic implants refer to these physical citations, including the chin of Botticelli's *Venus* and the brow of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. The skull in ORLAN's photograph, then, is far from the absence or lack of meaning that it represents for Lacan in *The Ambassadors*. Here it is embellished with all the weight of meaning attached to these historical artworks, another kind of layering of Symbolic meaning with the representation of the Real.

ORLAN smiles knowingly into the camera; the skull with its prosthetic implants clearly visible in front of her is a provocation. She acknowledges that the surgery-performance she is about to enact breaks the psychoanalytic taboo of touching the material body, the blue plastic implants emphasising that the Real of the material body represented by the skull can indeed be altered or 'resignified'. As prosthetics, and particularly as implements of medical technology, they allude to Donna Haraway's cyborgian resistance to the rigid

dualism of nature/culture. Like Preciado with his use of the hormonal prosthetic testosterone, ORLAN may be seen as following Haraway's call to use prostheses as a way to blur the boundaries between such dualisms, in rejecting the notion of a brute and inaccessible organic block in favour of a continuity between organic and inorganic. ORLAN's act of surgery pushes the limits of the border between language and that which it represents. With the act of surgery, ORLAN not only questions how far we can represent the materiality of the body, but renders the material body as far more accessible to signification than in its Lacanian formulation as an impermeable block resistant to meaning, a formulation similar to Nancy's opposition of 'sens' and matter, his concept of language as 'a hard, extended block of meaning' impenetrable to bodies (2000a: 51).^{xxxiv} ORLAN's work disputes the Lacanian association of bodily matter with a total resistance to representation (the Real); the material body, the flesh is not entirely in excess of signification.

ORLAN's forceful rejection of the prohibition against altering the material body as synonymous with altering the Real allies her work with transgender concerns, in particular through her questioning of the principles of some psychoanalytic discourse that has often been so damaging in accounts of transsexuality. If Lacan locates sexual difference in the Real, with its reification in the Symbolic, any attempt to touch the Real is understood as psychotic. Indeed, even writing about or 'arguing with' the Real has been understood by followers of Lacan as psychotic: in *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), Tim Dean argues that Judith Butler's engagement with Žižek in *Bodies that Matter* is itself psychotic:

To state my disagreement with Butler in its strongest terms, let me just say that in her rhetoricalizing of psychosis, in ‘Arguing with the Real,’ Butler’s argument and the politics it implies are psychotic [...] Butler’s project to ‘resignify’ the symbolic order by means of psychosis is not political but psychotic. (2000: 206)

Dean is of course not claiming that Butler is herself psychotic, but is critical of her suggestion in ‘Arguing with the Real’ that psychotic utterances can have political power. Fundamentally, his criticism is that ‘Butler’s argument with the real depends upon her substantializing the real as reference [...] attributing a content to that zone of pure negativity that Lacan calls the real’ (2000: 212). Trying to make sense of the Real is psychotic. When Adams claims in her reading of ORLAN that the ‘refiguration [of the body] touches on the psychotic’, she suggests that ORLAN’s project ‘works differently’ to that of ‘the transsexual’ (1996: 144). While her reading of ORLAN is otherwise incisive and engaging, Adams unfortunately follows the Lacanian analyst Catherine Millot’s understanding of transsexuality outlined in *Horsexe: Essai sur le transsexualisme* [Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality] (1983).^{xxxv} Millot writes:

le transsexuel vise à incarner La femme. Non pas *une* femme, du côté du ‘pas toute’, qui implique qu’aucune femme n’est Toute, toute entière femme, qu’aucune ne vaut pour toutes les femmes – en effet la position du transsexuel consiste à se vouloir Toute, toute entière femme, plus

femme que toutes les femmes [...] La Femme avec un grand F, celle précisément dont Lacan pose qu'elle n'existe pas. (39)

[the transsexual seeks to incarnate Woman. Not *a* woman, including 'not everything', which implies that no woman is Everything, a complete woman who is everything, that no woman stands for all women – in effect, the position of the transsexual consists of wanting to be Everything, a complete woman who is wholly and entirely woman, more of a woman than any other woman [...] Woman with a capital 'W', that which Lacan claims does not exist.]

Millot herself is strongly influenced by Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, and her psychoanalytic understanding of transsexuality follows Raymond's paranoid reading of transsexuality as an attempt by men to usurp the place of women.^{xxxvi} This understanding of transsexuality is also undoubtedly influenced by Freud's reading of Judge Daniel Schreber's writing, taken up by Deleuze and Guattari at the very beginning of *L'anti-Œdipe* [Anti-Oedipus] (1972). During his illness, Schreber believed that he was to be changed by God into a woman and impregnated with divine rays in order to give birth to a new race of humans. The unique case of Schreber is, however, read as exemplary, leading psychoanalysts to associate the desire to become a woman with a desire they locate in Schreber for omnipotence and completeness linked with megalomania. It is this combination of Raymond and Schreber that has come to signify a singular, wholly inaccurate and generalised reading of transsexuality

as a phallic desire for completeness.^{xxxvii}

Following Millot, then, Adams claims that ‘the transsexual act [...] involves not the empirical wish to become a woman rather than a man, but the omnipotent denial of sexual difference as such. For frequently the urge to refiguration involves a wish not to become a woman, but to become The Woman’ (1996: 144). ORLAN ‘works differently’ because she does not attempt to ‘cross the frontier of sexual difference, but as a ‘woman-to-woman’ transition – that is from her individuality [...] to what she artfully chooses’ (144). Secondly, following Millot, ‘the question of psychosis touches on the issue of completeness’: where ‘the transexual’ seeks to become The Woman, to become the phallus ‘turning the knife against castration’: Adams reads ORLAN’s project as undoing any claims to wholeness or complete identity (144). The ‘transsexual’ thus becomes the foil against which Adams reads ORLAN’s work. Diane Morgan makes this argument in ‘What Does a Transsexual Want?’ (1999),^{xxxviii} the final section of which touches on Parveen Adams’s essay on ORLAN. Morgan criticises Adams for ‘explicitly engag[ing] Orlan against transsexuals’ (237). She describes the distinction Adams makes between ORLAN’s actions and transsexuality, which ‘apparently demonstrates [ORLAN’s] sophisticated superiority to those other, megalomaniacal, transsexuals who aim to abolish sexual difference’ (238). Where Adams sees transsexuals as seeking to deny sexual difference and embracing an essentialist notion of completeness, she reads ORLAN’s actions as undoing such notions. And, importantly for Adams, ORLAN’s work apparently does not confront sexual difference. The frequent contradictions of Lacanian discussions of the Real with regards to sexual difference and its status as Real (beyond language)

and yet somehow also defined (as material, binary sex) are exposed in this treatment of transsexuality: not only are transsexuals psychotic because they deny the symbolic fact of castration, they also deny the necessity of sexual difference, embodying a psychotic attempt to become wholly Woman. Transsexuals simultaneously take material sex too seriously and not seriously enough.

Closer attention given to the Adams article is rewarding. She writes that ORLAN 'is changing, not from one thing into another – metamorphosis – but from one register to another' (144). The use of the linguistic term 'register' fascinatingly betrays her Lacanian grounding; Adams understands ORLAN's surgical procedures as working in the realm of representation, of the surface and the Symbolic rather than attempting to change the 'thing', the Real of sexual difference. Adams's theoretical framework allows her to read ORLAN's work in such a way, rendering her surgical performance one of shifting register rather than a confrontation with the bodily matter of sex. Such a reading epitomises the way in which the discussion of bodily matter is shifted to the realm of language and discourse within a Lacanian framework. It also reflects the same concerns Prosser holds over queer theory; concerns which should indeed be addressed in relation to its theoretical groundings. While Prosser and Namaste both identify poststructuralism as the source of the problem for queer theory, I suggest that careful attention should also be paid to certain interpretations of Lacanian psychoanalysis which equate the Real with the flesh or the material body. These Lacanian positions see sexual difference as beyond question due to its place in the Real and equate it simply to binary biological sex.

Judith Butler raises the important question of how it is decided (and who decides) what exactly it is that resists representation and constitutes the Real, given that it can only be accessed by a failure in the Symbolic. She writes in *Bodies that Matter*:

The problem here is that there is no way within this framework to politicize the relation between language and the real. What counts as the ‘real,’ in the sense of the unsymbolizable, is always relative to a linguistic domain that authorizes and produces that foreclosure, and achieves that effect through producing and policing a set of constitutive exclusions. (201)

Butler sees Lacan’s account of sexual difference as conservative, existing ‘either as a normative barrier erected by a policing discourse seeking to circumscribe the limits of social and sexual acceptability, or as a discursive after-effect reifying itself as pre-discursive law’ (Kollias, 2012: 158). Yet Lacan’s early exposition of sexual difference does hold radical potential as a constructivist account. In ‘L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient’ [The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious] from 1957 (published in *Écrits*), Lacan is clear that sexual difference is culturally produced. After discussing the male and female symbols accompanied by ‘Hommes’ and ‘Dames’ respectively regulating ‘la ségrégation urinaire’ [urinary segregation] (500), Lacan recounts a story:

Un train arrive en gare. Un petit garçon et une petite fille, le frère et la sœur, dans un compartiment sont assis l'un en face de l'autre du côté où la vitre donnant sur l'extérieur laisse se dérouler la vue des bâtiments du quai le long duquel le train stoppe: 'Tiens, dit le frère, on est à Dames! – Imbécile! répond la sœur, tu ne vois pas qu'on est à Hommes'. (500)

[A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated across from each other in a compartment next to the outside window that provides a view of the station platform buildings going by as the train comes to a stop. 'Look,' says the brother, 'we're at Ladies!' 'Imbecile!' replies his sister, 'Don't you see we're at Gentlemen.' (trans. Fink, 2006: 417)]

The failure of the brother and sister to understand each other here is placed firmly in the Symbolic, understood as resulting from the signifier (the symbols that denote gendered bathrooms). Lacan also comprehends the violence of this epistemic failure, writing further that:

Car il va porter la Dissension, seulement animale et vouée à l'oubli des brumes naturelles, à la puissance sans mesure, implacable aux familles et harcelantes aux dieux, de la guerre idéologique. Hommes et Dames seront dès lors pour ces enfants deux patries vers quoi leurs âmes chacune tireront d'une aile divergente, et sur lesquelles il leur sera d'autant plus impossible de pactiser qu'étant en vérité la même, aucun

ne saurait céder sur la précellence de l'une sans attenter à la gloire de l'autre. (500-1)

[For the signifier will raise Dissension that is merely animal in kind, and destined to the natural fog of forgetfulness, to the immeasurable power of ideological warfare, which is merciless to families and a torment to the gods. To these children, Gentlemen and Ladies will henceforth be two homelands toward which each of their souls will take flight on divergent wings, and regarding which it will be all the more impossible for them to reach an agreement since, being in fact the same homeland, neither can give ground regarding the one's unsurpassed excellence without detracting from the other's glory. (trans. Fink, 2006: 417)]

Lacan elucidates here what he means by his repeated claim that 'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel', that sexual difference manifests only as a failure in the Symbolic. Lacan is clear that sexual difference is a position taken up in the Symbolic and that what is 'real' about it is not known. In this instance he does not by any means make any essentialist claims regarding binary sexual difference, with the Symbolic sexual position not being yoked to material sex (placed as it is in the Real and unknowable). Furthermore, Lacan clearly claims in 'La signification du phallus' [The Signification of the Phallus] (1958 [1966]) that the phallus is not the penis:

La phallus ici s'éclaire de sa fonction. Le phallus dans la doctrine freudienne n'est pas un fantasme, s'il faut entendre par là un effet imaginaire. Il n'est pas non plus comme tel un objet (partiel, interne, bon, mauvais etc...) pour autant que ce terme tend à apprécier la réalité intéressée dans une relation. Il est encore bien moins l'organe, pénis ou clitoris, qu'il symbolise. (690)

[The phallus can be better understood on the basis of its function here. In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if we are to view fantasy as an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) inasmuch as 'object' tends to gauge the reality involved in a relationship. Still less is it the organ—penis or clitoris—that it symbolizes. (trans. Fink, 2006: 579)]

Mitchell and Rose have, in *Feminine Sexuality* (1982), long since made the case for Lacan's work as a non-essentialising account of sexual difference on these grounds. Lacan's thesis can indeed have radical possibilities for constructivist accounts of sexed embodiment and gender that have more recently been exploited in relation to transgender studies, as I will go on to discuss. Lacan was, however, ambiguous enough on the issue that numerous, often essentialising and normative, interpretations of his work exist – particularly in France. As Gayle Salamon asks in *Assuming a Body* (2010) during a discussion of the post-Lacanian Luce Irigaray, 'is sexual difference just "natural" binary and determinist sex?' (146). By seminar twenty, *Encore*

(1975), Lacan is able to write that ‘Rien ne distingue comme être sexué la femme, sinon justement le sexe’ (13) [‘Nothing distinguishes woman as a sexed being other than her sexual organ’ (Fink trans. 1999: 7)].

Dylan Evans summarises what has been seen as the ‘apparent confusion and semantic slippage’ in the ‘highly unstable’ distinction between penis and phallus in Lacan’s work,^{xxxix} as well as noting the vital role the penis as sexual organ and not the phallus plays in central concepts such as the Oedipus complex (1996: 144).^{xl} Rather than identifying instances of slippage between penis/phallus (something she is herself accused of by Prosser), Judith Butler asks in her essay ‘The Lesbian Phallus’ (1993), ‘what is the status of [Lacan’s] assertion of ontological difference [between phallus and penis] if it turns out that this symbol, the phallus, always takes the penis as that which it symbolizes?’ (84). With reference to Lacan’s use of language and the logical construction of his argument, she convincingly claims that despite Lacan’s assertions otherwise ‘the phallus is bound to the penis’ (84):

the phallus is fundamentally dependent upon the penis in order to symbolize at all. Indeed, the phallus would be nothing without the penis. And in that sense in which the phallus requires the penis for its own constitution, the identity of the phallus includes the penis, that is, a relation of identity holds between them (84).

Here Butler argues Lacan’s use of ‘phallus’ renders it fundamentally dependent on the real ‘penis’ as sexual organ, to the extent that one can question how the two may in fact be separated or separable at all.

While there are certainly radical possibilities for the understanding of sexed embodiment to be drawn from certain aspects of Lacan, there is a great deal of ambiguity in his work concerning the status of sexual difference. At worst, the implications of his association of biology and matter with the Real are that Lacan (and later Butler) is able to say far too much about the body while simultaneously claiming that nothing can be said about it at all. The Lacanian association of matter with the Real results in a kind of agnosticism towards the material body that engenders metaphor, allowing layers of meaning to accumulate with impunity. Since the Real resists meaning, statements about its representation can neither be verified nor indeed falsified, rendering interpretations or accounts of the material body beyond question and unchallengeable. Lacan is therefore able to metaphorise the vagina as Medusa's Head and the penis as phallus without reproach. An essentialism lingers in his work, unchallengeable.

In many ways Lacan's privileging of language or the Symbolic has been incredibly productive, not least for queer theory, and not least because of the anti-essentialist potential it holds. And yet, it has also led to accusations of an implicit idealism in his work.^{xli} If queer theory does seek to account for transgender bodies, and the materiality of bodies in general, it must pay notice to these concerns of idealism and essentialism. While ostensibly Lacan does not ignore the body, borrowing biological concepts, and drawing on animal studies ranging from pigeons to locusts or his terrifying image of the praying mantis, these discussions take such material examples and render them firmly as metaphor. In other ways, Lacan's replacement of Freud's use of the term penis in the Oedipus complex with the term phallus does raise questions for the

place of the material body in his work. As for Butler's engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis, this issue comes to a head in her attempts to account for bodies, perhaps nowhere more so than in *Bodies that Matter*. Her attempts to reconcile Lacanian notions of the bodily materiality with the discussion of sensitively political material concerns inevitably and repeatedly fall flat, and her slippage between Lacanian metaphors and biological sexed terms when writing about transsexual individuals in her reading of *Paris is Burning*, as Prosser so effectively points out, highlights the inadequacies of the equation of the material body with the Real. In contrast, ORLAN's work reaffirms the materiality of the body, clearly rejecting the equation of bodily matter with the Real. Rather, she asks her viewers to make sense of her flesh – forcing a meeting between meaning and the materiality of the body, testing the limits of both. ORLAN's work is critical of the Lacanian Real to the extent that it becomes a way of ignoring the body and preserving Christian notions of the inviolability of flesh. ORLAN breaks this taboo, repeatedly staging complex and provocative meetings between meaning and the material.

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2013. *Bump Load* [mixed media: resin, aluminium, infrared cell, LED, programmed electronics, luminous fibre-optic fabric].

2013. *MeasuRages* [3D video].

2013. *La liberté en écorchée* [3D video].

ⁱ This is how ORLAN herself describes these pieces, for instance in her essay ‘Ceci est mon corps... Ceci est mon logiciel’ [This is my body... This is my software] (1996: 90).

ⁱⁱ ORLAN used paint on her body and on sheets during performance, as in *La Tête de la Méduse*, as well as in creating her series of posters for imaginary films throughout the 1980s. Yet she references canonical paintings including Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* [Origin of the World] (1866) with photographic work rather than paint; her *L’Origine de la Guerre* [Origin of War] (1989) uses cibachrome printing and takes a penis rather than a vagina as its object.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Dominic Johnson’s essay ‘Psychic Weight’ (2010). Despite this, ORLAN’s work is often spoken of in the same breath as body art practitioners.

^{iv} See Mary Kelly's 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' (1981).

^v This performance is described by Ince (2000: 32).

^{vi} This title includes a pun that is impossible to translate: 'elle-même' is replaced with the similar-sounding 'elle m'aime' [she loves herself].

^{vii} *Femme avec Tête* has gained notoriety recently as one of two major works (the other being the sculpture *Bumpload* (1989)) that ORLAN has referenced in attempting to sue Lady Gaga for plagiarising her 'monde artistique'. Lady Gaga's video and cover for her 2011 single *Born This Way* feature Gaga with a blunt blonde bob, two 'bumps' on either temple similar to those ORLAN inserted during *Omniprésence*, as well as her decapitated head similar to ORLAN's in *Femme avec Tête*.

^{viii} Ince remarks similarly of ORLAN's use of the head in a previous work: 'I would suggest that there is a double gesture behind Orlan's representation of her head in work since her photo portrait as the Bride of Frankenstein, which works firstly to assert women's capacities of vision and language (capacities associated with the head and traditionally viewed as masculine), and secondly, to drive home that there is no rigid opposition between these attributes and those traditionally viewed as feminine. The head is a part of the body' (Ince, 2000: 88).

^{ix} The performance actually took place in April 1996, rather than in 1995 as this quotation states.

^x Kate Ince offers the following interpretation of ORLAN's statement: 'It seems much wiser and more appropriate not to endorse Orlan's speculation about the obsolescence of the human body, but to consider cyborg as one of the

many identities she employs in her continuous process of discursive identity construction' (2000: 98).

^{xi} 'The body is obsolete, Stelarc and I spoke of this at the same time, at the same moment, it's an idea we both agree upon. Effectively... our body is not, among other things, made for speed, is not made in order to speak several languages' (O'Bryan, 2005: 142). A number of essays in Zylinska's *Cyborg Experiments* (2005) explore this connection between ORLAN and Stelarc, and both Ince and O'Bryan briefly comment on it.

^{xii} Stelarc's work integrates robotics and information and communications technologies with his body for instance in *Exoskeleton* (1992). Like ORLAN, he has also used medical technology in his project *Extra Ear*, which began in 1998. His use of prosthetics here and in *Third Hand* (1990) and *Virtual Arm* (1992) claims to 'augment the body's architecture, engineering extended operational systems of bodies' (this text from 'Ear on Arm' is published on Stelarc's website).

^{xiii} *Courtroom Exhibit: Costume for the Seventh Surgery-Performance* (1993) records the robe as Prosser recalls, with 'The body is but a costume' emblazoned on its sleeve and with photographs of the surgical procedure pinned to it.

^{xiv} Prosser links his reading of ORLAN's statement to Catherine Millot's views on transsexuality in *Horsexe* (1989): 'For transsexuals a book may be read by its cover, and the bodily frame is thought of as another article of clothing, to be retouched at will' (1998: 63). Prosser explores the replication of these views in popular culture, for instance in the 'transsexual' serial killer of *Silence of the*

Lambs (1991), Buffalo Bill, who literally wears the skin of women he has killed.

^{xv} Lacan refers to ‘l’Hommelette’ in ‘Position de l’inconscient’ (*Écrits*, 1966).

^{xvi} Transgender theorist Sandy Stone alludes to a similar reading of ORLAN’s work, as I explore in the next section.

^{xvii} Lacan writes of the subject’s experience of ‘une image morcelée du corps’ [a fragmented image of the body] in ‘Le Stade du Miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je’ [The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I], published in *Écrits* (1966: 97).

^{xviii} ‘Chaque opération-performance a été construite sur un texte philosophique ou psychanalytique, ou littéraire’ [Each operation-performance has been based on a philosophical, psychoanalytic or literary text] (ORLAN, 1996: 90).

^{xix} O’Byrne interprets ORLAN’s consciousness as an attack on psychoanalysis: ‘In short, Orlan should be applauded for insisting that consciousness, rather than unconsciousness, be the text of her performance surgeries. Consciousness is her ultimate weapon against psychoanalysis’ (O’Byrne, 2005: 141).

^{xx} ‘I have made myself both an object and a subject: I have searched for a certain flexibility in identity in order to reinvent myself. I inhabited the trenches separating flesh and imagery, the body and identity. I created ORLAN’ (ORLAN, 2010: 118).

^{xxi} Lacan discusses this distinction in *Le Séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* [Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis] (1973).

^{xxii} Ince also understands ORLAN’s piece as critical of the Freudian understanding of the female body: ‘Orlan’s performance appears to have been a

direct allusion and challenge to the phallogocentric representations of the sexed body found in Freud's writings, and concentrated in 'Medusa's Head' (2000: 67).

^{xxiii} O'Bryan cites part of this quote in English translation in her chapter 'Beauty/The Monstrous Feminine' as part of her reading of ORLAN's *Tête de la Méduse*, which she links to the female grotesque and monstrosity.

^{xxiv} This figure is also adopted by Susan Stryker, in another foundational essay of transgender theory, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix' (1994).

^{xxv} McLuhan famously predicted the creation of the internet decades before its existence.

^{xxvi} Hoyer was the pen name of Ernst Ludwig Harthern-Jacobson.

^{xxvii} 'F*** the Politics of Disempowerment in the Second Butler' (2012).

^{xxviii} See *Queer Zones 2: Sexpolitiques* (2005a), 251-71.

^{xxix} Lacan's discussion in this seminar appears in parts six and seven.

^{xxx} The most explicit instance of this prohibition is Leviticus 19:28, which forbids the memorialising of the dead by marking the body: 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you'.

^{xxxi} Dylan Evans's summary of the Real in his *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* links it to matter, biology and bodily materiality: 'The real also has connotations of matter, implying a material substrate underlying the imaginary and the symbolic (see MATERIALISM). The connotations of matter also link the concept of the real to the realm of BIOLOGY and to the body in its brute physicality (as opposed to the imaginary and symbolic functions of the

body). For example the real father is the biological father, and the real phallus is the physical penis as opposed to the symbolic and imaginary functions of this organ' (1996: 163).

^{xxxii} For example 'For the flesh craves what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh' (Galatians 5: 17); or 'Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh; but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit' (Romans 8: 5).

^{xxxiii} Kate Ince writes that this skull was given to ORLAN by David Bowie (2000: 22).

^{xxxiv} Despite their similarity in this respect, Lacan and Nancy famously did not see eye to eye. Ian James notes Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's criticism in *Le Titre de la lettre* [The Title of the Letter] (1972), continued in *Ego Sum*, of Lacan's account of subjectivity, to which Lacan responded by describing the pair as Derrida's "underlings" (2006: 49).

^{xxxv} In *La robe*, the psychoanalytic work taken up by ORLAN, Lemoine-Luccioni offers the refreshingly different opinion among Lacanian analysts that transsexuals are not psychotic: 'le transsexuel n'est, par lui-même, ni forcément pervers, ni forcément psychotique' [the transsexual is not, fundamentally, perverse, nor psychotic] (1983: 127).

^{xxxvi} Psychoanalytic accounts almost invariably focus on male-to-female transsexuality.

^{xxxvii} While Millot's account remains the best-known thesis on transsexuality in psychoanalysis, it is useful to note Patricia Elliot's overview of psychoanalytic clinicians' divergent attitudes towards transsexuality. See Elliot's entry

‘Psychoanalysis’ in the ‘Keywords’ issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014).

^{xxxviii} Morgan offers an overview of psychoanalytic discourse on transsexuality, beginning with the Freudian account of Schreber in 1911 and culminating in Millot’s *Horsexe*.

^{xxxix} Evans writes: ‘Lacan usually uses the term ‘penis’ to denote the real biological organ and reserves the term ‘phallus’ to denote the imaginary and symbolic functions of this organ. However, he does not always maintain this usage, occasionally using the term ‘real phallus’ to denote the biological organ, or using the terms ‘symbolic phallus’ and ‘symbolic penis’ as if they were synonymous (S4, 153). This apparent confusion and semantic slippage has led some commentators to argue that the supposed distinction between the phallus and the penis is in fact highly unstable and that ‘the phallus concept is the site of a regression towards the biological organ’ (Macey, 1988: 191)’ (1996: 144).

^{xi} ‘the real penis has an important role to play in the Oedipus complex of the little boy, for it is precisely via this organ that his sexuality makes itself felt in infantile masturbation; this intrusion of the real in the imaginary preoedipal triangle is what transforms the triangle from something pleasurable to something which provokes anxiety (S4, 225–6; S4, 341)’ (Evans, 1996: 144).

^{xli} Lacan’s claims that his theory of the signifier is a materialist theory are disputed by Derrida, who argues that Lacan’s concept of the letter betrays an implicit idealism. See ‘Le facteur de la vérité’ [The Postman of the truth], in *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* [The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond] (1980).

Conclusion

Queer Directions: Lessons from the French Context

Abstract

Given the unique and specific nature of the French political and theoretical context, the development of queer thinking within France offers wider lessons for queer thinking globally. This conclusion draws on my examination of the works of Paul B Preciado, Monique Wittig and ORLAN throughout this book to offer four key considerations for wider queer thought. I first ask how French queer activists negotiate the anti-identitarian impulse of queer theory given their pre-existing battle against the dominant political model of French Republican universalism. Secondly, I consider the roots of queer thinking in political anger – a bodily anger provoked by the HIV/AIDS crisis. Has the institutionalisation of queer thinking within the academies of the Anglophone world diluted this politically productive anger, and what can be learnt from the dynamism of queer thinking from France that has remained embedded in activist circles? Thirdly, I examine the ‘real-life’ impact of politically conservative readings of Lacanian thinking around sexual difference in France today, from debates on gay parenting to hostility towards transgender people and ‘gender theory’. I advocate creative and disobedient readings of figures such as Lacan, considering a more productive engagement between transgender theory and psychoanalysis. Finally, I argue for the importance of embracing the utopian ideals running through the works of Preciado, Wittig and ORLAN.

This book has asked what queer theory can learn from the French theoretical and political context. It has examined the emergence of queer thought in France, its response to Anglophone queer theory and the criticisms leveled

against it, particularly from the field of transgender theory. French queer thought is not simply a translation of pre-formed ideas imported wholesale from one discrete national context to another. Over the course of this book, I have demonstrated the ways in which queer theory in France has evolved within its specific national and linguistic context, informed by its own political climate and theoretical heritage. This conclusion offers some of the ‘lessons’ that queer theory more broadly can learn from considering the unique French context: lessons regarding identitarianism and universalism; the institutionalisation of queer theory; the ongoing political and subversive potential of queer work; queer theoretical directions and the tensions between anti-social and utopian tendencies in queer work. My thesis is that French queer work, due to its marginalised position on the fringes of the academy and within activist communities, offers a return to the roots of queer work in the US. These roots are embedded in the activism, political awareness and anger of the early years of the HIV crisis, as well as the utopianism of those working for change.

The dominant political model of Republican universalism in France is fiercely opposed to expressions of particularity – especially from either sexual or religious minorities. French queer writers are therefore particularly sensitive to universalising tendencies within queer theory (and adjacent disciplines including psychoanalysis). The AIDS crisis in the US also made clear the logic of, and violence effected by, universalist thinking. French queer work, likewise, offers strategies for negotiating the anti-identitarian impulse of queer theory alongside this deep suspicion of universalism. Following these models, it becomes clear that anti-identitarian politics need not mean universalism, but

rather should embrace the *particularity* and specificity of material bodies and contexts.

Queer work from the French context displays an extraordinary dynamism, energy and appetite for subversion, including a disdain for academic conventions of either style or genre. This seems to have waned in the Anglophone context, and I ask whether this might be explained by the increasing institutionalisation of queer studies within universities in the UK, North America and Australia. Through work by Wojnarowicz from the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US, as well as early work from transgender theorist Susan Stryker, I suggest harnessing the productive potential of queer political anger from marginalised voices.

The French context forcefully demonstrates that theory is not somehow removed from ‘real life’ or material violence – particularly against marginalised (particular) bodies. The influence of conservative readings of Lacan in France, and the real dangers this poses for queer sexualities and transgender individuals, illustrates this. It would be dangerous – not to mention ironic – to read queer theory’s ‘forefathers’, including Lacan, as the ‘Law’, the *nom du père*. But, rather than an oedipal drama in which Lacan must be dismissed entirely, as queer work in France often contends, work such as ORLAN’s, as well as that produced by transgender theorists, offers a model of playfully creative, disobedient and unfaithful readings that are happy to break the rules, disdainful of theoretical dogma. As such, criticisms from transgender theorists such as Prosser (that queer theory is inherently incapable of accounting for materiality due to its theoretical roots in poststructuralism) may

be answered: queer work need not remain faithful to theoretical edicts, including that of poststructuralism in its division of language and materiality.

Finally, French work comments on the debates between anti-social and utopian tendencies in queer theory, epitomised by Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) on the one hand, and José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) on the other. The rich history of socialist and feminist utopian thinking in the French context, as well as the commitment of French queer writers to activism and politics (for why engage in politics if you have no hope of a better future?) tips the balance towards the latter in French queer work. Preciado's and ORLAN's work both insist on radical political action in their work, putting their bodies on the line in the process. Wittig's work in particular offers a model for a queer utopianism, insisting on the necessity of keeping one's eye on the potentiality of blank spaces, the words that are yet to come.

Drawing on the work of the authors and artists examined in this book, queer permeability offers an approach attuned to the material dimensions of theoretical work. Inspired by meetings between new materialist thinkers and queer work, it refuses the Cartesian separation of language and matter, instead following a monist account of discourse inseparable from material processes, environments and bodies. Its capacity to account for materiality is politically motivated, offering the ability to account for the material violence of discourse as it affects those on the margins of (or outside) society. In this way, queerness necessitates the unsecured borders of permeability and, conversely, recognises something particularly queer about the vulnerability of permeability. Queer permeability is not interested in the purism of untainted wholes, but rather

looks toward meetings of what may seem to be opposing systems (poststructuralism and new materialism, for instance). It is not interested in ideals, or universal abstractions (other than to dismantle them), but is committed to material particularity as well as to infidelity, creativity and thinking outside of the usual parameters.

The Lesson of French Republican Universalism: The Importance of the Particular

The impetus for this book came from identifying French queer theory's concern for particular, material bodies. The political dominance of Republican universalism in France has resulted in forceful opposition to anything deemed 'identitarian'; anything that would put 'individual' concerns before that of the state. This blindness to the particular remains dominant in France today, as evidenced by the language in which resistance to gay marriage was voiced, or by the law banning face coverings voted through in 2010. It is also evident in the ways in which queer theory has been viewed as tainting academia in France, as an outside (imperialist, or racialised)¹ threat, or as infecting the values of the Republic. Given the French state's fiercely anti-identitarian position, queer theory's dismantling of identity could be read as unwittingly allied to conservative French Republicanism's silencing of difference. There has been forceful resistance from French queer writers to what is seen as the universalist tendencies of more recent Anglophone queer theory (Bourcier, 2012), or of psychoanalysis. But anti-identitarianism need not mean universalism if we make a commitment to recognising *particularity*. Bourcier and Preciado take their lead from Wittig's commitment to particularity

addressed most directly in her essay ‘The Point of View: Universal or Particular?’ (1980, republished in *The Straight Mind*). In addition, queer organising in France often uses the collocation of identity terms *transpédégouine* [transfaggotdyke], cleverly provoking the French distaste for specific groups while merging qualifiers to create a single noun, an anti-identitarian umbrella term for sexual and gender dissidence.

The HIV/AIDS crisis in the West underlined the deadly logic of universalism. In the US and the UK, the demographics seen to be at risk of HIV/AIDS were recognised as a *particular* threat to the universal ‘general public’. In France, however, the political dominance of Republican universalism meant a refusal to recognise particular demographics at all, with equally deadly consequences. In the US, the desire to neutralise this threat was evidenced by proposals for quarantine camps for homosexuals,ⁱⁱ or by elected politicians advocating shooting gay men as a way to prevent the spread of HIV.ⁱⁱⁱ While these specific demographics were recognised, they were so only then to be deemed outside of the ‘general public’, as a particularity that might literally (materially) infect the universal. Both contexts can elucidate the logic of universalism, with the political environment in the US exposing the ways in which a virus or its symptoms (the lesions caused by Kaposi’s sarcoma, for instance) can become material signifiers of particularity.

David Wojnarowicz’s writing describes the immense corporeal pressure of living with HIV and embodying particularity in this way, as well as a desire to impart it to the universal. He imagines spitting blow darts tipped in infected blood at health officials, politicians, and religious leaders. He imagines his body as a ‘blood-filled egg’ exploding outwards:

I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there's a line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone (1991: 161)

Wojnarowicz imagines his particular, HIV-infected blood breaching the borders of his skin; the 'thin line', 'very thin line' between exterior and interior may explode at any moment (1991: 161). In essence, he threatens to infect the universal with his particularity, rendering the borders of the universal permeable by breaching those of his own body.

[INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE]

Andreas Sterzing: *David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)* (1989)

Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

The logic of universalism is one that silences the particular, refusing its existence. The title of Andreas Sterzing's portrait of Wojnarowicz, *Silence = Death*, makes clear what is at stake in universalism's blindness to particularity. The material violence of this logic is confronted in the portrait above: if at first the violent image of Wojnarowicz's lips sewn together suggests that he is silenced, the way in which his gaze arrests the viewer certainly does not. But furthermore, the very mechanism that would silence him fails: the wounds

around the stitching in his lips are not staunched, but flow with his blood that carries the HIV virus, exuding a material signifier of particularity that cannot be contained. Universalist logic is not ‘watertight’, but dependent on silencing the particularity that would undermine it. The dominant political climate of Republican universalism in France has led thinkers emerging from this context (including Preciado, Bourcier and, especially, Wittig) to cultivate methods of undermining universalism, of developing insights into how the silencing effects of universal reason and politics might be identified and resisted. The works I have examined in this book not only acknowledge particularity, but use it to dismantle the edifices of the universal.

The question of the body has been explored extensively in 20th-century *French* thinking especially, challenging the legacy of Descartes’s dualist account of bodies that had dominated French thought. By privileging universalist rational thought as the sole marker of humanity and rendering the body beyond knowledge, Descartes’s philosophical ‘method of doubt’ effectively eliminated particularity: bodies, and indeed anything other than universal rational truths, become practically synonymous with doubt. The foundation upon which Descartes builds his rationalist philosophy (his epistemic method of doubt) is an exercise in abstract universalising from which the *cogito* is proclaimed to be irrefutable, and yet from which one’s own body becomes the source of doubt. The HIV/AIDS crisis emphasised the importance of understanding the relation between bodily matter and politicised discourse: the HIV virus and its symptoms were flooded with moralising discourse, meaning and ideology. Permeability offers a model to describe this relation between meaning and materiality; a means of analysis able to account for the

violence of dominant ideologies acting on particular bodies; and, finally, a mode of resistance to universalist discourse. From Cartesian rationalism to French Republicanism, universalism is not only opposed to the particular, but relies on the exclusion of particularities that are designated as bodily and material. Queer thinking must avoid this trap of universalism, and do justice to the particularity of marginalised bodies it has always been allied to.

Preciado, Wittig and ORLAN all offer ways to voice particular bodies. In opposition to Nancy's or Butler's view of the material body as impermeable to discourse, their work focuses on penetrability, permeability and rupture. Each insists on a radical transitivity between material bodies and discourse, texts or language. For Monique Wittig, the refusal to acknowledge the material is commensurate with an inability to recognise particularity. She identifies that the universal (for her, the 'straight mind') abstracts the material and the particular as a means of denying its existence. Each of the figures I have considered in this book embraces the exploration of the material body through their writing or visual work. Their works refuse the notion that nothing at all can be grasped of the material body. They deploy the material body to produce meaning, with all three figures' insistence on the materiality of the body and their emphasis on particular bodies (whether transgender, lesbian or female) being politically motivated. All recognise and seek to elucidate the impact of dominant ideology on marginalised bodies. What renders their work persistently queer is their insistence on embodying particularity, over and above attempts to dismantle the universal or to demonstrate how it is constructed on its own terms – an exercise that often amounts to the linguistic monism described by Butler. By embodying particularity, these figures haunt

the logic of universalism that depends on silencing and denying the particular. While all will risk using universalising metaphor and abstract rhetoric, they refuse to abandon their particularity. This particularity persists as doubt, a kind of pervasive hyperbolic doubt, conjuring monstrous and queer ‘cogitos’ in the form of decapitated philosophers, lesbians who are not women, or women who transform themselves into women-as-Medusa’s head; figures that materially inhabit this hyperbolic doubt rather than seeking to overcome it.

Politics, Materiality: Queer Rage

This book investigates a critical moment in the development of queer theory in France, a moment that asks questions of queer theory globally. Queer thought in France remains marginalised in universities, having emerged outside of the academy amongst activist groups. This politically grounded nascence has produced texts recalling the energy and urgency of queer political writing from the height of the AIDS crisis in the US. Queer theory in the US, at its roots, emerged as a result of the political anger and dynamism resulting from the AIDS crisis. The energy of queer activism at this moment was dedicated to understanding the devastating material, bodily impact of ideology around this illness and the demographics it affected. It seems unavoidable to ask whether or not this political urgency exists in Anglophone queer thought today, and if not, how far this can be explained by queer theory’s increasing institutionalisation and establishment as an academic discipline as well as the gap between queer academic work and activism.

I have suggested that at its heart, queer theory began as the theorisation of an illness, of HIV/AIDS. The consideration of illness turns attention to the

materiality of the body, interrupting the possibility of universal philosophical meditations of a mind divorced from the body. Turning to work around illness, as I have through Montaigne's or Nancy's discussion of their respective conditions, or through Dustan's, Guibert's or Wojnarowicz's writing around HIV, can take queer thinking back to the political necessity to account for the material body at its roots. Queer theory must be conversant with other disciplines that seek to account for particular embodied experience and materiality. As such, turning to the emerging areas of disability studies and crip theory, as well as to new materialist enquiries is a particularly exciting prospect for queer studies.

Just as illness turns attention to the material body, so too does the consideration of transgender and transsexual experience. This is not only a concern of heightened subjective affect: both the experiences of people with HIV/AIDS and transsexual or transgender individuals expose the effects of dominant ideology on marginalised bodies. Such experiences are often described as producing a political anger imagined as emanating from the body, as inseparable from it: the 'rage' that Wojnarowicz describes as embodied, threatens the borders of his body. For Wojnarowicz, political rage is described as bodily permeability, with his own body becoming a weapon: his 'hands become weapons, every bone and muscle and fiber and ounce of blood become weapons' (81).

Susan Stryker's seminal account of the rage induced by gender dysphoria is just as embodied as that of Wojnarowicz's, outlined above. In the poem she includes within her essay 'My words to Victor Frankenstein' she writes that 'Rage gives me back my body' (1994: 247). Again, like

Wojnarowicz, rage renders her body permeable: 'Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart' (247). The rage described in both the HIV writing of Wojnarowicz and the transgender writing of Stryker charges their bodies with a political necessity. This is a particular rage: that is, the rage of particular, bodily experience resulting from the violence done to marginalised bodies by universal discourse. Queer permeability seeks not only to account for but to harness this rage.

Universal discourse is experienced as stultifying and silencing. Wittig imagines scenes of stasis, freezing and drowning in *Le Corps lesbien* to imagine the relation of particular to universal. Stryker's particular experience of gender dysphoria produces a rage whereby she imagines herself drowning, silenced. The water surrounding her smothers and suffocates, mirroring the effects of universal logic on particular bodies. It is omnipresent: 'I suck for air – and find only more water. My lungs are full of water. Inside and out I am surrounded by it' (248). Furthermore, it denies, 'annihilates' particular experience: 'This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet – an excruciating impossibility – I am' (248).

Finally, Stryker describes in response a rage that allows her to take on sound and movement against this water surrounding her: 'rage is the force that moves me' (247). Wojnarowicz's anger informs and drives his writing and visual art, lending him a voice against the dominant discourse of politicians, media and religion. Rage also allows Stryker to find a voice out of silence:

[Rage] throws my head back

pulls my lips back over my teeth

opens my throat

and rears me up to howl:

: and no sound

dilutes

the pure quality of my rage.

(248).

Descartes's method of hyperbolic doubt described in his *Meditations* leads him to a kind of uncertainty he likens to the sensation of drowning. He dismisses the sensation, turning away from doubt by pronouncing the universal certainties of the cogito in opposition to his body. Stryker's response to the groundlessness of drowning is to embrace it, finding a rage within that returns her to her body, offering her a voice to express her particular experience. Queer theory must embrace the political rage and energy of particular bodies, as well as the doubt the body casts on universal reason. Both Stryker and Wojnarowicz here offer a way of understanding the experience of universality as it acts on particular bodies. Queer theory would benefit from listening to rage such as Wojnarowicz's and Stryker's: the rage of minoritised bodies, rage that renders them politicised, energised and with a corporeal knowledge of dominant discourse. It must turn its attention to the bodily exploitation of the most vulnerable, and pay more attention to activist groups – to *who* is getting angry and *why* – engaging with these concerns not as an object of study but as part of the same struggle. Queer permeability has, through its elaboration in the analysis of Preciado's, Wittig's and ORLAN's work throughout this book,

been shown to contain a definite violence: from Preciado's auto-vivisection, to Wittig's dismembered lesbian bodies and ORLAN's surgical work. Such violence would not be possible without a *particular* rage that offers a way to return to material bodies, to the concerns of those who find their bodies infiltrated by universal discourse. Rage gives voice to particularity, to a necessarily *embodied particularity*.

Rethinking Theory: Breaking the Rules, Breaking the 'Law'

The French context urgently establishes theoretical work as political: it is not in any way removed from politics and 'real life' but can inflict material violence, especially against marginalised bodies. The ambiguity over the status of the material body and sexual difference in Lacan's work explored in chapter four has material implications for minority sexualities and transgender people, nowhere more so than in France. Lacan's work has been taken up by the most socially conservative voices in France, from the debates on *homoparentalité* and the PACS before it was introduced in 1999, to more recent arguments over the legislation for gay marriage. The French government sought numerous testimonies of psychoanalysts during the discussions over gay marriage in France in November 2012, during which work including Lacan's was appealed to as an authority, a 'Law' not to be broken. Psychoanalysis remains the focus of clinical psychology within universities in France, and psychoanalytic bodies are often represented on government health panels. The issue is perhaps most relevant to transsexual and transgendered people in France, since psychoanalysis offers the dominant mode of discourse regarding transsexuality in France. While psychoanalysis may be deployed in Anglophone (American)

debates in queer theory on transgender and transsexuality as a theoretical issue, in France a centralised health service where psychoanalysts' associations participate in working groups organised by the Ministry of Health and where psychoanalytic discourse is highly influential in political debates renders the material stakes of such conversations vastly different. Indeed, the specificity of transgender and transsexual experience in France in light of this has been highlighted by Todd W Reeser in his article 'Trans France' (2013), in which he notes that 'France is viewed as lagging far behind other European countries in terms of trans rights and care' (7).^{iv}

The interventions of psychoanalysts in the PACS debate often focused on *homoparentalité* and sexual difference. Of numerous examples, the Lacanian analyst Jean-Pierre Winter argues in 'Gare aux enfants symboliquement modifiés' [Beware of symbolically-modified Children] that for the child of gay parents:

before even having access to language, he will be faced with an impossibility: that his own life results from a fertile union between two people of the same sex. How will he be able to answer the question 'where do children come from?' that is so determinant for his future as a reasonable being [pour son avenir d'être doué de raison], if he is confronted with a socially legitimized situation which excludes the only real allowing him to separate his unconscious fantasies from his conscious faculties: the anatomical difference of the sexes [qui exclut le seul réel lui permettant de séparer ses fantasmes inconscients de ses

facultés conscientes: la différence anatomique des sexes]? (cited in Robcis, 2004: 118)^v

Knowledge of sexual difference is linked to heterosexual reproduction, and both are tied inextricably to the capacity for the child to reason, to acquire rationality.^{vi} In 'Homoparentalité et refus du réel' [Gay parenting and denial of the Real] (2010), Winter is clearer regarding the denial of sexual difference he sees as necessitated by gay parenting. Very much in contrast to the ambiguity present in Lacan's work, he writes:

la différence des sexes, en tant qu'elle est indissociablement liée à la différence des générations, est à la fois réelle, symbolique et imaginaire. Ainsi en va-t-il également de la différence entre la vie et la mort. Et chacun le sait bien. (2010)

[sexual difference, in as far as it is inseparable from the difference involved in procreation, is at once real, symbolic and imaginary. As such, it is also the difference between life and death. And everyone knows this very well.]

In a total dilution of Lacan's position, sexual difference and heterosexual reproduction are simple and commonsense fact, which it would not only be foolish to deny but which constitute a question of life or death.

This theoretical language resisting gay marriage in France spanned the political spectrum. While important figures on the political left in France such

as Elisabeth Guigou similarly claimed the need for children to have a parental model of sexual difference, Catholic intellectuals used very similar theoretical terms of sexual difference, warning of ‘the violent narcissism of homosexuality, the imminent risk of psychosis in same-sex parenting (given the foreclosure of the paternal signifier), and the social and psychic deregulation that would ensue if same-sex unions became legal’ (2015a: 919).

Finally, French Republican rhetoric collides with psychoanalytic arguments in the work of Michel Schneider in a nationalist defense of sexual differentiation. Schneider argues for what he sees as the French Republican approach to sexual difference as a ‘middle way’ between two extremes: that is, American individualism on the one hand and Islamic fundamentalism on the other. Schneider’s argument is that the American imposition of gay marriage as part of a ‘politics of recognition’ denies sexual difference (again reduced to reproductive heterosexuality). Likewise, Islamic fundamentalism is also unable to accept a non-hierarchical differentiation between the sexes: it falls to France then, to bear the responsibility of demonstrating to the world that ‘an asymmetry is not necessarily an inequality’: it is therefore imperative that France does not accept gay marriage (Robcis, 2004: 124). As bizarre as this argument may seem, this ‘oscillation between the American and the totalitarian “extremes”’ actually proved to be one of the most powerful rhetorical devices throughout the PACS discussions’ (130). This turn to nationalism marks France as the ‘middle way’ between two societal ‘extremes’ (US liberalism and totalitarianism). It embeds the defense of sexual difference as the defense of national identity – and even national security – against totalitarian or fundamentalist ideals.

This maelstrom of Republicanism and French psychoanalysis has influenced ‘global’ heavyweights of philosophy. Taking up a strikingly similar argument, the Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek argued during a lecture at the LSE in 2016 against two ‘extremes’ in the understanding of sexual difference.^{viii} He describes an individualist, neo-liberal and American account of sexual difference characterised by the ‘bathroom debate’ in the US – that is, the recent legislation in a number of states of the US aimed at transgender individuals, requiring the use of bathrooms designated for the sex one is assigned at birth and subsequent campaigns by civil rights groups against such laws. Echoing some Marxist arguments of the recent past regarding ‘bourgeois’ homosexuality, he stated: ‘It’s easy to see how transgenderism or even postgenderism fits perfectly our late capitalist subjectivity’. For Žižek, the resistance to these laws by activist groups, and particularly the demand for gender-neutral facilities amounts to a denial of sexual difference and a desire for uniformity that he also identifies in Boko Haram. In Žižek’s reading, like Schneider’s, Boko Haram represents Islamic fundamentalism’s inability to accept a non-hierarchical sexual difference. For Žižek, ‘both [Boko Haram and ‘transgenderism’] want to get rid of sexual antagonism [...] they want harmony’ – one wants a clear and hierarchical difference between men and women, one wants no difference at all. Again, Lacanian thought is deployed to produce an imperative to defend sexual difference (this time imagined at least, more faithfully to Lacan, as an antagonism rather than a certainty or ground for knowledge).

Upon this evidence, it is easy to understand why French queer theory has rejected psychoanalysis wholesale. Yet the capacity of psychoanalysis to

consider gendered and sexed accounts of subjectivity and identity should not be abandoned by queer or gender theorists as a result of its most normative interpretations. Fortunately there has been a recent and productive interest in the consideration of transgender questions from Lacanians including Jacqueline Rose, as well as interest in psychoanalysis from transgender studies, with the fourth issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* dedicated to the theme of ‘Transgender and Psychoanalysis’.^{viii} This engagement between transgender theory and psychoanalysis is all the more necessary in France where psychoanalytic conceptions of sexual difference are certainly not abstract debates for many, in the way they seem to be for some within Anglophone theory. Despite the much more conservative stance of many of his followers, Lacan’s work itself does offer radical possibilities for thinking sexed embodiment. There is enough ambiguity and contradiction in Lacan’s work that singular or ‘correct’ readings of Lacan appear contradictory in themselves. And neither should ‘correct’ readings be sought: the ‘truth’ according to Lacan does not exist, and in any case queer theory need not play by his rules.

The moments of genuinely radical thought expressed by Lacan with regard to sexed embodiment have recently been exploited by transgender theorists: most recently, for example, work by Patricia Gherovici (2010; 2017); Shanna T Carlson (2010) and Oren Gozlan (2014) has deployed psychoanalytic theories in order to consider trans embodiment and subjectivity anew. Carlson follows Tim Dean’s interest in the disruptive, queer potential of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Yet unlike Dean, she sees the ‘divorcing of gender from unconscious sexuation’ as the ‘the logical consequence’ of reading Lacan (2013: 60). The analyst Oren Gozlan has reconsidered psychoanalytic

approaches to transgender embodiment and the desire for surgery, offering welcome approaches that contrast to the singular narrative of transsexuals as seeking to embody a totalising completeness, as imagined by Catherine Millot. Gozlan imagines trans surgery as signifying an alternative to heterosexual reproduction ‘a rebirth that resists an origin [...] a birthing of the self that is not tied to the phantasy of reproduction, whose aim is not unity via procreation or continuity through lineage’ (2014: 50).

It would be hard not to compare this notion of rebirthing oneself separated from the origins of the Mother or the Father to ORLAN’s *Orlan accouche d’elle-m’ aime* (1964), and perhaps even more so to her re-imagining of the mirror stage in her ‘Manifeste de l’ Art Charnel’:

Désormais je peux voir mon propre corps ouvert sans en souffrir!... Je peux me voir jusqu’au fond des entrailles, nouveau stade du miroir. ‘Je peux voir le cœur de mon amant et son dessin splendide n’a rien à voir avec les mièvreries symboliques habituellement dessinées pour le représenter’.

‘Chérie, j’aime ta rate, j’aime ton foie, j’adore ton pancréas et la ligne de ton fémur m’excite.’

[I can observe my own body cut open without any suffering!...I can see myself all the way down to my viscera, a new mirror stage. I can see to the heart of my lover and its splendid design has got nothing to do with the soppy symbols usually drawn.

‘Darling, I love your spleen, I love your liver, I adore your pancreas and the line of your femur excites me.’]

ORLAN’s work once more shares similar concerns to those of transgender and transsexual theorists in notions of rebirth and bodily resignification. The eroticised description of the body’s interior – strikingly similar to Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien* – embraces the *corps morcelé* and again rejects the equation of bodily matter with the Real. ORLAN’s notion of the ‘nouveau stade du miroir’ is left provocatively open, and it is instances such as this, or her *mise-en-scène* of the castration complex in *Tête de la Méduse*, that offer a model of reading Lacan critically that may be put to work in reconsidering queer and transgender accounts of embodied subjectivity. It is precisely this kind of model for reading Lacan – reading with the spirit of invention and possibility rather than obedience to his texts – that queer theory may also employ fruitfully.

If transgender theory can find academic inspiration in the work of Lacan himself, it need not disregard queer theory due to its grounding in Lacanian or poststructuralist thought. However, the ‘blind spot’ displayed in relation to the materiality of the body by these disciplines – as well as by queer theory – together with their overstatement of the difficulties in gaining any appreciation of the body, should be regarded critically and with care by any theory seeking to account for the material body, especially the vulnerability of marginalised bodies. Queer theory must not become a theory of sexuality that follows theoretical dogma, including that of poststructuralism’s insistence on the separation of language and materiality.

Making space for Utopia

Finally, for all its political anger and persistent imagery of violence, queer thinking emerging from France is unerringly utopian. In fact, its utopian qualities are often inextricable from its investment in violent imagery: Wittig's grenades do not simply destroy old and laden linguistic forms for the sake of it, but to clear new ground for new possibilities. Preciado does not perform his autodecapitation out of nihilism, but to imagine new and less oppressive futures. ORLAN's work playfully, humorously, but *deadly seriously* calls for us to rattle the bars of the cage and wake up to new realities.

France has a rich history of utopianism, strands of which can be seen in the revolutionary governments of the early 1790s, the socialist movement of 'Icarians' who followed Étienne Cabet to the US to set up communes in 1848, as well as the Paris commune of 1871. Feminist utopianism in France began with Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* [The Book of the City of Ladies] (1405), which imagines a utopian city constructed by the stories of exemplary women. It continued in the 1970s with the psychoanalytic strand of feminism in France espoused by those associated with *Psych et Po* daring to imagine new economies of thought: Cixous's orange, or Irigaray's (ironic or not) vulvic model. Representing a very different feminist approach, Wittig's materialist, separatist feminism is perhaps the most utopian of all. Often seen only for its negativity, lesbian separatism is by definition utopian in imagining the possibility of a radically different and improved societal dynamic. This political heritage lends itself to the kind of utopian thinking espoused by

Preciado, who I have previously argued rejects the anti-social tendencies of queer theory, epitomised by work such as Edelman's *No Future* (Evans, 2015). Instead, he calls in his work for innovative methodologies of bodily experimentation through radical manifestos, drag workshops and queer calls to arms.

Where queer theory in the Anglophone academy has acquired a somewhat jaded outlook, French queer thinking has retained a utopian strand, calling for us to look out for new words for utopian possibilities that cannot be grasped yet, but will one day blacken out the sky as they fall to earth like Wittig's *samares*; for the impossibilities of birthing ourselves or for speaking as a decapitated philosopher. Like Wittig's self-named character in *Virgile, non*, theorists must keep striving to find the words for new possibilities so far from the normative they can only be glimpsed as yet:

Je tends vers toi, mon beau paradis, du plus profond de l'enfer, bien que je ne te connaisse que par éclairs et que si les mots me manquent tu disparais comme dans une hémorragie à l'envers. (Wittig, 1985: 64)

[I reach out towards you, my beautiful Paradise, from the very depths of Hell, although I know you only in flashes, and if words fail me you disappear like a haemorrhage in reverse. (55)]

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ⁱ See Robcis (2015: 457).

ⁱⁱ Quarantine camps were not only discussed or proposed, but actually balloted: a proposal was fortunately voted down in the state of California in 1986 (Feldman & Miller, 1998: 22).

ⁱⁱⁱ Wojnarowicz mentions the governor of Texas's recommendation: "If you want to stop AIDS, shoot the queers" (1991: 161).

^{iv} Reeser highlights the French state and its importance in trans narratives in France: 'In the current French context, these types of discursive conventions that flatten out differences among trans subjects may be directed not toward a specific clinician but toward the nation state which requires a number of normalizing criteria for an official change of sex – including sterility (e.g. a transman cannot get pregnant) and heterosexuality (e.g. a transwoman cannot be a lesbian)' (2013: 13). He writes that 'French universalism is defined as inherently cisgender' (10) and suggests that trans individuals feel a sense of 'lying outside the nation' (13).

^v Winter is cited in Camille Robcis's article 'How the Symbolic Became French: Kinship and Republicanism in the PACS Debates' (2004), linking the influence of Lacan and Lévi-Strauss to the language of the symbolic in debates surrounding the introduction of the PACS.

^{vi} In a similar vein, yet somewhat more extreme, Françoise Héritier followed the work of Lévi-Strauss to argue that *homoparentalité*, in confusing sexual difference, would quite literally undermine the capacity for rational thought: 'What I have tried to show is that the anatomical, physiological, and functional difference of the sexes – by functional, I mean the fact that it is the woman who carries the children – is at the basis of the fundamental opposition which allows us to think. Because thinking is first of all classifying, classifying is essentially discriminating, and the fundamental discrimination is based on sexual difference. It is an irreducible fact: we cannot claim that these differences do not exist; they are the unsurpassable limits of thought [butoirs indépassables de

la pensée], like the opposition between day and night. Our modes of thinking and our social organization are hence founded on the principal observation of the sexes' (cited in Robcis, 2004: 116-7).

^{vii} 'Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours', 20 April 2016. This later became the title of a book, the content of which does not however map onto that of the lecture.

^{viii} Rose, 'Who do you think you are?' (2016).